

Filipino Millennial Monomyth

I dream up worlds in my free time.

Fantasy and science fiction worlds, I mean.

Thirteen years ago, after graduating from college, I thought the biggest dream I could dream of was to buy a house and start a family. The tragic thing about being a Filipino millennial in this era is that we grew up being told and shown that the best we can hope for in life is to build the ideal Filipino home the way our parents did in their youth. Married in our 20s. A two-story house with a garden and parking space for two cars. Two kids (boy and girl). A dog or perhaps a cat or perhaps both. A sizable and steady income. A good career that's fun and challenging. And an insurance policy that'll tide us over till we die after retirement. That's the dream.

Thirteen years later, I'm 33 years old and still single. I do have a house with the title under my name, but it's a condo unit that's roughly the size of a public restroom in square meters. I have 20 years left to pay the mortgage. I had a boyfriend for eight years. We broke up five or six years ago, and I haven't had a serious relationship since. I don't have kids nor do I plan to bring kids into this terrible world—also, I'm queer. I have a dog who thinks he's a cat. I have the ultimate dream job, reading, writing, making books, but I've been doing it for so long that it has begun to feel monotonous, like it isn't going anywhere but here, endlessly. I am in so much debt that I don't know what to do with myself. And the insurance? A *banig* of Biogesic for the constant migraines (Advil if I'm feeling fancy), Gaviscon for my GERD, Salon Pas for my bad back, a 100-peso Mercury Drug first aid kit hidden in my drawer, and maybe liquor to numb the pain. I'm kidding. I have no insurance. The prospect of death scares me not because it's the end of life

but because everyone's going to find out that I don't have my shit together, and they won't know what to do with my corpse except maybe to sell it to med students to practice with.

Now this may speak more about myself than millennials in general. I'm sure other millennials are doing way better than I am in life. I see it on their social media, the image, the character, they built of themselves in the digital space. We always look better online after all. Even I, the failure of a millennial that I am, know to polish my online image—though my reason for making an effort to look good online could fall between the need to look professional online for potential clients, coworkers, and employers and the need to look fuckable so somebody would want to date me or at the very least fuck with me. (Please, somebody, anybody. It's been so long.)

(On a side note, I think it's a very millennial thing to blame everything and everyone except ourselves for the way our lives panned out like the volatile economy, the inept government, the pandemic, the constantly dipping value of the money we earn, and the decisions made by our predecessors in their own efforts to achieve their dreams. You know, the things that are completely out of our control. The era Millennials were born into definitely sucks—pandemic, war, autocracy, economic collapse, historical revisionism, and the return to Filipino values that should have been left behind in the 40s and 50s when women were first allowed into the labor force, given right to suffrage, and made to pay taxes. Life feels like a rigged game for us millennials, and we don't know where we'll end up 30 years from now. Now in true millennial fashion, I'm going back to talking exclusively about me.)

I only realized recently how small my dreams were. I still have 30 good working years left before my eyes go out or my mind fades or, god forbid, I kick the bucket—and this is if nothing untoward happens in the interim. The way the world is going so far, millennials could only be so lucky to hope for so much.

I suddenly found myself at a crossroad (overly dramatic and 90s-nostalgic as that may sound—I am a 90s kid after all). I didn't know what to do with the rest of my life—or myself for that matter. I'm not living the Filipino dream. I have no direction, no destination, no prospects other than what I'm eating for lunch tomorrow or that last Advil waiting in my drawer.

I was stuck. Here. And it sucks. I suck.

Somehow, between getting stupid drunk and high on paracetamol and antacids and working till my mind shuts down, I realized that what I was missing in my life was an ending, an end goal, a third act—hopefully one that ends with happily-ever-after. Every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Or “promise, progress, and payoff” as science fiction and fantasy author Brandon Sanderson would say.

I know where I came from. I know where I am. I don't know where I'm going. I needed a life goal. One that takes me away from my life even for just a few minutes ideally without the painful hangover the next day—I'm down to my last Advil after all. One that's not too small that I can finish in 10 years. One that no one can meddle into. One that no one expects from me. And one that'll give me my third act. In other words, a goal that is completely mine and is completely painless and is completely meaningful. A goal, a life that I chose for myself.

So I decided I'm going to dream up worlds and write epic fantasy.

Building Believable Lies

Turns out dreaming up worlds and writing epic fantasy novels aren't completely painless. It's hard work. It's a real, full-time job. You have to think about the physical world, its geography, topography, the plains, valleys and bodies of water that mark the land. You have to think about its cycles of life, the weather and climate, the forces that move the earth, the kinds of living

things that grow and thrive within that world, and if you're as neurotic as I am, you'd also be thinking about how planetary movements in the galaxy in which your world exists affect the one you're building. That's just the land. There are the people, their culture, history, infrastructure, economy, way of life, how they survive and thrive and interact with each other and their world. It's an ecosystem that when left unchecked could ruin the story you're trying to write. Remember you're still writing a story, and a story always tries to balance setting, plot, and character.

