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## Manananggal Terrorizes Ateneo: Fiction versus the Apocalypse

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to dedicate this talk to my late friend Uro dela Cruz. His full name was Rosauro Quevedo dela Cruz. He was born in Lucban. He taught in Ateneo occasionally in the film department. He was a screenwriter. He wrote the screenplays of Scorpio Nights, Unfaithful Wife, and many other important Filipino movies. He's probably best remembered as the director of Bubble Gang, which will run forever. Uro died in 2016. I spent much of the 2010s hanging out with Uro dela Cruz and Butch Perez. We would go to Quiapo to look for pirated DVDs. I am not anti-piracy, obviously. That was the source of my film education. We called it the Quiapo Cinema Tech. One of the proudest moments of my life was going to the grotty strip malls in Quiapo and hearing the vendors whom I would go to every week and bug about getting classic European films. And, you know, to walk through the strip mall and have people yelling, hoy, Fellini! Ozu! Tarkovsky! Visconti! And I am proud because it's because of makulit people like me, film fans, that the DVD pirates were aware of these filmmakers, and I like to imagine that while they're sitting in their stalls, swatting flies, some of them were watching Zona or Tokyo Story.

Jessica Zafra

# MANANANGGAL TERRORIZES ATENEO: FICTION VERSUS THE APOCALYPSE\*

Transcribed by Juliana Gono

**T**hank you very much to the committee on the Fr. Henry Lee Irwin, SJ, Chair for naming me this year's [2019–20] chair holder. Chair holder? I feel like furniture.

It's an honor to be acknowledged by the academe because I don't actually have a BA, and also I am what you call a popular writer. I don't mean that everybody reads me, but that real people read me as opposed to the people who will write papers about me, so this, this

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\* I would like to dedicate this talk to my late friend Uro dela Cruz. His full name was Rosauro Quevedo dela Cruz. He was born in Lucban. He taught in Ateneo occasionally in the film department. He was a screenwriter. He wrote the screenplays of *Scorpio Nights*, *Unfaithful Wife*, and many other important Filipino movies. He's probably best remembered as the director of *Bubble Gang*, which will run forever. Uro died in 2016. I spent much of the 2010s hanging out with Uro dela Cruz and Butch Perez. We would go to Quiapo to look for pirated DVDs. I am not anti-piracy, obviously. That was the source of my film education. We called it the Quiapo Cinema Tech. One of the proudest moments of my life was going to the grotty strip malls in Quiapo and hearing the vendors whom I would go to every week and bug about getting classic European films. And, you know, to walk through the strip mall and have people yelling, *hoy*, Fellini! Ozu! Tarkovsky! Visconti! And I am proud because it's because of *makulit* people like me, film fans, that the DVD pirates were aware of these filmmakers, and I like to imagine that while they're sitting in their stalls, swatting flies, some of them were watching *Zona* or *Tokyo Story*.

is a great honor. Actually, as we go along, I will show you that not only is it attractive to me for the prestige, but also because it's a job. When I look at the roster of previous holders of this chair, there are literary writers, there are National Artists, and so on. I find that I am probably the first chair holder who is part of that endangered species, the working writer, as in I live off my writing. And I feel that right at the start of this lecture, I have to give the most important piece of advice to people who want to be writers: your parents were right. You should become doctors, lawyers, etcetera, and then write on the side because it's really tough, and I'm talking to you from the position of someone who's already semi-famous.

The title of this talk was invented by the dean, who suggested "Manananggal Terrorizes Ateneo." *Manananggal Terrorizes Manila* was the name of my first collection of short stories. The title comes from something that happens regularly during election season, and also in other times of political turmoil, when there are sightings of *manananggal*. (For those of you who did not grow up watching *Shake, Rattle, and Roll*, *manananggal* are those monsters who are women by day, and at night they divide in two, and the upper half grows black wings, big hair, and claws, and flies around in search of human blood. The way to kill a *manananggal* is to find the lower half, and fill it with rock salt, so that the upper half cannot reconnect with its lower body. So it has to fly around until dawn, at which point, the sunlight vaporizes it.) The *manananggal* is always a woman, and I distinctly remember when I was thinking of a title for my short-story collection, Ishmael Bernal, the director, guested on a talk show, and he connected the *manananggal* sightings to the fact that there was a presidential election and the main contender was Miriam Defensor-Santiago, who arguably won the election. So, it was an anti-woman thing: "Oh, you're going to vote for a woman president again?" Here come the monsters.

