WHY WORDS MATTER

WHY WE READ AND WHY WE WRITE

WRITTEN by BUTCH DALISAY

ILLUSTRATED by MARCEL ANTONIO
This book belongs to:
WHY WORDS MATTER

Why we read and why we write

Written by Butch Dalisay
Illustrated by Marcel Antonio

Edited by Gigo Alampay
PEOPLE often ask me how and why I became a writer.

The easy answer is that I realized early on that writing was the only thing I really loved doing, and which I could do reasonably well.

At some point, I fancied becoming a scientist, and even entered college as an engineering major. But I couldn’t hack the math – in any case, I found words to be more fun than numbers – and so I resigned myself to becoming a writer for life: as a journalist, a playwright, a scriptwriter, a fictionist, a poet, and an essayist.

I do all these things not because I’m brilliant, but because I write for a living.

Some people live to write, I write to live.
Some people live to write,
I write to live.
to change or to make history.
Writers have offered all kinds of reasons why they write.

George Orwell famously said that writers write for four reasons: sheer EGOISM, AESTHETIC ENTHUSIASM, historical impulse, and political purpose.

Sure, some of us write to be famous, or to change or to make history.

But it was the Nobel prizewinner Toni Morrison who, I think, gave the simplest and most honest reason why we writers write when she said, “I wrote my first novel because I wanted to read it.”
What do you need to become a writer?

Let me toss out a few ideas.

*First*, a love of words, and a fascination with their origins, meanings, and uses.

As an adolescent, I used to spend an hour or two after school in the library, where I would flip idly through the pages of the big fat Webster’s dictionary, picking up words I would never use (like “fennec: a North African fox”) but didn’t mind meeting.
Second, a love of books and reading. There’s no other or better way you can learn about words and how they behave except by reading.

I was a reader before I became a writer, and I read everything – the Hardy Boys, history books, science books, maps, TIME Magazine, Liwayway.
Third, an insatiable curiosity about the world and the way things work. We can’t get everything by direct experience, but we can read up on woodworking, jewelry, macramé, gardening, automotive mechanics, and New Zealand – in other words, things we may not be too interested in ourselves, or think about on ordinary days.
Fourth, an empathy for people, a sense of how they think, feel, and act, and a keen understanding of the workings of human relationships. It all comes down to people and their motivations, or why we do what we do.
Fifth, a sense of narrative, a desire, and the ability to imagine what happened or may have happened.

Sixth, faith in art – in my case the art of fiction – and in its ability to deal with the most complicated human issues and concerns.

Unlike science, art is not fact-based but truth-based, and often life’s truths can be established not by reason but by imagination and intuition.
“Literature is what makes us human.”
Why bother with books and literature, when it seems we can get everything we need on Google and Wikipedia?

We’re often told that like the other arts, “Literature is what makes us human.”

But what exactly does that mean?

How does literature humanize us?
Literature relies on language.

Whales, monkeys, elephants, and birds communicate, presumably for the most basic things—food, sex, danger. We might even call their most basic utterances words and phrases. They perform a clear and practical function, and they form sequences of meaning, like saying, “There is food down there” or “I want to make a little baby with you.”

This is language, but it is not literature.
food, sex, danger.
Literature requires imagination—dreaming of things beyond the immediate and the practical—
Literature requires imagination
– dreaming of things beyond the immediate and the practical
– and furthermore, a medium of \textit{transmission} and \textit{preservation} of the products of that imagination.

We are told that animals can dream. \textit{But, they cannot record and communicate these dreams like we do.}
Literature is our waking dream, a dream we describe and share through words.

These dreams – these stories we make up in our minds –

*can teach,*

*can delight,*

*can disturb,*

*can enrage,*

*can exalt.*

They can remember and can therefore preserve our memories – our thoughts and feelings – as individuals and as a race.

