

Every Filipino Child a Reader

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*"When you give someone a book,
you don't give him just paper, ink, and glue,
You give him the possibility of a whole new life."* Christopher Morley

When the new school year began in June this year, media reported the typical and well-known information in tired and familiar terms. It was a time that again emphasized the usual problems in the Philippine public school system, often described as "overburdened and under-resourced". And the litany talked about the following: not enough classrooms for student enrollment, overcrowded classrooms, large class sizes, not enough teachers, not enough textbooks, poor quality of available textbooks, less than ideal classroom settings, increasing enrollment of former private school students in public schools because of their lower tuition fees, increasing dropout rates.

Not all was dismal news, however. The good news was that the 2011 budget of the Department of Education has increased to a record Php 192 billion, 52% more than the Php 122 billion budget in 2006. However, this is not sufficient to address the herculean problems facing the Philippine public school educational system. Elementary education is free and compulsory, while secondary education is also free but not compulsory in public high schools.

We cannot talk literacy without talking of the setting, the backdrop against which this is happening—or not occurring at all.

Based on SY 04-05 data for public schools, the dropout rate begins to be marked from as early as Gr. 1 to Gr. 2 because of health and nutrition problems due to poverty.

From a 100% enrollment rate in Grade 1 to 68.38% in Grade 6, there was a decline each year because of poor comprehension skills and inability to succeed in school—the main problems are in reading, math, and science. In HS Year 4, the enrollment rate plunged to 42.50%, with only 14% graduating from college. The statistics are alarming and disheartening, to say the least. The country's old boast of being one of the most highly educated developing countries with high enrollment rates at all levels is no longer true. More disturbing than the completion rate is the poor quality of teaching and learning. It is apparent that reading proficiency is the key to early literacy success and eventual success in school and the work world.

Keeping the students in school is however, a success that will breed new problems. What a contradiction that keeping the children in school will compound current shortages. By improving retention in school, there will be an additional 1-1.2 million children in the system.

Part of the 10-point agenda for Basic Education Reform of the Aquino administration is to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere in the country, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Most relevant to us is the education reform that states that every child must be a reader by Grade 1 by the end of the Aquino administration in 2016. With the introduction of the mandatory pre-schooling in June this year, the goal which is dependent on a full year of Kindergarten is to initially make every child a reader by Grade 3, then Grade 2, then Grade 1. The necessary infrastructure to make this

happen has to be in place: libraries, reading books, teachers trained in teaching reading. Indeed, this seems like an ambitious plan, but something very possible.

This education reform builds and improves on **the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP)** launched by the Department of Education in 2001 which targeted Grade 3 as the level by which every child must be a successful reader—sometimes described as the zero nonreaders goal by Grade 4. In recent discussions, Grade 3, of course, has been found too late in the elementary level, especially with the introduction of the Kindergarten program. A goal as ambitious and all-encompassing as that entails major institutional reforms, the accompanying infrastructure, and the much needed teacher training for more effective reading instruction. To echo the prevailing observation about such initiatives from the Department of Education: there is no denying that we have numerous pockets of excellence going on, but *not* a mandated standard, uniform, sustainable program that every one adheres to. What we have on hand instead, are different initiatives from different divisions around the country: a catalog of Best Reading Practices and Reading Intervention Projects from 30 schools in 17 regions as of March 2010. Thus, a decade after the launch of this very catchy Every Child a Reader slogan, our achievement scores remain nothing to crow about.

The Every Child a Reader Program has spawned two major programs, which hopefully, are helpful for future planning in classrooms and on the national level and do not just generate more clerical work for the already overworked, underpaid public school teachers. The first is the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory, the assessment component of ECARP which is done by the teachers one on one especially for the oral reading portion. The second program has yet to take off in more schools, as it has only

piloted in one school as of today. It is the New Zealand Reading Recovery Program for Grade 1 students, a short-term, school-based intervention program for low literacy achievers. It involves intensive one-to-one lessons for 30 minutes a day with a trained literacy teacher for an average period of 20 weeks. Public school teachers have been selected to train for this in New Zealand and in turn, train their colleagues in the Philippines.

