

SPECIAL ISSUE: INTERVIEWS

# M. Evelina Galang

By Melissa R. Sipin

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Photo courtesy of author

Author of [\*Her Wild American Self\*](#) (Coffee House Press, 1996) and [\*One Tribe\*](#) (New Issues Press, 2006), [\*\*M. Evelina Galang\*\*](#) teaches in and directs the Creative Writing Program at the University of Miami and is core faculty and a board member for VONA/Voices. She is the recipient of the 2004 Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Awards Advancing Human Rights, the 2004 AWP Prize in the Novel, and the 2007 Global Filipino Award in Literature. As the Fulbright Senior Scholar in the Philippines in 2002, she has been researching surviving WWII Comfort Women, endearingly called the Lolos (grandmothers), since 1998. Editor of the anthology, [\*Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images\*](#) (Coffee House Press, 2003), she recently finished penning *Lolos' House: Women Living With War*, a nonfiction book of essays.



The following is a conversation on her newest novel, [\*Angel de la Luna and the Fifth Glorious Mystery\*](#) (Coffee House Press, 2013), and Galang's research with the surviving Lolos.

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**As I finished the book, my body began to shake and convulse. It was because of the stories of the Lolos. I wanted to vomit. I had to ask myself: why was my body revolting?**

Oh wow. That's wild. I never expected that for a response!

**How did Angel's voice come to you? Lola Ani's? Inay's? They were so different and yet the same; how did these characters invade your space?**

It's really about that combination of—well, it's so funny that I would say 'research,' but it really is—even though fiction is fiction, it's based on certain kinds of emotive truths, but there's also this pretty strong amount of research that goes into it. And I don't mean factual research or historical research, but living in a world where you're a listener. Where the writer is an observer. Where a writer can sit in a room and observe and let people be who people are, and then finding a way to translate that onto the page. And the other part of it is

imagination: asking, what if? You always hear writers asking: what if? There's even a book of writing exercises called, What If? The whole idea is that we're asking that very question.

**Lola Ani struck me as so strong, especially when Angel asked her: “Why aren’t you angry?” She was always giving, feeding the Lolos as they protested; she was always there for others.**

Her voice is a voice that comes from part research, part being with the Lolos, hearing their stories, and watching them in action, seeing how they are bigger than the issue. They have been raped and abused repeatedly, and they have lost family members, they have been shamed, they have been ostracized for years.

But, so many of the women I have met are not victims. They are just not. They don't have time to be victims. They were silenced for 50 years, and in those 50 years, many of them were raising families. You know what I mean? There was no time [to be a victim].

And in some ways, they were like Inay—there is no time to grieve [after losing your husband], to feel sorry for yourself, you just have to do what you have to do to keep everybody together. And that's Inay. Inay came from, in part, watching strong women around me and also asking: what would you do if you lost the love of your life, but you have all these other lives you were responsible for? What great lengths [would you commit] to keep them together? And for her, that was her green-card marriage with Manong Jack.

I wrote this spin-off story that isn't in the novel. There's this moment that's off the page, and I always say: sometimes you've got to write stuff that doesn't end up in the book.

**I felt like even the landscape had a voice, a character. The landscape was so alive. People always tell me: more details, details, details of Manila. But I haven't been back since I was 12.**

You know, that's why journals can be very, very helpful. Or those kind of free writes where you are asked to recall things through sensory details—the first kiss, the first taste of santol [fruit], the feel of the atmosphere, the look of the light of a room, a window, or the temperature. Those are the details I'm constantly taking note of. If you are a writer who wants to write about landscape, place, and time, you have to be observant. You have to be present. If you are present, you can take note of color, sound, details. You have to constantly be on watch, on guard, and it's why I jokingly say: careful what you say in front of me. It might end up in my writing.

I haven't lived in Chicago for almost 20 years. But those scenes in those neighborhoods are vivid to me: they are “me” remembering Chicago, they are “me” remembering winter. I've lived in Miami now for more than 10 years. This is my landscape now. When I sit down and I think about Chicago, it's actually a great opportunity to reignite memory, to bring back the sensory details of that time, and to use it in a way that's going to support the story. There's nothing worse than when people set up landscape. When it's like landscape landscape landscape and it has nothing to do with the narrative. The other component is

when you do landscape, it becomes an important part of the narrative, it's supporting character, it's supporting conflict; it's integral to what's happening—you almost don't notice that it's actually there.