That was the title of my first collection of short stories. I am a

short-story writer. I've written a novel, but I find that because I have a short attention span, the short-story form is really what works for me. Now, I'm afraid to disappoint some of you who may have come expecting actual *manananggal* when we are not going to discuss monsters. If you are interested in monsters, it would be better for you to seek out the classic *Creatures of Lower Philippine Mythology* by Maximo D. Ramos. *Manananggal* are classified as viscera eaters, it's like biology.

I'm going to talk off the top of my head. I do give a lot of talks, and being on radio trained me to talk into the dead air, so I can basically talk with my brain disconnected from my mouth. This might also be useful for tracing my writing process because it's really very random and spontaneous. Whatever jumps in, I try to connect it to the work. So let's get started.

This is a still from the original *Frankenstein* movie because writing is in many ways a horrific job. Lots of renowned writers have talked about the horror of the blank page, but I find that the blank page no longer presents any horror if writing is basically what you do with your life, and life is what you do outside of writing. Basically I treat life as the distraction, and writing as the real reason that I am on earth.

### THE COMPLETE AND UTTER HELL OF WRITING FOR A LIVING

I would like to first talk about being a “working writer.” I can name very few people besides myself who write for a living. Some of our finest writers are working in the academe, or in the advertising industry, or in journalism, or, an even worse hell than mine, that of crafting speeches for politicians who do not deserve to have your words in their mouths.

I'm fortunate in that I started writing when I was eight years old. Because my parents were not great readers, what we had was that

staple of middle-class homes in my generation, *Reader's Digest* Condensed Books. Even then, I was kind of a snob because I looked at them and said, "Condensed? You're not even the complete versions!"

I went to school at St. Theresa's in Quezon City, which was an excellent training ground for grammar because many of the women editors in newspapers and magazines come from St. Theresa's. Letty Magsanoc was from St. Theresa's. Thelma San Juan, Millet Mananquil, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil were from St. Theresa's. The rudiments were taught very well, and apart from that, handwriting. I still write by hand today, so I know that if a giant EMP takes out the internet, I'm not going to miss a keyboard because I can still write in cursive.

I started writing at eight. As I was saying, we didn't have many books in the house, so I would borrow books from the school library. One time, I ran out of things to read, and being a kid—you know that all kids are essentially *mayabang* [arrogant]—I was thinking: I don't have anything to read; surely I can write something myself. I read a lot of books. I can write something. So I wrote some crappy ABAB rhyme, which I was very proud of, and which convinced me that this was what I was going to do for the rest of my life.

And then, when I was supposed to go to grade seven, my parents suggested I apply to Philippine Science High School. (I think apart from the prestige, one of the attractions for going to Philippine Science High School was *libre, e*. It was free and you got a stipend. It was really my parents' choice, and if you poll graduates of Philippine Science, I think many of them will tell you that their parents kind of pushed them to go there.) And so, I went to Philippine Science. From St. Theresa's, where I was top of the class (it was easy because I have a really good memory, and basically, if you listen in class and remember the facts, then you're fine), I had to go to Philippine Science, where I learned what torment is all about because I had to put up a massive effort just to get the basics while my classmates

who were sleeping in class would get everything right. This only cemented my resolve. I said, “Well, obviously I’m not going to be a mathematician, or a theoretical physicist. I really am going to be a writer.” I believe that in order to become a writer, you got to have something to write about, and there’s nothing like torment.

And so, after high school, I started freelancing for magazines, and here’s the depressing fact: I was freelancing during the eighties and early nineties and they actually paid freelance writers more than what freelance writers get paid now. That harks back to my earlier piece of advice: don’t be a freelance writer. On the other hand, college tuition was low at UP [the University of the Philippines], and I managed to put myself in college by writing articles for magazines, mostly profiles of movie starlets who were on the covers of women’s magazines. At that time, I used to read a lot of *Rolling Stone* magazines. So I would go and interview a starlet that I couldn’t tell apart from the other starlets, but I would treat it like a *Rolling Stone* profile. That’s how I entertained myself, and I managed to save up for my tuition, and so on, which wasn’t a great effort, because tuition in UP was very cheap.