When I first set out to write epic fantasy stories, I told myself that the world will be inspired by the Philippines or a version of the Philippines that I would like to live in, one where a third world country is the superpower, the conqueror instead of the colonized. There will be magic of course—it's the only thing I could think of that can make a small third world country on the edge of the world a world superpower. Besides, I'm already leaving this world for this story, so why not go the extra mile, right?

I think I speak from experience as both book editor and writer that in writing stories set in made-up worlds, you run the risk of creating unbelievable stories—a sort of anti-realism that makes the story difficult to take seriously. You're basically telling your readers an entertaining lie. The challenge is in making a reader believe your lie long enough to finish the book.

To quote Neil Gaiman, "We who make stories know that we tell lies for a living. But they are good lies that say true things, and we owe it to our readers to build them as best as we can."

Storytellers are lucky to be always given the benefit of the doubt by their readers in every book they churn out. Think of each story as a kind of first date. Readers want to buy into the story (the lie) you're telling and they're giving you a chance to sell the story to them. They opened the book, watched the first episode, stayed in their seats for the first hour of the movie.

This is not to say that you can remake and revise the real world according to your whims. That's cultural appropriation—or a dictatorship—and a can of worms that I don't want to open.

After 19 plus drafts, several scenes to test the world I was building (fight scenes, love scenes, and pitched battles were most helpful), and intense research in the past three years for the first epic fantasy novel that I wrote, I learned that the more I dipped into my research of the real world and forced those things into my made-up world, the more difficult it was to buy into the story. Even I wasn't buying into my own lie.

The closest approximation to the feeling is the feeling I got after watching *Bright*, where Will Smith arbitrarily says “Fairy lives don't matter today.” I cringed. Not because I don't agree with the real-world social issue it was referring to, but because the lie was so blatant that I felt insulted by the story. It came off as pandering to an audience who they probably think are stupid and impressionable. *Bright* was making an attempt to incorporate real world issues into the movie's story by copying the exact same issue and assigning an actual real-world race to the in-story persecuted fairies as if we won't be able to tell that they're trying to sell us a full dose of poison made to look like snake oil. It's an attempt to make the racial coding realistic to the audience in the real world but fails to make them buy into the story.

People *have* bought into the lie that snake oil can cure maladies and found themselves waking up the next day feeling like nothing has happened while still hoping that the snake oil will kick in eventually. The difference is hope. But poison sold as snake oil is medicine that's difficult to swallow. It takes the fun out of the magic potion.

So going back to the world I was building, I took example from George RR Martin, author of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* books, instead. I stepped away from the real world and then leaned hard into the fantasy. I took random islands from an actual world map to make the terrain (because

let's face it, I'm only a writer, not a divine creator), dropped them into my world, and watched what the people dropped into this world would do—I did a lot of test scenes—until the world made sense in my head. Until I believed my own lie.

Because that is what fantasy is. That's what fiction is. A lie you're willing to believe.

But then isn't all works of fiction a sort of fantasy? A work of the imagination?

Why Does Fantasy Matter?

Isaac Asimov, grandmaster of science fiction and fantasy, says that all fiction is fantasy, “in that it is drawn from the imagination.”

We say the word “fiction” in almost the same breath as a dismissive laugh. It's fiction. It's a lie. Easy to shrug off and forget. And yet there are stories that stick with us, that carve themselves deep into our hearts, that shine a light on our paths when we feel lost.

Neil Gaiman continues in that same quote from earlier, “Somewhere out there is someone who will grow up with a different landscape, who without that story will be a different person. And who with that story may have hope, or wisdom, or kindness, or comfort.”

There are books that have changed my life forever. That brilliantly weird *Kenan and Kel* TV-show tie-in book that I read when I was eight years old was the book that first implanted the idea that I could be a writer, a teller of stories. *Harry Potter* was the first to show me that the world can be different, better, everything we imagined it could be. Ray Bradbury's *All Summer In A Day* showed me that good and bad things are ephemeral and that we have to grab and fight for every good thing before they are lost to us forever. Brandon Sanderson's *Cosmere* books expanded my view of the universe, gave me the lens by which to see beyond the earth, the sky, the moon, the stars, showed me how a small, insignificant creature of one world could make such

big waves across worlds. Madeline Miller's *Circe*, VE Schwab's *The Invisible Life Of Addie La Rue*, and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* forced me to look inward, to find the pieces of me that define my life, to find parts of me worth remembering.