But certainly, more important, more critical than all these is the DepEd directive from 2001 that every student should show written or oral evidence of having read at least two books a year, one per semester prior to promotion to the next level. It is specified that the books referred to are not textbooks and that one be in English and the other in the vernacular or the mother tongue. It does not seem a big task, but considering the limitations the public school system grapples with, it is far from easy.

Another important education reform that directly relates to reading is the medium of instruction used in schools. President Aquino refers to an ambitious tri-lingual approach that poses a challenge: **“learn English well to connect to the world, learn Filipino well to connect to the country, retain your mother tongue to connect to your heritage.”** It improves on the bilingual policy as medium of instruction because the majority of students do not have the background in English and Filipino, the national language to succeed in either language. It is now recognized and buttressed by research and empirical evidence that the use of the mother tongue in the early grades promotes better learning of subject areas and also of English and Filipino. We should build on the cultural and linguistic diversity of Philippine society, rather than view it as a liability. It is the richness of our cultural heritage and the archipelagic geography of the

country's 7100 islands that has given us over 120 distinct languages and eight major regional languages which are widely spoken.

The one-year old Aquino administration is working on badly needed reforms in the educational system. For school year 2011-12, Education Secretary *Br. Armin Luistro FSC* announced the formal implementation of the first-ever universal public kindergarten program for 5-year olds which will better prepare the children for the rigors of formal schooling. At least one million (1.12 to be exact) preschoolers signed up for this. This is the initial step under the K+12 program which will add two years to the present Basic Education Curriculum of six years of elementary and four years of high school. This measure is seen as a vital step that will solve deficiencies in the competencies in the core subjects of English, Math, and Science among a majority of high school graduates, as well as gain recognition for Filipino professionals among employers abroad. To date, the Philippines is one of only two countries in the world with a ten-year basic education curriculum, the other being Myanmar. An obvious consequence of the ten-year curriculum is the unwillingness of companies abroad to hire graduates of the abbreviated program. The K+12 program should make our graduates more globally competitive.

The results of the National Achievement Test (NAT) for Grade 6 in the SY 2009-10 reflected a passing rate of only 69.21%. This already marked a 24% improvement over the 2005-06 passing rate, but shows that reforms are still urgently needed to achieve substantial improvement.

How does one promote the love and habit of reading in a setting like the Philippines today? Two foundations I work with—the **Philippine Board on Books for Young People** or the **PBBY** and the **Sa Aklat Sisikat Foundation** are both impassioned with the crusade to make every Filipino child not only learn to read but love to read.

For many years, in the course of teacher training for public school teachers, I would talk endlessly about my favorite award winning books in children's literature from developed countries and of late, from Philippine children's titles. Then I realized how futile it all seemed: how dare I preach about the love of reading when the students did not have books to learn to read with in the first place? How can one talk about love for reading when the students could not even read and in fact hated reading because their reading classes only meant learning meaningless words and endless worksheets? It was not as if the teachers deliberately meant to make the classes so tedious--they just had neither the resources nor the knowhow to do otherwise. How could I convince the teachers about the books I love when these were so alien, so inaccessible to them? Where was the joy to be found in all that?

One could not help but empathize with the public school teachers who work long hours during the day and on into the night because they have to write out long detailed plans that their administrators require. That meant they were too tired to teach the next day and yet, had to contend with students who cannot learn because they have not had a decent meal and often number more than 60 in classrooms which are certainly less than ideal. How promising those teachers were, but how they lacked the exposure and the professional development opportunities to be excellent teachers. Bless those

teachers who remain cheerful and steadfast in their jobs and who have not lost the sense of humor (and sanity, too) as they tell me that their take-home pay cannot even take them home.

