

## The Complicated Pleasure of Children's Books



**Karina A. Bolasco** (Philippines)  
Assistant General Manager, Anvil Publishing, Inc.  
Editor and poet

Children glow from delightful reading, and realize more and more that there is a whole wide world out there. Reading, for them will be a lifelong habit, and for lifelong book readers, a fiercely committed and loyal lot, there will always be that compulsion to buy a certain book no matter what, “to beg, steal or borrow” (and that’s why good libraries are infinitely essential to them). They are, in general, also a special lot, not just in terms of skills (comprehension, appreciation, language), or knowledge, but more notably in terms of being more open to and tolerant of other people’s ideas, more sensitive to their own or others’ feelings and disposition, and yet more critical of what others as a rule would accept as givens in a society. We don’t need a social treatise to recognize how far ahead of others is a society of book readers.

When I publish a children’s book, when teachers teach children’s literature in the classrooms, or when parents read good bedtime stories to their children, I think that what we really want to convey and share with them is our very own joy, or pleasure, in children’s books. It is one of our fondest remembrances of childhood: being lost in a book, the illustrations carrying us out of ourselves and bringing us elsewhere many times over. And even as adults, even after countless books later, we are still intrigued each time we open a new children’s book. As people and events continue to shape and re-shape our reading habits/preferences, the fundamental joy that is there in every children’s book, that was likewise the pleasure derived by the author from writing it, remains and awaits to be savoured as it is passed on from reader to reader. And what’s simply amazing is when we make the right books, or as you introduce the children to the right books, we don’t have to instruct them on how to locate that joy or pleasure. It is just there and the child gets it the minute she or he turns the first page. As a publisher, I always believe deeply that the successful book carries in it the pleasure of both the writer and the reader. This can’t get any truer than for children’s books.

Our problem in the Philippines is our children’s books have no pleasure to pass on from writer to reader. While the organization of young writers for children is so playfully called *KUTING*, a local term, Tagalog, for kitten, and is an acronym that stands for *Kwentista ng mga Tsikiting* (Storywriters for children; *tsikiting* is Tagalog slang for children), they have not been producing playful stories children can read and delight in. The artists and illustrators are way ahead in imaginativeness and inventiveness. While the manufacture, distribution, and sale of this pleasure should be easier now in terms of the physical aspects – the art and its colour reproduction, very good printing and paper, many bookstores to put them in, many libraries that welcome them now – the pleasure, the delightfulness, the whimsy and fantasy are just not there in the stories and the writing. This, to me, is the biggest problem we face today, especially

because we are a naturally funny and happy people who unfortunately, for the last 70 years or so have been reading American-written-and-produced children's books.

Our writers are young and vibrant but may have been unwittingly weighed down by long years and traditions of moralism and didacticism from 400 years of Spanish attempts to turn us into devout Catholics. Our young are defenceless as teachers, and parents ask story after story "What is the moral lesson?" Our young writers have to break away from thinking that for stories to be significant they must be serious and grave in explaining our social ills to our children. The texts tend to be long and chatty – nothing is left to the imagination.

We are a country saddled with problems, and our young must so rightfully observe that their elders seem content to just hope and try to laugh and sing away such problems. So in turn, they carry upon their shoulders as their burden the urgency to talk about poverty, marital separation, absentee parents who work abroad, homosexuality, incest, and many others. But there must be other ways of dealing with deprivation without depriving readers. Writers can talk about impoverishment without impoverishing readers or the audience. After all, with 30 million Filipino children aged 0–14, an incredibly huge market, there are also incredibly huge spaces for many kinds of stories.