Perhaps the book with the most impact on my life is Pierce Brown's *Red Rising*. There's a scene in the book where the main character, Darrow, is asked by his wife what he lived for. He answers, "I live for you." To which his wife answers, "Then you must live for more."

The book came to me at a time when I was severely burned out by work, life in general, and the looming lifetime spent alone and lonely if I don't succeed at achieving the Filipino dream. A copy of *Red Rising*, signed by the author himself with the words "Live for more," has not left my bedside since 2016. The book and ultimately Pierce Brown himself said out loud what I needed to hear most at that time in my life. I needed to live for more.

These stories got me through the worst parts of my life, and I would be a different person today if I had never found them, if I had never believed the lie that held truth between the words.

However, science fiction and fantasy are genres that, I think, suffer the most prejudice.

Of all the kinds of fiction stories, fantasy and science fiction are arguably the biggest if not the most spectacularly epic lies we tell each other. Spaceships sailing across galaxies, faraway magical kingdoms, aliens, sorcerers, sapient robots, talking animals—these are things that are difficult to believe in the real world when taken out of context of the stories from which they came from. They are relegated to "escapism" fiction, as if to say that the people who try to escape from life by one means or another are cowards, deserters, lesser men.

And yet, when looked at more closely, these science fiction and fantasy stories examine real world issues through different lenses and isolate them from their real-world context so that we may see them in a different light. The same way one would need to step away from a puzzle that

has remained unsolvable for so long we've forgotten how the puzzle fell into our hands or why we're trying to solve it in the first place. Sometimes, we forget why the puzzle needs to be solved. Sometimes, we even forget that there is a puzzle.

JRR Tolkien, grandfather of modern fantasy, himself said that it's okay to want to run away, even if it's just into a book or a story.

“I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which ‘Escape’ is now so often used. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?” he says.

Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings* ultimately was an examination of the effects of the industrial revolution and war on the life of the common man. His friend CS Lewis extrapolated Christian values from the real world and dropped them into Narnia to see how those same values affect individual life in a different world—thereby examining the universality and ubiquity of faith. Frank Herbert's *Dune* books analyze the ecological relationship between man and their world and experiments to see how the world changes once man turns to destructive goals.

We go back to Neil Gaiman who says something in the similar vein as Tolkien.

“Fiction was an escape from the intolerable, a doorway into impossibly hospitable worlds where things have rules and could be understood; stories had been a way of learning about life without experiencing it, or perhaps of experiencing it as an eighteenth-century poisoner dealt with poisons, taking them in tiny doses, such that the poisoner could cope with ingesting things that would kill someone who was not inured to them. Sometimes fiction is a way of coping with the poison of the world in a way that lets us survive it.”

At the end of the day, whichever tiny dose of poison can help us survive life's very real and potent poisons is the one that matters if only for that one person who needed it. A tiny dose laced in snake oil prepares us, strengthens us for life. It could even save our lives.

In this case, fantasy saves my life, every day, in little doses.

Filipino Fantasy and Science Fiction

The sad thing about my childhood spent on reading is that I never encountered books by Filipino authors until I was in high school. And I had to be forced into reading these books for school like *Noli Me Tangere*, *El Filibusterismo*, *Ang Ibong Adarna*, and *Florante't Laura*.

I've never even heard about F. Sionil Jose, Nick Joaquin, Kerima Polotan, Pete Lacaba, and Virgilio Almario until I got to college—when I finally got access to the university library. That was when I began to consume their work like a starving man in the desert.

I'm a bit jealous of the kids today. They have access to books like Pop Fiction. Books by Filipino authors get to be part of their formative years as readers. They get to ingrain Filipino identity into their personal identity before they turn into adults.

I did not have access to books by Filipinos when I was a girl. Our high school library was filled with books by western authors, which so defined my world view of what classic Literature looks like instead of what it should be to me as a Filipino. I could never relate to white people's experience of the real world. I'm brown-skinned after all. My parents can't afford to buy me books. The ones we *can* afford then, like Precious Hearts Romances and those other thin horror and romance books worth less than a hundred pesos, my parents didn't want me to read because of the explicit content. What they didn't know is that I've been reading bodice-ripper romance books and stories since I was ten years old. I just remember that the more scorn given to

romance, the more intrigued I was by them. How I got my grubby 10-year-old hands on these books, I can't remember. I think I borrowed most of them. Considering how much effort I put into hiding them in shame when I was a girl, I'm beginning to think that maybe I stole them. (Good God, I wish we had better, freer, and more accessible libraries then AND now.)