So in college, I had the good fortune to get accepted to the UP National Writers Workshop—it’s still going on. I went when I was in my second year, and among the facilitators were Francisco Arcellana, who was wonderful, Jimmy [Gémino] Abad, the dad of Cyan Abad, who teaches here; and I think it was Jimmy Abad who pointed out that my short stories read like movies. He was right because I feel that movies influenced my writing as much as books did. Also present at that workshop was Butch [Jose] Dalisay. I remember that, in UP, you had to pick your concentration around the second year, and I had a choice between Comparative Literature and Creative Writing. I asked Butch Dalisay, who I ran into at the cafeteria, for advice. He said, “Well, you already know how to write, so why don’t you take Comparative Literature, which is essentially

reading?” So I said, “Yes, okay.” I read a lot of books and a lot of books in translation.

I can't say I finished college because I lacked one unit in Physical Education. I've always hated PE (and one thing about me is you can't make me do something I don't want to. Give me the consequences, I just don't want to). I lacked one PE, and then when I hit thirty, they said, “Oh, you don't have to take PE, because you're old. You can just go ahead and apply for your diploma.” And I said, “No, I think I like being an undergraduate.” One of the advantages of being an undergraduate is that no one can force you to teach. I've always had a horror of teaching. I can teach short workshops, but teaching is such a huge responsibility that I feel should be left to people who are good at it. And, you know, also, I have no patience, and the body count would be too high.

After I left college, I supported myself again by doing freelance work, and my expenses had gone up because I decided to move out of my parents' house. One of the first things I learned about writing was that in order to write, I have to be alone. I'm sure a lot of people can write in the middle of a crowd, or while having very active social lives, but I've never really been a sociable person, and I really like being alone. I think this is a plus if you want to write fiction because, essentially, you're having a conversation with yourself. Now, Filipino society is suspicious of people who want to be alone. I like to go to the mall and write there. I'll have lunch and stick around with my coffee and scribble on my notebook. You will not believe the number of people who have come up to me and said, “Mag-isa ka?” [Are you by yourself?] They cannot conceive of anyone who wants to be alone. And yet, if you want to listen to the voices in your head, which are hopefully not manifestations of schizophrenia, you really should like your solitude. I could not be alone in a house with my parents, and my sister was growing up so I decided that I would go and get my own apartment. Which became a subject of one of the short stories

in my book, which I hope you will read, which I hope you will buy, because working writer.

Apart from writing feature articles, I found out that public-relations agencies will pay freelance writers to write press releases. This is the way it works. Procter & Gamble releases a new shampoo, and then the PR agent hires you to write ten different versions of the same press release. It was soul-crushing work, but it paid very well and it paid the bills.

I'd always believed that the apocalypse was coming. This is what comes from reading Revelations as a child. Apart from the *Reader's Digest* Condensed Books, we had the Bible at home, and the Old Testament is great. It's full of smiting and violence, but the New Testament is full of advice—women be like this, women be like that—so I skipped most of it and went straight to Revelations. So, yes, I was half-expecting the apocalypse to happen. And 1990 and 1991 were an especially apocalyptic time because you had the first Iraq War massing, and then you had the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, so we would have ashfall every morning, a thick layer in the driveway, and also, there was the cataclysmic earthquake in Baguio, which killed thousands of people. And so, I was sitting in my apartment thinking, the world is going to end . . . I have a lot of stuff to write.

So I sat down and wrote this story, and being in my early twenties and mayabang, I said, "Ah! I will send this to the magazine where all my favorite writers were published. I will send it to the *New Yorker*." I sent it to the *New Yorker*, and because this was the early nineties they still had the courtesy to return your manuscript along with a form that said, "We are sorry we cannot use this material at this time." So, I was looking at it, at my story and my crushed dreams of being in the *New Yorker*, and at the same time— Does anybody remember broadsheets? Newspapers on paper? It said, "Deadline for the Palanca Awards." I thought, well, what am I going to do with

this? I only have to make four copies and submit the forms. I went and submitted it to the Palanca Awards, and it won. It won because I lucked out. The head of the jury that year was Adrian Cristobal—Adrian Cristobal, not one of the academic types, but someone who wrote a lot. I remember his comment about it was “This story grabs you by the neck,” which has basically been my rule, as in the first sentence should grab the reader because what’s to stop the reader from turning the page? The first paragraph has to stop them from turning the page, right?

