

Real people behind ultimate fantasy

True life experiences are the staple of their best-selling fiction and OFWs are lapping up their works, writes **Gabby Alvarado**

Queens of hearts, you might call them. To millions of Pinay readers worldwide who still believe in true love, commitment and a happy ending with Mr Right, authors of Tagalog romantic fiction like Martha Cecilia and Eve Montelibano are God's precious gifts.

They are cupids with pens. Weaving sensuous, charming, inspiring, passionate, feel-good and sometimes bittersweet stories of love in all its form and splendor. Thanks to their creative juices, readers escape the daily routines of life and, in the time it takes them to finish a book, are transported into a fantasy world where, in Eve's words, "people are more passionate, more daring, more into anything." When it comes to affairs of the heart, these well-loved authors seem to know everything; or at least enough to empathize with every lovestruck or dreamy-eyed Pinay. They can certainly drive up the kilig factor.

The genre of the Tagalog romance paperback is relatively new, but Martha Cecilia, Eve and writers of publications like Precious Hearts Romances have quickly adapted to it. The industry may have been inspired by successful US publications Mills and Boon and Harlequins Romances, but it can as easily be the modern equivalent of the Liwayway nobela and Tagalog komiks where the likes of Gilda Olvidado, Elena Patron and Nerissa Cabral reigned supreme.

Love makes the world go round, some people say, and these creative women make it even better reading.

"The desire to have the ideal man or relationship is not something to be ashamed of," says Eve, author of the best-selling "Lothario" series.

"The desire to have this fantasy man is not something that any woman should deprive herself of. If we don't aim for the ideal, then we would just settle for the mediocre ... By presenting the best and the ideal, I as an author am actually helping women achieve higher goals and not just settle for anything less or below their standards.

"A woman has an ideal man. She wants an ideal relationship. What's wrong with that? We all dream of an ideal job, ideal house, ideal car, ideal vacation. We work hard to get all that. So why can't we work hard to find our ideal man?"

Evelyn May Guinid in real life, Eve is a fiercely independent 36-year-old interior designer from General Santos City. "Kikay," she says. A graduate of UP Diliman, Eve teaches at a local university and paints oils, acrylic and mixed media. Her influences are "mostly surreal and impressionist" painters. She is also an active member of a local visual arts guild and theatre group. But her greatest passion, Eve says, is writing.

"On print, I become this bold, opinionated writer more often perceived as deviant in her views. In private, I'm quite very amiable," Eve says. "In fact, my friends here, when they read my stuff, often get shocked. They go: 'Really? Sinulat mo ito? I don't believe you. Hindi ka naman romantic.' I just laugh at their reactions."

Determined to chart her own creative path, Eve with the help of

Who reads what and why

ADORA MALLARI, 38, TAI HANG

Favorite authors: Sonia Francesca, Elizabeth McBirdie, Camilla, Sonja, Noelle Arroyo and Vanessa

"Interesting basahin. May matututunan ka sa kanila. Hindi lahat puro drama, may katatawanan din."

Favorite book or series: Skylander

"Sa Sagada kasi ang pangyayari. Parang ang ganda-ganda ng lugar. Mga karanasan ng mga taong nagpupunta doon, parang gusto nilang doon na abutan ng pagtanda."

GERALDINE ALEGADO, 26, LAI CHI KOK

Favorite authors: Martha Cecilia, Nympha Beck, Eve Montelibano, Sonia Francesca, Vanessa and Camilla



"Kasi may true story din. May nakakatawa. Comedy, drama, action. Lahat na."

Favorite book or series: Lothario

"Maganda ang dialogue at pagkakarawan ng mga characters. Saka na-describe niya yung guy na puwede kang ma-in-love. Wala namang Mr Perfect pero malapit doon yung character."

WILMA ANGALA, 28, WAN CHAI

Favorite authors: Helen Meriz, Martha Cecilia

"Ang stories nila magaganda. Puro happy ending.

Usually ang characters nila guwapo at magaganda. Ang location na ginagamit parang sa fairytale. Parang Cinderella."

"Nakalimutan ko na ang title ng aking favorite book or series dahil sa dami na nang nabasa ko, saka matagal na iyon. Natatandaan ko lang na nag-uumpisa sa 'Hacienda' ang title nito. Happy ending."

ESTER OMOTOY, 59, MID-LEVELS

Favorite authors: Helen Meriz, Gilda Olvidado, Lenafe Sanz-Villa



"Makatotohanan ang mga kuwento nila. Habang binabasa mo parang nakikita mo ang pangyayari. Magaganda ang books nila. Hindi boring."

Favorite book or series: Still In My Heart

"Marami akong paborito pero ito ang nandito sa kuwanto ko ngayon. Basta may nagustuhan akong pocketbook, inuulit-ulit kong basahin."

MARIA ELENA GARCIA, 36, TUEN MUN

Favorite author: Rose Tan

"Medyo mag pagka-komedyante ang mga kuwento. May mapupulot ka ding aral."

Favorite book or series: Senorita

"Maganda ang pagkakasulat. Tungkol sa mayaman na nagiging maunawain at natututong magmahal sa mahirap."

friends formed the new publication Love Match and left Precious Hearts Romances, where the prolific Martha Cecilia has become something of a legend. Martha Cecilia's string of bestsellers over more than a decade include the "Kristine" series, which to date has 59 volumes.

