Author Lysley Tenorio champions isolated misfits
Meredith May
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San Francisco writer Lysley Tenorio was born during an earthquake in the Philippines.

His six siblings wanted to name him Lindol - Tagalog for earthquake - but his parents chose Lysley, pronounced "Leslie." His mail has been addressed to the wrong gender ever since.

But for a literary shape-shifter like Tenorio, who writes tender and quirky short stories from the point of view of charlatans, horror B movie starlets, old men, lepers and transgender cocktail waitresses, the faux pas is somehow perfect.

His debut short story collection, "Monstress," binds together eight tales of isolated misfits in San Francisco and the Philippines dreaming and scheming their way to impossible glory.

The roots of Tenorio's tales are buried in his family's decision to immigrate to California when he was 7 months old. He grew up in a home so eager to assimilate that he learned to imitate President Jimmy Carter to please his father.

"He loved it because it was so American," Tenorio said.

Outsiders take leading roles in Tenorio's stories. In "Superassassin," a half Korean comic book geek who idolizes the Green Lantern comes up with a murderous yo-yo weapon to attack his high school bullies. In "A View From Culion," a young girl at a leper colony in the Philippines falls in love with an AWOL American soldier while talking to him behind a curtain that hides their disfigurements.

Drawing from memory

In "Save the I-Hotel," one man's 40-year unrequited love for his neighbor unfolds as a memory on the day that police evict the old men from the San Francisco residential hotel, which was occupied mainly by Filipino laborers.

"Emotionally and psychologically, these stories are autobiographical," said Tenorio, 39, who
teaches creative writing at St. Mary's College in Moraga. "Even if I never lived in a leper colony, or I never had breasts, I draw from memories of all my siblings’ desire to break out of one culture into a different one."

Tenorio didn't realize he wanted to be a writer until he took an undergraduate class at UC Berkeley to fulfill an English requirement. It was titled History of the Short Story, taught by award-winning writer Bharati Mukherjee.

"I picked up her short story collection, 'The Middleman,' and was blown away," he said. "She wrote from the point of view of an Indian American woman, a white male Vietnam vet, an aristocratic Filipino. I wanted to try on personas like that."

He describes his first attempts as "immigrant of the week" stories - too didactic, politically charged and riddled with thinly disguised thesis statements.

"I wanted to control the readers' appreciation and understanding of the work - something you absolutely can't control," he said.

The stories in "Monstress" have been crafted over the past 15 years as Tenorio honed his skills in graduate school and several prestigious writing fellowships, among them Yaddo in New York, the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, the Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Coping with rejection

Tenorio was first published in 1999, after sending "Superassassin" to the Atlantic.

"That was the happiest day of my life," Tenorio said. "I thought it was going to be easy after that."

Instead, the rejection letters piled up. Two years' worth. Then Ploughshares, the literary magazine at Emerson College, published "Help!" - about an airport security guard so enamored of Imelda Marcos that he enlists his nephews to ambush the Beatles with mangoes at the Manila International Airport because the band refused the first lady's request for a private concert.

"What kept me going all this time were the fellowships," he said. "It gave me the sense that these large institutions were willing to invest in my writing, and in a weird way, it would have been selfish, or inconsiderate, to not keep trying."

He's glad he did. The reviews are coming in, and critics are using words such as "luminous," "bold" and "electric" to describe his first short story collection, which was given a starred review by Publishers Weekly.

Working on novel
Stories in "Monstress" have been previously anthologized in "Best New American Voices," and the Pushcart Prize compilation, which selects the nation's best stories from hundreds of small presses.

Tenorio is at work on a novel, which he's not ready to talk about beyond saying it's also set in a California Filipino American community and explores issues of family and alienation.

The combination of funny, sad and beautiful is working for him, so he's sticking with it.

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