Because I had won a Palanca Award, I met Karina Bolasco, who is still my publisher. I followed her here [Ateneo de Manila], and she published my first book, *Manananggal Terrorizes Manila* [in 1992]. And then, to my horror, being a published short-story writer doesn’t mean that that’s going to be your living. Nope. I continued to freelance.

Then I wrote a column in a broadsheet called *Today*. Abe Florendo, who died a few years ago, hired me to write a column in the lifestyle section. I said, “What do I write about?” He said, “Ah, whatever you want!” Mostly it became kind of a proto-blog, because I was writing about myself, what I ate, what I watched, what gigs I went to. It was called *Twisted*, and it became quite popular. And I was consciously addressing the smarter readers by employing irony. I would be saying one thing, but if you were a smarter reader, if you were used to reading, you would know that I meant the opposite, and so it was kind of a Rorschach test for the reader. If they got what I was saying, great, then we could talk, but if you did not get what I was saying, well, I cannot help you there.

One example of how irony is . . . well, some people really are irony-challenged because there was this truly, truly, terrible Baguio writer, whose book I read. Ambeth Ocampo gave me a copy of the book. It was terrible. It was so terrible that even if we all tried to write a book, we could not be that terrible. I wrote a column where

I kind of overdid the irony thing. I said, “This is the Gabriel Garcia Marquez of our time. This guy, watch him. He’s going to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.” And he believed it. He wrote to me, thanking me, and that’s when I learned that irony has a downside because I may have enabled him to write more books.

### THE SOUL-CRUSHING HORROR OF SEMI-FAME

We were talking about the complete and utter hell of writing for a living, and now we get to the soul-crushing horror of semi-fame. I call my condition semi-fame because I have traveled with people who were truly famous. I went to the States with the Eheads, the Eraserheads, and they were so famous that everywhere we went, I could feel my ears bleeding because all I could hear were screams, really. That was all I could hear. I was their temporary manager and I discovered that—oh, it only lasted four months; well, it was going to be a temp job anyway—I discovered that if you become a manager of people whose massive fame has nothing to do with you, there is no reason for them to ever listen to you. So I was there, kind of like furniture. I knew that I had made the wrong decision because I assumed that the term *eraserheads* came from a David Lynch movie I love, which is *Eraserhead*. And so, when we got to LA, someone from the indie press suggested, “Oh, let’s take a photograph of the band in front of the coffee shop where Jack Nance, the star of *Eraserhead*, was bludgeoned to death.” It was kind of a morbid concept, but I suggested it to the band, and the vocalist said, “I finally saw *Eraserhead*.” They had named the band before seeing the movie. “I didn’t like it.” And that’s when I knew I was in the wrong place.

Along with writing a column—because in the Philippines, if you do well, if a lot of people read the columns and the books of the collections of the columns, they think it’s a reward for you to go to television—I did television for a while. I was one of the hosts of a current-affairs show, and I find that TV was really boring and

tedious because everyone is making a fuss about your makeup and whether you're shiny, and no one really cares what is coming out of your mouth. It was not for me. Radio, I enjoy, because basically you put me in front of a microphone and I can keep talking.

In the nineties, one of the major events was that *Sex and the City* started coming out on cable. *Sex and the City* made it a requirement for any straight woman who, you know, who got it, to have a gay best friend. So gay best friends were the handbags of the nineties. The thing is, when I was writing *Twisted*, I guess because I was writing from the position of an outsider, I found that I had a great affinity with gay people. I can tell you that, 90 percent of the time, I am hanging out with gay people. Sometimes weeks pass before I talk to a straight person. If gay people were the handbag of the nineties, I am the handbag of the gay people.