In the spirit of transparency, I must say at the outset that three of the foundations I will talk about whose main advocacy is literacy and reading promotion are also those I have been closely associated with. **The Philippine Board on Books for Young People (PBBY)** is a private, non-stock, non-profit organization representing a multisectoral group of writers, illustrators, publishers, booksellers, educators, book reviewers, librarians, researchers, storytellers, reading advocates, and mass media representatives committed to the development of children's literature in the country and promoting reading among our children. It is the Philippine National Section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), a world organization founded in Zurich in 1953 that promotes international understanding through children's books. I represent the book reviewers sector on the board—not that this is a large sector in the country—and once chaired the PBBY. It is the lead agency in celebrating National Children's Book Day every third Tuesday in July, the date especially selected as it is the anniversary of the publication of Jose Rizal's "The Monkey and the Turtle" in Trubner's Oriental Record, a London publication. Yes, Rizal also dabbled in children's literature, even sketching and translating Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales for his nephews and nieces back home during his long years of exile in Europe. Thus, it is appropriate that our poster and theme this year features him with much gratitude as *Grandpa Pepe* (the affectionate nickname for Jose): *One who reads; someone who is read.*

This year marks the sesquicentennial birth anniversary of our national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, an intellectual genius, a true bibliophile, and a man of many talents whose novels written in Spanish, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* were milestones towards the country's independence from the shackles of colonial rule, 300 years from the Spaniards and 30 years from the United States. His novels were initially considered seditious material, anti-clerical as they narrated excesses of the Spanish governor-generals and the clergy. *Noli Me Tangere* is Latin for "Don't touch me/Touch me not", recorded in the Bible as the words Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalen after His resurrection, while *El Filibusterismo* has the alternative English title of *The Reign of Greed*, while the Spanish word, *filibustero* means "a revolutionary suspect, a subversive." You can now understand and appreciate why the Spaniards banned the book. And curiously enough, even in the 1950s, our lawmakers had heated arguments about whether these are worthy and suitable reading materials in school. Today, they are required reading, but how to make them palatable for today's youth is another issue altogether. A recent sesquicentennial celebration was the mass recitation of Rizal's "Mi Ultimo Adios" ("*My Last Farewell*") sponsored by Instituto Cervantes in Manila. A few years back, there was a marathon reading of Rizal's novels with celebrities invited to read a chapter each, organized by the National Book Development Board.

Sa Aklat Sisikat, ("Books make you cool" or "Books make you shine" is the loose translation) Foundation where I have been a trustee since its inception over a decade ago, in collaboration with the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd), it has been running innovative Reading Programs and Teacher Training Workshops for the last eleven years. DepEd has publicly recognized it as its longest running

nongovernment partner in literacy. The foundation's reason for existence is to build a nation of readers and to develop in the public school children the love and habit of reading. SAS is accredited by the DepEd to implement reading interventions in the public elementary school system, under *the Adopt-A-School Program*. SAS' s focal activity is the implementation of the 31-day Reading Program. The Reading Program comes in three major parts: the Teacher Training Workshop, *the Read-A- Thon*, and the "Celebrate Reading" culminating activity.

To begin the SAS Reading Program, SAS brings together the Grade 4 teachers and principals from each of the participating schools for a two-day weekend teacher-training workshop, prior to the implementation of *the Read-A-Thon*. The workshop is designed to further enhance the teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching, especially teaching reading as well as to impart innovative, creative strategies and activities they can use in the classroom both during and after the Reading Program. SAS believes that teachers are the key reading advocates in public schools. At the end of the weekend, each participant takes home the SAS Teacher Training Manual which contains all the strategies and activities covered during the workshop. It is a reference for the teachers as they implement the program in their schools.

