

## **Call Me A Book “Editor,” I Dare You**

I am afraid to call myself an editor. I wake up in the middle of the night, body shaking, hands sweaty, and head buzzing with the thought that I could never be taken seriously as a writer and as an editor because of my job. In this country, in this industry, if you edit Wattpad novels, you are made to feel ashamed of yourself for saturating the small world of Philippine Literature with “trash books.”

I’ve heard that phrase so many times since I started this job that sometimes I catch myself calling my own work just that: trash. And sometimes I fall for that trap. Sometimes, I think that maybe they’re right when they say that I’m not a real editor. Most of the time, the phrase would come from the people I admired and respected.

"Trash books" are harsh words for the twenty-five-year-old me who had just gotten the biggest career jump in her life. I had been a full-time writer for years before this gig. On top of my full-time job writing for health magazines, I also did freelance writing jobs. I never turned down any new writing project that came my way, regardless if it was for public relations or marketing or journalism. Never mind journalistic integrity. I had bills to pay. I needed to hustle.

I was tired, and I was ripe and ready for any kind of boost to my paycheck.

Nobody ever told me that being a writer in the Philippines meant you’d be stuck living with your parents all your life, which isn’t exactly seen as a bad thing here. In fact, it’s expected for an unmarried woman in her 20s to live with and support her family. That is until an unwitting man comes along to cough up some money for her and her family. Sucks for that guy. Ha! If you

don't get married, then sucks for you. You know you'll be paying off your family's debt and bills on top of your own until you die alone and lonely after years of pent-up libido.

And don't preach to me about gender equality or respecting your elders. Get off your high horse. That's the reality of being a Filipino woman for this generation of "woke-ness." You never really know how to properly conduct yourself without unintentionally---okay, maybe sometimes intentionally---offending one group or another. You want to be "woke" so all your paycheck goes to your next "add to cart" splurge, but you also don't want to make the people who put a roof over your head mad at you.

I'm the typical millennial who gets distracted by shiny, fancy things I find on online shopping apps. But my tiny paycheck as a full-time writer and *raket*-hustler means I could only add-to-cart and imagine that the stuff I wanted to buy just lost their way to my house.

But I'm Ilocana from my mother's side. And it's hard living with Ilocanas. They're not joking when they say that they're ridiculously stingy. When I was young and our family was struggling financially, if I opened a new bottle of ketchup before we've scraped up every bit from the last bottle, my mother and grandmother would nag at me all afternoon and make me feel guilty for being so wasteful. And it's not even the fancy tomato ketchup. That's too good for us. What they would do is pour hot water into the old bottle, shake it until every bit of ketchup mixes up with the water, and pour the entire red watery mess into a tiny bowl. Now, I get to enjoy *patis*-marinated fried chicken with watered-down banana ketchup. Yum!

But even now that I'm a grown-ass woman living a comfortable life with my comfortable editor's paycheck, I'm still afraid to open a new bottle when the old not-empty-enough bottle is staring right at me at the dinner table. I feel my mother and the generations of the Ilocana women

in my family breathing down my neck just at the exact point when my fingers are touching the new bottle.

But I occasionally give in to my most craven impulses even with my tiny writer's paycheck. I can indulge a little at the grocery store now that I'm earning my own money. Why am I working if I don't live it up a little, right?

Mind you, becoming a writer and earning the tiny writer's paycheck was a conscious choice---It was my dream job. It was my childhood dream to become the Filipina JK Rowling. You know, daydream, write stories, and get rich by selling out for movie deals.

I had two chances to change career track back in high school and college. I had two chances to get out before it was too late. Guidance counselors from both schools tried to convince me to take an engineering or IT track, because according to my aptitude tests, I was supposed to be a mathematical genius. And I scored pretty low for the Humanities tests. They said I would perform better in those courses. One of them even said, "What are you doing in this college? Are you sure this is what you really want?"

If they could only see me on night-outs with my friends when we're dividing checks now, they'd see why I can't even multiply 12 by 6 in my head without pausing for a hot minute to compute. I would give the wrong answer anyway after so much thought. Is it 36? Never mind.

In my head, they basically told me that I was a shitty writer, and I could never amount to anything if I chose that career. Being the prideful little shit that I was, I went ahead with my little childhood dream of becoming a passionate writer just to prove to them that I could do something that they said I couldn't. It's an annoying habit that I still carry up to this day: proving to everyone that I can do something they tell me I couldn't. If only they told me then that I would

earn more money if I took those courses instead, then maybe I wouldn't still be eating fried chicken with watered-down ketchup today.

