



## On Old-Timers, Boxing, and Lots of Sex (off the page ...)

### Peter Bacho debuts his first YA novel, *Leaving Yesler*

Next April, if you happen to be in the DC area, you might be lucky enough to meet Peter Bacho at the Smithsonian as he presents *Leaving Yesler*, his first foray into the young adult readers market which debuts late March 2010 from Pleasure Boat Studios out of New York. "I'll read for food," Bacho promises.

Bacho's been here at the Smithsonian before, back in December 2006, as a panelist for "Filipino American Literary Writers," together with M. Evelina Galang, Marianne Villanueva, and Luis Francia. Truth be told, he and Villanueva had the audience giggling and occasionally wide-eyed with shocked surprise. Model minorities don't say *those* things.

In spite of his immigrant roots (Bacho's parents are both from Cebu, Philippines, although his Wikipedia entry erroneously claims him to be half-Filipino and half-Yakima Indian), his *summa cum laude* undergraduate degree from Seattle University, his JD and LLM from the University of Washington, his experience in San Francisco's Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, and his various professorships in Washington universities and colleges, Bacho is anything but model minority, truth be told ... nor are his characters, thank goodness!

His first book, *Cebu* (1991), about a Filipino American priest who arrives in the Philippines to bury his mother in her homeland, won him an American Book Award from the Before

Columbus Foundation. He won both a Washington Governor's Writers Award (renamed the Washington State Book Award) and The Murray Morgan Prize for his collection of short stories, *Dark Blue Suit* (1997). Then he did a young adult title, *Boxing in Black and White* (1999), which got him on the Center for Children's Books Best Books List. Next came *Nelson's Run* (2002), about an oversexed young man who travels to the Philippines after the accidental death of his father, followed by my personal favorite, *Entrys* (2005), about a teenaged Filipino Native American hapa Vietnam War veteran's challenging attempts to re-enter civilian life.

*Leaving Yesler* definitely treads on familiar Bacho territory: religion, boxing, immigration, and – of course – lots of sex ("mostly off the page," Bacho insists in this case for the sake of younger readers, ahem!). Bobby Vicente is five months shy of turning 18. His family has just shrunk by half, after losing his mother to cancer and his older brother to Vietnam. His father, Antonio, an old-timer Filipino American immigrant who once had a glorious boxing past, is determined that his only surviving son will not only avoid war, but somehow make it out of their Yesler housing project in Seattle. Antonio doesn't have a whole lot of time left to both educate and train sweet, kind-hearted Bobby. What happens in that fast-forward week before Bobby takes his GED – from falling in love, to having conversations with a dead brother not to



mention a martyred saint, to witnessing murder – will literally determine the rest of Bobby’s life.

“The kid survives,” Bacho quips. “Gotta give the little kiddies hope and all!”

**BookDragon:** I have to ask ... now that you’re moving into the young adult market ... do you have kids yourself?

**Peter Bacho:** Yes, one daughter [now 27 years old] from a former marriage. I like to say I’ve been married 35 years – if I put them all together, that is.

**BD:** Why young adult now?

**Bacho:** Why not? It’s getting increasingly edgier and, I think, more interesting. Also, I think the genre may be open to a bit more experimentation. I mean, *Yesler* is a Filipino American novel without a Filipino protagonist.

**BD:** Oh, no ... you can’t give TOO much away ... besides, culturally, that protagonist is all Filipino American!

**Bacho:** True. For some Filipinos, especially those arriving after 1968, there’s almost a racial and linguistic purity – stuff we never bothered with.

**BD:** Purity ... that’s ironic, given the tragic history of Filipino colonialism, no?

**Bacho:** It is that, but it’s expected because colonized people imitate the colonizer.

**BD:** So you ... why write?

**Bacho:** Because I have stories to tell about a community that no longer exists. By that I mean that where I grew up – the Central District in Seattle – was in those days a mix of poor and working class African Americans, some whites

and a lot of Filipinos, most of who settled near the main Central District Catholic churches. We developed close friendships, partly because we knew we were looked down upon, marginalized, by others in the city. For the young Pinoys, I guess we wanted to emulate our fathers, and their larger-than-life stories organizing unions – a dangerous thing in the 1930s - and confronting racism in redneck California towns. We wanted to be tough, just like they were.

**BD:** The old-timer Filipino American *manong* – elderly ‘uncles’ – community in Seattle’s Chinatown seems to be in some way or another always a part of your stories ... why do they inspire you so?

