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Review of Lives Remembered: A Memoir

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Lives Remembered: A Memoir

Linda Ty-Casper. PAHL Books, 2025. 192 pages.

Autobiography is challenging. Even when one wants to reveal everything, elements will get left out due to privacy concerns, memory lapses and/or (unconscious) revisions of what happened.

But there is a way to create autobiography in an effective if paradoxical way: choose a specific point of view that becomes the scaffolding with which the author can arrange and organize a life viewed with hindsight. (I know this directly from writing *The Inventor*, a 2023 autobiography through the scaffolding of literary inventions.) It's paradoxical because, as Oulipians and other practitioners of constraint-based writings know, by choosing to narrow the focus, the writer provides a more in-depth treatment.

In Linda Ty-Casper's memoir *Lives Remembered*, the scaffolding is what the title cites. It's notable that the title mentions "Lives" before "Remembered." The title would have worked if the two words were reversed, but she privileges other lives instead of herself as the one who remembers. What's amazing is how many lives Ty-Casper recalls—and not just people like family members, friends, and literary contacts but folks she must have met just once (e.g., a poet who—in a moment exemplifying the acuity with which she's conducted literary analyses—she observes as someone who "laughs deep but [doesn't] listen").

Those who are remembered are mostly memorable because Ty-Casper felt love or affection for them. In that sense, the resonant writing in the book is apt—one can sense the burnished gold sheen of treasured memories. For example, she recalls two family portraits painted over a

hundred years ago: “Long ago, itinerant artists peddled partly finished portraits in the provinces, and clients chose the frame on which to have their likeness painted” (5–6)! For readers not related to Ty-Casper who are less interested in her relatives and more in the times they lived, she provides numerous vibrant and interesting details like these traveling portraitists.

Ty-Casper lived through significant historic periods for the Philippines: the American colonial period, the Japanese occupation, Martial Law, Corazon Aquino’s presidency (the first time for a woman to be Philippine President), Rodrigo Duterte’s cruel reign, and the current time when the son of Ferdinand Marcos is, remarkably if not ridiculously, the president.

Much of history’s unfolding is influenced by the past, and *Lives Remembered* is worth reading if only for the Harvard Law School incident that “redirected her life” into becoming a historical fictionist. At the university’s Widener Library, Ty-Casper discovered books that contained “unfair and erroneous” material as regards the Philippines and decided to write an essay refuting them. But upon discovering that some of those books had never been checked out of the library to be read—a detail that reminds how the most insulting thing a writer can experience is not criticism but indifference—she decided to “write a historical novel which might have more staying power/life outside the shelf” (71).

“Just one book,” Ty-Casper recalled, “then I’d go on with my life” (71).

More than one book, of course, occurred. The first was *The Peninsulars*, which was set in the 1850s, the period of the British Occupation. This was followed by *The Three-Cornered Sun*, set amidst the 1896 Revolution against Spain; *The Stranded Whale*, which involved the 1899–1901 Philippine-American War; and other books that would deal with the Martial Law dictatorship, among others. She remembers and affirms her decision to turn from law to literature:

Only after many years, with the UP Law Class '55 (whose valedictorian I had been) having fun designating me the Class 'deviate' for writing instead of practicing, did I realize that writing is a form of advocacy. I was defending the country against unwarranted "smearing." (71–72)

Lives Remembered does touch on other facets of Ty-Casper's life besides the literary, including family relations; her involvement with the US-based anti-Martial Law group Friends of the Filipino People; advocacies such as nuclear freeze, prison ministry and pro-life; and her relationship with Leonard Casper, the poet, fictionist, and literary critic who became her husband. But remembering others could not prevent how her memoir inevitably highlights her literary—and historic—life.

Despite her resonant writing, Ty-Casper at times also understates the emotional content of certain experiences. For example, she *mentions* three incidents of racism, the first occasioning the "go back where you came from" attack, a familiar insult to many people of color in the United States. While impactful, these three incidents are all referenced in a single paragraph. She could have said more about those experiences—she stood up to her attackers—but chose not to, an understatement that ironically reveals how racism is an old—thus boring despite being dangerous—story.

Similarly, while she logically writes about her husband, she avoids discussing the first time they met: no performative romance here. Her understated approach, though, can be the more effective technique. Her chapter on her mother Catalina Velasquez-Ty is powerful because the emotionally fraught last days of dying and the toll taken on caregivers become more charged from terse daily accounts. A reader can easily inhabit this chapter since the brief accounts paradoxically create expansive spaces for empathy as the reader personalizes what's being read.

It is fitting that Ty-Casper would end her memoir with the reminder that much of history still needs to be written:

I no longer have the energy to be able to go back to the historical novels; to the American campaigns in Mindanao; but perhaps . . . children/grandchildren will write about the atrocities. There is the need to call attention to the role of guerrillas and civilians in the liberation of the Philippines during World War II. There are still boxes of clippings books on the War in an upstairs room . . . (170)

Recently, Linda Ty-Casper turned ninety-four. Through her books, she turned her life into a gift to the Philippines. With gratitude, we should mind the lessons of that life: not writing so much as speaking on our own behalf instead of letting others determine our identity and history. As she's noted in various contexts, "If history is our biography, literature is our autobiography."

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