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Tributes to Gregorio Brillantes

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TRIBUTES TO GREGORIO BRILLANTES

Short story writer and essayist Gregorio C. Brillantes passed away on September 26, 2025. He was 92.

Brillantes was born on December 18, 1932, in Camiling, Tarlac, where he set a number of his stories. He entered Ateneo de Manila (then located in Manila) as a freshman in 1948, and graduated with a Bachelor of Letters, major in journalism, in 1952, soon after the campus had moved to Loyola Heights, Quezon City.

After graduation, Brillantes taught English at Ateneo High School, as well as the Far Eastern University, while contributing short stories to national magazines. He won several times at the annual short story contest of the *Philippines Free Press*, receiving the top prize in 1953 (for “The Living and the Dead”), 1954 (for “A Wind over the Earth”), and 1956 (for “The Distance to Andromeda”). “Faith, Love, Time, and Dr Lazaro” received the second prize at both the Free Press contest and the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards in 1960. That same year, his first collection of short stories, *The Distance to Andromeda and Other Stories*, was published.

In the decades that followed, Brillantes grew in his craft, receiving more awards for his stories, including first prizes at the Palanca Awards for “The Cries of Children on an April Afternoon in the Year 1957” (1974), “Janis Joplin, the Revolution, and the Melancholy Widow of Gabriela Silang Street” (1977), and “The Flood in Tarlac” (1988). The stories from the 1960s onward show his experimentation with modes of storytelling

and a broadening of thematic scope, which both situate his works within a definite Philippine context and evince his evolving craftsmanship. “The Cries of Children . . .” came to be the work most admired by his fellow writers (including Jose Y. Dalisay Jr. and National Artist Gemino Abad) in its handling of time, and is regarded as one of the masterpieces of Philippine fiction written in English. Brillantes’s stories from this period were collected in *The Apollo Centennial* (1980) and *On a Clear Day in November, Shortly Before the Millennium* (2000).

Brillantes was equally a master of non-fiction. His work with the *Philippines Free Press*, and later the *Asia-Philippines Leader*, the *Manila Review*, and *Midweek*, combined incisive takes on national and international issues with flawless prose. Along with Nick Joaquin and Jose F. Lacaba, Brillantes set new standards for reportage and critical commentary. His non-fiction has been collected in three volumes: *Looking for Jose Rizal in Madrid*, *Chronicles of Interesting Times*, and *The Cardinal’s Sins, the General’s Cross, the Martyr’s Testimony and Other Affirmations*, all published in 2005.

What follow are eulogies. Jose Dalisay’s, Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo’s, Angelo Lacuesta’s, and Susan Lara’s were given at a tribute organized by Lacuesta on September 30, 2025, at the Arlington Memorial Chapels, Quezon City, Philippines.



GREGORIO THE GREAT

By Jose Y. Dalisay

Let me begin tonight’s sad but still privileged assignment with an admission of what should have been a secret: I was the designated advocate, or *abogado*, for Greg Brillantes’s nomination for National Artist this year. It was a request from Greg that I accepted with some awkwardness, because I myself was a nominee, with my own *abogado*.

But I did not hesitate to say yes to Greg because what you will hear from me tonight is what I would have told the selectors, had they called me in: In short, that if I were to lose to any other writer in English, it would happily be to Greg Brillantes.

Unfortunately for both of us, neither of our abogados have been summoned, so we shall now have to wait a little longer—with Greg having the leisure of eternity, and me in hot pursuit—for a great honor we would have appreciated to receive alive but that no writer ever truly lives for.

Few writers turn me into a blushing fan; Gregorio C. Brillantes is one of them. Like his papal namesake Gregory the Great, who wrote a massive 35-volume commentary on the Book of Job, Greg Brillantes was an untiring and unsparing chronicler of his time and place.

