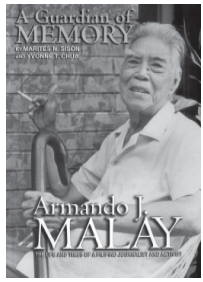
"Remembrancer" of Things Past

by Paz H. Diaz



A Guardian of Memory: Armando J. Malay
The Life and Times of a Filipino Journalist and Activist
by Marites N. Sison and Yvonne T. Chua
Pasig City: Anvil Publishing House, 2002 (236 pp)

Writing a biography can be intimidating, even for seasoned writers. On the one hand, it requires painstaking research, so that one is sure he/she has all the facts right. On the other hand, it demands of the writer the ability to get into the heart and mind of her/his subject, and to make the person "come to life" before the readers. Marites N. Sison and Yvonne T. Chua, authors of the book ***A Guardian of Memory: Armando J. Malay/The Life and Times of a Filipino Journalist and Activist***, have proven that they can rise up to the challenge.

To collect materials for this book, the authors paid regular Thursday afternoon visits to Dean Armando J. Malay from July to September 2000 and shorter and less frequent visits in 2001. In addition to their talks with Malay, the authors found a "gold mine of information" (ix) in his unpublished autobiography, which he titled "The Rushing Years," a 52-volume manuscript crammed with innumerable vignettes and observations of a man who was a reporter, a columnist, a family man, a teacher, a school administrator, and above all, a freedom fighter. The volume of information must have been overwhelming, but Sison and Chua, in the 14 chapters of their book, successfully presented an intimate and vibrant narrative of the multifaceted life of Armando J. Malay – as journalist, educator, human rights activist and family man – and a compelling biography that reads like the history of the Philippine Press.

The book gives the reader a chance to take a closer look at someone whose fame has aroused people's curiosity to learn more about him. He was not really an enigma for he had been forthright in explaining his actions. Hearing the reasons for acting the way he did, straight from the proverbial horse's mouth, is indeed fascinating.

Many readers would wish they had acted the way he did in particular incidents, or, on the contrary, be thankful that they had not acted the way he did in different situations. Unlike many of us, this was a man whose "feet of clay" were never a cause for embarrassment.

For those familiar with Malay and/or the events recounted in the book (e.g. World War II, the Huk rebellion, Diliman Commune, Martial Law), the book will certainly evoke nostalgia. For those who had not yet been born when these events happened, the book will be instructive and will help them construct a more comprehensive picture of the pivotal periods in Philippine history. For both of these readers, Malay's accounts of the various events shed light on the lessons the Filipinos have, and have not, learned. Juan L. Mercado, in his lyrical foreword, calls Malay a "remembrancer," someone who reminded people "of what they preferred to forget." "Remembrancers," according to Mercado, "are vital to a country's freedom. They are, as Herodotus insists, 'guardians of memory'" (viii). Which is what Malay is, "a teller of tales, ensuring that the tribe's ideals would be passed down to subsequent generations" (208).

Malay's work in the Philippine press spanned six decades – from the 1930s to the 1990s. Sison and Chua describe his entry into journalism as "inevitable," nurtured as he was by parents who were no strangers to books and writing. The wisdom gained from those six decades of his journalistic career is encapsulated in this book. It is a rich source of journalistic philosophy, principles and praxis, which makes it a must-read for journalism students and practitioners. For example, his advice to his journalism students carries the same force today as it did during his time: "A would-be newsperson should ask for a newsbeat, rather than a desk assignment, if he wants to savor the thrills of newspaper work" (155). A journalist should "go out, meet a lot of interesting people, cover fires and battles, witness dramatic court trials, run down cases of graft and corruption, interview presidents as well as tramps; in short, have a ringside view of the exciting world outside of the newspaper office" (156).

In these days of media sensationalism, Malay's exhortations on freedom with responsibility are an appropriate reminder for journalists and other media practitioners. Journalism, he says, "should follow the rules of boxing. 'If you're delivering your punches right, you can hit very, very hard. But the rules also forbid you from twisting [your opponent's] arm or hitting below the belt.'" (166).

It is not only from Malay's achievements that journalism practitioners and students stand to learn; his candid narration of his and his fellow journalists' blunders and shortcomings likewise provides lessons on what journalism should and should not be.