Ironically, books by Filipino authors then and now are more expensive than imported books, Wattpad and PHR books notwithstanding. Make no mistake: Reading books is a luxury for any Filipino household. Let's do the math. The minimum average price of one imported mass paperback is 350 pesos while the minimum average for a local pocketbook is 199 pesos. If the minimum daily wage for a Filipino household is PhP537 (based on 2022 data from the Department of Labor), a book is already more than half a Filipino's daily wage. Realistically, Filipinos only spend 0.6% of their household income on recreational activities (based on Philippine Statistics Authority 2021 data), which includes television, cinema, radio, and books. Before I was able to afford to buy books with my own money, I had to be resourceful in acquiring books that I wanted to read. I tried buying, selling, and trading books in Recto, pirating ebooks and pdfs online, borrowing (sometimes never returning) books from friends, and photocopying said friends' books. Philippine libraries were the least helpful. I tried to borrow a book from the National Library once. They won't even let me take it out of the shelves. I was expected to finish books in front of the shelves before closing time at 5PM.

Here's the catch, Filipinos genuinely like to read. This is why Wattpad and Webtoon are such popular avenues for consuming stories—and such lucrative investments in the book publishing industry. Wattpad and Webtoon are low-hanging fruits for publishers. It already has a captured audience. The stories are free, infinite, and written by one of us in our mother tongue. It's a phenomenon that we shouldn't ignore because it is dictating how we tell our stories, how we

deliver stories to the Filipino readers, and how it defines this generation of readers—whether academics and literary snobs like it or not. To quote Stephen King on popular literature, “What? We’re going to remain ignorant of our own culture?”

I remember being called up to the front of the class to explain *Florante’t Laura* and why it mattered so much that we see Florante tied to a tree at the beginning of a story. He was tied up to a tree to represent slavery or colonialism or some such clever answer that I can’t remember anymore. The ubiquitous Filipino stories we know—and were forced to read for school—were these revolutionary *opus*, signaling to the Filipino our dissent of our colonizer’s hold on us. We were pushing back foreign influence. These stories changed our country.

And guess what? *Florante’t Laura* and *Ang Ibong Adarna* are epic fantasies.

Today, our fantasies are a far cry from those required reading revolutionary books.

On one side of the spectrum, there is an increasing interest in our mythologies especially by graphic artists and visual storytellers. Perhaps this is best demonstrated by arguably the most popular Filipino fantasy story of this era, *Trese*, about a fair-skinned Filipino babaylan chasing after monsters in modern day Philippines.

On the other side, we go back to Wattpad, a thriving genre in itself in Philippine publishing—partly because the books are cheap and partly because the books are accessible. The fantasy books I have helped produce in my job as managing editor of a major publishing house in the country are nothing like *Florante’t Laura* or *Ibong Adarna*.

The authors of these books are fascinated by western stories and tropes and mythologies. Instead of the blood-sucking *manananggal*, they write about vampires. Instead of *aswang* that turns into a grotesque hound, they write about werewolves. Instead of *diwatas* and *engkantadas*, they write about fairies and elves.

Of course, this is not to ignore Philippine “literary” Literature. Make no mistake. They are still being made, written, and published. They are undeniably important, but we have to look at book publishing as a business, too. And in my eight years working in the industry, I learned that publishers are more likely to greenlight books that guarantee sales. And if it’s popular, someone’s going to buy it. There are books we display on our shelves and never open, and then there are books we read till the pages fall off the spine. So for the purpose of this essay, we’ll focus on popular books produced and written in this era with the big print runs being published today locally—meaning books with more or less 10k copies in circulation.

Storytelling themes switched from revolutionary ideas—one that fought against colonizers—to western-adjacent ideas—one that embraced and even co-opted western styles and themes.

I don’t recognize the “Filipino” in these stories, but they were written by Filipinos.

Perhaps the problem then is that I wouldn’t recognize a Filipino today if one looked back at me in the mirror.

Character Development In The Philippines

Stories give us a glimpse of how man lived in one era or the other. Think of it as an imprint of that generation—post-war economic boom for the boomers, worldwide economic collapse for gen-x-ers, the pandemic and war for the millennials.

I like to think that my millennial life is a moderately lucrative mine for ideas for stories. If there’s anything I learned from my relatively short career as a writer and book editor, it is this:

Writing is an act of love.

It takes so much of us to write stories. My epic fantasy novel took me six months to write a workable draft and it will take a couple more months to create the beta draft, the one I won’t be

ashamed to pitch to literary agents and publishers. This 8k-word essay took me an entire Sunday to write and another couple of weeks to edit, revise, and polish.

This is not to mention the pieces of ourselves we carve out—sometimes painfully—to create our stories and to put them on display for all the world to see and judge. We mine ideas, themes, scenes, people, places, and memories from our own lives to create this thing that we hope people would love as much as we do. Like martyrs and the heroes of fantasy and science fiction stories, storytellers willingly go through the pain of doing the thing we love even if being loved back is not guaranteed. The act of loving itself is enough.