His nonfiction comprises delectably urbane musings on everything from potholes on Mayon Street to cockroaches in Mexico—as well as, of course, weightier and meatier subjects, the usual suspects of politics, religion, and history, made unusual by his diligent, often playful, skepticism. And—ah, yes—those lyrical digressions, like windows in darkened rooms suddenly opening to seashores and temples. This, I told myself, this was the prose I'd always wanted to write, the attitude I'd always wanted to assume, the voice I'd always wanted to mimic.

His fiction is infused with power and luminosity; he surprises but never screams. I use two of my favorite Brillantes stories—"The Cries of Children on an April Afternoon in the Year 1957" and "The Flood in Tarlac"—to show young writing students how, within the now-unfashionable realist mode, breathtaking effects can be achieved by an author with masterful vision and control of material.

But behind my fandom, I must confess, was a simmering despair. I have seven Palanca second prizes to my credit; as far as I can recall, two or three of those were the direct result of one Gregorio Brillantes coming in first. I kept dreaming, in my active years as a literary combatant, that the reverse would miraculously happen, but it never did.

One time, Greg very kindly consented to speak before my graduate writing class. My students were thrilled to pieces to have their work read and critiqued by the Great Gregorio. Greg promptly praised the very stories I had found some problems with, and nixed the stories I thought had merit. So let this be a forewarning to anyone thinking of inviting a literary lion to dinner—you will be that dinner, with your reputation for dessert. Later, over beer, and seeking to redeem myself somewhat, I told Greg about an incredible day when I wrote two stories. He then told me about an even more incredible day when he wrote three!

When the Ateneo Press launched his *Collected Stories* two years ago and asked me to speak at the event, I felt like a jealous juvenile again at 69, with the 90-year-old Greg in a wheelchair in front of me, and cheekily boasted that, at last, I had one over him: his collection had 39 stories while mine (*Voyager and Other Fictions*, 2019) had 44. Of course, it was a hollow boast, because any one of Greg’s stories is easily worth two or three of mine. That’s how highly I hold this man in my esteem.

In an art card that Ateneo Press used to promote the book, I said further: “More than a master of language, Gregorio Brillantes is a master of our Filipino sense and sensibility, particularly those parts we find hard to put into words or to recognize as our truest selves. We see life in his stories as through a gossamer screen that filters out the harshest light; that screen is his own sensibility, suffused with a deep and tolerant understanding of pain as pleasure’s shadow.” But really—putting all the fanboy talk aside—why Brillantes? What did I and my students—and what can every young writer of fiction—learn from him?

To get right down to brass tacks, I’ll take one of his best-known stories and dissect parts of it that should show what not only good but masterful writing is all about.

“The Distance to Andromeda” has been mistakenly described by some as a science-fiction story, but it is not, although science fiction figures prominently in it. Too many young writers fuss over the elements of what their Ultrawave Galactic Terminator Machine should contain,

glossing over the seemingly inconsequential gray matter of daily living that congeals into human drama. In “Andromeda,” the boy Ben’s post-apocalyptic fantasies are foregrounded by domestic business. See how Brillantes constructs a scene:

He dribbles an imaginary basketball toward the kitchen, skidding on the floor, feints and jackknives a neat shot through the door. His sister-in-law Remy is giving her baby his supper of porridge from a cup. The child gurgles a vigorous greeting at the boy, and Remy laughs at the wonder of her son’s knowing the infant-accent of his language. The kitchen is bright and intimate with its rich cooking smells: Pining bustles about the old Mayon stove, and the girl with the pigtails smiles her crooked-toothed smile from the lithographed calendar on the wall.

It doesn’t seem much and the young reader may feel bored by the lack of “action,” but note how, in fact, the scene is full of action—physical and emotional action, of the kind absent from too many stories being written today about morose characters sipping cappuccinos at Starbucks and ruminating over their wayward romances and work-life balance. “Get your characters off their butts,” I always tell my students, and Brillantes does.