The novel and enjoyable *Read-A-Thon* presents reading in another light to the students. It is not tedious as the usual reading lessons go, is more a game than a lesson and presents a set of 60 storybooks in color, all recent Philippine publications, for every class to use for 31 schooldays. Consider what a rare treat that is for the students who do not even have their own textbooks. I can never forget the comment of a boy who held the new book lovingly and smelled it, because he had never even had

that pleasurable sensory experience. As the name implies, it is a reading race, with an accompanying progress chart to check on individual student performance and a Reading Passport for every child to record books read, for which different activities must be done. Completed activities give the students the right to paste a paper feather on the Ibong Adarna (a mythical Philippine bird) mural. At the end of the 31 days, the schools in the city plan a final activity to celebrate reading.

Why 31 days and why Grade 4? SAS researched this before plunging into the program which is quite costly and labor-intensive, with the teacher training, the sets of books, the monitoring team during the implementation phase. Based on scientific evidence, it takes the continuous and consecutive practice of a routine 21 to 28 times for a habit to be established. In this case, for the love and habit of reading to be part of one's life. The habit is of course best nurtured in the youth and is all about creating a desire to read.

Grade 4 was the particular academic group chosen because according to the Department of Education, this grade level is critical in the development of functional literacy. This is the age when the child begins to read comfortably and intervention at this point proves to be more effective in terms of developing the love and habit of reading and preventing school dropouts.

I am particularly proud of SAS because of its track record—its performance for the past 11 years, never losing its passion, its particular advocacy but only continuing to refine its program. It is the only one of its kind accredited by the Department of Education. It is sustainable through the years, having been integrated into the curricula

of partner schools so that it takes the place of the usual language arts curriculum for the month—a major breakthrough in itself if one considers the bureaucracy to hurdle to achieve that. It provides professional support for its teachers with regular enrichment, workshops, a yearly weekend conference for reading advocates, and the publication of a glossy distributed free of charge to its partner schools, *Star Teacher*.

Through its reading program from 1999 to the last schoolyear, SAS has served 868 public schools, benefitting of 24,619 teachers and touching the minds of over one million Filipino students nationwide. SAS has also distributed almost 181,000 children's books.

As **SAS** marked its tenth year, it wanted to know the affectivity of its program and embarked on a self-evaluation survey in partnership with a highly respected third party expert, **the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)**, Columbia University and the Department of Education. **J-PAL's** objective is to improve the effectiveness of poverty programs by providing policy makers with clear scientific results that help shape successful policies and it has provided research data for the likes of Warren Buffett and Bill Gates for their philanthropy programs. This independent study which began in 2009 and concluded in 2011 is the first of its kind among literacy initiative groups in the country. For every phase of the study, doctoral students and other representatives came from the US to personally run and monitor the surveys which were conducted for 100 schools in Tarlac, a province north of Manila, as it was deemed a microcosm of the country.

The results of the study have been positive and encouraging, a validation of the efforts of SAS: basically, that the short-term SAS reading program is an effective way of “cultivating good reading habits in children and, hence, improving their reading ability.” The age-appropriate books improved reading skills and the program had the largest and most persistent effect on word recognition and boosted the reading habits of students, even outside school.

Emboldened by the positive results of the MIT J-PAL Survey Study, SAS is finalizing its plans and the software to translate its face-to-face modules into an online teacher training program to broaden its reach. This new initiative is called **the Computer Access Mentorship Program (CAMP)**.

In 2010, the Republic of Korea’s e-Asia and Knowledge Partnership Fund awarded a grant to SAS, through the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The grant is dedicated to the development of an online teacher training program, as well as to the creation of 25 computer labs across the Philippines dedicated to this purpose.

CAMP will be implemented by **SAS** over a period of three consecutive years, in coordination with the Boy Scouts of the Philippines (BSP). The computer labs, or ‘CAMP Sites’, are located in BSP Council Offices and will serve as a venue for 9,000 elementary school teachers to learn new and innovative teaching methods through the online, in- service program. The program will be aimed specifically at the improvement of the teacher’s skills in the teaching of reading and to make it available to as many teachers as possible.