This heroism and proclivity for martyrdom reminds me of an archetype that's endemic to fantasy and science fiction genres: the monomyth or the hero's journey. Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, explains that the monomyth “examines the stages of the hero who goes on an adventure, faces a crisis and wins, then returns victorious.”

The characters I write, I try my best to make them as Filipino as I could make them—whatever that means. I try my best not to base them on myself—how vain do I have to be to write epic fantasy with me as the main character, right? I won't survive in the world I built. Instead, I let the characters live for themselves. I mine from my life and give characters problems that Filipinos have to handle daily in their lives. Pressures like replacing our parents as the sole breadwinners of our households, like getting married and making babies before all our eggs shrivel up and die in the womb, like shutting up when the men are talking, and like giving up a thriving career when women actually made babies.

Life as a Filipino is hard. Life as a Filipino writer is a constant battle to get our words out there for literal coins—except of course if you're, say, a National Artist For Literature or a rich person who can afford to hire a ghostwriter. The minimum rate for a writer's work in the Philippines is

one peso per word, and on average, an article is 300-500 words. In order to earn the monthly minimum wage of ten thousand pesos, we have to write around 36 articles per month or 1.2 articles per day. And admit it, the minimum wage is not livable wage in the Philippines, no matter how good we are at squeezing every last drop of value from one peso. No writer could have the time to create their 100k-word *obra* with that kind of daily churn.

As a Filipino queer woman, the cards are stacked against me. I'm expected to be my family's breadwinner and forget my own dreams because I need to earn more than the minimum wage for my family to survive and help build the ideal Filipino home. The only way I can be free of that pressure is if I get married and have children of my own, thereby restarting the vicious cycle of creating the "ideal" Filipino home, the Filipino Millennial Monomyth.

There are days when I don't like living in the Philippines, that I don't feel like I belong here, or that my personal identity doesn't align with the national identity. This election is a truly vicious one. I have woken from nightmares of living in a country governed by another autocrat. It's like we never learned from our past. We keep forgetting what happened to us, what was done to us over the course of our history. The cycle is endless.

I, being a queer, liberated Filipino, have time and time again gotten into arguments where my world view doesn't align with the world view of many Filipinos, my family especially. And this season of election campaigns sends me spiraling into a pit of fear that we're not going forward, that we're retrogressing into a past that has no place in this world anymore, that the third act of our country's story will lead to a *1984*- or *Handmaid's Tale*-esque dystopia.

But the thing is, I'm not a character in a novel. I'm a living, breathing human being with dreams, ambition, hopes, wants, and needs. My life isn't divided neatly into three acts, into promise, progress, and payoff. The promises life makes at the beginning don't always pan out. The

progress in the middle is sometimes wasted. And payoff? I've yet to find out what my life is worth. I may never find out. You only know the shape of a story till after the end after all. I only live with the growing fear that my aversion to having children and making descendants has doomed me either into obscurity or into a vicious cycle that I never chose for myself. No one will remember me. There will be no evidence that I existed in this world. I did not make a dent in this world. My life did not matter. I did not live for more.

And I did not want to believe that lie. Or perhaps I would rather believe the lie that my life actually matters. Because what's the alternative? Stop living? What's the point of waking up tomorrow, of going forward, of looking for a third act if all of it was in vain?

The question is this, who am I and am I worth remembering?

The Fantasy of National Identity

Memory has a way of playing tricks with our heads, of making us feel bigger than we actually are against the backdrop of history.

Like say if someone tells you that the Marcos years were the best years of our country, while also ignoring the fact that thousands of people disappeared or died in that time, or that the national income that supposedly went to the government went someplace else, or that the president's family lived like royalty while the rest of the country made do with whatever scraps fell off their table.

A poor country with fat leaders is still a poor country. We just know where all the food is going.

I'm afraid that this, who we are today, will define how our descendants will remember us.

Who are we anyway? Who is the Filipino?

When I was dreaming up national identities for countries in the worlds I was building, I dissected my own life to see what the Filipino identity looks like and to see which mythologies I could mine for the epic fantasy I was writing without risking cultural appropriation.

I'm so pale-skinned that I barely look Filipino—I have on occasion been asked if I was Korean or Chinese. But I'm not fair-skinned enough to be Caucasian. I have Chinese, Spanish, and Filipino ancestors, but my parents and grandparents come from different corners of the country: Ilocos Sur, Cebu, Batangas, and Cavite. I don't speak any of those provinces' dialects, nor do I have an accent. I was born in Manila. I've lived in the capital all my life, and I was raised to speak English more than Tagalog because English was the language that'll earn me money, my mother says. They say the language you think in is your mother tongue—I think in English. I don't know how to define myself other than a Filipino born and raised in the Philippines, who barely thinks, looks, and talks like a Filipino.

