



# What Good Books Could Do

## **MA. KARINA A. BOLASCO**

Ma. Karina A. Bolasco is a Philippine publishing icon. She was awarded the National Book Development Board Lifetime Achievement Award for her years of service to the Philippine book and publishing industry. She is the former Publishing Manager of Anvil Publishing, Inc. and the former Director of the Ateneo de Manila University Press, both of which won countless Publisher of the Year Awards and National Book Awards under her leadership.

Today, the Filipino literary and publishing landscape is vibrant with book launches, readings and signings, writing workshops, literary contests and book awards, fairs and festivals. Indie presses are making a mark for themselves and winning awards and prizes for their books. Regional indie presses, like Savage Mind, Kasing-Kasing Press, and Aklat Alamid are now established entities in their localities. They publish in their local languages and more of them are emerging. In 2023, the number of new books released was 10, 297 titles, the highest ever in the last ten years.

Production is across genres: children's books, crime fiction, romance (English & Filipino), graphic novels and comics, academic and scholarly, biographies and memoirs, poetry and fiction.

Overall sales, as reported by publishers to the Book Board, went up to PhP 11.1 billion in 2023.

There is a robust network of distribution and purchase points making sure books reach readers. The biggest boost that came with the pandemic was online stores, like Shopee and Lazada, that included books in their product range. Without the huge commission brick-and-mortar stores ask for, some publishers doubled, even tripled their sales.

After more than four decades in book publishing, we have been able to substantively secure a market share in what once was dominated by imported books from the US and the UK. And create new niche markets in other languages especially in Filipino, where print runs far outnumber those in English.

But what the book industry and the nation have not achieved is a synergy that otherwise could have long mutually and greatly benefited both. The disconnections are so glaring just as the solutions are so obvious—areas which have to be seriously looked into and dealt with urgently to massively improve our education, political maturity, and economic stability.

First, as we are still largely a poor country, with more than half of the population not able to afford books or even the time to read them, an efficiently functioning nationwide library network has long been needed. Books do not have to be individually purchased to be read. All types of books for all types of people should be available in a town or city library. There will always be the argument that there are other more important nationwide infrastructures like health centers and transportation, which is valid, but the sooner we realize how vital to a nation books and reading are, the sooner we will find the resolve and the means to critically improve our local and national situation. Book reading, when done well with quality books, increases knowledge and language use, improves memory and empathy, and sharpens critical thinking. The sooner we are critical of what are alleged as givens, the sooner we elect true public servants who put the citizenry's well-being first.

Second, our textbook publishers, while now serving only the private sector, are the top earners among Philippine publishers. This is because the textbook market is captive: once schools select their textbook programs, all their students in basic education must buy those books, and for at least three years, which is the typical lifespan of a textbook adoption. These textbooks have endured and evolved in the many years

they have been in use in most of our leading private schools. Why these same textbooks cannot also serve the public schools is beyond logic and comprehension as it definitely is one way of leveling the gap between private and public education. Use of the same textbooks will eventually erode the perception that children in the public school system, who certainly are not a homogeneous group, will not be able to cope with the high vocabulary or readability levels (whether in English or in Filipino) of textbooks developed for the private sector. It will also expedite the evaluation and purchase of textbooks for public schools as the extreme unnecessary delays of making new ones are horribly disenfranchising our kids in the public school system. Closing that gap through use of the same textbook programs will address the low reading levels of our children compared to those in other Southeast Asian countries, as well as our very low rank in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) world rating.

It was not until 2001, when Dr. Isagani Cruz, then Undersecretary of Education, required that every child in the public school system read at least one story book. Imagine that degree of deprivation, not until the 21st century! This started the Department of Education's (DepEd) procurement of children's books and other supplementary learning resources to reinforce their reading and writing curricula. For as the good old adage says: the only way to really teach reading is to encourage and allow children to read good and engaging books. Let them find the books they love.

And the way to also teach them to write is to develop programs which will make them consistently read very good books. The DepEd though has been erratic in their purchase and advocacy of these materials and in distributing them nationwide, more so integrating them in the children's regular classes. Such programs are set in motion only when the country scores low in world education rankings. There is no constant and consistent build-up of these important thinking skills through book reading. A previous administration's "one storybook per child" or Library Hub program—books on plastic boxes with wheels, arranged thematically per box, and moved around to different public schools in one vicinity—is short-lived. It is often abandoned by the next administration for a new program that either simulates it or goes in another direction. There are just too many imaginative programs which are never sustained, often aborted at the whim of new officers.

Third, our embassies do not even have a small Filipiniana library in their offices or centers. How small a budget is required to provide them such collections, yet how significant the yield is when Filipinos abroad, whether expats or domestic helpers, are able to read of home while separated from their loved ones. Their offspring will learn of their culture and arts, their estranged nation's legacy. This certainly will contribute to the shaping of their national identity, or a notion of home, even as they are oceans away from their homeland.

Fourth, our trade attaches never include books in the product range they push commercially as a trade. Neither do the Department of Trade or Tourism trade fairs (be it arts and crafts, food, furniture, agricultural produce like abaca and banana, or energy) include books, which organically complement the products they showcase. For at this stage, it can be confidently said that our books, in the last 100 years, cover almost every aspect of our culture. They are great complements in providing more comprehensive information on the history and background of the industry, more so than labels and commentaries can. Even cultural exhibitions of our ancestors' gold jewelry or body tattoos, for example, will not be complete without books on display for purchase or reading, so that the exhibition is appreciated in its complete context.

National Artist for film, Kidlat Tahimik, mounted this huge exhibition in Madrid, Spain titled, "Magellan, Marilyn, Mickey, and Padre Damaso: 500 Years of Conquistador Rock Stars." It was a series of massive installations depicting the cultural struggles and aspirations of the Filipino people over the last 500 years and featured larger-than-life sculptures, all showcasing Filipino craftsmanship. It was so successful that 700,000 people saw it in Museo Nacional Centro de Reina Sofía, at the Palacio de Cristal (Glass Palace) in the UNESCO Heritage Site, El Retiro Park, Madrid. But many foreigners did not fully comprehend or appreciate it. If there were books on our mythology, on our anti-colonial resistance, on our ancestral beliefs and epics, the exhibition would have been truly complete. Such book showcases in our world fairs and exhibitions also expose our untold, unrecovered stories of the past, sublimated or suppressed by colonial intent. They are economic products as well, meant for rights sales to interested foreign markets.

Good books hold in them significant and quality content. They are written from diverse perspectives; and absolutely enrich our experiences.

They improve young people's knowledge and intellect, open them up emotionally and empathetically, help teach them analytical skills, and illustrate leadership aptitudes.

What good books could do is erect a formidable reading and education infrastructure and assemble an ecosystem that will raise a generation that will know how to think critically and imaginatively, teaching them to be politically mature, showing them how to respect their past and preserve their heritage, all while working towards economic stability.