Another new endeavor of **SAS** is the Kinder College public preschool teacher-training conference which grew out of a sponsor's interest in preschool education. There is heightened interest in preschool education as I mentioned earlier as it became mandatory this school year which began in June with the government doing something about the knowledge that this promotes literacy and prepares the learner better for formal elementary school education. Previous to this, only the children of the families that could afford preschool education had this rather unfair advantage.

It is a welcome development that a sister of President Benigno Aquino, Jr, Pinky Aquino Abellada has been focusing her efforts on building preschool classrooms and supplying these with preselected books and school supplies through the AGAPP Foundation and its *Silid Pangarap* program, which can be translated either as Room of Dreams or a Dream Room. The foundation acronym stands for *Aklat, Gabay at Aruga Tungo sa Pag-angat at Pag-asa*. In English, it means *books, teacher training, feeding, livelihood and parenting support programs towards a better quality of life and hope*. In partnership with the Department of Education, its goal was to build 100 preschools during the first year of the Aquino administration which began on June 30, 2010. And they managed—with the 100th launched in mid-June. For Year 2 of the project, it hopes to build 150 more preschools, focus on the feeding, livelihood and parenting support programs and develop performance tracking systems for teaching skills and the performance of the students. The program is encouraged by reports that Kindergarten enrollment has gone up from 30 to 60% in their classrooms. As photos will attest, existing old structures or new classrooms have been transformed into the learning wonderlands that they should be. What better testimonials are there than the retiring

DepEd personnel in the southern province of Leyte who was brought to tears upon seeing the inviting colorful classrooms, as she never imagined she would ever see anything like that in her career. In a northern province, Cagayan, some children planning to enroll in private kindergarten classes switched to *Silid Pangarap* instead. It is a tremendous boost that a presidential sister has taken this initiative because sponsors have not been difficult to get.

If **SAS** targets Grade 4 students and AGAPP, Preschool students, two other foundations have other grade levels for their target beneficiaries.

The Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC) –yes, even McDonald’s!--with its banner program *Bright Minds Read (BMR)* began in 2002 for beginning readers. It was determined to focus on Grade 1 after it found out that only 4% of public school students in the grade level could read. Partnering with the Department of Education, reading toolkits were developed by reading specialists—these were made up of 33 big storybooks, 28 books in Filipino, 5 books in English; student workbooks with 200 activity sheets for the 33 storybooks; teacher’s lesson plans, all geared at helping teach basic reading, building comprehension and enriching language skills of students. These kits may be shared among classes, so there is one BMR kit for every participating school. Training of public school teachers, supervisors and principals is an important component of the BMR program. To date, over 2,700 public elementary schools—the ones recommended as most needy-- in 17 regions are equipped with BMR kits. These kits are not meant to be supplementary materials but used in Filipino classes since they were designed under the Basic Education Curriculum of the Department of Education.

The program is guided by four objectives of beginning reading: development of a genuine love for reading, the development of comprehension and critical thinking skills, oral language development, and the development of decoding skills. Now on its ninth year, BMR measures its effectivity through the increase in the number of schools and students participating in the program and in the results of the pretests and posttests administered

In surveying the existing literacy programs for the various grade levels, the Union Bank of the Philippines Corporate Philanthropy and Social Responsibility (CPSR) Program found that NGOs did not have programs for Gr. 2 students. It decided to sponsor this grade level because it was also deemed the most appropriate formative grade for values education. At this stage of their school life, students can be best assisted because this is where most of the children are still in school. The dropout rate becomes very high in Grade 4.

