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June 11, 2010

Manila Vice

By **RAYMOND BONNER**

ILUSTRADO

By Miguel Syjuco

306 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$26

The Philippines, it might be said, is a country in search of an identity. Its colonial Spanish rulers brought with them the [Roman Catholic Church](#), making the archipelago the largest Christian state in Asia. Adherence to church doctrine has given the country one of the world's higher birth rates, but the church's moral teachings haven't made much of an impact. Having a mistress is de rigueur for political figures. Young prostitutes ply their trade in Manila's strip clubs, then go to Mass on Sunday. After the Spanish departed, the Americans left their mark. "We will become American," says Cristo, one of the characters in Miguel Syjuco's ambitious new novel about the Philippines. "Our children will learn to speak American. When they are ready, we will send them to America to be educated."

"Ilustrado" is filled with complexities, layering fiction with fiction — and nonfiction. Cristo is a character in a novel within the novel by a writer named Crispin Salvador, and he may be Salvador's grandfather's alter ego. In turn, Salvador, the principal figure in "Ilustrado," may be its 33-year-old author's alter ego. In a daring literary performance, Syjuco weaves the invented with the factual, putting himself directly into his own fiction — at times under his own name and elsewhere as "our protagonist." He also creates essays, poems and novels written by Crispin Salvador, as well as Salvador's autobiography, "Autoplagiarist."

A noted writer, Salvador fled the Philippines in 1972 on the eve of Marcos's declaration of martial law. At the outset of "Ilustrado," we learn that Salvador was in exile, serving as a professor at [Columbia University](#), when he was found floating in the Hudson River in February 2002. His researcher and acolyte, Miguel Syjuco, is determined to discover the cause of Salvador's

death — suicide or murder? — and find the manuscript of a book Salvador had been working on for 20 years, “The Bridges Ablaze,” in which he intended to expose, as he put it, “the generations-long ties of the Filipino elite to cronyism, illegal logging, gambling, kidnapping, corruption, along with their related component sins.” In his fictional role, Miguel Syjuco (who in real life and in the novel is a Filipino expatriate living in North America) undertakes to write a biography of Salvador. In keeping with its subject’s professional and personal preoccupations, it will be “an indictment of my country, of time, of our forgetful, self-centered humanity.”

There is much to expose, to indict. The Philippines is a country in which a man of morals can’t be president, in which a politician who hasn’t been linked to any wrongdoing isn’t assumed to be honest, but merely better at hiding his corruption. (Or so says Salvador in a fictional interview with *The Paris Review*.) This is a country in which the rich live in mansions behind high walls in gated communities, their manicured lawns tended by impoverished laborers. The poor are reduced to stealing manhole covers to sell for scrap, and in the torrential rains that routinely flood Manila’s pathetically maintained streets, a man can easily be sucked into a drain and drowned. In the novel and in reality, the police routinely steal from street urchins.

Like the novel’s author, Crispin Salvador was born into a wealthy family. The Salvadors’ fortune came from sugar cane and political graft. When Salvador’s mother was dying of cancer, his father made a trip to the Vatican and donated a fortune to the church. “Just your typical rich family,” Salvador’s sister sighs, while a maid in a mint-green uniform fans her, shifting from one hand to the other when she gets tired. Salvador resented his father, saying he had no scruples. “You can’t govern well if you have scruples,” Salvador’s sister replies. She, in turn, is appalled that Filipinos who can’t write their own names are allowed to vote.

These are not caricatures, and this is not satire. Filipino readers will recognize figures in Syjuco’s cast, even though some of them are composites. The same handful of wealthy families rule the country today, much as they did 30, 40, 50 years ago, and they don’t do much to hide their contempt for the poor.

“Ilustrado” is being presented as a tracing of 150 years of Philippine history, but it’s considerably more than that. Just as this country is searching for its identity, its author seems to be searching for his own. What does it mean to live in exile? What does it mean to be a writer? The fictional Syjuco tells Salvador that he wants to change the world through his writing. “Changing the world is good work if you can get it,” his master replies. “But isn’t having a child a gesture of optimism in the world?”

“Ilustrado” received the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2008. Spiced with surprises and leavened with uproariously funny moments, it is punctuated with serious philosophical musings. Searching for the cause of Crispin Salvador’s death, and for his missing manuscript, Syjuco comes across an old woman, formerly a photographer, who knew Salvador in her youth. When she last saw him, she reports, he too had been searching. “Angry men,” she reflects, “have little to live for when their rage becomes ineffective.” The reader senses that this possibility worries the author of “Ilustrado” as well.

Raymond Bonner, a former Times foreign correspondent in Southeast Asia, is the author of “Waltzing With a Dictator: The Marcoses and the Making of American Policy.”