



A Conversation with M. Evelina Galang, author of **WHEN THE HIBISCUS FALLS**



Photo credit: Jenny Abreu

Q: What are you trying to say in *WHEN THE HIBISCUS FALLS*?

A: There is something about being born in the United States when you are the child of immigrants. Instead of fairy tales and fantasies set in make-believe lands, I was fed stories about my parents' homeland. The Philippines. That was a magical place with lolas and lolos, grandparents I had only met once when I was a baby, and hordes of aunties and uncles and cousins. With sun all year long and sea you could swim in and mangoes!

When I was a toddler, we moved to Manila for two years. I did not return until my thirties when that taste of santol fruit triggered visceral memories from childhood—sounds and flavors and faces and most of all, belonging.

That's a powerful thing for a writer. To imagine the homeland of one's ancestors, especially if you were born in another country.

So I long for a connection to a homeland I have inherited. And I am curious. I want to know everything. I want to be connected to our earliest beginnings – all of it, the cities, the provinces and especially the ancient memories of tribes and practices of the indigenous folk we now call Filipinos.

The stories I write help me go there, help me explore. Give me solace.

My characters, mostly Filipina and Filipina American, move in a complicated world of in-between and that is what I am interested in. I also want to know how the world receives them – whether that world is familial (which it often is) or in their own immigrant community or in the external community in their cities or nation. I place them in difficult situations, and I take the journey with them.

Q: What are your obsessions and how do they manifest in this book?

A: I didn't intentionally write them to be one body of work. I wrote the stories for **WHEN THE HIBISCUS FALLS** over ten years. I created them while in the midst of longer works. The short story was my first form and it's where I go when I want to relax. To play.



So when I sat down to read the stories all at once, imagine my surprise when I saw this obsession with ancestors. I am a family person, so stories between mothers and daughters, cousins, or uncles and nieces, husbands and wives, didn't surprise me.

This desire to connect with our families who have gone before us was first revealed to me in the eighties, I think, when my cousin's son died in a car accident along the Pacific Coast Highway. I was in my late twenties. It was the first time someone I knew had passed away. Our family began to experience little things. One night after picking up my cousins from the airport, we were at a stoplight. The car was running smoothly all through the red light and then dying each time the light went green. We laughed and joked that the son, our nephew, was playing with us. Another time, I was kneeling at the casket with my hand on the wood, eyes closed when I felt someone take my hand and squeeze it. I opened my eyes and no one was there.

Fictional ancestors began showing up in my stories. A dying father. A lost husband. A teenage sister drowned. The matriarch of a family. A great auntie speaking from the afterlife. Though they were not the protagonists in my stories, they were integral participants, sitting among the living, sometimes speaking to them, sometimes guiding them.

I was blown away when I came across Datu Migketay Victorino Saway, a tribal leader of indigenous peoples in the Philippines and his teaching on ancestors as teachers and guardians to their descendants. Here was a Filipino principle I've never formally been taught, but something I have experienced in my life and fiction.

This is an obsession to connect to the past, to the beginning of me and my people, my family, to carrying tradition forward, to remembering and connecting to the ones who came before us and the ones we leave behind. It is an obsession with not forgetting.

Q: Are you still writing about identity and assimilation?

A: So much of my first collection of stories, *Her Wild American Self*, was about figuring out who the characters were, claiming their space and naming their identity. There was often the struggle of being American and Filipino, and how to braid those identities. It's not that the characters didn't know who they were. They just had to figure out how to move in a world that didn't see them, (or the world they didn't see) or when they did, they mislabeled them, or rejected them. Most of my girls, teens and women, all Filipino American in *Her Wild American Self*, knew they were of two cultures. American born with strong ties to the Philippines. That book was definitely about identity.

These days, I think my characters find themselves in complicated and layered situations. Of course, they recognize their identity. But that's not their conflict. They don't concern themselves with fitting into dominant White culture. In fact, if anything, they rebel against that. Instead, most of them are working through some kind of grief, or familial conflict and asserting their choices.