A Brillantes story is an accretion of impressions, ideas, and emotions. It’s that kind of preparation that earns Brillantes the right to orchestrate this kind of paragraph later in the story:

He catches the streak of a shooting star from the corner of his eye. Instantly his waiting becomes a sharp alertness: he holds his breath and the strangeness comes into him once more, the echo of an endless vibration. But it is no longer an abstract aching for the relief of words: it speaks within him, in a language full of silence, becoming one with his breathing, his being, and the night, and the turning of the Earth: incomprehensible, a wordless thought, an unthought-

of Word: like the unseen presence of One who loves him infinitely and tenderly. The fear has gone, the lonely helpless shrinking he felt on the bridge, walking home: love surrounds him, and no evil can touch him here, in his father's house.

For a story written in the author's mid- to late twenties, "The Distance to Andromeda" already lays out, in full, Brillantes's talent and vision, his familiar themes of family and love, of doubt and faith, of Rilke's God "who holds this falling / Gently in his hands, with endless gentleness."

It is a story that I myself could not have written, as I inhabit a more sordid and much sadder world in my fiction, with little to draw on but my characters' residual sense of goodness for their salvation. Brillantes celebrates—consecrates—the mundane joys of the middle class, even as he underscores their fragility and transience.

So, young writers: read Gregorio Brillantes. Understand what truly breathtaking means by reading two of my favorite stories of his: "The Cries of Children on an April Afternoon in the Year 1957" and "The Flood in Tarlac." If you read them and still wonder what great fiction is, then you might as well be looking up at the sky to find Andromeda, because that's how far you have to go.

And so there you've gone, Greg, ahead of me again—and I'm not complaining—but I'm sure, before too long, we'll have that lunch we kept postponing. There's a moral to this eulogy. If you can't beat them, praise them, and so I write in sullen worship of every writer's writer, and every editor's editor, Gregorio Brillantes.

JOSE Y. DALISAY

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Jose Y. Dalisay Jr. is the author of several prize-winning works of fiction, including *Soledad's Sister*, shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007. His short stories are collected in *Oldtimer and Other Stories*, *Sarcophagus and Other Stories*, and *Penmanship and Other Stories*. He teaches at the University of the Philippines.



TIMELESS BRILLIANCE

By Susan Lara

We are doing tonight what we should be doing every day—honor the life and legacy of Gregorio Brillantes—a master of the short story, a moral compass in Philippine letters, and a quiet force whose words continue to echo in our hearts.

Gregorio Brillantes was a towering figure in Philippine literature, and yet, one of the most approachable. Among his many unforgettable works, “Faith, Love, Time, and Dr. Lazaro” stands as a luminous example of his genius. In that story, we meet a man of science—a doctor hardened by loss, numbed by routine, and quietly estranged from the faith he once held. As he travels through the night with his son, summoned to heal a dying child, we witness not just a physical journey, but a spiritual reckoning. The scene where Dr. Lazaro’s son, Ben, quietly baptizes the dying child—a gesture of faith, compassion, and spiritual urgency—is one of the most haunting and profound in Philippine literature. For Dr. Lazaro, a man who has grown skeptical and emotionally distant, this act is both startling and deeply unsettling. He doesn’t interrupt or object, but his internal reaction is telling: he is shaken, not just by the ritual, but by what it reveals—the depth of his son’s belief, and the chasm between them. It’s a moment of spiritual tension—not resolution. And that’s Brillantes’s brilliance: he doesn’t resolve the conflict, he illuminates it. He lets us feel the ache of a father watching his son act with conviction he no longer possesses. He is moved to silence. In that quiet, Brillantes shows us the cost of losing faith, and the quiet power of witnessing it reborn in someone we love. Brillantes portrays this moment with restraint. He is left in quiet turmoil, forced to confront the emptiness that has crept into his own soul. The baptism becomes a mirror: in his son’s gesture, he sees the faith he has lost, the love he has buried, and the time that has slipped away.

