Reading and Re-Remembering in Gina Apostol's *Bibliolepsy*

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First published by the University of the Philippines Press in 1997

Reading Remembrances of a Manila Past

I first read Gina Apostol’s Bibliolepsy in 1998, a year after it was published by the University of the Philippines Press. I was residing in Manila at the time; one of 10 U.S. scholars and artists granted a year-long fellowship to experience the thriving and bustling metropolitan city that keeps expanding to include neighboring provincial towns.

I was there primarily to research my second novel that, mirroring the political and economic state of the country, was in perpetual crisis. But the locals didn’t seem to mind the political circus and economic instability, for they were partying like it was 1999. They had just unanimously elected a president, Joseph Estrada, who first gained national prominence by saving lives in the movies before shooting his mouth off in politics, which seems to be the trajectory for opportunists and oligarchs. Two years after holding office, the action-hero-turned-mayor-turned-senator-turned-champion-of-the-poor-president would be ousted through another People Power revolution, the second in 14 years.

Rolling the Revolution

 Revolutions are like rolling power and water outages in the country—they occur more often than Jesus appearing through the hole of a magic doughnut or Mary speaking in French to young boys aspiring to be beauticians. The first People Power is the setting for the second part of Bibliolepsy. It takes place in Manila in 1986, when the Marcos dynasty, after nearly two decades of plundering and exploiting the nations’ resources, reached a climactic end, with the ailing despot being wheeled into a U.S. military plane bound for Honolulu via Guam.
Buy the Book by the Cover

I was sold on the cover of Bibliolepsy alone: a girl in braided pigtails sitting on the floor with an opened book the size of a photo album before her. She has her palms pressed hard onto the floor covered by rumpled sheets, as if she has just pulled herself up from the world of her reading to look up at the camera. One can deduce that the wide-eyed girl is Primi, the bibliophile protagonist in Apostol’s debut novel whose world revolves around books.

Sex, Books, Revolution

A memory that stuck to me about the novel was its frank treatment of sex. In fact, the novel opens with the narrator Primi’s definition of “bibliolepsy” as “a mawkishness derived from habitual aloneness and congenital desire” that manifests in “a quickening between the thighs and in the points of the breast, a broad aching V, when addressed by writers, books, bibliographies, dictionaries, xerox machines. . . .”

Prior to Bibliolepsy, the only books from the Philippines that candidly dealt with sex were the groundbreaking anthologies Forbidden Fruit: Erotic Writings: Women Write the Erotic (Anvil, 1992), edited by Tina Cayugan, and Ladlad: Philippine Gay Writings (Anvil, 1994), edited by Danton Remoto and J. Neil Garcia. To my knowledge, Bibliolepsy is the first single-authored novel by a Filipina that unabashedly talks about sex (because sex is best when it’s unabashed!) and connects it to reading. Most importantly, it’s told from the perspective of a Filipina.

So, memories of sex, books, and, oh, yeah, the EDSA Revolution, also known as “People Power” (because, like our first names, we Filipinos can’t just settle for a single appellation to christen our revolutions; we have to have nicknames for them as well).

I was also intrigued by the novel’s formatting. It reminded me of the novels of one of my favorite Brazilian writers and early influences, Machado de Assis. An autodidact and grandson of freed slaves, De Assis predated postmodernism by a century. His novels were experimental, wickedly funny, witty, smart, and über critical of his country, like Apostol and her novels.
Bibliolepsy, for example, is formatted like de Assis’s Epitaph of a Small Winner. Both are divided into small sections with catchy titles.

My 1999 memories of Bibliolepsy end here.

Twenty-Three Years Later . . .

Thanks to Soho Press, home of three of Apostol’s four novels (to date), U.S. readers now have the opportunity to read her debut novel and be entranced by her poetic language, experimental narratives, and multidisciplinary interests. The subjects of Apostol’s novels include U.S. empire and Spanish colonialism in the Philippines, metafiction, and reading in relation to translating and adapting, as explored in The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata and Insurrecto, respectively. Also recurring in her subsequent novels are orphaned, nonconformist characters with histories of love and reading, survival and abandonment. These novels are as provocative and subversive as the revolutions Apostol writes about.

Rereading Bibliolepsy, I find myself once again surrendering to the wordsmith Primi who is wickedly funny, erudite, and unapologetic, living on a cocktail of sex and books.

The Motherland, in a Nutshell

“. . . it was quite true that the Philippine islands were like dreams of each other, ideas unreconciled, lands not destined for discovering but, with luck, an apprehension.”

Lost in Memory, Recovered by Reading

The difference between me as the reader then and 23 years later is that, in 1998, I had just begun to train myself to read as a writer, meaning, in addition to content (character and plot development), I also began to study how authors put their books together, from their plot and character development (or lack of), to dissemination of information, narrative structure, sentences, and the use of punctuation. And if the work is
experimental, what exactly is the writer doing to challenge or expand our
definitions of genres?