In the nineties, I started traveling, and that's when I started expanding my reading. I would read the books by the citizens of or set in the places that I was going to. In the last two decades, I've read a lot of books set in Venice, Prague, Paris, Warsaw, and, most recently, in Spain. Then, in the early 2000s, one of the columns I wrote was spun off into a monthly magazine called *Flip: The Official Guide to World Domination*. This is the column where I said that the Philippines can take over the world just by organizing all the OFWs, particularly the nannies and the domestic workers, into an army. We could take over the planet by just going on strike, right? This became the basis for a magazine which lasted eight issues before we ran out of money. We had been funded by rich people who found us amusing. That's when I discovered that the line in *Almost Famous* is true. It was uttered by Philip Seymour Hoffman, who was playing the very influential music critic Lester Bangs. He said, "These people are not your friends." Okay, you should remember this as you go through life when you're flattered because rich people kind of adopt you, treat you like one of them. These people are not your friends.

I had already quit my old paper, *Today*, and I started writing columns for the *Philippine Star* and interaksyon [the news website]. And in 2014, I had a medical drama. My brain shut down, and it was a simple case of water intoxication. It happens a lot to marathon runners, which is the only time I would ever have anything in common with marathon runners. Basically, I had the flu. I was only drinking fluids and not eating, so my sodium and potassium levels dropped, and so my brain shut down. I had an appointment that day and I went out of the house, I said goodbye to my cats, I locked the door, my brain shut down, I sat on the stairs. And lucky me, because if I had stayed in the house, my brain would have shut down, and then I would have gone into a coma. But I sat on the stairs, and I think my eyeballs went white, kind of like the wargs in *Game of Thrones* as they turned into birds. The janitor and the building administrator took me to the hospital, where the emergency room doctors said, “Oh, it’s water intoxication. We just have to bring her electrolyte levels back up, and then she’ll be fine.” So they put me in the hospital because they have to do that slowly or else your sodium goes up too fast your brain will explode. Then the doctors in Makati Med looked at me and said, surely that’s not the only thing wrong with this woman. So they put me through every medical test known to man. They gave me a spinal tap for water intoxication, and the strange result of having spent over a week in the hospital was that I found out that I was in perfect health.

But that got me to thinking, what am I doing with myself? I’ve been doing the same thing for over two decades, I still don’t have a novel, I have only one collection of short stories, and I have to continually crank out columns and features in order to support myself. There has to be a way out of this.

And then 2016 happened, and as far as I know, in 2016, the apocalypse started. First, David Bowie died, and then Prince died, and then the swing to the far right all over the world; and I thought,

I can't write a column anymore, there's no talking to trolls. It's time to stop and write a novel, which I had been threatening to do all my life. So I quit all my columns and I wrote a novel. The great thing about having written three columns a week for twenty years is that I wrote my novel in three months because it's really all about habit, you know? When people ask me, "What is your writing process," it's really habit. You have to work yourself up to a state where if you don't write on a certain day, you feel ill. I wrote that [novel] in three months.

I was talking about the horror of semi-fame. The thing with having a lot of readers, followers, and so on, is that people feel that they know you especially if you've been on television—you've been in their house. And so, they feel free to accost you whatever they're doing. You're in a restaurant, eating, and you're putting food in your mouth, and then someone comes up and starts having a really personal conversation. That's when I got the reputation as a bitch because if I'm eating, you cannot stand between me and my food. I'm not saying that I don't deserve the reputation, but people will interrupt you because there's a sense of ownership that comes from being your faithful reader.

### WRITING AS THERAPY

Anyway, one good thing about writing is that it's a form of therapy. It saves me a trip to the shrink, and let me tell you that shrinks are very expensive; we are in the middle of a mental health epidemic. I think the statistics for suicide and depression are through the roof and I feel that if more people kept diaries, it would at least be an outlet for them to express what ails them, what keeps them from leading the lives they want to lead. Of course, the problem is a lot of people also don't know how to express themselves, so there you have it.

But I've been keeping a journal since I was fifteen, and of course, in the early days, it was mostly hatred of your teachers, unhappiness, unrequited love, general neurosis. But then in college, one of my

favorite authors was Graham Greene. He wrote *The Power and the Glory*, *The End of the Affair*, *Our Man in Havana*, *The Comedians*, and so on. In an interview, he said that if you write one thousand words a day, the books will take care of themselves. And so, I trained myself, beginning in college, to write one thousand words a day.

