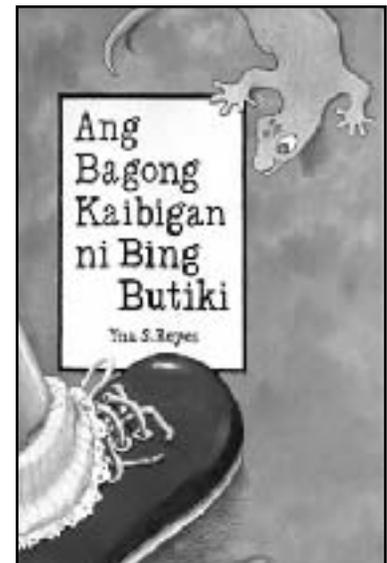


# RESULTS: A Dozen Original Titles

*Yna S. Reyes, recently promoted editorial manager for OMF Literature, discusses the nurturing of children's writers through a care-and-critique group.*



In 1994, when I became editor-in-charge of the Hiyas Children's Collection (Hiyas is the Filipino term for precious gems), the children's list of OMF Literature had only seven titles in print. I began working with three writers who had very little knowledge and experience in writing for children. I tried to help them, but being a neophyte myself, I could not pretend to know much more than the basics. So I said, "Why don't we invite other interested writers and form a critique group where we can help one another?"

### ***The care-and-critique group***

For one whole year, seven writers and a children's book editor met every month for a care-and-critique group (CG). Our group includes: Aris, a pastor and father of two; Blessie, a pastor's wife and mother; Luis, a pediatrician; Diana, a college professor and doting aunt; Beng, an

OMF Literature editor; Juliet, a law graduate; Renato, a small-scale children's book publisher; and myself, an editor and adoptive parent. Of the eight, seven are now children's authors. Moreover, 12 stories we critiqued are now children's books.

In our CG, we encouraged each writer to either improve a story in progress, or to begin a new one. Everyone got a chance to have his or her work reviewed. In each of our one-and-a-half hour sessions, three writers can read their works and get feedback from the others. We aim to "affirm first, before critiquing." Being writers ourselves, we value the labor our colleagues put into their work. We know it isn't easy to create characters or develop story lines. Therefore, even if there was only one good thing about a writer's work, we told him

or her what it was, and then offered suggestions for improvement.

The group became a good source of ideas for new stories. Some stories that originated in the group are: vegetables that try to win a child's heart, a worm's short-lived adventures in a boy's body, a cockerel hooked on television, a water buffalo that teaches humility to an arrogant horse, and other stories with characters Filipino children might find in their backyards—with some imagination!

### ***Finding our own voice***

Although the members of our group can write stories in English, we are better storytellers in our own language. Filipino is the language of our hearts and the language of our readers' hearts. We express our joys, tell our jokes, cry, and vent our anger in Filipino. In the cri-

tique group our discussions were in Filipino. As Filipino writers we want to enrich our literature by writing stories in our mother tongue. But because many Filipino children are bilingual, the books of Hiyas Children's Collection have a parallel English text.

### **Work at writing**

Rewriting (many times) is a discipline that must become second nature for a writer. Most new writers love their first drafts. They think that since they worked hard on their manuscripts, perhaps the "finished work" is already publishable. In our CG it was clear to us that a good story emerges only after three or more rewrites.

All the writers in the group, not just the editor, pushed colleagues to improve their work. They gave feedback and suggestions for revisions. We learned together. We read about best-selling authors who rewrote their stories ten or more times before publication. Such testimonies encouraged us.

As the "professional" editor in our critique group, I took on the role of teacher. We set ourselves writing exercises or other activities to develop creativity. Once I invited an editorial consultant to give a workshop. Another time a veteran children's book writer reviewed our work and encouraged us to excel.

We have already seen some fruit from our efforts. With the CG's help, Juliet, rewrote two stories that were published by Hiyas. Renato publishes and distributes the books he wrote. Luis joined a national writing contest and won first place. He has written six children's books for the Hiyas Children's Collection and two for another publisher. He is also president of a group of children's book writers.