After studying Bibliolepsy, I’ve come up with the following structural
analysis. The book is structured as a two-novella-like novel. The first part is
set predominantly in Tacloban, Leyte, also hometown of Imelda Marcos, and
focuses on Primi’s parents, from their initial encounter aboard a ship ferrying
them from Manila to Tacloban, to their romance in the time of Komiks and
TB, to the birth of their two daughters Annie and Primi, to their suspicious
deaths (a double suicide?). Primi’s father, Prospero Peregrino, is an animator
known for his controversial anti-Marcos cartoons, and her mother, Prima, is
a taxidermist. “In a tidy manner of putting it . . . my father’s productions of
impossible lives and my mother’s belief in impossible death.”

Logophile

Love for books begins with love for words, and for Primi, age four, those
first-loved words were “labia,” “mound,” and “fellatio,” extracted from a
brown-wrapped paperback Autobiography of a Louse her father had been
reading on the boat on the day he met his future wife. A logophile, Primi
slept with the Oxford Dictionary, all 20 volumes, that her grandmother
had gifted her and her sister Annie. A bibliophile, she can read practically
anywhere except while riding in cars (weak intestines she inherited from
her mother).

Manila, My Manila

The book’s setting shifts to Manila in Part Two, where Primi lives with her
20-year-old sister/guardian Annie and Annie’s fiancé. The three reside in a
tiny Makati apartment until Annie leaves to pursue her lover as well as her
calling as a healer. After graduating from high school, the biblioklept Prima
attends the University of the Philippines and surrounds herself with writers,
promising and jaded, virginal and slimy. Primi reads their books, attends
their readings, and, regardless of the quality of their prose or poetry, screws
them, sometimes assuming the role of the seductress/aggressor.
To her, sexual conquests and literary pursuits are one and the same. She also gives us access inside Manila’s bohemia, a navel-gazing circle of artists and writers tirelessly engaging in bacchanalia of alcohol, sex, and nocturnal poetry and prose readings as dank and humid as the tropical climate. On one hand, who can fault them? The only literary prize is awarded every September. Such is the sad literary state of the republic. The novel ends in February 1986, highlighting the People Power revolution that ended the 20-year Marcos dictatorship. The three-day nation-altering event is marked with protest poetry readings, prayer rallies, and, in-between the vigilance and verses, Primi fucking and talking of books.

Thirty-six years after the end of the kleptocratic dictator Ferdinand Marcos’s regime is deposed, his son, Bongbong Marcos, Jr., is elected president by a landslide.

What’s Your Type?

*Bibliolepsy* is about the love of books and the pleasure one receives from reading—that romantic interlude between text and reader, corporeal and imagination. The stimuli are sensual and sexual, as much as intellectual. There are many types of readers. Primi offers us six. There is the Man of La Mancha reader “who believes in an ideal world as he finds it in a book.” The Emma Bovary reader is the “escapist who appropriates books to patch her own face.” This is the reader as a narcissist who turns to books to escape their ennui-ridden existence. The third type is the Paolo and Francesca reader who “may not even like to read at all. It’s simply that one book might pander an arousal,” for “love in print begets love in the loins.” The fourth, Kinbote, is the reader as scholar. This reader comes equipped with highlighters and pens, marking up the text with annotations and editorial notes for its editors. Supremo the Reader is the “decisive reader who acts on a book, thus changing the course of history.” Examples of this reader are the Filipinos of 1896 whose revolution against Madrasta España was sparked by Jose Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere*. Apostol talks about it in *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*. Last is the Bouvard and Pécuchet reader, or “garbage collector of cultures.”
We Read, Ergo We Are

The list of reasons is endless. We read (out loud even) to breathe and break away momentarily from our lives and our messy world, only to measure the book’s worth by its proximity to our version of truth. I read for the same reasons as I write. I read to learn how other books, like those of Apostol’s, are ingeniously assembled. I read because books like Bibliolepsy afford me the opportunity to partake, albeit as a bystander, in nation-altering events. Through Primi/Apostol, I got an eyewitness’s account of what it was like to be in the eye of a revolution, amidst all the chaos, danger, beauty, and resilience of an unarmed collective protected only by prayers and the power of solidarity. At the time, I was a high school student in Honolulu where, coincidentally, the ousted dictator and his cronies ended up in exile. I read to refuel my art and rage, my childhood memories and ambivalent love for a place I also call home. I read because, like Primi, reading is an integral part of my identity. Just as the identity of a book is shaped very much by the sum of experiences of the reader, from what they remember most about the book, to how it relates to their immediate lives and communities, to personal/current events that may not have anything to do with the book’s content. “I was reading this book when such and such happened to me.” Last, but not least, I read so I won’t forget. For reading is remembering, just as books and being to Primi are one and the same.