The program that was developed carries the title, Developmental Reading Integrated with Values Education for Good Citizenship. It is a complete kit that has a Student's Workbook, a Teacher's Handbook and a Multimedia Teaching Video Set, designed to strengthen basic reading skills and to instill the values enshrined in the Preamble of the 1987 Philippine Constitution – which teaches the readers to be more patriotic and overall more committed and dutiful citizens of the country taking pride in the Filipino heritage. It was developed with the perspective of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of achieving universal primary education, and

the Department of Education's goal of zero non-readers through the Every Child a Reader Program.

Every child has his own workbook which will be used with the Reading and Language classes during the school year. For most schools, having a book alone would be a boon since they do not have books in the first place. This year, 533,000 Gr. 2 students from 5,200 schools nationwide on all three major islands of the country will be using these learning materials. Many regional directors have commented that this is the very first time that Gr. 2 students would be holding the same worktext in different parts of the country. DepEd director for the National Capital Region *Teresita Domalanta* commented: "This program improved not only pupil but teacher performance as well. It was the first time in the history of the entire Philippine educational system that the school children signed ownership on a book that was personally issued free to each child...."

The worktext follows the DepEd's requirements for a full school year curriculum in English and Reading and may also be integrated into the other subject areas. The exercises were written based on the DepEd's Philippine Education Learning Competencies and the official work requirements. An important goal of the program is to develop independent readers for a very practical and realistic reason; so that even if they eventually drop out of school, they can still learn to read and survive because of that essential skill. Their belief is: "Reading is a survival skill. If you cannot read, you cannot learn; if you cannot learn, you cannot survive...."

The UnionBank program is now on its fifth year of implementation and has been refined from its initial stage of operations. It has benefitted over 1.4 million Gr. 2 public school students and 24,000 teachers. If it has achieved a degree of success and acceptance, it is because UnionBank consults with the DepEd every step of the way, working with existing programs and procedures. It also shares its best corporate practices with the DepEd: aside from mere financial resources, it applies the cardinal virtues of business: creativity, building community and practical realism. The UnionBank Learning System has been recognized for being the best corporate social responsibility program in education and responsible citizenship.

With the literacy initiatives mentioned above, we can see that K, Grades 1, 2, 4 have special programs dedicated to them. If only every grade would be “adopted” from K to 12! Much more needs to be done.

The Department of Education through a visionary former undersecretary for finance and administration, *Juan Miguel Luz* conceptualized the idea of Library Hubs all over the country during his tenure. He realized something very basic: if students were to be encouraged to read and to love reading, there had to be an infrastructure for reading in every school. The students needed to have books in their hands. School libraries do not exist in our public school system. If they do, there are neither books anyone would be lured to read nor a librarian to inspire and promote reading. If there were a school librarian, it would be someone about to retire or could no longer stand the rigors of regular classroom teaching. Truly, the least coveted teaching assignment. The Department with its limited resources for a burgeoning population knew that setting

up 37,000+ public elementary school libraries for each of its schools would not be economically feasible and would take time.

Thus were Library Hubs born: These are warehouse or wholesale libraries established in different schools divisions in the country to service public elementary and high schools in the division. A division, depending on the particular classification, is made up of a particular number of public schools. The Library Hubs provide supplementary reading materials in plastic bins sorted by grade, subject, and theme in bundles of hundreds in secure plastic storage boxes for school representatives to check out for a month, placed in their respective school library--materials which would otherwise not be accessible to teachers and students. Prior to the opening of the Hubs, teachers are trained on the importance of reading, a variety of reading promotion strategies, and librarians on the cataloging and processing the books. School heads report a remarkable increase in the reading scores in achievement tests of schools serviced by the Library Hubs. Library Hubs are situated in an existing, centrally located building provided by the local government that is especially refurbished for the purpose. The concept and the partnership between DepEd, the local government, and the public sector has been so well received that there is a pending bill in Congress to make the Library Hub concept a legal mandate so that Hubs are institutionalized and built in key cities as well as farflung areas. The law also seeks to mandate the DepEd to create a staff in the Hub: a librarian, an assistant librarian, a library aide, and a utility worker. To date, there are 194 constructed Library Hubs in the country for 117 schools divisions, out of a total of 204 divisions all over the country. Eighty-seven (87) divisions await

their own Library Hubs. Some divisions, because of the number of schools they service, have more one Hub.