**I felt like the land also embodied so much trauma. It felt like the land remembered.**

And how can the land not remember? Especially with Filipino culture and history and the whole attention to the land as being sacred, and to anitos [spirits] living on the land. You don't just pass through somebody's property. You say: excuse me. You ask permission.

**Right, you say: tabi tabi po [may I pass, sir]?**

Exactly. Because the land is part of the story.

**There was so much love throughout this book, too. Did the love help you write through the pain of the Comfort Women's stories?**

It's the only reason to tell the stories, you know? The Comfort Women themselves say the reason why they go through the trauma of telling and retelling their stories is for the next generation; it's so that it won't ever happen again. It's for the love of the girls who are coming.

The only reason to tell these stories is because of love, and the only way that these stories can make any sense is if they are told in the context of love. Out of context, it would just be one violent act after another, and also there would be no way to redeem anything if there was not love. And love comes from different places, at different levels, and for different reasons. It's also, again, part of that research I've been doing and this understanding that I've been coming to as I've worked with the survivors, who were first victims, then survivors, then heroines, and now teachers. It's all part of that healing process. You can't heal unless you open up your heart and you're vulnerable and you allow love to take place. You allow yourself to feel loss.

**Lastly, what was the difference between writing this novel and the essays on the Lolas? It seems, at least to me, when you write nonfiction, you are witnessing this trauma, and in fiction, you are filling up the empty spaces. So, it's a little bit different—there's this veil.**

It's very different, I think. I'm trained as a fiction writer. You think that writing is such a brave act, but it's also very safe—you write it on a piece of paper, type it up on a screen, and you can leave it. You can say: oh, I didn't do that! Right? But, in fact, fiction helps to do the same thing [as nonfiction].

But, the practice of writing this novel and those essays were, in fact, very different. I feel like there is a responsibility that comes with being a witness to these stories. If somebody is

going to be silent for 50 years, and then they're going to speak, and they speak to you—you want to make sure that you get it right, you want to make sure that you honor the stories. And also, there's that part of me that wants to make sure they're not confused. Memory brings with it revision and subjectivity. I worked with 15 women very closely and I interviewed most of them at least twice if not three or four times, going over their testimonies in different ways. So, there was the gathering of the work, and that could be very taxing on the body and the spirit. They go through it, experience the trauma, relive it, every time they tell it. Then you start to go through it. And you have to have a kind of distance so you don't take on their stuff. You're supposed to be just a witness. But at the same time, when it comes to writing you need to be aware of what you're doing. Be respectful of it and honor it in a way that does not dramatize it, does not inflate it, does not dismiss it; there's a fine balance you have to walk.

When I was writing the essays—the book is in its second or third draft now—especially in the initial drafting, my body would fatigue. I would get tired in two hours. Everything in my body would turn off. I would literally have to lie down, chill out, go meditate, workout, go see a dumb movie. I would have to step away because I couldn't take it. Literally, my body could not take it. But when I write fiction, I could sit down on a Friday night and I could go all the way to Sunday night, barely getting up for bathroom breaks. I would forget to eat. I would become so immersed in the story, which I think I did with this novel.

So, one of the biggest differences was just my physical reaction to the essays verses the novel. And the second, I think, there was a burden. I felt so committed and devoted not just to the Lolas and their stories, but I'd grown attached to their movement and their fight for justice. There's this constant balance and responsibility as a writer, and it's almost like a burden. It is a burden. But writing the novel was quite freeing, it was liberating, and even though it was about painful stuff, it was joyful. It was getting at the same material but not having that burden I feel with the essays. The novel did not have the same kind of responsibility, and yet it does many of the same things that the essays are trying to do: to get at the essence of the experiences of the Comfort Women and to talk about the struggle for social justice. And that is ongoing and it still has not been addressed.

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*Above artwork by [Trinidad Niki Escobar](#) | Previously printed in [580 Split: Issue 16](#)*

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