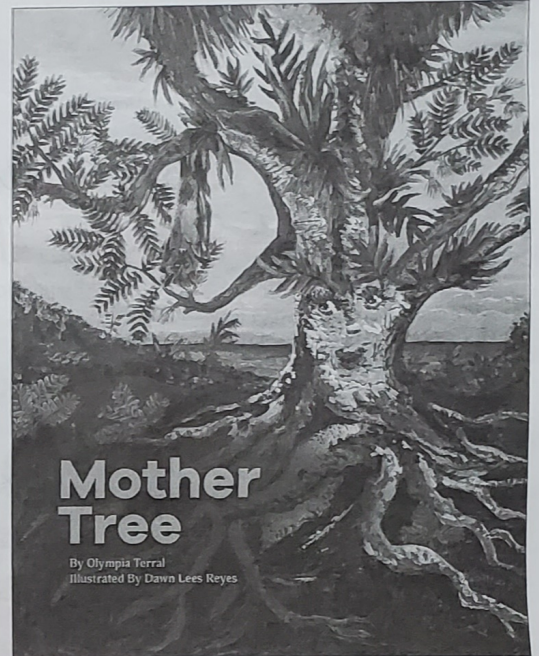


A TRIBUTE TO NATURE

By Johanna Salinas



During the quiet of the pandemic, many are rediscovering the tranquility of nature and the bliss of reading. And so, the release of Olympia Terral's book, *Mother Tree*, was met with great love and appreciation.

The book, illustrated by Dawn Reyes and published by UOG Press, follows a *háyon lágú*, or "tree of the north," who yearns to become a mother. Because of her experience with conservation, Terral felt compelled to write about how much life can depend upon one tree. "I wanted to talk about invasive species without saying the word 'invasive species,'" said the author. "It came to me to write about *Serianthes nelsonii* and tell the story from the point of view of a tree. I hope to get young people to get interested in protecting the natural world."

The UOG Press has hosted an online reading and Q&A for Terral and Reyes to engage with readers on island and across the ocean.

Mother Tree is Terral's tribute to her love of Guam's nature and culture. "I've lived on Guam for over 30 years now. I've learned so much from living on Guam and the Chamoru people and other island people," she said. "The Chamoru culture has been an important part of my life even, though I'm outside of the Chamoru culture as a settler. I wanted to acknowledge Chamoru culture through this book, because the environment is getting destroyed from outside forces that the people of Guam don't really have control over—like the military. That was one aspect I wanted to bring in. Another aspect is using Chamoru names, like *Atisa* means to multiply or make more. For me that was a great name for the tree, because she wants family and it's a beautiful name. In Chamoru culture, family is of the upmost importance."

While Terral was comfortable researching Chamoru names for her characters, she was hesitant to include *taotaomo'na*. "Originally, I didn't write about *taotaomo'na*, because I felt *mamalao* or insecure with my editor, Lola, at UOG Press. I originally had the tree talking to the elements, but she brought in the aspect of the tree talking to the *taotaomo'na*," Terral said. "Since I'm not Chamoru I told her I wasn't 100 percent comfortable talking about the culture in that way, so she really helped me with that. I wanted to talk about otherworldliness, like the tree talking to other elements, but didn't tie it into that cultural aspect because I felt shy not being Chamoru. With her help and guidance, we made it happen in the story."

Terral was happy to collaborate with Dawn Reyes, local artist and her dear friend. While a wildlife story can be lighthearted and fun, Reyes is aware that capturing Guam wildlife can be a sensitive topic and that if she did not portray it properly, it detract from the book's purpose. "The way I paint and the way I draw, I like to do a lot of research—especially when it deals with culture or science. I just happen to like a lot of colors, because it makes it exciting and fun to look at," said the artist. "We started cartoony kinds of ideas. Our minds were changed as things evolved with the story and with the purpose of the book. My artwork in that book reaches more people without the cartoons. The level of interest is for children of all ages, not just for

six-year olds. Even though it's a children's book per se, it's important to reach people of all ages—especially with an issue like that."

As a fan and friend of Reyes, Terral knew what she was expecting when working with the artist. "If you know Dawn's work, it's magical surreal all the time," said the author. "When Dawn was almost completed with the art and I saw them, I cried. I was stunned

by the beauty. When I had that reaction, I knew people were going to be moved by the drawings."

Reyes said she enjoyed bringing an author's words to life with her colors. "When you're doing a commission or anything generated by someone other than myself, there's a lot of back and forth," she said. "I needed to find out what she wanted so I could deliver. The story dictated what I put in my illustrations. It wasn't my intention to go into my studio and do something cultural important. It was the story that was culturally important and so the illustrations had to follow."

Although *Atisa* dreams of becoming a mother, her story ends without any seedlings. This lonely ending is comparable to Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever* or Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, where motherly love can almost feel thankless. However, Terral feels that *Mother Tree* ends with sense of optimism. "For me, I thought the ending was hopeful in that she still keeps trying," said the author. "One of the main focuses of the book was to speak the issue of invasive species on Guam—including humans as invasive species—especially how our environment is threatened by brown tree snakes. The damage that has done was exponential because we've lost so many birds."



Dawn Reyes



Olympia Terral