So you work yourself up to one thousand words a day. I always compare this to training yourself for tennis competitions by serving one thousand times a day, so that when you're standing on Centre Court in Wimbledon, you're not thinking of where you're going to put the ball. If you've trained enough, it's almost a kind of automatic pilot. Later, I found out that the quotation that I read was wrong. He said, five hundred words a day. This is good because I feel that I can take an occasional break from writing. I've gotten so used to writing a journal that if I didn't write about something, I'm not sure it really happened.

And then, a good thing about keeping a journal is that you have something to read for material. I remember a quote by Oscar Wilde. He said, "I always take my diary with me while I'm on the train, so that I have something sensational to read." Oscar Wilde was right. If your life is boring, why does your diary have to be boring as well? As in you can spice up your life. You can lie. As in, no one is going to read your diary, right, unless you want it published. Diaries, I feel, should be burned upon your death. But then you can quote them for material.

My worldview is very simple: no matter how terrible things are, you can always write about them. And so, I like to repeat something by the Roman writer Ovid: Be patient and tough. Someday this day will all be useful to you.

### WHO ARE YOUR INFLUENCES?

When we write, we develop our own voice by admiring certain practitioners of the art, and then imitating them, and getting to the point where you feel confident enough in your skills so you can drop them altogether. I have made a quick list of my influences.

First, *Sesame Street*. I grew up during the *Sesame Street* era. Not only does it teach you language, but everything is delivered through humor, right? So I feel that my generation's sense of humor is very much inflected by *Sesame Street*. You also have a lot of cultural references, like suddenly an orange starts singing the aria from *Carmen*, and so when you hear the aria from *Carmen*, oh, I recognize that from *Sesame Street*. I read an article recently that *Sesame Street* was really part of the civil rights movement where they were trying to reach inner city kids as an educational program. In a way, even if we were just sitting at home watching TV, we were part of the civil rights movement.

I have to say that the first time I went to New York, I didn't know the train system, so I got on the wrong train. It was an express train, so I got off in Harlem, and I started to walk around Harlem, and I said, "I know this place. This is where *Sesame Street* was shot!" And I felt no fear. I have *titas* [aunts]; they wind up in Harlem or the Bronx and they're terrified. If you saw *Sesame Street*, you found them familiar.

And then, also, I read a lot of fairy tales, and as I mentioned, the Old Testament. The Old Testament is great for the grandeur of the language in the King James Bible, and also for all the smiting. Religious leaders are always criticizing the media for all the sex and violence, but no one has more sex and violence than the Old Testament. I'm not kidding. You've got incest of *Game of Thrones* proportions, you've got smiting, you've got genocide, the works.

Another book that was very important to me growing up was Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, which was my substitute for a classical education. That's where we learned Greek and Roman mythology. Recently, I watched the film *The Lighthouse*, with Robert Pattinson and Willem Dafoe, and I was very proud of myself because when I was watching, I said, "Aha! I recognize those allusions. That's Proteus, the sea god, and Prometheus, whose liver was eaten away by eagles." Reading Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* is a great foundation

for learning literature. I know because when I went to college and I was taking Shakespeare under Professor [Wilhelmina] Ramas, who was wonderful and terrifying, the only times I could answer was when I recognized the names of the Greek characters. And whenever people despair that Filipinos don't read, I like to point out that Fully Booked has sold thousands of copies of the hardcover anniversary-edition of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, so there's hope, you know.

And then, of course, like my people my age, I read Nancy Drew, which not only taught me about girl power—because the leads were all girls—it taught me the rudiments of plot, how to maintain suspense, and so on. And it also taught me a very important lesson: that serials really sell because people cannot wait to get the next installment, so it's always been a mystery to me as to why there are not more murder mysteries in the Philippines. We should all be writing murder mysteries. We don't even have to invent them. You can just read the papers.

No, seriously, we all need to write murder mysteries because it's easy. What is stopping us from writing murder mysteries? I find that the major cities of the world all have a great detective attached to them. For England it's Sherlock Holmes, for France Inspector Maigret. So in the Philippines, where is our local detective? Is this because the procedural part is going to be very difficult because by the time the police get to the corpse, everyone has taken a souvenir and stepped on the evidence? Plus, does anything get solved? It would have to be a murder mystery slash fantasy, but if you want to write novels, there's nothing like murder mysteries. The process is already very clear and defined. If there is a writer's block, there is also reader's block, where for some reason, you cannot bring yourself to finish a book. Pick up a murder mystery. Before you know it, you'll have read ten of those, and then, you know, you're right back on track.