So when this amazing opportunity to become an editor---and earn more than twice what I was earning as a writer---comes up, I snatched it up like a buy-one-take-one pack of plus-size bras at the surplus store. No more watered-down ketchup for this writer. Gone are the days when the only time I get to indulge in fancy food and waste all the ketchup I want on them is when they give out free catered food at press conferences and public relations events. Gone are the days when I would hustle for freelance writing jobs. No more writing for money. This writer will be living the good life from now on.

So you could only imagine the look I had on my face when it dawned on me that becoming an editor meant that I would have no time for the thing I loved doing the most and my dream job. Gone are the days when I get to passionately say that "I'm living the dream as a 'real' writer, and I'm giving up THE life because of that passion."

Gosh, was I an annoying, naive little shit when I was young.

And I tell you, the media industry in this country is ruthless. There are so many standards needed to be fulfilled before you're allowed to actually call yourself a "real editor." You have to have won awards. You have to be from a reputable school. You need connections. You need to carry yourself in a dignified manner. Try telling me to look dignified at 3AM in the morning when I'm stuck in the office trying to finish a book that should have been printed two weeks ago.

I read somewhere that once you do become an editor, there's no going back to being a full-time writer again. And I can't agree enough with how true that is! You can't return to being a full-time writer once you become an editor. You've already gotten used to the paycheck by the time you

realize you want to go back. You'll have to write like crazy to earn close to the same amount that you're earning now. Or write a bestselling book, but believe me when I say that in this country, getting a bestselling book is like winning the lottery.

And it feels like a triple whammy for me that I'm a *Wattpad* book "editor."

Notice that I put quotation marks there. In this industry, I think I'm only allowed to call myself an "editor" because there's no other better word to call a person helping an author with their manuscript that was published on that infamous website.

One time, on a date with this guy who I thought was going to break my five year long-cycle of being single, he actually said these words to me, "You mean those convenience store pocketbooks? You actually edit those books? How could you sleep at night? You could do so much better."

Nothing like being told you have a shitty job by a guy you barely know to get your self-esteem ---and pathetic love life---flushed down the toilet.

I'm not allowed the dignity or the prestige of being called an "editor" now that I can't go back to being a writer. So humor me when I call myself an editor without the quotation marks from here on out.

Before I started this editing gig, my only reference for the job was the very glamorous Miranda Priestly. I thought becoming an editor was sitting in a glamorous desk in a glamorous office, reading books, coming up with cool new books, going to fancy meetings and parties, and making big decisions that'll affect the outcome of the book. Like how Miranda decided on those two very similar belts.

You should see my hot mess of a desk---contracts, book samples, manuscripts, proofs, and so much paperwork everywhere. And I'm not just reading; I'm basically rewriting stories because some authors wrote their stories when they were nine years old. They didn't know any better when they wrote it, and they're now way in over their heads because of their newfound fame. Book meetings are basically me trying to defend why so-and-so author is late in submitting her manuscript, when she promised she would submit last week. Parties are done over *sisig* and beer. And forget about making big decisions. That's way above my pay grade.

Being a book editor is not glamorous.

It's gritty. It's long hours of staring at a manuscript wondering why you let this book pitch get to your editor in chief and publisher in the first place. You knew you were already up to your eyeballs with manuscripts that should have been sent to the printer last month. It's working till the wee hours of the morning trying to decipher if this shade of blue on the color proof is the shade of blue the art director wanted based on the soft copy of the book. It's feeling the grease on your skin and the skin on your teeth thickening up because the last time you went home to take a bath or brush your teeth was more than 24 hours ago. It gets worse during the months of April to September, when you have to get all the books to the printer in time for the book fair to ensure that they really sell out.

Editing a book is a lot of work. No shit.

But editing is not the only thing you're doing for this job.

Someone acquired the manuscript before this whole project began. Someone coordinated with writers, publishers, art directors, illustrators, photographers, proofreaders, copyeditors, transcribers, stylists, production coordinators, and the authors themselves to get the book to

move forward. Someone checked every little detail of the book until it was ready for approval by the bosses before turning it over for mass printing.

And that someone is you, the hardworking book editor.

It gets a lot more difficult when there's a celebrity involved. And it gets so much crazier when a newbie author, who has had one hit book, suddenly realizes she can make you cough up more money and/or slow down book production. Apparently, Miss One-Hit-Wonder didn't like what you did with the book. Imagine having fifteen other authors acting the same way all at the same time. Say goodbye to your monthly book release quota---and your bed. You're not going to see either of them for a long time.

Granted, I'm sure a lot of other editors would be better than me at the job. But which dispassionate editor would actually heed the call when our industry hates or at the very least dismisses the books I spent sleepless nights making? Which editor in his right mind would want to make books when everything else is jumping to digital media? Which editor would risk their entire career for an industry that we're not sure would survive 10 years from now?

Only this chump would. I knew what I was getting myself into, and I'd take this job in a heartbeat over and over again.

