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Benjamin Bautista **Stories From Another Time**

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Book Reviews

BENJAMIN BAUTISTA

Stories From Another Time

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008. 128 pages.

One cannot help but associate *Stories From Another Time* with a kind of vehement nostalgia. There is an innocence in the many young boys of these stories who must eventually experience the heartbreak of change, a change that curdles up idealism into bitterness. A young boy in “Sin” trades a silver medallion, his mother’s gift, for a shiny red airplane, which inevitably cracks to pieces. In “New Songs to Sing,” a boy with a God-given voice must come to terms with new desires and a changing body: “My voice had changed and I with it, and everything was gone; I had nothing” (6). In “Batman and Robin,” Joey realizes he cannot continue to play the dynamic duo with his father, because his mother, the one who made the fantasy possible, has passed away. Finally, in “My Father’s Son,” Carlito must not only accept the fact of his venerated father’s death, but also the new, unbearable truth of his father’s flaws come to light.

In other stories, the young men are defenders and preservers of the good ‘ol days of youth, who “wrote of God and beauty and true love that never died” (69). But the girls they give their hearts to, in “About Nora,” “All the Girls Named Lydia,” “The Girl Across the Street,” and “A Girl Named Emong,” are forgetful, false-hearted, or fickle. In the last story, the young narrator finds himself at least partially at fault:

I thought it would be wrong for Emong to change. She should remain the way she was all her life. She was fresh and honest and unaffected and, most important, she was herself. She was Emong and she should never change and I wanted to go up to her and tell her that but alcohol was always one stimulant that had the effects of a sedative on me . . . (112)

Because he chooses to spend more time with a favorite starlet rather than with Emong, who is his truer friend, and before he could affirm Emong for being “unaffected and natural and straightforward” (110), she has already turned into one of the “tired synthetic people” whom he despises.

The author, Benjamin Bautista, himself claims he is interested in the conflicts and contradictions of his characters’ lives. If he wrote “dark, tragic stories,” it was because he thought “they reflected a more serious, more authentic perspective” (xvii). Indeed, there is nothing of the farcical or superficial in his roster of characters: earnest students, old fathers, bright ladies, uptight girls, and jocular friends. They all carry in their hearts a spiritedness that calls to mind Dylan Thomas’s line: “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” His characters struggle for light—whether the light means a lover’s solemn vow to love always, or a father’s reputation as a gentleman of the old school—often fruitlessly, for the light unavoidably dwindles and dies.

Such is the life that Bautista presents, though historically, his stories are set in

a period of peace and predictability without the turmoil, unrest and radical rage of the years to come. Life, if not entirely blissful, was simpler, untroubled, and a few of the stories in this book reflect the awkward, artless, innocence of the time. (xvi)

The time might perhaps be innocent, but there appear tension, “turmoil,” and “unrest” in most—if not all—his stories. Poverty demeans a man in “A Christmas Story,” the helplessness of old age plagues another in “Sampaguitas for Tonight,” the loss of life ruins a husband and wife in “The Baby in the Bottle,” and an attempt at suicide shows up a would-be man in “The Boy.” What is perhaps “innocent” or “artless” too may lie in each story’s conviction that the struggle for light, no matter how foolish, daunting,

or hopeless, rises from the passionate heart of the protagonist, who wishes to safeguard all that he or she holds dear—truth, love, beauty, selfhood—and in the process denies change, progress, perhaps even choice.

In “The Baby in the Bottle,” Mr. Libre lives a half-life of routine, shuttling from home to work and back to home again. He shares his home with a lonely, depressed wife, who clings to a prematurely born baby, which she keeps preserved in a bottle. Soon she slides into a netherworld he cannot reach; yet he chooses to work for her and stay with her just the same,

to understand her and be patient with her. She did not want to be the way she was, he told himself, to live in a small cramped world of her own, to look at the baby, make up daydreams about it all day, to want to touch it, hold it in her hands. She could not help any of it, he knew, and he did not stop her and day by day he got used to her being that way. But still he felt sorry for her. (11)

The baby in the bottle becomes the symbol of themselves as well as their marriage, frozen, or more appropriately, pickled in time, when children and family were still a possibility of the future. Even at work Mr. Libre is stuck and unable to prosper, slaving away at receipts and fighting back tears.

Bautista’s characters are always sympathetic, relatable. They remind us of our own dreams and ideals from another time, now lost or irretrievable because the hours and the days have marched on. Even “The Boy” who mistakes taking his life as proof for manhood stirs up memories of our own immaturity, and the once dreadful necessity of proving ourselves right.

These stories may come from another time, but it is also “a well-remembered time” (69), thanks to the writer who hopes his stories will “provide contemporary readers a better understanding of an age and a generation other than their own” (xviii). Indeed, these stories not only fulfill this hope, but exceed it, because readers will note there are some things that do not change: what Gregorio Brillantes enumerates in his introduction as “the themes of love, desperate lives, death, beauty, youth, memory, cruelty, alienation, violence, tenderness, the visions of young men, the dreams of old men—all comprising the body of the human condition” (xii).

What is more, each of these stories can be held as an exemplar to the form. As Gregorio Brillantes states, Benjamin Bautista is a champion of the short story. He measures up to novelist and critic Francine Prose’s standards

regarding great short stories: each story gives “a feeling of completeness [. . . a] sense of the artistic whole” (xi–xii). More remarkably, “there is the sense in his short stories of an easy competence, a casual unrehearsed performance,” yet in “the seeming effortlessness [Bautista generates] stories of the highest order, in vision and resonance, matter and form and prose; in felicities of language that recall Nick Joaquin, Renato Madrid and Kerima Polotan” (x–xi). Surely, *Stories From Another Time* by Benjamin Bautista must appear upon the literary shelves among books by these celebrated writers: with Joaquin, Madrid, and Polotan, as well as with Francisco Arcellana, NVM Gonzalez, and Gregorio Brillantes.

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MEGAN C. THOMAS

Orientalists, Propagandists, and *Ilustrados*: Filipino Scholarship and the End of Spanish Colonialism

Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 277 pages.

The late-nineteenth century, with the Propaganda Movement and the Revolution of 1896, is arguably one of the most interrogated and intensely studied periods of Philippine history. A book that purports yet again to look at this period may seem superfluous and repetitive, but that is not so in the case of Megan C. Thomas's *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados: Filipino Scholarship and the End of Spanish Colonialism*. By examining this period from the lens of intellectual history, more specifically, the history of the knowledge produced by the *ilustrados*, the author provides a fresh and interesting perspective on an old, familiar topic.

In the first chapter, “Locating Orientalism and the Anthropological Sciences: The Limits of Postcolonial Critiques,” the author establishes the framework of the book in conjunction with the intellectual trends and fields of knowledge that emerged in the late-nineteenth century. Starting out with a background on the state of knowledge in late-nineteenth-century Europe, particularly the ideas that came from the Orientalist standpoint, Thomas sets the stage for a discussion of Philippine intellectual developments in the