

MARITES Vitug for Philippine News

By Gemma Nemenzo

How did President Noynoy Aquino's administration do in its first 100 days? Can his anti-corruption and reform agenda pass a Philippine Supreme Court stacked with appointees of his predecessor? Can the Filipino people expect the high court justices to live true to their oath, rather than play politics?

These issues and more will be discussed by ace investigative journalist, Marites Danguilan Vitug, whose latest book, *Shadow of Doubt: Probing the Supreme Court*, is the first to dissect the power plays within the current Philippine Supreme Court.

Marites will be at the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) Latino Room on Wednesday, October 13 from 6-7:30 pm. The book-signing event, sponsored by the SFPL's Filipino American Center and the Literacy Initiatives International Foundation, is free to the public.

Like those of millions of Filipinos, Marites Danguilan Vitug's life took a turn with the assassination of Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino in August 1983.

Marites was then a reporter for *Business Day*, the Philippines' most respected business daily, writing about investments, corporate performance and bottomlines. She was competent in her reporting but hardly inspired. When the assassination happened and the country exploded in collective rage, she convinced her editors to let her report on the volatile political situation. Reluctantly (*Business Day* then prided itself as a politically neutral newspaper), she was given the go signal – after all, at that point, business could no longer be divorced from street protests.

Thus, a spectacular career in political and investigative journalism was born. Marites' keen nose for digging out stories, her doggedness in pursuing sources, her ability to see the big picture without losing sight of the details – a distinction that distinguishes good reporting from a mediocre one – all these made her one of the most important journalists of her generation.

As the only reporter covering the anti-Marcos beat for *Business Day* during those heady days of both disquiet and rage, Marites was free to write about the various players that made up the complex post-assassination political landscape. Politicians, government bureaucrats, the clergy, the military, rebels in the hills, street protesters, businessmen – none of them whose opinions mattered escaped Marites' questions.

As her reputation grew, so did her Rolodex of sources. Some sought her out to tip her scoops; others – such as Hashim Salamat, chair of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front – granted her exclusive and rare interviews. Marites was the first journalist told in confidence about an anti-Marcos group within the military that was planning "something big." The group eventually emerged as the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM), instrumental in triggering the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution that sent Marcos to exile.

In pursuing stories, Marites is well aware that danger and critics come with the territory. She recalls with amusement how then-human rights lawyer, now Senator Joker Arroyo replied to a question that she can no longer remember: “Are you stupid? Or are you just pretending to be stupid?”

Then there was that stomach-turning episode in the 1980s that almost made her question the wisdom of choosing journalism as a profession: when covering the Batasang Pambansa, she would be handed envelopes containing cash by some assemblymen. When she tried to return them, she was practically ostracized by some of her colleagues because she was making the rest of them look bad. Not wanting to create enemies within her professional circle, Marites decided to turn the envelopes over to Business Day’s editorial desk instead. The desk then donated the money to charity under the official’s name. Her most hair-raising experience occurred during the waning years of the Marcos administration when she and two colleagues went to Samar to write about the New People’s Army there. “We had to trek to some mountain and when we reached a clearing, there was a military helicopter hovering above! Our guide ordered us to hide in the bushes. What if they had fired at us? My press card couldn’t save me then. I imagined waving my laminated press card to the soldiers but there was no chance they would see it from above. Those moments in the bushes [when we were] crouched and terrified seemed like eternity.”

Her talent, passion and the hard work that went into all her reportage didn’t go unrecognized. After the Philippine upheaval in 1986, Marites took a break from journalism when she accepted a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, after which she took postgraduate studies in international relations at the London School of Economics where she graduated with Merit. Not a bad turn for someone who chose to major in broadcast communication at the University of the Philippines because she was poor in math and wanted to be different from her older siblings, three of whom are doctors and one, a lawyer.

Returning from her studies abroad, Marites felt that filing news reports was no longer enough. “Being a reporter educated me on a lot of issues, provided me with insights and terrific access to news sources, but I could only write so much for a newspaper. I wanted to pursue certain subjects in-depth.” Thus she decided to write a book, *Power From the Forest: The Realities of Logging*, a pioneering work that promptly brought her a libel suit from one of the prominent loggers (the case was eventually dismissed), won her extensive accolade including the Courage in Journalism Award from the New York-based International Women’s Media Foundation, and the [Philippine] National Book Award in 1994.

She later wrote *Jalan-Jalan: A Journey through EAGA*, with Criselda Yabes (chosen by Asiaweek as one of the best books on Asia for 1999); and *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*, with Glenda M. Gloria (which won the National Book Award in 2001).

Though finding fulfillment as an author, Marites realized that she couldn’t abandon journalism altogether. “Books are extended reportage so I like doing both.” Too, there is that nagging reality that “one can’t live on just writing books in the Philippines.” When some financiers called on her to start a

current affairs magazine, she drew on her vast knowledge of Philippine society and politics and created Newsbreak, then as now considered THE magazine for reliable in-depth reporting.

Newsbreak has placed the Philippines in the world journalism map by its winning numerous national and international awards for investigative reporting. The New York Times described it as having “spunk and spice...and has more than demonstrated its independence from the privileged and powerful.”

Marites decided to write her latest book, *Shadow of Doubt: Probing the Supreme Court*, two years ago. “I was intrigued and fascinated by the culture of secrecy and hierarchy of the Philippine high court. It reminded me of my old beat, the military. Both are important institutions that need public scrutiny. And no one had written a book on the inner workings of the Supreme Court so I found virgin territory to explore – and push for transparency and accountability.”

Shadow of Doubt has since become a bestseller, albeit a controversial one. The Philippines’ largest bookstore chain found it too hot to handle and refused to carry it. One of the Supreme Court justices, Presbitero Velasco, has filed 13 counts of libel against Marites because of a Newsbreak Online story she wrote, which she included in her book’s epilogue. The case is still pending but, just as she did in all her other stories that gained her libel suits (none of which prospered), she stands by her story.

Journalism is a dangerous profession especially in the Philippines. But for dedicated practitioners like Marites Danguilan Vitug, it can also be the most fulfilling and noble job in the world. And we are all the better for this.

Sidebar:

Hear Marites Vitug talk about the First 100 Days of the Aquino Administration and *Shadow of Doubt*
Oct 13, 2010

6-7:30 pm at the San Francisco Public Library Latino Room

She will also be signing books.

The event is FREE. Light refreshments will be served.

For more info: filbookfest@yahoo.com.