Pandering aside, I work for one of the biggest and most stable book publishing companies in the country. Our very small book publishing team within a larger media company churns out close to a hundred books every year, and Filipinos actually buy each and every copy we put out on the shelves. I'm not kidding, but maybe I'm exaggerating a little. It's good for morale.

Considering that the country's national pastime is posting fancy flatlays of food, hopefully with a book they bought three months ago but haven't gotten around to cracking open yet, "stable" is a

generous word. Local publishers are folding one by one, and while we're hopeful that print is not dead at least for books, watching our peers go down is like standing in line at the waxing salon and listening to the girls who went in before you whimper in pain because of the bikini wax. You'll always have this sinking feeling that it could be your turn next.

It makes me wonder if Filipinos would still be reading decades from now. It makes me wonder if my own children will someday get to enjoy such great books by Filipino authors and publishers. Most would say that it's a miracle that we're surviving, but I beg to differ. I dare say that we're thriving because this generation is a generation of readers. No miracles necessary. And book publishers have refused to recognize that until just this year because of what these kids are choosing to read: Wattpad novels.

The novels that sprung after the undeniable success of *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer, *Fifty Shades of Gray* by E.L. James, and *After* by Anna Todd. The novels I edit. The novels I have been churning out on a monthly basis for more than five years. The novels that I gave up my writing career for. The novels that are paying for my mortgage.

They did say that romance keeps the lights on in this industry. It definitely keeps the light on in the one bedroom condo unit I still have 23 years to pay for.

I always thought that romance was this niche in literature that nobody took too seriously like Science Fiction and Fantasy. Remember a time when *Game of Thrones*---sorry, *A Song of Ice and Fire*---or *The Notebook* sat on the shelves collecting dust for years before they were picked up for TV and movies? Me neither.

I used to enjoy romances like I would enjoy a bag of chips, which were nutritiously empty but hugely satisfying. I remember just devouring books by Nora Roberts and Judith McNaught. The



next book in the Harry Potter series hadn't come out yet, and I was hungry for more stories when I was 12 years old.

These romances definitely obscured my view of love before I actually knew what real-life love was, but I didn't care. I wanted to be the strong independent heroine who gets swept up off her feet by the strong, handsome CEO. It wasn't the sanitized versions of love I learned from Disney movies. Romance novel love was carnal, sexual, can't-keep-my-hands-to-myself love. And those stories mattered to me growing up with my deeply ingrained Catholic beliefs and even more so when my nine-year-long relationship ended the way it did.

In a way, romance novels empowered me to think that love isn't just about the pomp and the grand displays of affection that was so common in Disney movies. That there was a gray area between Disney and Nora Roberts. That true love is nothing like we see in books. Not exactly.

To this day, I still enjoy romances between my high-brow books, and I've recently realized that I also liked its little sister, YA books.

I have to be honest: I've only been reading Wattpad novels for a year before I started this gig. But I've enjoyed them tremendously---even the campy and strangely plotted ones. I was just too embarrassed to admit it then.

I think high-brow readers, or the literati, who dismiss our books, are missing a lot. They are missing out on so many talented authors and such wonderfully well-written stories just because they branded Wattpad novels as "trash books" or "cringe books."

They would miss out on Matthew Dela Cruz's search for the one told through the stories of five heartbreaks in *Six Degrees of Serendipity*. They would miss out on Ceyla Ward's adventures in

the magical land of Helios in *The Ceyla Chronicles 1*. They would miss out on the cool choose-your-own-adventure-book that is the second installment of *The Ceyla Chronicles*.

They would miss out on the *Gossip Girl* inspired drama of Tori and Zach in New York in *Must Date The Playboy* and on spine-tingling fantasy and mystery adventures like *Black Equation*, *Reapers: Thirteen Brothers*, and *No One Will Know*. There are so many stories I wish avid readers like me wouldn't dismiss like *Glass Sneakers*, *The XI Beauty*, *The Four Bad Boys And Me*, and of course, the one that started it all, *She's Dating The Gangster*, if only they gave these stories a chance.

When I was starting at this job, I admit to succumbing to the shame pinned on me by other editors. I admit that I once wanted so desperately to be accepted by the literati.

I went to writing school; my classmates and professors were very critical of what we put out there as writers. You'd rather hide your work than show it to class. It was this pressure that ultimately pushed me to feel shame at the beginning.

When asked about the books I edit especially on dates, I'd give a brief and inconspicuous description of Wattpad books. The dumb ones don't usually realize what I'm describing to them and are satisfied to know that I'm at least smart enough to become an editor. That balances out the fact that I'm fatter and weirder than the manic pixie girls they actually want to date in their heads. The smart ones, the ones I actually want to date, usually get it when I say, "YA pocketbooks." The look on their faces can't hide the cringe they so desperately want to let out at the mention of "Wattpad." And of course, in an effort to save the date, I would say, "Those aren't the only books I work on. My company also publishes celebrity books, business books, arts and crafts books, poetry books, novelty books, and etc." Like a chump.