**Bacho:** They were also dapper and stylish – zoot suit originals – when wearing such apparel outraged a lot of whites. But it was also a statement that they were more than what they were consigned to do (field work, dishwashing, etc.). And, to top it off, they created a powerful, militant union – ILWU Local 37, which allowed its members to earn a decent wage in the Alaska canning industry – and also allowed many of them, my Dad included, to save enough and to stop being a migrant worker ... They were always fighting something, whether it was unfair laws and work conditions – or each other.

**BD:** Is it true you have to check yourself into a hotel, order in room service, sequester yourself indefinitely in order to get a book out?

**Bacho:** I did it once when I was working on *Nelson’s Run*. Spent most of my time drinking,



watching TV, and smoking cigarettes, though. All in all, it was a pretty good deal.

**BD:** And teaching? You got some admirable posts on RateMyProfessor.com, a site I recently discovered googling famous academic folks ... how do you balance Professor Bacho with Bad-Boy Author Bacho?

**Bacho:** Geez, you're nosy ... there's no need to balance, I teach the way I write. I've been at this business for more than three decades, and I still enjoy the work, the interactions, and friendships. And in both settings (as a writer and as a professor), sometimes I'm unfiltered ... oops.

**BD:** Not nosy ... have to do my research homework, Prof! So are all academics nuts and boring?

**Bacho:** Just boring, for the most part. I taught in AAS [Asian American Studies] for a long time, and other than old George [Woo] and the two Dannys [Bigornia and Gonzales] – they were part of the crew that established ethnic studies at San Francisco State during the student strike of 1968 – and the rest of the wild bunch there, I don't think you could find a more straight-jacketed crowd. Nice folks, but on the boring side. Exceedingly polite – yes sir, no sir, three bags full, sir. Nuts would have made them much more interesting.

**BD:** And what about boxers? Funny enough, while I was reading *Yes/er* outside the office on a sunny afternoon earlier this week, a group of men were talking loudly, regaling the skills of one Pinoy boxer ...

**Bacho:** Yo, this is why I must take my time to educate fellow Asians about the cosmic importance of fist fighting (it's a Pinoy thing). The winner: Manny Pacquiao. The loser: Miguel Cotto of Puerto Rico. All of my books have fighters lurking around. It's a cultural and generational thing. Manny slaughtered Miguel. ... Don't get me wrong, Manny is a one-of-a-kind fighter, the best of his generation. No one goes up that many weight divisions and keeps his punch – except Manny. I pull for him, sure, but I don't put the symbolic value on him that other Filipinos do. I suppose it's because times have changed American society for the better. I know the Filipinos in the Philippines stop everything when he fights – and I understand that. Symbolic wins matter most to those who have least – and the Philippines is a very poor, war-ravaged country, with a dominating and exploitative elite, and an ineffective government ... a classic third-world mess.

**BD:** Gina in our office was lamenting Miguel's beautiful face getting brutalized ... I can't stand watching boxing. Am bleeding heart wimp. I can curse with the best of them, but even road kill gets me weepy.

**Bacho:** Me? I love the fights, not the MMA [Mixed Martial Arts] stuff, but the old style that my Dad and his cronies made me grow up on. Tell Gina to knock it off. She's probably related to Manny, for goodness sake – six degrees of separation, etc. etc. And tell her she's probably related to Marcos, too!

**BD:** I'm sure you and Gina AND Marcos are all one big happy family, right?!



**Bacho:** Yes, that is at least a possibility – Filipinos are one large dysfunctional family, some of whose members – I am sure – were abandoned at birth and raised by wolves.

**BD:** And do you box?

**Bacho:** As a young person, yeah. Gym rat stuff, small smokers ... kind of an adjunct to martial arts training at the Bruce Lee school in Seattle. Bruce was big into boxing because the contact and the pressure were real. But no, I don't channel Bruce Lee ... I joined the club in 1967, the year after he left for LA to do *The Green Hornet*. So, nope, never met the dude, but he was a revolutionary martial artist because he defied thousands of years of Chinese thinking on martial arts. These days, I start every morning with coffee and a workout – weights, heavy bag, running ... the same stuff I've been doing for 40 years plus.

**BD:** Which means if I ever give you a bad review, I might have to be afraid ...

**Bacho:** Naw, I stopped hitting people when I turned 50 – nine years ago – when the punches I used to avoid started to land – block with your face, that sort of thing. Now I just hit a nice hanging bag.

**BD:** Talking of bad reviews, did you know your Wikipedia entry is just plain wrong?

**Bacho:** Too much hassle to bother. Folks can write what they want ... it's the way of the Internet world. I got other things to think about, like where's the best place to grab a shot and watch a fight ...

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