

The Heart of the Nation Merlinda Bobis's *Banana Heart Summer*

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Close to midnight, when the heart bows from its stem, wait for its first dew. It will drop like a gem. Catch it with your tongue. When you eat the heart of the matter, you'll never grow hungry again.

Nana Dora, *Banana Heart Summer*

The twelve-year-old narrator of Merlinda Bobis's *Banana Heart Summer*, Nining, is listening to Nana Dora. And, although quite peeved at the numerous aphorisms and Nana Dora's know-it-all attitude, Nining goes home with the story of the banana heart lingering in her mind. Years later and in another land, Nining still remembers the myth, "the charm" that she has always "kept in [her] pocket ever since" (225).

In Bobis's novel set in the 1960s, the reader is treated to a feast, not just of a sumptuous array of Filipino food and recipes integrated into the narrative of Nining but to a string of stories and tales, both hilarious and heart-rending at the same time. The novel opens with a series of "whens," the events that happened in the life of Nining who at forty, relates the story/stories of the most important summer in her life. It was in the 60s, remembers Nining,

[w]hen we laid my baby sister in a shoebox, when all the banana hearts in our street were stolen, when Tiyo Anding stepped out of a window perhaps to fly, when I saw guavas peeking from Manolito's shorts and felt I'd die of shame, when Roy Orbison went as crazy as Patsy Cline and lovers eloped, sparking a scandal so fiery that even the volcano erupted and, as a consequence, my siblings tasted their first American corned beef, then Mother looked at me again, that was the summer I ate the heart of the matter. (2)

With this enumeration of events opening the novel's first chapter entitled "For those who love to love and eat/For those who long to love and eat," the reader gets a peek at the stories about to be told, all of which, although about the experiences of an adolescent girl in a small town in Albay, Bicol, are actually disquieting.

That summer might have been a woeful one but it was the same summer when Nining hears the invaluable story of the banana heart, a myth that has since then inspired her to search for the first dew, the charm which will hopefully appease her family's hunger and win back her cruel mother. And thus, begins Nining's narration of the lives in her street of "sweets and spices" (3). Setting the parameters of her story, she says: "Let's begin with appeasement, my first serious

business venture long ago. . . Let's begin with a makeshift kitchen [Nana Dora's], a hut with no walls, under banana trees in bloom" (3).

In a novel that orchestrates metaphors of food, body, and narrative/story in recounting what had happened in Remedios street forty years ago, the reader hears and senses the heartbeat of the Philippine nation. In Bobis's *Banana Heart Summer* are murmurings of the nation and the nobility found in the ordinary, everyday life of its people.

Remedios Street in Her Heart

Like the other novels included in this study (e.g., Grajo Uranza's *A Passing Season*, Ty-Casper's *Dream Eden*, and Apostol's *Bibliolepsy*), *Banana Heart Summer's* first few pages establish the "geographical" contours of the novel's setting. Nining introduces the readers not only to the cacophonous sounds of Remedios street but also to its "flavors." In a seemingly adolescent's voice but one tinged with foreboding pain and air of gravity, she begins:

From the site of her remark [Nanay Dora's myth of the banana heart], I will take you through a tour of our street and I will tell you its stories. Ay, my street of wishful sweets and spices. All those wishes to appease stomachs and make hearts fat with pleasure. And perhaps sweeten tempers or even spice up a storyteller's tongue. (3)

But while the other novels, narrated as they are from either the third person point of view or from the first person point of view by an older narrator who relies only on words to describe the imagined community in the narrative, *Banana Heart Summer*, narrated by a forty-year-old woman trying to