Nick Joaquin said, “The identity of the Filipino today is of a person asking what *is* his identity.” The implication of this, whether Joaquin, a writer I admire so much, meant it or not, is that our identity as Filipinos remains as a question mark—which is both unnerving and a relief at the same time. Unnerving because I'm already going through an existential crisis as a Filipino. It doesn't help that I don't understand my own national identity and can't align my personal identity with it. Relieved because I get to define who I am and who I am as a Filipino.

There's freedom in that, I think. And also duty.

The quote, however, came from an essay written in the 80s. Whether it still holds true today is up for debate, one that I am unwilling to join in because I'm not dumb enough to challenge *the Quijano de Manila*.

The irony here is Filipinos abroad today, especially the ones who were not born and raised in the motherland, seem to have a better grasp of their roots than the ones born and raised here.

And though some of them risk exoticizing their homeland, I like to think that there is a grain of truth in how they define our common roots. They have, after all, isolated themselves from the puzzle that is the Filipino identity. They've created enough distance between themselves and their motherland to see the trees for the forest. Perhaps the Filipinos in the diaspora can see us better from where they stand. I think Filipinos unwittingly define ourselves based on how we remember us and analogously based on how the world looks at us and reacts to us.

Perhaps the Filipino national identity today is what we Filipinos, wherever we are in the world, and the rest of the world sees and remembers of us. I wonder if they like what they are seeing.

The Worlds That The West Dreamt Up

Sometimes I feel like the world has left behind the Philippines.

The west has turned their sights to the stars and beyond. The Filipino still have their feet firmly planted on the ground, sometimes digging for relics and fossils of the past selves we lost after colonialism, war, and martial law, like lost souls desperately digging for identities and memories of better times—relics that remind us of who we were, how glorious we were. Like fine old clothes that don't fit us anymore, vestments that don't fall right over our frames anymore.

Western fantasies are set in space, have alien superheroes, and develop science-y magic systems.

Filipino fantasy either co-opts or borrows western fantasies or dreams about the past, about a golden age that likely wasn't so golden for those martyred for our freedoms.

It hasn't even been a century since Tolkien's death in 1973, and yet the seeds he planted for modern fantasy—and eventually science fiction—have created leaps and strides in Literature. He changed the way we tell our stories, the way we see the world, the way we imagine a good life. Neil Gaiman, in his Newberry Award acceptance speech, talked about meeting a party official at the first ever science fiction convention in China. He asked the man why they organized the convention after his country's long-time disapproval of the genre. The Chinese interviewed people working at USA's big tech companies to find out where they got their ideas for their inventions which they send to China to mass produce. The common denominator? The creators all grew up on a healthy dose of fantasy and science fiction. Now, China has some of the best science fiction and fantasy books worldwide.

It blows my mind just how many epic fantasies have been written and published in the west in just the past century. Epic fantasy has perhaps the most arduous writing journey. With at least 150k words, the task of writing one epic fantasy book is real labor, and that's not including the research, study, practice, worldbuilding, and planning that goes into writing a book. It's labor that doesn't guarantee a livable income.

I should know, my own story is 173k words, and I was able to do this while working a full-time job and side hustling. I had to manage every hour of my day so I could sneak in some personal writing time. I am exhausted. I hate to say this, but if the pandemic never happened, life would have never created room for me to pursue my passions.

In that same two-three years it took me to get to this draft, Brandon Sanderson, arguably the most popular and prolific epic fantasy author today, wrote at least 10 books.

I am a little jealous at just how prolific western writers are. It makes me wonder if they had to juggle full-time jobs while writing, if they ever worry about paying their bills this month, if their words were worth more than a Filipino's.

They are so prolific and there are so many books that science fiction and fantasy as a genre splintered into subgenres. Swords and sorcery, gunslingers and gunpowder fiction, urban fantasy, grimdark, dark academia, space opera, epic science fiction, epic fantasy, the list goes on.

The fantasy and science fiction of the west are set in intricate, sweeping, secondary worlds. They have awesome magic systems. They tell stories about world-changing and -ending plotlines, nuanced races, and complicated, larger-than-life characters. They're saving the world from dictators, conquerors, impending war, rivals, and evil men. At the center of those stories, we find characters, would-be monomyths, who fight even when the odds are not in their favor.

Sometimes I think they've exhausted their own culture enough that they've imagined worlds based on cultures that they did not grow up with, like *The Wizard Of The Earthsea* by Ursula K. Le Guinn, *Under Heaven* by Guy Gavriel Kay, *The Emperor's Soul* by Brandon Sanderson. They are white people writing Asian-themed stories.

