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Rosario Cruz Lucero,
Feast and Famine

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How They Got It Started,” gives us impressions of the beautiful courtship activities and wedding ceremonies between Japanese men and Filipino women. But why use fiction? The author does not explain.

Since the book is mostly about Japanese settlers who had Filipino wives, I would like to believe that the wives could be credited for half of the success of these Japanese pioneers. It is unfortunate that not much is written about them. Moreover, the oral histories could have been buttressed by documentary research and secondary sources. For example, the book states that “oldest sons tend to remain home” (p. 231) rather than seek employment overseas. Why was that the case? Lastly, it is obvious that the book shied away from telling the story of the Second World War.

However, as the editor says, the goal of the book is to begin (p. xxiii), not to tell yet the complete story of the lives of these pioneers. It is an impressive beginning, and deserves a good sequel.

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Rosario Cruz Lucero, **Feast and Famine: Stories of Negros**. Introduction by Resil B. Mojares. Afterword by Linda K. Albuero. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2003. 105 pages.

If one had to argue for the high place of *Feast and Famine: Stories of Negros* in the canon of Philippine literature, one would have much ammunition.

Set in Negros, the stories in this collection capture Negrense life, history, culture, cuisine, myths, customs, and stark class contradictions. Even the non-Negrense will delight in the description of place and people, particularly the evocation of the *bisayá* accent—characters exclaim “*Ay, ambot!*” and say “en-pi-eh” for NPA and “The Litol Mermaid starring Walt Disney.” In the afterword, Linda Kintanar-Albuero acknowledges the important contribution of this volume to the creation of a Visayan literature in English.

The wit and effortlessly postmodern construction of the stories are probably also the reasons why four of the five stories in this collection won first prizes at major literary competitions ("The Death of Fray Salvador Montano, Conquistador of Negros" and "Doreen's Story" at the Palanca Awards in 2001 and 2003, respectively; "Good Husbands and Obedient Wives" and "The Oracle of the One-Eyed Coconut" at the Philippine Free Press Literary Awards in 2002 and 2004, respectively). In a literary world that demands verisimilitude in the midst of imagination, balance in the midst of contradiction, the stories are at once witty and meditative, sensual and cerebral, historical and yet very contemporary.

The most compelling reason, however, for classifying *Feast and Famine* as a landmark in Philippine literature is its ingenious treatment of the precarious and complex relationship between orality and literacy. The central preoccupation of most of the characters in these stories is telling stories be it through a ladies' lunch ("Doreen's Story"), through personal myth making, or "story telling-a-lie" ("Good Husbands and Obedient Wives") or through the *composo*, a form of Hiligaynon extemporaneous folk song cum historical record, the subject of which is local current events ("The Composo of Hacienda Buyung"). The two remaining stories ("Fray Montano" and "Oracle") have Estrella and Estrellita, epic chanters/composo singers/town healers/soothsayers as main characters. (Estrella appears in the other stories too.) These stories lend insights into the power of the oral tradition to capture imaginations, create myths, and establish history, and into the oppositional but sometimes symbiotic relationship between the written and the recited.

The friar in "The Death of Fray Salvador Montano, Conquistador of Negros" struggles with temptation, superstition, a dwindling congregation, censorship, bird droppings falling from the ceiling beams, masturbation, the pressure of having to produce a dictionary, forgetfulness, and even aphasia. His foil Estrella (the stars to his mountain), the village *baylan* and epic chanter, is his nemesis but also his confidant and consultant. The tension that exists between them is spiritual as well as sexual. She is another one of the many temptations he fends off in his quest to be as strong as the long and hard bell tower erected by his predecessor Fray Duertas (alluded to in all the other stories). His lifelong struggle against temptation ends in his deathbed, in the arms of Estrella, and with the realization that the temptation he fought off all his life is both *Yawa* and Yahweh.

"Doreen's Story" is probably going to be the one most anthologized story in the collection and one for which Lucero will be most known. Its characters are memorable because they are the members of the familiar rich and eccentric family that every small town seems to have. Anabella, an heiress, is a Miss Emily-like figure (Greirson at first but later Dickinson) with a whip-wielding father and a hysterical soprano mother. But Lucero offers a twist. The eccentric is actually ordinary, the familiar, surprising.