For instance, his account of media's coverage of the Huk rebellion reminds journalism practitioners and students of the importance of getting all sides of a story. Malay and his colleagues were witnesses to the cruelty of the soldiers towards the suspected rebels, but "neither he nor the other reporters ever wrote about these military atrocities.... The stories that Malay and his fellow reporters wrote about the Huks never even dealt with the human cost of war" (109). As Malay himself said: "You will not find it in the newspapers if you look at the old files. *Walang nagsasabing kawawa naman ang mga taong yan.* They were treated as *insurrectos*. There was no national dissent. In that sense, the media neglected, for one reason or another, to see the other side; what they were fighting for. We covered it from the military's point of view. Only the who, what, when, where" (109).

The biography's account of Malay's life as an educator not only presents an engrossing portrait of a journalism professor; it also gives the reader a glimpse into the difficult position Malay found himself in as Dean of Student Affairs of the University of the Philippines (UP) in Diliman in the 1970s, the height of student activism. Malay's pro-student stance earned him the military's suspicion. Yet, he was not spared scathing criticisms from the students, who accused him of censorship and plotting to kill the ***Philippine Collegian***, UP's official student publication. Malay gives a vivid description of student anti-government mobilizations in the 1970s in the chapter on the 1971 Diliman Commune (pp. 167-190), and his narration of this event leaves the reader with a sense of nostalgia for the days of feisty student activism.

It would perhaps come as a surprise to some readers that despite being an outspoken and critical journalist and a firm supporter of student activism, Malay "was not as militant as his wife and children" (193). As he himself said: "If not for my wife, I would've been more quiet.... Sometimes I am conservative. My wife was more active. She was joining demos. Her activities went further than mine" (193). Sison and Chua also note that "For many years, Malay shunned violence as a means to achieve power or to overthrow a government, a path that his two children – Bobbie and Dick – had taken, and which his wife supported" (193). It was also his wife who prodded Malay to work for the release of political detainees. He became head of the Kapatiran ng mga Kapisanan para sa Pagpapalaya ng mga Detenidong Politikal (KAPATID), and would always be remembered as "one of the most effective spokespersons for the rights and welfare of political prisoners" (196).

The vignettes in the biography about the people who became part of Malay's life fascinate the reader – some because they demystify larger-than-life personalities, and others because

they bring in the feeling side of a hardcore journalist and activist. One of the stories that stand out is Malay's account of his visit to David Bugoslav, who was dying in an American hospital. Bugoslav had made Malay's life difficult when he (Malay) was still a young journalist. In that visit, Malay recounted: "While I was saying goodbye to him, he gripped my arms and wouldn't let me go. He looked at me steadily, raising gooseflesh in me.... [At that moment] I found it in my heart to forgive him for all his trespasses against me" (154). And then, with the same characteristic wry humor, Malay muses, "the pain I suffered under Bugoslav did some good too. Without that I could've been a bigger braggart than I was. [His] acts of cruelty provided the balance" (154).

Snippets about Malay and his family are, firstly, affirmations of this family's commitment to nationalism, patriotism and activism. Malay's son Dick was in his 20s when he left for China on assignment with the Communist Party of the Philippines. His daughter Bobbie was 31 when she joined the armed struggle of the New People's Army. But there were no regrets about any of these. As the Malays explained: "We never discouraged our children from becoming activists. But we told them to take precautions; not to be reckless" (190). More emphatically, Malay's wife, Paula Carolina, declared: "I am not sorry my children turned out the way they have" (190).

The family sketches likewise offer assurances that even "activist families" grapple with "mundane" concerns: Malay's sense of helplessness without his wife beside him, the sense of loss that he never got over when his wife died, his initial reservations about Bobbie's relationship with Satur Ocampo, the fights he had with his daughter over her decision to go underground, the arguments between Malay and his wife over big and small things, his religious documentation of his grandchildren's milestones.

This biography has something to offer to each category of readers: students, journalists, editors, publishers, teachers, politicians, activists, parents and grandparents. Sison and Chua, indeed, have succeeded in showing the different facets of Malay's life as journalist, as educator, as an activist and in bringing the reader right into Malay's inner circle of family, friends and acquaintances. The authors showed strong devotion not only to the man but also to the journalistic profession he embodied in his lifetime. We all profit from their passion and inspiration.

Paz H. Diaz *obtained her Ph.D. in Communication from the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP CMC). She is an associate professor at the UP CMC Depatment of Journalism. She is also dean of the Faculty of Management and Development Studies of the UP Open University.*