Brillantes wrote with elegance. His prose was precise, his imagery radiant. In *Dr. Lazaro*, he captured the ache of doubt, the weight of time, and the fragile hope that love—and perhaps grace—might still break through. What makes this story endure is its quiet courage. It doesn't offer easy answers. Instead, it invites us to sit with mystery, to listen for the silence between words, and to consider that even in the darkest hour, something sacred might still stir. He reminded us that literature can be a form of prayer, a way of seeing, a way of healing.

SUSAN S. LARA

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Susan S. Lara is the author of *Letting Go and Other Stories*, which received the National Book Award in 1997, and co-author of *Creative Nonfiction: Crafting a Knowledge of Self, Others, and the World*. She is a regular panelist at the annual Silliman University National Writers Workshop, Asia's oldest writing workshop, and is the vice chair of UMPIL (Unyon ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas). In 2015 she received the Gawad Pambansang Alagad ni Balagtas, a lifetime achievement award, from UMPIL.



BRILLANT GREG

By Karina Bolasco

His peripheral vision was only for tall, gorgeous women. He married one and had a houseful of them with three daughters, and granddaughters.

So in the lead-up to his launch in July 2023, he said he would go if I could bring Gemma Cruz and Evangeline Pascual to grace the launch. And they did go, not because I had the power to make them. Gemma is a friend, but I never met Evangeline Pascual (who, by the way, was at the writers night at the wake)—they went because it was for Greg—a brilliant writer and an amazing jazz pianist who also disarmed, not only

women but also men, with his dry-wit humor. Twelve years ago, at Anvil, we wanted to collect Resil Mojares's short stories published in the *Free Press* and the *Graphic* in the 1960s and 1970s to show his other side as a writer. He hesitated. I renewed the project at Ateneo Press, he still hesitated, even after Carol Hau had already written an introduction for it. He never gave the "go" for us to release the collection. He claims he would cringe every time he read the stories again today. I said, lamely, of course, literature is a product of its time, and that Greg's collection has stories he wrote in the 1950s and 1960s, to which Resil quickly replied: "*Iba naman si Greg Brillantes!*" I think what Resil also said but did not actually say is that the architecture of a brilliantly written short story is perfect. When it's done, it's done. You don't take down the staircase or expand the kitchen. And that is how great writing is: they are timeless yet timely. Greg's stories are philosophically grounded, and between that and his wry humor, language was like clay in his hands.

In my four decades of publishing books, there are occasions when I think we did the country some good service. This definitely is one of those occasions. Putting out *The Collected Stories of Gregorio C. Brillantes*, the omnibus collection of all his books of short stories, is his legacy to our nation of millions of young people. They say our median age is 23.5 years old, and for a population of 114 million, that's about 40 percent. So *The Collected Stories of Gregorio C. Brillantes* is not just his legacy; hopefully it will be their education, too.

Greg, I still want to wait for that novel you said you would someday write. I had hoped Pat would find a chapter or so, and that it was not razed down or flooded away like many of your precious books. You also said it was going to be about our revolution. I never asked which revolution, but I did ask about it, again, a few more times, even at the Ateneo launch two years ago, but you couldn't hear me. We are most grateful, Greg, not just for the stories but also for your steady but biting journalism, no matter which politicians and their sidekicks or pompous intellectuals and their groupies got bitten. We bid you love and grace on your journey home.

KARINA BOLASCO
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Karina Bolasco was the director of the Ateneo de Manila University Press (until 2023), and for twenty-six years before that managed Anvil Publishing. She was named one of the Ten Outstanding Women in the Nation's Service (TOWNS) in 1997 and received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Book Development Board and the Manila Critics Circle for her work in publishing in 2023.