I grew up during the martial law era when there were reruns of classic *Star Trek*, not Jean Luc Picard's *Star Trek*, but the tacky

one with William Shatner as James T. Kirk going around the galaxy, getting with all the babes on all the planets, and being a terrible ham. I watched a lot of *Star Trek*, and *Star Trek*, at the time, made up for the wonkiness of its sets—people would have a fight, push each other, and go right through the cardboard set—by hiring the most important science fiction writers of the era to write the scripts, so it was hard science fiction. And I hate to say this about *Star Wars*—I also enjoyed *Star Wars* in my childhood—but *Star Wars* is fantasy. *Star Trek* is science fiction.

Because I love science fiction, I've read *Dune* by Frank Herbert. I've read Philip K. Dick, whose work was the basis of *Blade Runner*, and of course, Ursula Le Guin, who was my bet for a Nobel Prize, but then she died.

And then, also, because I spent a lot of time at home— It's weird because the martial law administration controlled the press, controlled the news, but then, on TV they showed a lot of stuff that unsupervised ten-year-olds could watch. As a ten-year-old, I was sitting at home at ten in the morning watching *Dog Day Afternoon* with Al Pacino. I saw Martin Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. I saw John Boorman's *Deliverance*, which is why, to this day, I'm afraid of rednecks with ukuleles, and then *Hammer House of Horror* and Woody Allen movies. I know Woody Allen is a very controversial figure now, a lot of people have canceled him, but I haven't canceled him because much of my worldview is based on the fantasy formed by watching a lot of Woody Allen movies, where people sit around arguing about literature and fighting with the people in line to watch a documentary.

*The Catcher in the Rye* is very important to me because I learned to write my first short stories by imitating the voice of Holden Caulfield. And so, I imitated the voice of Holden Caulfield in several short stories until the ridiculousness of it occurred to me: why am I trying to sound like a sixteen-year-old from the Upper East Side? I think I should start talking more like myself.

But imitation is how I discovered how to write, and if you're wondering how to develop your voice, I would suggest that you do what old-timey writers used to do. They would copy their favorite novels by hand. They would get Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and copy it because you're sort of replicating the experience of writing it, even if it's basically a form of ventriloquism. You will pick up something along the way. For instance, you love *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton. Get a notebook and start copying it by hand and you will pick up something.

Although I would like to think that while the influence of J. D. Salinger has lessened in my work, I have also learned an important thing from J. D. Salinger, which is that you have to protect yourself from the fandom. As you know, he later became a recluse. He lived in New Hampshire, and people would try to take pictures with him and get his autograph, but he had the right idea in that you can't be listening to the fans and giving them what they want. You have to be true to yourself. If that requires living in the woods and not talking to anyone, maybe that's what you have to do.

This was another favorite of mine in college, *The Collected Stories of John Cheever*. A roaring, drunken bisexual, he was representative of the *New Yorker*-school of writing. One of the things that they used to do at the *New Yorker* was that they would cut out the last paragraph in your story so everything was *bitin* [incomplete]. I liked it because . . . Yeah, let the reader do a little work. If they're optimistic, maybe they can think of an optimistic ending, and if they are pessimistic, then, you know, doom.

I've always loved the cinema. As I've mentioned, movies have had at least as much influence on my writing as books do. We always talk about the process of adapting novels for film, but I think I'm doing it backwards in that when I imagine a story, I see it as a movie in my head, complete with a cast of characters, and so on. It's a simple matter of describing what I see.

In the nineties, I wrote a couple of stories that were heavily influenced by *Pulp Fiction*. They were very conversation-heavy and they seemed to be disconnected episodes, until some revelation towards the end. Another favorite movie of mine was *Magnolia* by Paul Thomas Anderson, which also involved a whole lot of characters who seemed to have nothing to do with each other. As the movie progressed we found out that, yes, they were all connected, and then I particularly liked how the resolution has something biblical about it. I like to bring surreal elements into my writing because when you are writing, everything is open to you. You can do anything you want, you know? Why stick with social realism? You can have a social realist story, but then bring in elements of the weird. What for are we writing, if not to feel like God?

