

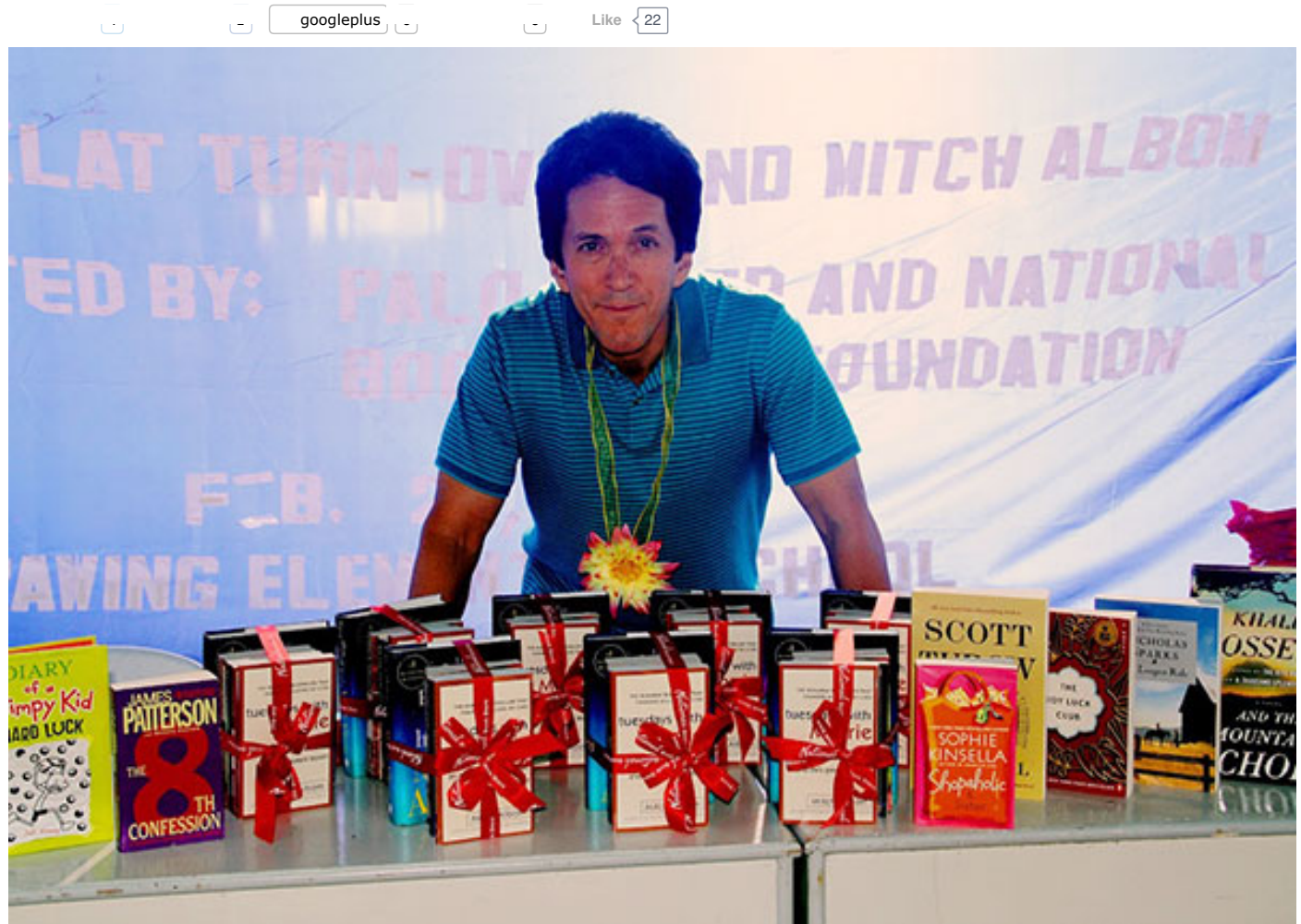


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A nation rebuilt by books

By John A. Magsaysay (The Philippine Star) | Updated June 28, 2015 - 12:00am



"Today, we have a beautiful library with a magnificent design that can withstand the storm. It's one of 10 we're opening, and I can't tell you how much it warms my heart," says author and A Hole In The Roof Foundation president Mitch Albom, commemorating the opening of the first Donated Reading for Youth (DRY) Library. Albom is shown above during his first visit in Palo, Leyte last year.

All endings are also beginnings. We just don't know it at the time. — Mitch Albom, The Five People You Meet in Heaven

MANILA, Philippines - When talking about truth being stranger than fiction, nothing in recent history brought more horror and sadness than the onslaught of typhoon Yolanda. The Category 5 tropical cyclone carried 315-kilometer-per-hour winds, leaving over 6,000 deaths in its wake and some 11 million people displaced. Yet however destructive a force of nature it was, it also brought in its aftermath — a measure of hope.