"Foodie in the Philippines" is about identity, in a way. She's sure of who she is—and she's so westernized, she can't recognize the spirit of her own grandmother. A few of my characters are too much in their day-to-day life to see that they are being visited and guided by ancestors who love them. Who know them even as they have no idea who these ancestors are.



I think maybe I am writing about identity, but not in the same way. They are moving through the world with a clear sense of self, and sometimes the White gaze disrupts their day, but not enough for it to be the reason for the stories.

Q: You write in English, but you also have Tagalog, Kapampangan and Spanish in the book. Can that be off-putting to your readers, because you don't always translate?

A: These are the languages that bring the characters to life. I hear them all around me, in the way they interact with the world. It is the cadence of the voices I am trying to capture on the page. It seems like a natural choice to layer Tagalog, Kapampangan and Spanish into my stories. These are their stories. Their languages.

For monolingual readers, this is an invitation to enter a space where they would never be. Witnessing my characters in these intimate spaces, thinking as they would through their language, and reacting from a cultural and political view that is foreign to those readers, is an opportunity.

One must be willing to make the journey with the characters. To read in context what is going on in their lives. One must say yes, I trust this fiction to show me these lives and welcome me into this world.

Word choice here is not only about the music of the prose. It is a pathway to understanding the psychology of the characters, the complicated notion of Filipino personhood and Kapwa.

Q: Can you talk about Kapwa and how it functions in your work? What is Kapwa to you?

A: In her book, *Kapwa, the Self in the Other*, Katrin de Guia defines Kapwa as “a Tagalog term widely used when addressing another with intentions of establishing a connection.” She says “it reflects a viewpoint that beholds the essential humanity recognizable in everyone there for linking people rather than separating them from one another.”

This is a term that dates back to our indigenous Filipino selves. Before colonization. Before greed and politics and martial law. It was the way of our people.

Though I came upon Kapwa and the definition of Filipino personhood as an academic and a writer, I have come to realize, I have been living it all this time.

My parents were Filipino immigrants-turned U.S.-citizens. They were generous people who invited everyone to our house for a good meal, music and community organizing. They served our communities everywhere we lived, supporting those immigrants who had trouble finding housing, or who were homesick and needed to feel a little bit of home so far away.

I used to think they did this because they were good people. It was their nature. Come to find out, their way of being speaks to the practice of Kapwa. And you know, I'm just like them!

My community life is an integral part of my day—whether it is creating community in the classroom or feeding friends and family in my backyard or organizing alongside Filipina “Comfort Women” of WWII, or planning the next BIPOC writing workshop for VONA. This is my way of being too.



I love this concept of Kapwa.

Naming it and exploring it has become part of this book. I imagine a life before the Spaniards, a community of people consciously practicing Kapwa, but I also create contemporary communities where Kapwa not only sets up the characters but creates tension. What happens when communities practice Kapwa in a nation driven by commodification, greed, and power?

Q: Your dad has said the Philippines was three hundred years in the convent and fifty years in Hollywood. How does a statement like that play out in your characters' lives?

A: My dad was a funny guy that way.

He meant Spain colonized the Philippines for more than 300 years. After WWII, the United States had a military presence in the Philippines for fifty years.

There are some of us who have internalized the religious, cultural, gendered, and socio-economic beliefs of these nations. There are some who work to decolonize themselves from these nations' influences and wish to return to indigenous practices and ways of being before the creation of Las Islas Pilipinas. And the in-between of these extremes has many narrative struggles and possibilities.

The questions surrounding Spanish and U.S. tensions within the Filipino/Filipino American identity runs through all the characters in this book, as it probably always will in my writing. Even as many Filipino Americans struggle for independence from these influences, they remain a part of who we are. I am interested in exploring how we play them, how we try to connect or reject them. Notions of Kapwa and Filipino personhood among contemporary Filipino/a/x Americans is a struggle and a tension that can never be fully resolved.