A SHORT MESSAGE
By Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

I deeply regret not being able to go to your wake and bid you a proper goodbye. I wanted to thank you for so many things. First, for all the stories and essays that you wrote. (My personal favorite is “The Cries of Children on an April Afternoon in the Year 1957,” one of the most poignant, most beautiful stories I have ever read.) Second, I want to thank you for publishing my stories and essays in all those magazines which you edited. Third, I want to thank you for your friendship. And, finally, I want to thank you for what you did for me back in 2011, when Tony passed away. During his wake, you came every single night, just to sit with me quietly, and thereby provide immeasurable comfort. Unfortunately, I cannot do the same for Baby now. Please forgive me for this. *Paalam*, Greg.

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Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo is a writer of fiction and nonfiction with over thirty books to her name. She was the director of the University of the Philippines Press and the

University of Santo Tomas Publishing House. She continues to teach creative writing as professor emeritus of the University of the Philippines and as professorial lecturer at the University of Santo Tomas.



EULOGY FOR GREGORIO BRILLANTES

By Angelo Lacuesta

You just need to read what's been written by others, old and new, to know: *Nasa DNA ng Philippine Lit in English si Greg Brillantes.*

At sorry kung naging personal, si Greg ang unang nag-publish sa akin, sa Philippines Graphic. Ngayon ko lang na-realize how much he was like a dad to me. Daddy story na naman ito, oo, pero please indulge me: on the first or second day of my dad's wake, Pete Lacaba told me I had won First Prize sa Philippine Graphic Lit Awards for my story "Harvest." At that time bangag ako so di ko masyadong naisip. Also, outsider ako sa mga writers communities. That was my very first First Prize.

Anyway, late ako sa awarding kasi medyo nahiya akong umakyat ng stage kasi nga outsider ako. Inantay ako ni Greg to hand me my prize money. And boy I really needed that money. So I did the prudent thing. I bought a beautiful oak writing desk and had my recently deceased dad's watch repaired and restored. Exactly 50,000 yung total ng dalawang yun. Magmula nun, si Greg ang naging isa sa mga ilang tatay ko na sumalo sa akin at tinuro sa akin na pwede pala akong maging writer.

Ninety percent of the time, we'd be drinking Tsing Tao. Or he'd be playing the piano and singing for me. Marunong naman ako mag-piano pero he was so, so much better at it that I didn't try to get in there. Same feeling nung nanalo ako nung editor siya ng Graphic. But he forced me and I played and it came out bad and he enjoyed it anyway. Or he'd take me on a tour of his enormous library, the air thick with his omnivorous appetite for reading, at ako naman parang nanalo ng golden ticket to Willy Wonka's.

But when it was about writing, *iba na ang usapan*. He knew how serious you were, he knew what you were trying—and failing—to do. He was always generous with praise—but only when it was well deserved. *At dahil nga si Greg siya*, he was cutting and crisp with his criticism, the way he wrote his stories. He had time to hyper line read one book of mine when all I had been asking for was a blurb. He became a guy you'd always wanted to be your father.

ANGELO R. LACUESTA

Angelo R. Lacuesta is a fictionist and novelist, and also writes screenplays and essays. He has written more than ten books and two screenplays, and has won many national awards for his writing. He recently wrote and produced the films *An Errand* (2024) and *Song of the Fireflies* (2025), and wrote the novel *IRÓ* (2025). He is the current president of the Philippine Centre of PEN (Poets, Essayists, Novelists) International.



**FROM TARLAC TO ANDROMEDA AND BEYOND:
REMEMBERING GREGORIO C. BRILLANTES**

By Jonathan Chua

I got to meet Gregorio Brillantes for the first time through the late Clinton Palanca. He had assigned me to interview Brillantes for *Pen & Ink*, a literary magazine that Palanca founded. I was warned by friends that Brillantes could be crabby and was intolerant of stupidity. Before that interview, I had only read his stories “The Distance to Andromeda” (in the English textbook *Insight*, used when I was a freshman) and “The Flood in Tarlac” (in the English textbook four years later, when I started teaching). Those two stories alone already showed me how good a writer he was, so my trepidation was doubled.