As far as I know, **no other species** – nothing and no one else – can do this.
Literature is our waking dream, a dream we describe and share through words.
Stories that
never happened, except
in our imaginations.
Literature makes us human, because it allows us to tell stories that make sense of our lives, even stories that never happened, except in our imaginations.
This is why and how belief in \textit{things} like Paradise are possible.
Things like Paradise are possible.
The **magic of literature** lies in how it deals with reality and reason through fantasy and the imagination, and approaches the truth through make-believe.

As one of my own teachers put it, art (or literature) is “the **mirror of Perseus.**”

That’s because – if you recall the story of the Gorgons – Perseus could kill Medusa, whose fatal gaze would have turned him to stone, only by using his shield as a mirror. Literature is that shield. By deflecting our gaze and seeming to look at other people, we are able to see the truth about ourselves, in all its harshness and unpleasantness.
It is therefore not enough to say that literature makes us human; rather, literature makes us better humans, by teaching us discernment and critical judgment.
Literature makes us better humans.
Literature is a **history of the words** that have made sense of our lives. Like the Bible or the Iliad or the Noli and Fili, it shows us at our best and worst, so we can choose how we want to live – whether as individuals or as citizens or as a society.
To help us use both our reason and imagination, literature uses language, and language uses words.

Through carefully crafted stories, poems, and essays, literature shows young readers that words are supremely important in becoming a better person.

This is especially true at a time when words like “friend” have been devalued by Facebook, and “hero” by those to whom history, and honor and honesty, especially in public service, no longer mean anything.
How careful are we with our ideas, with our choice of wards?
Every entry and every post that we make on Facebook and on Twitter is a test of how well we have learned our language and literature.

I’m not talking about our grammar.

I’m talking about our sensibility – the way we think and express ourselves, the way we deal with other people, especially people holding an adversarial opinion.

How careful are we with our ideas, with our choice of words?
This is the first and the most important lesson of all literature:

**Words have meaning.**

And because they have meaning, *words have power*, and *words have consequences*.
Wards make nations.
Words can hurt.
Words can kill.

But words can also heal.
Words can save.
Words make law.
Words make war.
Words make money.
Words make peace.

Words make nations.
Words are the songs we sing to our loved and lost ones.
Words are the songs we sing to our loved and last ones.
Words are the prayers we lift up to the skies.
Words are the prayers we lift up to the skies.
Words are the deepest secrets we confess.
Words are the deepest secrets we confess.
Words are what we tell our children the first thing in the morning. and the last thing at night.
Words are what we tell our children the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night.
Words are all that some of us – especially those whom we call writers – will leave behind.
Words are all that some of us—especially those whom we call writers—will leave behind.
Even after all this time
The sun never says to the Earth
"you see me"

Look
What happens with a line like that?
It lights up the whole sky
Seven hundred years ago, a Persian poet named Hafez wrote a short but wonderful poem:

    Even
    After
    All this time
    The Sun never says
    To the Earth
    "You owe me."

    Look
    What happens
    With a love like that.
    It lights up
    The whole
    Sky.

This, my friends, is why we write, and why we read.

We light up the sky of our minds with love — the love of ideas, of our engagement with ourselves and with the world.
JOSE “BUTCH” DALISAY JR. (born January 15, 1954) is a Filipino writer. He has won numerous awards and prizes for fiction, poetry, drama, non-fiction and screenwriting, including 16 Palanca Awards.

He has published more than 30 books of fiction and nonfiction; his second novel, “Soledad’s Sister,” was shortlisted for the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007. He is a Palanca Hall of Fame, TOYM, and CCP Centennial Honors List awardee, and the Jose Y. Dalisay Jr. Professorial Chair in Creative Writing has been endowed in his name at the University of the Philippines.

He has received Hawthornden Castle, British Council, David T.K. Wong, Rockefeller (Bellagio), and Civitella Ranieri fellowships, and has held the Henry Lee Irwin Professorial Chair at the Ateneo de Manila University; and the Jose Joya, Jorge Bocobo, and Elpidio Quirino professorial chairs at U.P. Diliman.

Prof. Dalisay taught English and Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines, where he also chaired the English department and served as Director of the UP Institute of Creative Writing, and as Vice President for Public Affairs.

