

# Studying humor, seriously

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Prof. Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta, PhD

**Filipinos are known as fun-loving and are always smiling.**

**H**owever, what makes Filipinos smile? Where do they draw their joy?

In her 2017 book, “Halakhak: National Humor in Philippine Popular Cultural Forms,” Prof. Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta, PhD, examined how humor is deployed in Philippine popular cultural forms in response to the scarceness of resources studying Filipino humor.

“Humor is, in fact, a Filipino national weapon—one that is utilized not only to reflect social foibles and cultural beliefs that allow Filipinos to find belonging in using humor as a response to crippling national horrors, but one that is used to train an apparently disparaging look at themselves as victims of embarrassing and painful historical, political, or cultural circumstances,” Ancheta said.

In a 2018 interview with the UP Press, Ancheta recalled how other faculty members and both graduate and undergraduate students would ask her, “Why didn’t you write the book sooner?” At that time, materials on humor studies, specifically in Philippine setting, “is hard to look for, and if at all there is material, you have to claw to look for it,” she said.

**LEARNINGS AND GOALS.** The book project started after Ancheta’s dissertation when UP Diliman (UPD) College of Arts and Letter (CAL) Professor Emeritus Gemino H. Abad encouraged her to go into Filipino humor “because nobody’s on it,” Ancheta said. Thus began her entry to popular culture.

Ancheta realized two things about how people perceives humor studies.

“One, which I also addressed in the introduction of the book, is that humor is not a proper study for scholarly discussion. And only very recently has it become so because, and I think especially in the Philippines, it really is rather trivialized,” she said.

She also said the irony of trivializing humor as more of a topic for entertainment is that the reality of humor is a very serious study in understanding what Philippine culture is. Thus, the importance of humor studies in understanding the idea, or stereotype, that Filipinos are fun-loving and are always smiling.

The second is that studying humor or any artifact that delves on humor is, in itself, enjoyable. Ancheta said “It is entertaining throughout. It is like hard slog. It’s as valid an area of study as anthropology, sociology or the sciences.”

Her main goal was to start a conversation about Filipino humor. Ancheta saw the need to provide an initial resource for the examination of Filipino humor and what it means to understand this in terms of Philippine culture.

“Humor is functional. It depends on who we are evolving as a people,” she said.



Ancheta

**HUMOR AND COMEDY.** Comedy is a genre, a type, while humor is a sensibility, “and many times people interchange the two,” Ancheta explained. Humor has already been studied and theorized, and there are certain ways by which theorists have already looked at the nature of humor, and these were discussed in the book.

First is to look at humor as being born of incongruity. “We laugh because we see something that is unexpected, and that recognition of that unexpectedness pushes us to laugh or it becomes the impetus to laughter.”

Second is to look at laughter as being born of superiority. People laugh at other people. “We do things, gestures. We have words that put other people down. And in the course of that, we feel superior over them,” Ancheta said.

Philosopher Thomas Hobbes said we laugh “because of sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others.”

Last is that laughter is a release. “People usually have this nervous laughter when we talk about taboo things like sex or things that we really don’t talk about in ordinary life like fecal matter or urine. I mean like even

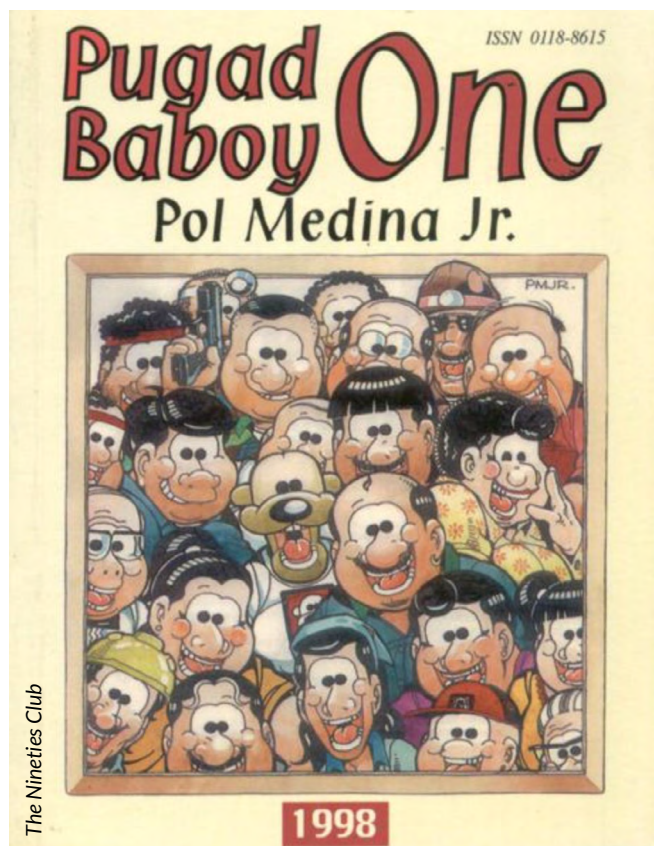
talking about it makes us titter a bit. So that idea of release or relief, that laughter is not so much cognitive. It’s not that we think about it but it is a release of emotion,” Ancheta explained.

**CONTENT.** The book has nine essays where Ancheta used several tools of the “scholarship of humor studies” such as classical humor theories, linguistic humor frameworks, and comic narrative strategies, among others.

She used these tools to read and study popular Filipino cultural forms as seen in theatrical works of the “komedyas” and “sarsuwelas;” in political joke work in the Erap Estrada and Gloria Arroyo “Hello Garci” jokes; in the Filipino visual arts such as in the earlier Filipino “komiks” Kenkoy by writer Romualdo Ramos and cartoonist-illustrator Tony Velasquez; in contemporary comic strips by Larry Alcala (Slice of Life), Pol Medina (Pugad Baboy) and Jess Abrera (Pinoy Nga!); in the Dolfy films; in digital media (Maritess vs. the Superfriends by Dino Ignacio); and in contemporary creative nonfiction essays.

As Ancheta prepared the essays, two main stories propped up. One is the experience of a fan girl as she ended up connecting with the creators and copyright





Comic materials mentioned in the book

owners of the comic materials. “Everybody has been very accommodating,” she said.

The other story is the gratification of producing the book and the respect and appreciation of the need for such book as evidenced by students from different universities “who would approach me, asking about their theses and studies and if I have a book which they can use,” Ancheta shared.

**THE AUTHOR.** Ancheta is Professor at the CAL Department of English and Comparative Literature, teaching American and British literature. Her areas of interests are humor studies in American and Philippine literary and popular culture, everyday life and domestic cultures, sociology of the body and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

She finished PhD English Studies: Anglo-American Literature, MA English Studies: Anglo-American Literature, and BA English: Anglo-American Literature from UPD.

For a copy of “Halakhak: National Humor in Philippine Popular Cultural Forms,” visit the UP Press physical store in UPD, the UP Press website or online shops Lazada and Shopee.