### **Read widely**

Encouraging writers to write well is not enough. They also need to be encouraged to read widely. I recommend children's classics like *The Wind in the Willows*, books by Maurice Sendak, Eric Carle, and Roald Dahl, Newberry Medal and Honor

Books, Scholastic Books, and books published by Tahanan and Adarna (these last two are Filipino children's publishers). We also borrow books from each other. There were times in the critique group when we would review a book, discuss its strengths and weaknesses, and learn from the author's style.

### **Write for children**

Beginning writers for children often use language fit for adults rather than children. They need to be conscious of the age level of their target readers while writing.

Suggestions I give writers include:

## Books we have found helpful:

1. *How to Write and Illustrate Childrens' Books and Get them Published*, by Treld Pelkey Bicknell and Felicity Trotman (London: Macdonald & Co. Publishers Ltd.)
2. *Writing for Children and Teenagers* by Lee Wyndham; revised by Arnold Madison (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books)
3. *Telling Stories to Children* by Marshall Shelley (USA: Lion Publishing)
4. *The Storytelling Handbook* by Anne Pellowski (New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers)

1. Think of a particular child and keep him or her in mind while writing your story.

2. If you are writing for eight-year-olds, spend time with them while working on your manuscript. Observe their ways, listen to how they speak, and notice the words they use. Do the same when writing for other age levels.

3. Read books written for your target age level and study the way the narrations, descriptions, and dialogues have been written.

4. The most important: Pilot test your first draft. Let several children from your target age level read your story and ask them to circle words, sentences, or paragraphs they do not understand.

5. Finally, rewrite based on the comments of your target readers.

Children's book writers need to develop a genuine love and respect for the readers. This was not difficult for our group because we are very much in touch with children. Still, we visited schools for storytelling and went out of our way to be with our readers. Now that we have our own books, we enjoy telling the story we ourselves wrote. Seeing the pleasure in the eyes of a listening child gives us joy, especially when a child says, "I like your story very much!"

### **Keep in touch**

Having a critique group is ideal, but not every writer can be a part of it. Some writers live far from the city, but these "long-distance" writers need help too. Keeping in touch with them is vital. Write a letter, send a fax or an e-mail, or call these authors to find out how they are getting along. Ask questions like "How are you feeling today?" "Are you having any difficulties with your manuscript?" "Is there anything you need to finish your work on time?" "How would you like me to pray for you?" "How can I help?" Perhaps your author is tired of working on revisions. Or maybe he or she is discouraged and needs to hear some reassuring words.



Yna S. Reyes, the author, participated in the May 1999 International Christian Publishers Institute held at Cook Communications Ministries International in Co. Springs, CO USA.

Writers have real needs, and an editor has lots of opportunities to reach out to them. I once helped a writer get an advance because he needed money to care for his sick father. Another writer needed extra

cash for computer repairs. I gave comfort to a grieving writer who lost his father to leukemia. In such situations, I learned nurturing goes beyond helping a writer sharpen his or her craft.

***Nurture is friendship***

To nurture is to be a writer's friend. Nurturing is making a writer feel that OMF Literature is his family. In our context it could mean offering space in the office to a writer who needs a quiet place to work. It could mean letting a writer use my PC or borrow my books, or remembering writers on their birthdays and at other special times. It means giving the support they need to finish their manuscripts. When books are published, we encourage them by promoting their titles and making them known to their target readers. Most of all, nurturing is praying for and with our writers.

Nurturing children's book writers is a beautiful ministry. It is hard work, but very rewarding. By God's grace the writers in our critique group are fulfilling their dream of being published. One by one they now pursue the greater dream of becoming the favorite author of a Filipino child. ❖

# WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON IN CHRISTIAN PUBLISHING?

## ***Subscribe to InterLit and find out!***

- Call 1-719-536-0100 ext. 3978 or 1-800-708-5550 (USA only).
- E-mail us at [ccmintl@ccmi.org](mailto:ccmintl@ccmi.org) and we will bill you.
- Complete the form below and fax it to 1-719-536-3266. Or,
- Write to: InterLit, 4050 Lee Vance View, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80918 USA.



Name and/or Title \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Country \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Fax \_\_\_\_\_

One year (6 issues) US\$18       Two years (12 issues) US\$30

Bill me       Payment enclosed

Credit Card: # \_\_\_\_\_ Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Visa    MasterCard    Discover   Signature: \_\_\_\_\_