Barely three years after Yolanda, the townships of Leyte are entering a new chapter, as the province worst hit by the century's strongest typhoon have rebuilt their communities somewhere close to normal. With the exception of memorial markers in what were once mundane streets, or full-colored landmarks that cut through the bleak, denuded landscape — gentle reminders of the heroics of humanitarian aid workers — the newer structures show that life in this part of the country will never be the same again. They now know that it's not enough to rebuild; they will have to build better, because the future depends on it.

"I have never been more impressed with the character or the strength of a people that I've met around the world than I was when I visited Tacloban," shares bestselling inspirational author Mitch Albom on a video message addressing the opening of his A Hole In The Roof Foundation's first philanthropic project on Philippine soil.

"What I saw there just devastated me, and yet inspired me. The love of learning that went on in the tattered areas right after the terrible Yolanda storm was just something to see. I remembered feeling that I needed to do something about it. I asked some of the people I was there with, 'What can we do?' and 'Where are the libraries?' They said they were destroyed along with all the schools," Albom recalls of his February 2014 trip.

While building houses and schools may seem the most urgent step in aiding disaster-battered communities, Albom and his partners —National Book Store Foundation and Habitat for Humanity Philippines — opted instead to build 10 libraries in key heavily-damaged areas in the region. Aside from his affinity for books, there was also an underlying wisdom in Albom's words: how what we find in bound pages can effectively restore lives in ways no other brick and mortar edifices can.

After the First World War, homecoming British troops ailing from battle trauma and war shock often found solace in books from authors such as Jane Austen. The prescription is called bibliotherapy, based on the idea that getting lost in chapters of fiction can effectively lighten the burdens of one's reality by offering a soothing, albeit temporary, escape.

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"I got the idea that maybe I should call some of my friends in the States who are writers and maybe get some books donated, and maybe we could raise some money, and maybe we could build some libraries. The many 'maybes' of life that actually turn into realities are really what make life worth living. And this is one of those cases," Albom proudly announced, as the doors of the first Donated Reading for Youth (DRY) library were formally opened at Pawing Elementary School in Palo, Leyte.

The festivities were slightly dampened by a slight drizzle that is uncommon for this side of the country, but the crowd was heartened by the stormproof building: the unusual double dome-shaped concrete structure that figures prominently amid a cluster of foundation-funded buildings lining the school of 700 young students.



A rainbow of hope: The children's section of the new DRY Library in Pawing Elementary School, with ample ventilation, natural light and a rich resource of colorful, kid-friendly books serves as a glimpse of the bright future ahead for some of its 700 students.

"With this project, we thought of introducing the dome as the strongest structure to withstand any calamities. The problem with its shape is social acceptance in terms of housing. So our strategy was to start with community facilities such as a library, so people can begin to appreciate the value of a structure like this. It's not only what you see inside that is educational, but the structure itself is also educational. We are in exciting times; we just have to think differently," explains Habitat for Humanity Philippines Foundation, Inc.'s managing director Charlie Ayco, the non-government-organization tasked with building the DRY Libraries.

Inside, the colorful library stores hundreds upon hundreds of books from fellow international bestsellers such as J.K. Rowling, John Grisham, Stephen King, Michael Chabon, James Patterson and Amy Tan — all generously donated, alongside local favorites such as a collection of Adarna paperbacks lining the multi-hued shelves.

"It is a unique library in that there's a very special selection of books for children and for those who just love to read. We hope that with this, we can have more kids discover the love of reading and learning on their own. Whatever they learn in school is great, but the world of literature opens their minds to more possibilities," shares Alexandra Ramos Padilla, president of the National Book Store Foundation, Inc.

With the neighboring city of Ormoc, and the provinces of Eastern Samar and Iloilo all slated to have their own versions of the DRY Library by 2016, other struggling schools affected by the typhoon are set to experience the life-changing effects of literature soon.

"It's really one community at a time. Hopefully, the library will be put to good use. If the books will be worn out and well read, then our job will have been

accomplished. We have to do whatever we can to create that new generation of readers, to make sure that the next generation will keep on reading," adds Padilla, who is encouraged that young people are taking up books more these days, based on their growing sales and the proliferation of local authors.

"I hope that this is the start of much more reading for your wonderful children and book-loving citizens," Albom said with a smile, adding that the library in Palo will have the first delivery of his new book, *The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto*, when it comes out this November.

Disasters may come and leave us damaged, but the ability to dream is enough to make us whole again. Such is the power that books have to rebuild nations. By bringing us information and inspiration, books become building blocks that help us withstand any uncertain futures.

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