

# New Children's Book, Once Upon the Sun & Sea, Recovers Indigenous Philippine Cultural Heritage Through Storytelling

*11 lyrical retellings widen the storytelling space, connecting readers to Indigenous Philippine cultural heritage eroded by enduring impacts of colonialism.*

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*Jo Tiongson-Perez*

[Sun & Sea](#): Indigenous Stories and Folk Tales from the Philippines, the debut children's book from co-authors Jo Tiongson-Perez and Denise Orosa, is an introduction to pre-colonial and popular stories from the Philippines. Dedicated to the children of the Filipino diaspora, this collection of eleven lyrical retellings, lavishly illustrated by Tin Javier, seeks to widen the storytelling space and connect readers to Indigenous Philippine cultural heritage eroded by the enduring impacts of colonialism.

The 100-page children's book (ages 6-12) is arranged into two sections: seven Indigenous stories and three folk tales.

With consent from two community elders of the Tagbanua—one of the oldest Indigenous tribes in the Philippines—audio recordings of their oral storytelling of The Quail and the Shrimp and The Story of Buwal were translated into written English. The rest are adaptations of stories from diverse regions of the Philippines, transporting readers to a wondrous world alight with gods and goddesses, brave heroes, curious creatures, and magical powers. From the adventures of Aponibolinayen as she is carried by vines into the realm of the sun to Tulalang's epic battle with a giant eagle, each story is an invitation to dive into the rich storytelling traditions of the Philippines.

An AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) [Grant Awardee of the Sachs Program for Arts Innovation](#) at the University of Pennsylvania, the two-year project was sparked by a conversation between two mothers and writers, Tiongson-Perez and Orosa, as they observed their own young children actively seeking connections to their heritage while being raised in Philadelphia and the Cayman Islands. Outside of recounting personal histories, they realized that there was an opportunity to provide more access to Indigenous Filipino literature for children. To illustrate the

book, they commissioned Philippine-based collage and mixed media artist Tin Javier, who brought the stories to life using a pattern-rich punched paper technique inspired by Filipino culture.

“Growing up in Manila through the 1980s, I was raised on books filled with Western, Eurocentric narratives and representation,” says Tiongson-Perez. “When my daughter began asking for Filipino stories, I realized I only knew a handful compared to the dozens of Hans Christian Anderson and Brothers Grimm fairy tales I love. While researching stories from the Philippines, I was struck by historical and anthropological characterizations of our Indigenous culture as inferior, primitive, even savage. I wondered if a book like this could not only help widen the space to include Indigenous voices but also recover pride in our cultural heritage.”



The Heron and the Eagle is an excerpt from the Tulelangan, an epic song of the Ilianen Manobo people where Tulalang battles a giant eagle, turning him from foe to friend. One of the 11 tales from *Once Upon the Sun & Sea*. Illustrated by Tin Javier.

To inspire curiosity and a deeper exploration of Philippine culture, the book also includes a visual glossary with definitions of regional and colloquial vocabulary, offering short, digestible facts about their meaning or significance.

Orosa notes, “The Indigenous stories of the Philippines are as rich and wondrous as any Western counterpart, and yet as an avid reader and teacher who can recount obscure Greek myths on demand, I couldn’t tell a single Filipino story by heart to my own child. These wonderful stories from the Philippines deserve to be cherished and embedded in young imaginations, and this book was a way for us to do that. Simply choosing to tell Indigenous Filipino stories at bedtime can spark curiosity, conversations, and pride. This keeps the connection to our culture vibrant and alive.”

[Once Upon the Sun & Sea is available for purchase](#) on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Book Baby, and other online retailers worldwide. More information about the project can be found [here](#). Digital excerpts from the book may be requested by contacting [jotp@upenn.edu](mailto:jotp@upenn.edu).

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Denise Orosa was born and raised in Manila, but left the Philippines in 2001. An award-winning arts and elementary educator, writer, and artist based in Canada, she has been working with and writing for children and families for over 20 years.

Jo Tionson-Perez is a Filipina-American, Philadelphia based writer investigating how stories, language, and media shape worldviews and identities. . At the world-renowned Barnes Foundation and Penn Museum, where she is currently Chief Marketing and Communications Officer, she led ADDY and AAM MUSE award-winning multimedia campaigns, making art, anthropology, and archaeology accessible to all.

Jo Tionson-Perez

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