The plan is not as perfect as it sounds, I have to admit. Book deliveries are delayed, teachers complain that the Hubs are far from their school so that transportation costs are incurred, there are not enough books and also inadequate titles to support the curriculum. But of course, we all know that a library can never have books enough for every interest and inclination. These books have to be regularly maintained and replenished.

In a province south of Metro Manila, Batangas, a private school run by *La Salle* Christian Brothers in the city of Lipa has a *BookMobile & Reading Program (BMRP)* for the neediest public elementary schools in the city. The bookmobile provides the students with the library that their schools do not have. Components of the literacy program are: book borrowing privileges, guided reading programs, creative learning experiences through arts and crafts and storytelling, tutorials in English, Math, and Science, values formation, and computer literacy. There is also a training package for Reading teachers which is especially critical as 60% of teachers in 2007 did not have the proficiency in English, the medium of instruction in all public schools. A component for parent involvement is also being developed.

The BMRP envisions that in the near future, we will have public elementary school students who love to read, have the necessary skills in reading, and are well equipped to hurdle the learning process and become successful students.

The National Book Development Board is a government agency under the administrative supervision of the Department of Education responsible for developing and supporting the development of the [Philippine](#) book publishing industry. Some of its programs include the following:

- ***Booklatan sa Bayan*** (a pun on the word “books” which literally means, “opening up in the nation”) This is a series of training activities and workshops on readership development held nationwide: lectures on Filipino poetry, fiction and nonfiction, and other genres. Storytelling workshops with teachers, librarians, and community workers are also scheduled.
- **Philippine Book Development Month** in November each year. This is the biggest celebration of books and reading with the Manila International Literary Festival as a major event where distinguished local and foreign writers talk about books, literature, and the craft of writing. In November 2010, it was called LOL, Lit Out Loud! And special guest was Simon Beaufoy, author of *Slumdog Millionaire*.
- **NBDB Book Club Meeting.** To promote interest in books written by Filipino authors, the Book Club meets to discuss books by the featured guest author.
- **Get Caught Reading.** This is a reading campaign of the American Association of Publishers (AAP) in the US which has been replicated by the NBDB, where celebrities are invited to pose for large posters in the act of reading.
- **National Book Awards.** This is the Philippine book industry’s most coveted annual awards established by the Manila Critics Circle in 1981 to honor excellence in book publishing and which the NBDB has chosen to institutionalize through a partnership with the MCC in 2008.
- **National Children’s Book Awards.** This is a collaboration between the NBDB and the Philippine Board on Books for Young People to recognize the country’s best children’s books. Up to 10 commendable books may be named each time to make up a Best Reads for Children bibliography. In 2010, six books were selected for the first NCBA.
- **Bookwatch.** This is the official magazine of the NBDB which documents book-related news and developments.

The Inquirer Read-Along of the Philippine Daily Inquirer, the country's leading newspaper was launched in May 2007 as a "simple, low-cost" idea aimed at encouraging public use of the Inquirer Library, according to its research head.

When the sessions first began, they were called "reading sessions" targeted at school children in the hope of getting them started on the habit of reading while still young. In an attempt to make reading fun and attractive to children, Inquirer editor in chief *Letty Jimenez Magsanoc* renamed the project what it is called today, "***Inquirer Read-Along***" and suggested that celebrities and role models be invited to read stories to the students in attendance. The hour long sessions, held twice a month, are usually divided into three parts: a read-along with a celebrity or role model, another session with a trained storyteller, and a third one with Junior Inquirer (the children's weekend supplement of the newspaper) readers who share reading tips with participants. All featured celebrities and personalities from media, sports, music, politics, the academe, the diplomatic corps offer their services free of charge and read largely Philippine children's titles. The sessions are open to the public and held at the Inquirer building in Makati City and to reach out to more children, some sessions have been held in malls, schools and out of town venues. The celebrities are the drawing power—their presence certainly helps, and because the broadsheet daily is the most widely circulated, the idea of a read-along and the virtues of reading itself have gotten the attention and the publicity it needs and it deserves. The project also wants to convey the message that "Reading is fun. Reading is cool. Reading is in." It is encouraging that from the initial audience of 15 students, attendance has ballooned to about a hundred.