Three narratives make up "Doreen's Story." Real-life food critic Doreen Fernandez sits in a restaurant with the story's narrator and recounts over *panini* and iced tea the story of Anabella of Silay (the second and main narrative). The telling of this second narrative is also interrupted by discussions of the narrator-writer with real-life literary scholar Jonathan Chua about the accuracy of the details of the story. The main character itself is named after the eponymous protagonist of a short story written by a reclusive Negrense woman writer Magdalena Jalandoni. Doreen plays epic chanter in this story, but the reader is reminded, just at the right moment, that this is also just a cleverly crafted piece of artifice. It is metafiction at its finest.

"The Oracle of the One-Eyed Coconut" begins "at 7:28 that morning [when] Mayor Pedro Soler the Fourth was cut down by three bullets from an assassin's gun as he ran from the *carenderia* to the plaza." As the story unfolds, we hear the accounts of the mayor's wife, the priest and the hacienda manager and we learn about the scoundrel that was the mayor: abusive, corrupt, and lazy—an "*atsay* killer" (seducer of maidservants) and ruthless murderer. "Oracle" has the flavor of *Rashomon* where each account is like a piece of the puzzle of a crime. But unlike *Rashomon*, which questions the possibility of arriving at the truth, "Oracle" allows us a glimpse of what actually happened. While Captain Baby Baltazar, who investigates the assassination, misreads all of the clues, Estrellita, the village soothsayer, healer and composo singer, sees all of the truth.

"Good Husbands and Obedient Wives" is about the hypocrisy of pious folk and the duplicities of Negros hacendero life and of marriage in general. Divina, the narrator, is inundated by her husband's and by her friend Lita's trite "words of wisdom," pat little statements of common sense that do wonders to end conversations and squelch curiosity. These pearls of wisdom are the perfect masks for chaos and decay. As Divina goes back home to Negros and gets in touch with

her high-school friends Rene and Lita, she is at first taken by the neatness of Lita's life. Rene, the good husband and good provider, is always encouraging of his wife; Lita, the obedient wife, dutifully cooks her husband's favorite dishes and cross-stitches drawer upon drawer of cocktail napkins. Lita's continual avowals of her happiness and of Rene's goodness mask a hideous lie, and Divina realizes this when she sees the writing (in this case, the pornography) on the wall. "Good Husbands" is a story too of the loss of innocence as much as it is about the myths we create.

The most remarkable of the stories in the collection (ironically, it did not win a major prize) is "The Composo of Hacienda Buyung." The story consists of six composo, each telling a story that is interrelated to the rest. It begins with Estrella, the town's composo singer, singing the story of Toto Kiko, the spurned lover, and his lost bag of jewels. Men and women gather around her store to drink and listen to her chanting and to the comments and chatter of those present. The characters gathered at the store—hacienda workers, school teachers, the barangay captain—interject, correct, and argue about the details of the story. There are even dueling composo when other characters pick up the guitar and sing their own composo, which are variations of the same story. Lucero is here able to perfectly capture the feel of the *kuwentong barbero* or the *usapang lasing*, the twice-told tales surely heard not only in Negros but elsewhere in the Philippines.

The details of one story lead us to the next composo; all six composo make up this written story. The six manage to cover all aspects of life in Negros: hacienda life, peasant life, NPAs and CHDFs, "salvagings," corrupt politicians, foreign aid that intensifies poverty, the eccentrics who live in the *Balay Daku*, and the common folk who create myths and sing composo about these eccentrics. The mysteries, conflicting versions, and unanswered questions are cleverly settled in the last three paragraphs—a satisfying sense of closure.

The wonder of this collection is that the stories are written the way stories are told: with wit, familiarity, juicy details, and with insight, and often with the uncertainty of a definitive version. Here, art imitates life. These stories—like no other in Philippine literature in English—celebrate and replicate the power of telling stories and creating legends.

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