



***The Mystery on 17th Street* by Annie Gorra.
Mandaluyong City. Anvil Publishing Inc. 2016.
180 pages. 5 x 8 in.**

This is a long-awaited book that should have come out much sooner for young adult Filipino readers too much immersed in Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, and Disneyland.

The author, Annie Gorra, is one of the few writers who hail from Cagayan de Oro in Mindanao. She is now based in Vancouver Canada where the novel was alternatively published as *The Witch on 17th Street* (2015). There is a charming simplicity of her telling which could not be missed as it goes well with the material so familiar to the locals of Cagayan de Oro.

The plot follows the story of a young boy named Agustin and his friends in the neighborhood of Nazareth. Intertwined into the boys' growth towards manhood is the mystery which revolves around Iya Vellit wrongfully suspected by every single neighbor as a "witch" bent on spreading ill-will and disorder on 17th Street.

As the narrative unfolds, leading gradually to the resolution of the mystery, a host of characters and subplots are likewise introduced, showing the reader a broad canvass of Philippine society and culture. (Fortunately, these subplots are somehow pulled adequately at the end.) While excellent traits of Filipinos such as idealism and a strong sense of community are shown, there are also those familiar faults handled with satiric flair.

For instance, the description of the balikbayan's pretentiousness is spot on. Fresh from the States, one of the neighbors, named Annie, affected an accent all throughout her visit, refusing to speak her native language. Her pretentiousness was exposed, however, when she was bitten by house wasps and was screaming shamelessly in Bisaya for help. This shortcoming, perhaps is a reflection of a society teetering on the brink of transition, a transition which is multi-faceted, it shows in government corruption, in the armed conflict between the military and the NPA (an issue embedded unobtrusively into the main plot), in the dynamics between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity. These last two, while big issues, are made palpable as they trickle down into little scenes and tiny images. For example, in Annie's preference for soft drinks over coconut water, in the boys' curiosity what a cake tastes like and in their penchant to pronounce apple as "eypol," in Mang Tomas' preference for canned sardines over chicken raised in his backyard, as sardines have just turned into "a symbol of sophistication, eaten by city people."

Alongside this socio-cultural canvass, is the active description of flora. Here, I can sense the writer's earnestness in providing a sense of place, locating the human experience in an identifiable geographical setting. In a tropical country like the Philippines, fruit trees such as lomboy and mango, vegetable and flower gardens are everywhere, but the writer's rendition, at times, gets so postcard-perfect it makes me wonder where all the insects and ruthless Philippine summers have gone.

Even ordinary meals consisting of rice and vegetables picked from the gardens are overly embellished, the reader senses the overt intent to showcase Philippine culinary to foreign readers. But then, nostalgia, it is said, alters our memory which becomes selective as it remembers only what it wants to remember. Thus, surroundings and chores previously considered mundane, suddenly become vivid and irresistible in memory.

As the book draws to a close, when the characters have all grown up and the mystery has been wonderfully resolved, the reminiscence becomes patently framed as hindsight coming from an adult's vantage point. Here, the book turns increasingly authorial, inserting introspection that oscillates between didacticism and profundity.

The debate between good and evil which is the core of every human experience is played out mainly by the conflicting interests of Agustin's father and the corrupt military general, Rogelio. In their confrontation, the dialogue turns hopelessly unreal, as if suddenly addressing a different kind of audience. As the men delve into their youth in broad sweeps of flashbacks, their conversation gets entangled with issues of morality, a young reader might feel the need to backtrack, especially when quotes from St. Augustine and Sozhenitsyn are dropped.

This sudden philosophic-moralistic direction of the book, seems abetted by Agustin pursuing Theology as a professional interest. His conversations with his parents at this point reveal his nascent maturity evident in his questions on "fairness" and "forgiveness." But his parents' natural wisdom—which is also the author's—always outshines his. It is wisdom that evolves from a lifetime of experience, the kind of wisdom that finally acknowledges the power of "grace," and is worded so lightly ("If we know how to give, we must also know how to receive") it doesn't suffocate the readers.

Finally, one important dimension of this book worth noting is its humor.

Some of the scenes that provide a breath of fresh air include those bubbles drifting out from the principal's wet sleeves as he led the singing of the national anthem; Agustin wondering if he's eating the urine of Iya Vellit every time he ate her mangoes; the theft of the cake at the party; and then that incident of a man bursting naked out of the outhouse exploded by vengeful boys who reactivated an abandoned bamboo cannon. Unwittingly, this last incident turns out to be a poetic comeuppance since it was the same man who disrupted the women's prayer meetings by dancing naked, his underwear pulled over his head.

One more charming incident which comes very close to the heart of the narrative is when Agustin was shoved away from circles of mature conversations. Agustin was thus pushed back and forth between the house and the garden by grown-ups who thought the boy was too young to understand their "secrets." I think, this is a beautiful narrative strategy that not only indicates the clues to the "mystery" as revealed from snatches of conversation Agustin overheard, but also shows, in a funny way, Agustin's transition—how he is slipping precariously into the world of adulthood.

Humor, while very much part of the Filipino psyche, is strangely scant in Philippine literature in English. This is a remark made by literary critic, Gémino Abad. But perhaps Gorra is one of the few writers who break away from that mold. What is most interesting in her humor is that it does not call attention to itself and does not distract from the seriousness of the novel. Rather, it blends most lightly and naturally into the narrative texture and neutralizes the philosophical-moralistic preoccupation of the book.

r Arlene Yandug