So now, I'm also sacrificing my love life for these books---not to mention my loyalty. And maybe a little bit of my dignity.

I've been working in this job for five years, and I can't emphasize enough how much I regret being ashamed of this job for guys I barely knew and haven't talked to for years.

I would still use my career as plus points for dates, of course, but I'm not so ashamed of what I do now that I'm older.

Five years in, I still get a lot of flak for being an editor of "trash" books. They say "editor" as if I was doing a disservice to Philippine Literature. As if our "trash books" could burn down the entire industry when it was our "trash books" that I dare say made this new generation of readers fall in love with reading.

Our books were easily accessible to these kids when they were looking for stories to transition from *Barney the Dinosaur* to Martha Cecilia or Jessica Hagedorn or Lualhati Bautista or F.H. Batacan or maybe eventually F. Sionil Jose. Because admit it, you couldn't understand what these authors were trying to say in their novels when you were barely a teenager.

And I don't need to mention that the price of our books are friendly on our readers' allowance. I can't emphasize enough how accessibility is an important factor for our kids nowadays.

When I was young and was only starting to discover my love for reading, I remember that I preferred to read *Sweet Valley High* and *Nancy Drew* books over the stories and books that my teachers were forcing me to read and understand. Reading *SWH* and *Nancy Drew* was much more fun, cooler, and easier than reading stories about children excited to hear the sound of rain. And they were way cheaper. I was a young, naive, impressionable child. I wanted instant gratification. And of course, I wanted to be cool.

I was cleaning up my room the other day, after reading about Marie Kondo and *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*---typical for the old millennial that I am of course, and I dug up my old textbooks. I found that some of the stories that my teachers were trying to force me to read then were by Ray Bradbury, my favorite author today. I didn't enjoy nor understand his stories at that age in my life, but somehow I eventually found my way to him now that I'm older. I think we underestimate this new generation of readers too much. We act like we lured them into this deathtrap of bad writing that rotted their brains to mush.

But where was your God's gift to Philippine Literature when these kids were looking for books to comfort them between the stress of school and teenage life?

That's the problem with my generation of writers and readers. We're all talk and no action. I bet very few of us have produced stories that the generations after us will enjoy. I'm not excluding myself from this narrative. I've been working on my novel for five years.

Meanwhile, Wattpad authors have been churning out stories like vending machines. We were only lucky enough to see the opportunity and catch the windfall, but our kids found these stories even before our company started up our book publishing arm. The least we could do was help these authors turn their manuscripts into the best books they could be.

And these authors were writing when they were nine years old! They wrote stories that they wanted to read because they couldn't find it anywhere else. What were you doing when you were nine years old? What did your BA in writing get you? Don't preach if you can't provide what these kids need.

But I'd be a hypocrite for castigating the literati for not providing the books our kids need. I don't think I could ever do that myself. I don't think my novel could ever do that---if I get around to finally finishing it.

Sometimes, I feel like I don't deserve this job and that I'm only here because no one else wanted their names affiliated with the word "Wattpad." But looking back, I know I owe the literati no explanation, no apologies. If anything, the literati have failed the next generation for not finishing their novels, for not making their own stories accessible to the kids, and for not doing enough to make these kids fall in love with reading.

Maybe if we're lucky, these kids may find joy in reading like we did without our help. If we didn't make everyone who enjoys Wattpad novels feel ashamed of reading what they like, we might not need to force these kids to read the really, really good books. The kids could go to those quiet corners of the bookstores to look for God's gift to Philippine Literature on their own. If we did our jobs well, these kids could move on from the books editors like me work on and choose the books that they not only enjoy but also make them think on their own.

But if they don't eventually find their way to F. Sionil Jose, if we failed the generation after us, if the next God's gift to Philippine Literature doesn't make it to the printer on time for these kids, then the least I could wish for is for these kids to find joy in reading and solace in the stories accessible to them.

I won't make the kids feel ashamed if they continue to patronize our books. In fact, we should stop calling them "trash books." A book is a book is a book is a book. Just as every book is different, every person is different, too. And books will always find readers who would appreciate the stories it holds within.

Not to mention, we put a lot of work in the books we make. I take insult every time they're called "trash." Our books are incredibly fun and rebellious. It goes against the grain of what has been the norm, which is what youth is anyway---Cool and fun and rebellious.

At the end of the day, I sleep well at night knowing that this new generation of readers started with the books I helped make.

So humor me when I call myself a book editor. Because that's what I am. The new bottle of fancy ketchup I bought with my editor's paycheck proves it.