There was a LaserDisc rental place called Video Take-out in the basement of Makati Cinema Square. This was in the nineties. First there was Betamax, and then there was VHS, and when LaserDisc came out, we thought, “This is the end of technology! This is so great! Nothing will be better than the LaserDisc!” It had two sides so when one side was finished, the youngest person in the room had to get up and turn it over. But the sound quality of the LaserDiscs was wonderful, and so I used to borrow a lot of LaserDiscs from Video Take-out, mostly American classics—Preston Sturges, a lot of Alfred Hitchcock. Later, when DVDs became the thing, and everyone was putting out imported movies on DVD, we used to go to Quiapo a lot. Among the filmmakers whose work I love is Éric Rohmer. Éric Rohmer was a French director. I highly recommend the *Six Moral Tales*, which is six stories featuring people having some sort of crisis of conscience. The crises of conscience are not that big, but the storytelling was very engrossing, and everyone was having philosophical discussions, and it made me imagine myself having philosophical discussions in daily life, which hardly ever happens. Another one would be Max Ophüls. I recommend *The Earrings of*

*Madame de . . .* That's one of his masterpieces, also *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, also *La Ronde*.

### MY SO-CALLED PROCESS

I don't have need for much of a process because I just keep writing. The thing is to stop getting in your own way. Don't overthink anything, and just write something from the beginning to the end. I find that setting deadlines for yourself is very useful. Of course, I, myself, had deadlines set for me by the newspapers and magazines I was working for. Whenever I am stuck on something and the piece has to be submitted within a couple of hours, I do one of two things. Either I take a nap—everything is fixed in sleep, I suspect that most of my stories are written while I'm asleep—and then another thing that I do is I go to a noisy place, and I write there because if you're in a noisy café, you're forced to shut out the sounds of everyone around you, which makes you concentrate.

I know a lot of people who have been working on the same story for the last ten years. Don't be like that. Write one draft. Write it by hand if you can manage it, and then when you are typing it into your computer, that's when you edit it. You leave it alone for a few weeks, and then you go back to it, which is why my attitude towards my own work varies radically. Sometimes, I read something I wrote and I think, "Wow, this is really good. What's happened to me?" But other times I'll read something and think, "How did this get published? Why did they allow me to publish this?" As it is, since I was publishing three columns a week for twenty years, I feel that I have published too much, and it's just as well that the *Twisted* compilations are out of print because if they're reissued I will cull the pieces which I feel don't really hold up.

So set deadlines for yourself, and more importantly, don't think about the audience. Don't think about the people who are going to read your work. If you have to think about an audience, think about

someone who is like you, and is interested in the same things you are interested in. I find that second-guessing the reader is going to stop you at every turn. Just write it from beginning to end and then as you work, read it, or ask a close friend who is not competitive to read it.

Always carry a small notebook around with you because ideas pop into your head at the most inopportune times. It's best to write them down or else you will forget them. This is a twofold thing. Writing things down helps you to remember better, and also, having the notebook around, which has all the ideas, is helpful because when you're sitting down to write something, you can just leaf through it. Some people like to leave messages for themselves on their phones, but better if all these ideas are in one place. And then, everyone's changing phones, so goodbye brilliant idea.

The most important thing is to read a lot, so try to read as many books as you can. Even a book that turns out to be a terrible piece of crap is useful because it will teach you how not to write. So read a book a week.

Now I know what it sounds like, I'm telling you to write 1,000 words a day, and to read a book a week. In our distracted society, in our distracted world, where there's a lot to think about besides reading and writing, this might not be feasible. Of course, I have the built-in advantage in that I am not married, and I have no children. I guess the corollary advice today would be don't get married and don't have children. But since most people cannot not get married or have children, if you must get married or have children, have separate houses because separate houses ensure that you can do your work in peace. Also, if you are imaginative types and, you know, you're worried about *mumu* [ghosts] and things like that, it's always helpful to have cats because they make you feel like you're not alone. Cats are always having conversations with things that you cannot see, so you figure, "Ah, well, you know, let the cat take care of it, so the *mumu* are not going to bother me."