In 2019, Prof. Dalisay was appointed as professor emeritus of the University of the Philippines.
ABOUT THE ARTIST

The Chagall-esque works of MARCEL ANTONIO (born June 28, 1965) often involve mysterious themes, utilize fabular images that combine myth with reality, and inspire stories and imagination.

The son of Filipino painters Angelito Antonio and Norma Belleza, Marcel achieved early recognition when he launched his first solo show while still in college at the University of the Philippines. This was followed by a string of sold-out exhibitions, and he is today considered as among the most important artists of his generation. His paintings continue to be prized by collectors in the Philippine and Southeast Asian art markets.

Marcel has exhibited in numerous major galleries in the Philippines, and has also exhibited in Berlin, Australia, and Singapore.
CANVAS’ 1 Million Books for One Million Filipino Children Campaign aims to inspire in children a love for reading by donating its award-winning books to public schools, hospitals, and disadvantaged communities throughout the country.

A child that reads is a creative, empowered, and imaginative child who will learn independently, envision a brighter future, and ultimately lead a productive and meaningful life.

You can help us!

For more information, visit www.canvas.ph, email info@canvas.ph, or find us on Facebook: Center for Art, New Ventures and Sustainable Development.

CANVAS, a non-profit organization, works with the creative community to promote children’s literacy, explore national identity, and broaden public awareness of Philippine art, culture, and the environment.
MORE BOOKS FROM CANVAS

ELIAS AND HIS TREES
Adapted from “The Man Who Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Adaptation by Augie Rivera
Art by Romeo Forbes

THE HUMMINGBIRD
by The King and the Royal Trees
by The Star Thrower
and art by Aird

Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Written by
Art by

ELIAS AND HIS TREES
Adapted from “The Man Who Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Adaptation by Augie Rivera
Art by Romeo Forbes

THE HUMMINGBIRD
by The King and the Royal Trees
by The Star Thrower
and art by Aird

Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Written by
Art by

ELIAS AND HIS TREES
Adapted from “The Man Who Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Adaptation by Augie Rivera
Art by Romeo Forbes

THE HUMMINGBIRD
by The King and the Royal Trees
by The Star Thrower
and art by Aird

Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Written by
Art by

ELIAS AND HIS TREES
Adapted from “The Man Who Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Adaptation by Augie Rivera
Art by Romeo Forbes

THE HUMMINGBIRD
by The King and the Royal Trees
by The Star Thrower
and art by Aird

Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Written by
Art by

ELIAS AND HIS TREES
Adapted from “The Man Who Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Adaptation by Augie Rivera
Art by Romeo Forbes

THE HUMMINGBIRD
by The King and the Royal Trees
by The Star Thrower
and art by Aird

Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Written by
Art by

ELIAS AND HIS TREES
Adapted from “The Man Who Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Adaptation by Augie Rivera
Art by Romeo Forbes

THE HUMMINGBIRD
by The King and the Royal Trees
by The Star Thrower
and art by Aird

Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Written by
Art by

ELIAS AND HIS TREES
Adapted from “The Man Who Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Adaptation by Augie Rivera
Art by Romeo Forbes

THE HUMMINGBIRD
by The King and the Royal Trees
by The Star Thrower
and art by Aird

Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Written by
Art by

ELIAS AND HIS TREES
Adapted from “The Man Who Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Adaptation by Augie Rivera
Art by Romeo Forbes

THE HUMMINGBIRD
by The King and the Royal Trees
by The Star Thrower
and art by Aird

Planted Trees” by Jean Giono
Written by
Art by
"People often ask me how and why I became a writer"

So begins multi-awarded writer Butch Dalisay’s poetic reflection – complemented by the uniquely lyrical art of Marcel Antonio – on reading, writing, language, literature, and the enduring power of words.

CANVAS, a non-profit organization, works with the creative community to promote children’s literacy, explore national identity, and broaden public awareness of Philippine art, culture, and the environment.

For more information, please visit www.canvas.ph or follow us at www.facebook.com/canvas.ph.

www.canvas.ph
creative possibilities, open conversations, meaningful change.