Her real name is Babes Cajayon — "a wife and mother, first and foremost," she says. Martha Cecilia is actually the name of her daughter which the 52-year-old has adopted as her pen name. This Dapitan City-born novelist is a commerce graduate from the University of the East and a product of Conchitina Bernardo's Karilagan Finishing School in Sta Mesa. Martha Cecilia, the Romance diva, was born after a chance meeting with author Olga Medina.

"Imagine, I met a novelist, she showed me her books. Hindi ako makapaniwala," she says. "It was through her that I became a writer. I was so ecstatic when my first book was published."

Having established a name in writing, Martha Cecilia now dreams of seeing one of her novels — possibly "Midnight Phantom", about a man whose face was scarred — turned into a movie. "Ultimate dream ng lahat writer na gawing movie ang book nila. Pero nagtitipid ata ang ibang producers. Imbes bilhin pa ang rights sa isang book, magbabasa na lang sila at kukuha ng ideas na puwedeng i-develop."

Her success has brought her to places like Hong Kong, which she has now visited at least three times to promote books and sign autographs for fans.

"Unang-una kong punta sa Hong Kong, nakita ko ang dami palang nagbabasa diyan," Martha Cecilia says of a Sunday signing session at World-Wide House. "Medyo napuno



I love to read, mula sa balutan ng tinapa hanggang sa encyclopedia

BABES CAJAYON

Otherwise known as Martha Cecilia

ng third floor. In-escort ako ng guard papunta sa basement using the backdoor to greet the readers. Para di daw maabala ang flow ng ibang business. Ang dami-dami talagang nagpungang fans. Nagpapasalamat ako. Madami akong naging kaibigan."

Pocketbooks are among the favorite pastimes of the bored, homesick Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong, the others being videoke, Pinoy telenovelas on VCD and internet chatting. But

not everybody has the voice for singing. Neither does everyone own a VCD player or TV, or has access to a computer. And so alone in their bedrooms at night, or sometimes during short breaks at work, these OFWs pore over pages of Tagalog romance pocketbooks with the zeal of someone reviewing for the bar exams.

Like their fans, with whom they have developed a sisterhood that, Eve says, "believes in the power of love", Martha Cecilia and Eve share a passion for reading, which has helped prepare them for a career in writing.

"I love to read, mula sa balutan ng tinapa hanggang sa encyclopedia. I can't remember a time in my life when I wasn't reading," Martha Cecilia says.

Among writers of the romantic genre, Martha Cecilia admires Sandra Brown and Judith McNaught, but is surprised to find that both are now turning out romantic suspense thrillers. "OK din siguro mag-try ng ibang genre," she says.

Surprisingly for a weaver of romantic tales, Eve's favorite book is the anti-war novel "Johnny Got His Gun" by Dalton Trumbo.

"It's a story about a World War I soldier who lost his limbs, his speech and all his senses save for the sense of touch in war," she explains. "The story unfolds behind the soldier's confused, drugged mind while he lay in a hospital bed. It's pretty intense, riveting and unforgettable. Makes my heart bleed every time I read it. I am strongly against war. I have lived in Mindanao for so long and I've been exposed to this kind of conflict for as long as I can remember. It's really sad."

Eve, originally from Kabacan, North Cotabato, also has read "The

Art of War" by Sun Tzu and "The 48 Laws of Power" by Robert Greene, among others. She is also an admirer of award-winning Filipino writer Edgar Reyes.

Happy endings are necessary in every Martha Cecilia novel and, like Eve, she is not averse to mining personal experiences for story themes.

"Kung mayroon man akong hindi gustong isulat, heavy drama iyon," Martha Cecilia explains.

"I read and watch movies to be entertained, hindi para umiyak. Life is a drama already. I need an escape and that is to read something that would make me dream and laugh and cry a little ...

"I believe personal experiences matter a lot [in writing]. When you have suffered in life, I believe it is only then that you can be effective in imparting your message. Back in high school, I was only able to write poems and articles for school mags when I was sad and in despair."

In despair? Readers might think these goddesses of romance are immune to this feeling. But heartbreaks are part of their lives, too.

Eve's "Lothario" series, now with 10 installments, began when she reached her late 20s and started having relationship problems.

"All of my novels are based on past experiences, mine or of people close to me or some that I am not even close to," she says. "I ask them if I can use parts of their experiences in my novels and more often than not, they say yes. Maybe because they want to inspire other people also, to be strong, to be survivors. But sometimes, I'm being bad also and use their woes without permission. One time, a friend of mine called me up in the wee hours of the morning. She was like: 'Girl, is this my shit you wrote on your latest novel?' I said, 'Yeah, now your shit is quite famous!' We ended up laughing about it."

But matters of the heart are no laughing matter.

Martha Cecilia counts herself lucky in love. She has found her gorgeous hero in her tall husband who, after 25 years of marriage, "doesn't get out of bed without kissing me first to wake me up."

Their union has produced four kids that she is most proud of. One can imagine Martha Cecilia bonding with them as though she's just one of them.

"Gusto ko kasama bata, seryoso kasi matatanda," she says.

In Eve's case, she continues to pine for that special someone.

"I'm a romance writer but I am the type who doesn't easily fall in love ... It's not that I have unreachable standards in a man. Believe me, mababaw ng kaligayahan ko. Basta mabait, mapagmahal, magalang at tootang mahal ako, at siyempre mahal ko rin, okay na.

"I just want to find love, real love, the one that lasts, with a good man, a chivalrous modern-day knight who would command my respect, my love, my desires, carnal and otherwise [ha ha], and above all, who would still tell me I'm beautiful even when I'm 80.

"That's my ultimate romantic fantasy."