Inquirer has even trained its employees to be hosts, storytellers, coordinators. The readalong model has been replicated especially in areas far from Metro Manila.

I would be remiss if I did not mention other ongoing endeavors that help promote the reading habit. There is the Manila International Book Fair (MIBF) held every year in September for at least five days, now on its 32nd year. If one had any doubts that Filipinos are booklovers, this event will dispel all that. MIBF has become a yearly tradition with a record attendance of more than eighty five thousand people for the week and over three hundred local and foreign book exhibitors. The organizers, like the Book Development Association of the Philippines, Asian Catholic Communicators, Inc., Philippine Booksellers Association, Inc., and the Overseas Publishers' Representatives Association of the Philippines admit the challenges facing the printed word with the advent of other reading platforms. But they vow that for as long as the written word thrives in any medium, the MIBF will continue its legacy of promoting the love for reading.

There is also the growing popularity of a brilliant young illustrator and writer, Jomike Tejido whose two books (*Tagu-Taguan*, a delightful hide-and-see counting book and *Lub-Dub Lub-Dub*, a book Tejido illustrated) were cited among six books as National Children's Book Award titles in 2010. Engaged in innovative work and using his architecture background, he has been publishing his Foldabots Toy Books which have drawn a large following of avid robot-crazed kids who pore over his stories and in the process of robot construction, cannot help but read "carefully, closely, avidly."

There are the weekly sections in three major national dailies devoted to books and reading: *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Philippine Star* on Mondays, and the *Manila Bulletin* on Saturdays. The children's weekly supplements of the *Inquirer* and the *Bulletin* do not only feature children's works but also regular book reviews.

Mention must also be made of the Philippine publishers who continue to publish quality books which sell and are well received—despite all the competition that the digital age offers and the successful marketing and promotion strategies that make foreign titles such phenomenon worldwide, including the Philippines which “behaves and consumes books like the American market.” That observation was made by *Karina Bolasco*, publishing manager of Anvil Publishing, Inc., the country's biggest publishing house and eight-time recipient of the Manila Critics Circle's Publisher of the Year Award. Book publishing these days is not such a simple business, when local titles have to compete cheek by jowl with foreign titles. It almost seems like an act of courage for publishing to continue when our local output of titles, excluding school books or text books, was a mere 5900 in 2009 and 5800 in 2010. Children's titles from nine publishers have been less than a hundred the past two years. During her lecture at the recent Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators conference, Bolasco echoed the sentiments of determined book loves and publishers: “.. *as long as we make books that get children to read, this by itself is good, for the habit of reading, unlike other habits like watching television, playing computer games or going to the malls, is what we aspire to develop among our young as a lifelong habit. Book reading is a virtue unto itself, and if publishers succeed in turning it into a lifelong dependency or addiction,*

then that should be good, for truly and regrettably, book readers are today an endangered species.”

Every Filipino child a reader. Let this be more than beautiful rhetoric. Yes, it all sounds so ambitious and so elusive. But if we do not dream, if we do not try, what are we left with? It is clear that the Department of Education and the limited government budget cannot handle the herculean problems in the public educational system. It needs the private sector and the nongovernment organizations to turn every child to be a reader. There is no time to tarry, though it will take time and effort and much patience—for truly teaching a child to read is much like watching a flower bloom. It will happen, in time.