But Mr. Brillantes turned out to be a pleasant interviewee, or at least I don't remember his throwing a tantrum during the entire interview at a restaurant somewhere near his place. That was in 1997.

I was to see him again in social functions, during one of which he remembered the interview and reproached me for having included a poem of his in the feature that accompanied the interview. One should not publish things that the author wants forgotten. You see, he was a poet, alongside Emmanuel S. Torres, back in his Ateneo days, and a cartoonist. I said that I didn't think the poem was bad, and it's for literary history I quoted it. He then pointed out a typo in the article, an extra "d" changed "biding his time" to "bidding his time," and that error properly got me abashed.

Years later, I was to see him again, at the Ateneo de Manila University Press. I had him sign my copy of *The Cardinal's Sins*, and straightaway he turned to a page and edited a typo. It was Maricor Baytion's (she was the director of the press at that time) turn to be abashed. I got the honor of compiling his *Collected Stories* because of Karina Bolasco. Some years before the lockdowns of 2020, she had wanted to publish his collected stories: it made sense that his alma mater should publish the collection. At that time, my business with him was to get him to agree to write about his Ateneo experience as part of a history book that the Ateneo School of Humanities was planning to publish. I went to his place with the double mission. I failed at one, but got the other accomplished, for in 2023, after getting derailed by the pandemic, came *The Collected Stories of Gregorio C. Brillantes*. It is, properly speaking, a "near complete collected"—because he refused to have some stories included, and I was more of a compiler than an editor. Not wanting to repeat my mistake, I kept to the contents of his three collections and to the order of stories that they used, but I added a bibliography so those who want to read his uncollected stories may be able to find them.

In between the time he signed my copy of his book and the time *Collected* was made, there were a few more meetings: at the Rizal

Library, when my colleagues and I mounted an exhibition in his honor (to get him out of the dumps post-Ondoy), at the Manila Grand Opera Hotel, where he played the piano while we had dimsum and I think Peking Duck, again at the Rizal Library for Nick Joaquin's tenth death anniversary exhibition, at the Manila Pavilion when Luis Cabalquinto was in town and they both agreed to have a novel manuscript ready by Luis's next visit.

The book launch in 2023 at Areté on the Ateneo de Manila Loyola Heights campus was the last time I would see him. If I had known then that that was it, I would have made a trip to his place in Cordillera, walnut pie in tow.

But that is a recurrent theme in his stories: you just don't know that the joyful cries of children on a clear day in 1957 will turn into painful disease, a murderous gunshot, and numb silence in an asylum in 1974, or that the star-sown sky over Tarlac humming with the "unseen presence of One who loves [you] infinitely and tenderly" will one day be strewn with surveillance "helidiscs" flying against a sickle-shaped moon in the centennial of the Apollo moon landing, or that one should have a near-mortal stroke while just beyond the door of one's room a birthday party goes on. You just don't know. Only the storyteller knows, but even the storyteller does not know when to write "The end."

The Anglo Saxons called human existence in all its unpredictability and brute facticity "Wyrð," from which the modern word "weird" descends. Mr. Brillantes seemed to be aware of life's Wyrð-ness from the beginning of his professional literary career. That's why his Manong Ramon (from his first commercially published short story) vows to write; and why Dr. Lazaro realizes, though only for a moment, that "for such things like love, there was only so much time."

I thank Mr. Brillantes for the time he shared with me and for his many excellent stories. May he be with the One who loves him infinitely, beyond Andromeda and the floods, the years, the light and shadow of leaves, and "senseless accidents of pain" of this existence.

JONATHAN CHUA

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Jonathan Chua is the editor of *The Collected Stories of Gregorio C. Brillantes*, and of *The Critical Villa: Essays in Literary Criticism by Jose Garcia Villa* and *The Collected Stories of Jose Garcia Villa*. He is a faculty member of the Ateneo de Manila University.