Western authors are fascinated by our side of the world that they're writing our stories for us.

A glaring example: There is a tattooed human skin splayed out on display in a museum in Oxford. I read from an article published in Esquire Philippines, that for the longest time, the man who once wore that skin was believed to be a lost prince from the Philippines with a wild epic tale of princess rescuing, saving kingdoms, and getting lost at sea. It was a hoax of course made up by the westerner who brought the skin to Oxford. The skin belonged to a Mindanaoan slave. That's as close to the truth as we could know about him.

Nonetheless it's a lie about us that we didn't tell ourselves.

Fortunately, there are Filipinos who have taken the task of writing our fantasies like K.S. Viloso who wrote *The Wolf Of Oren-Yaro*, Rin Chupeco who wrote *Wicked As You Wish*, Rosani Chokshi who wrote the *Star-touched Queen*.

Since I finished my novel three weeks ago and am in the midst of revising it and planning the next book, I have been combing the web for literary agents and international publishers who might be interested in my story.

What I found out is promising. There is genuine interest in Filipino fantasy, and there aren't enough stories out there yet to fill the need. East Asian and South Asian fantasy books are thriving worldwide. We could only hope that Southeast Asian books would follow in their wake. We've so far let the westerners tell our stories for us. It's time we tell *our* stories ourselves.

The Philippine Story We Forgot

There are stories that are true. There are lies made to look like they're the truth. And then there are lies we choose to believe as truth.

I'm having trouble defining the Filipino identity today. I am heartbroken by the turnout of this year's election. This election was us voting not only for our futures but ultimately also for our past. That's six years of our lives where the country denies a part of its history as truth.

Nick Joaquin said, "Identity is the history that has gone into bone and blood and reshaped flesh. Identity is not what we are but what we have become, what we are at this moment."

What is the Filipino today?

I've begun to rethink the stories I tell. I blame myself for being complacent, for thinking that I can step back from my own culture and just tell the story I want to tell.

I genuinely thought I was living for more before this.

It hurts to know that the telling of stories is what led us to this presidential regime. Or rather the retelling and revising of true stories, spinning them into alternative history for those who didn't see true history with their own eyes. The stories themselves have become real poisons of mind and self and country. The relics were retailored to fit old frames pretending to be kings and queens and monarchs in a country that's enjoyed democracy for over a century.

This isn't the epic fantasy I signed up for. How did this become the Filipino monomyth?

Democracy is a double-edged sword. Everyone has a voice, but we've allowed twisted storytellers to shape those voices so that the loudest voices drowned out the truth.

I can't help thinking that I am at fault here, in this cruel plot twist that our country has to face.

That I didn't do enough. That I wasn't enough. We grew complacent, grew fat and greedy at the teats of democracy, thinking that it would never run out, thinking that we don't have to fight to defend not just our future or our past, but ourselves, our identity.

We let our guard down and failed to notice that *they*, the characters of an alternate history, never stopped playing the game. It irks me to think that People Power was just a lost battle that paved the way to win a war.

If history is told by the victors, then what does this make of us Filipinos, who let an ousted dictator's son take power back? Is this our third act? Or theirs? Is this the story that our descendants will remember of us?

The Modern Filipino Fantasy Epic

I love books. I buy them. I collect them. I read them. I dissect them. I make them. I made a career out of making them. And most importantly, I write them. At least I try to.

I want to write *the* modern Filipino epic fantasy. Epic. Fantasy. Modern epic fantasy written by a Filipino using themes, stories, structures that are endemic to us.

It is however a monumental endeavor to do so. Epic fantasy is a lot of work, which is not to say that writing a book is easy. Not at all, but epic fantasy requires, or at the very least encourages, expertise not just in writing and storytelling itself, but working knowledge of some such skill that takes assiduous study, if we look at the grand classics of the genre.

Tolkien was a philologist, poet, and academic. He wrote *The Lord Of The Rings* so that, among other things, the Elven languages (or his “nonsense fairy languages”) he developed could have a place to live in. Frank Herbert was an ecologist, and Arrakis, the planet of his *obra Dune*, is an ecological examination of how living things interact in a world with limited water supply but is an abundant source of space dust. C.S. Lewis was a lay theologian, and his *The Chronicles of Narnia* is known for its Christian themes and imagery.

I am unfortunately only a simple book editor. It will take me more work than say a war historian to write epic pitched battle scenes. Or an ecologist to build planets. Or an astronomer to build galaxies. Though I am more than willing to do the work. It’ll just take me more time to do it than an expert. That said, I sincerely and wholeheartedly believe that anyone can write if said anyone is willing to put in the time and work to learn the craft of writing and storytelling.

