

Sunday Profile: Geronimo Tagatac

Written by Ruth Liao *Statesman Journal*

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Salem fiction writer Geronimo Tagatac draws from revelations as varied as a cubicle worker's stark humor, the flashbacks of U.S. Special Forces operations to the wisdom of immigrant Filipino farmworkers picking fruit in northern California.

For Tagatac, 69, it's crafted from as much imagination as from his experiences. In his travels, Tagatac has skirted all over the globe, from Patagonia to the dusty outback of China in Xian to the Vietnamese beaches of Hoi An. During the Vietnam War, he was a member of the elite U.S. Special Forces. Most recently, he was a civil servant in the Oregon state government for 16 years. For awhile, he danced modern and ballet. He was a folk-singer. He was a wanderer.

Now, Tagatac is likely a familiar face in Salem when he's not abroad — either stationed in front of his laptop at Coffee House Cafe downtown, running at high noon at Bush's Pasture Park or lifting in the weight room of the YMCA.

Tagatac published a collection of his short stories in "Weight of the Sun" in 2006. He's working on his first novel, "Memory Palace," and preparing to find a publisher by summer.

Tagatac has an idiosyncratic background: His father came from Ilocos Norte in the Philippines; his mother was a Russian Jew. His stepmother was Cajun, hailing from the tiny Louisiana town of Happy Jack in Plaquemines Parrish outside New Orleans. He has one daughter who's studying at University of Oregon.

In a few weeks, Tagatac will attend a writing conference at the eastern Oregon literary residency program Fishtrap, which has organized writer-in-residences program for Tagatac in Harney County and in the Fossil and Condon area. Then, Tagatac will head to Seattle to do a reading at a national Filipino-American history conference.

Tagatac's lithe frame carries his square, sturdy features, set off by his sun-soaked skin, eyes ringed with bright, blue-gray irises and salt-and-pepper hair. Tagatac has even-keel, mellifluous tones in his voice, peppered with jazz-inspired phrases, such as remarking that "he's a cool cat." He tells stories with precision, imitating accents and recalling dialogue word for word.

Friends often comment on Tagatac's global features, which are often mistaken by natives in myriad countries during his various travels. He's been taken for a Roma, or gypsy, when he was in Prague; as an eastern Turk in Turkey; and as a Japanese in South America.

"That's what writers strive for — a kind of invisibility that lets me watch things," Tagatac said.

One recent morning at Coffee House Cafe, Tagatac looked up the spelling for "caliph" on his laptop, before saving his work for the day. He grew up hearing stories by his father, where he gets the namesake of Geronimo, and older Filipino men he grew up around. Many of his protagonists are Filipino-American men, young and old.

"I write every one of my stories to be read aloud, just like how you'd tell a person," he said.

He runs four miles every day, a decade-long tradition he's kept up with West Coast bank official Bill Malak and other Salem professionals. His route circumscribes Bush's Pasture Park, passing the 1947-era house where he lives. In the morning, he feeds his consummate habit as a news hound by listening to National

Public Radio and perusing online news publications.

Salem poet Marilyn Johnston, who works for the city of Salem human rights commission, took part in a writing fellowship with Tagatac at Fishtrap.

"He's one of those people who can watch from the periphery and (write stories) down like you're sitting in someone's living room," she said.

Salem painter Marilyn Krug met Tagatac while working in state government together.

"It was fun to watch, as we left full-time employment in IT, to watch both of our careers blossom in the arts," Krug said. "We're collectors of each other's works."

Krug said she'd always like to illustrate one of Tagatac's characters in painting, just based on his descriptions in words.

As worldly as Tagatac's experiences, he has now lived in Salem for longer than he's lived anywhere else. He enjoys encountering acquaintances and familiar faces on the sidewalk, in the coffee shops.

As far as his journeys take him, he appreciates returning to the verdant Mid-Valley and "simple quiet" of Salem.

"You want to come back to a place," he said. "It's hard for people to get to know a backpacker — after awhile, you sort of crave a place where people do."

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