What I *am* good at, if I may be so bold, is making books. I have a working knowledge of how to turn an idea into a manuscript that can be turned into a book. I understand the industry well enough to know which audience group would like which genres, which social classes would like which themes, and which readers would like which stories. And I think I am able to make informed guesses on which books will trend next. I have even helped produce local bestsellers in my short career as a book editor. But to be perfectly honest, betting on a book sometimes feels

like gambling. Think of it as if you're playing slot machines. You're likely to win from the machine that nobody has won from at closing time. Likely but not surely. And then sometimes, you don't have to do anything but make that bet and you just win.

Bottomline: Books have power if we know what books or stories people want and how we can get those books into their hands.

What this working knowledge informs me is which books the Filipino is missing out on—and *might* likely buy into if the books were made available for them.

And in my professional opinion, we're missing out on modern epic fantasy. *Our* modern epic fantasy. It's never been tested locally so the potential is intriguing. Nobody makes it—and likely very few Filipino writers know how or have the time, energy, or resources to learn to write it.

The Filipino identity is incomplete without our epics and mythologies. Komikon is a real thing—a thriving community. Fantasy and science fiction is booming worldwide, especially in the west, which means it will make its way to us soon enough. And there is a very real interest in Asian fantasy epics worldwide today.

When I was considering the stuff I want to do with the rest of my life, I turned to the one constant thing in my career that I would love to do for the next 30 years, and that is to write and tell stories. We need stories now more than ever, stories with truth laced between the words, little doses of poison in snake oil that'll see us through the very real poisons of life.

Epic fantasy allows us to see hobbits as saviors of a world that's losing magic. It makes us believe that an orphan magician can defeat the most wicked sorcerer in the world. It shows us that slaves can break the chains that bind them and become epic fantasy heroes themselves. It shows us that we can be more.

We Filipinos need to see ourselves as more than what we are now, more than a race that has forgotten and rewritten our past. We need to believe that we can be more, that we can live for more. Because otherwise, what are we? Who are we?

And more importantly, we need to drown out the lies, the misinformation, the complacency.

The most heartbreaking thing about this election is the prospect of losing my voice. Already, I am censoring my thoughts, my words, my stories in my head as if I'd already lost the freedom of speech. That's what happened to writers and storytellers during Martial Law after all. Dead or mute. Every word I put down now feels like a knife pointed at me.

But words are all I have, and if even just one word by me could give my life meaning, could change the way history remembers me, us, our lives, the way we lived, what we believed in, even just a little bit, then I will wield those knives myself. I will write until the words will run out or until the last drop of blood is squeezed out of my body.

Words and books after all can cure and hurt. They are poison and blade, a double-edged sword. I hope somehow my stories become someone's poison, either to survive tomorrow or to cure the poison from actual lies that seeped into our lives.

This battle against alternative truth may be lost, but the war for our identity is not over.

My Monomyth

In the last scene of the epic fantasy novel I wrote, the protagonist says goodbye and flies away.

The last line was "She was free." I was thinking about freedom when I decided on that ending. Is running away really the solution to life's problems? Will I be free if I escape this life for another one, a better one? Do we get a reset if we botch life on our first try?

I set out to write epic fantasy to live for more, to find a way to escape my life even for just a few minutes, but in so doing, I found power in my voice, an ability to speak truth between spectacularly epic lies. It's a power that I would like to wield in our war for our identity.

The Filipino Millennial Monomyth is a story of struggling to find our identity and glean through the brambles of obscurity, mediocrity, and broken dreams written not by our own hands to find a good life built according to our terms. It's our turn to write our story, our only chance to define who we are and how we will be remembered when we're gone.

My dream is to get published and live a lifetime of writing with the desperation of a thirsty man in a desert. I will cull from my life, my heritage, my homeland to create. It's a painful process, writing stories without the guarantee of being loved back, but there is joy in it, too, in knowing I can do something special. Something that could define how I lived my life. Something that, I hope, would be worth remembering about me when I'm gone.

You don't see the shape of stories till after the end after all. The third act is yet to come.

There's no escaping from the real world, but it doesn't hurt to dream up one we can live with, one that we as Filipinos define for ourselves. It doesn't hurt to dream that the made-up impossibly hospitable worlds we create in our fantasies as a possibility in the real world. It doesn't hurt to dream that one life is worth remembering, that the story of our lives is worth remembering, that the story of our country is worth telling and fighting for.

It's never painful to dream, but it is a thing we need to always fight for, to always defend with the courage and fortitude of an epic fantasy monomyth.

The Filipino Monomyth's third act is yet to come.

We just have to be brave enough to live for more.