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All the Conspirators by **Carlos Bulosan**

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Book Reviews

CARLOS BULOSAN

All the Conspirators

Introduction by Caroline S. Hau and Benedict Anderson
Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005. 161 pages.

All the Conspirators begs to be made into film noir. It has a beautiful but treacherous moll; a somewhat naïve but trustworthy hero; a mysterious ring; a missing money belt; and various characters who drift in and out of the shadows. With its punchy sentences and tough-guy talk, the book is more Ellery Queen than Raymond Chandler. Carlos Bulosan situates the action of his novel—and it is *his* novel, despite initial doubts as to its authorship, as Caroline S. Hau and Benedict Anderson make clear in their lucid introduction—in a Manila devastated by the Second World War. Returning to the city of his youth, Gar Stanley has promised Candy he'll find Clem, her missing husband and childhood friend to both, who fought the Japanese as part of the underground even as Gar was marching against the Germans in Europe. All three are island-raised Americans, beneficiaries of empire.

Gar's search gets him into trouble with a cabal of war profiteers and collaborators determined to find and silence Clem, who holds damning information on how they made their fortunes. And so the hunt is on, from bordellos and brassy nightclubs to Baguio City and Igorot villages. Appropriately, the finale is a shoot-out on the waterfront, resulting in a neat wrap-up, though Bulosan adds a minor twist at the end.

Part of Bulosan's narrative strength lies in his remarkable ability to set a scene quickly, so that the transition from setting to setting, from character

to character, is smooth, making for a seamless, entertaining read. Inevitably, however, nuance is sacrificed as, for instance, in the clichéd portrayal of mountain tribes as strong, silent types—one of them, Damyan, is literally a mute. Gar seems to have a “Noble-Savage affinity” with the highlanders, who, as Hau and Anderson note, “are likened to American Indians” (xvii).

War, of course, is the perfect arena where capitalism without a conscience can rear its predatory head—the exact target Bulosan hoists up in *America Is in the Heart*, his classic, Marxist depiction of race and class exploitation. But *Conspirators* is a decidedly minor work; Gar lurches from adventure to adventure, with minimal insight. It isn’t that he is dim. It’s that he hasn’t suffered enough *psychically*, and yet in Gar’s feelings about injustice are echoes of Allos, *America*’s protagonist. After Montalvo, the head of a war-profiteering ring, offers him a lucrative deal, Gar reflects: “Then I remembered the war and I thought of the thousands of little people that had suffered hunger and privation while a few . . . grew rich and fat in the midst of that suffering. Every country had its Quislings, every nation its collaborators. . . . And I thought, Hell! I belong with other people and our war isn’t over yet” (75). Familiar with the ravages of unfettered capital on global communities, we glimpse the implied truth, that this kind of war never ends, and the poor continue to lose—the plight *America* so movingly limns through its grim, unsentimental portraits of the lives lived by Filipino, mostly male, immigrants in the U.S. just before Pearl Harbor.

Like *America*, *Conspirators* traces one man’s journey, this time in exactly the opposite direction—from the center to the periphery. Gar couldn’t be more different from Allos: benign symbol of colonial privilege and power, he dispenses money easily and has access to the upper reaches of Manila society. He can be an instrument of change, unlike Allos, who is, along with his *kababayan*, mired in poverty and powerlessness, consigned to the margins and perpetually scrambling just to stay in place.

Bulosan, who emigrated to the United States in 1931, never returned to the country of his birth. This might bother those who would view the novel as realistic, and fault it for that very reason. That would be a mistake. The Manila here is more imagined than remembered, with a nightmarish aura imparted to it by a corrupted society, wrecked as much by greed as by bombs. *All the Conspirators* accurately pictures, if not the documentary details of a city in ruins, the venality of war, highlighting the issues of collaboration that dogged socially prominent individuals. Given that, in real life, no politically powerful

Filipino was tried for collaboration, the government's pursuit of the bad guys in the novel is truly ironic, with "the issue of collaboration," according to Hau and Anderson, implicating "politicians like Manuel Roxas, who went on to become the first elected president of the postwar Philippines" (xviii).

The nonreturn of the native thus becomes irrelevant. Bulosan was burdened with the exile's peculiar fever: the inability or lack of desire to forsake one's origins and be immersed completely in another country. In a sense, he never left the islands. Who could blame him? Racism in the United States served as counterweight to the mythical welcome mat laid out for the stranger. As a result, memory metamorphosed into a sanctuary, one shaped by an often wistful imagination. If Allos is Bulosan's bittersweet autobiographical mask, Gar is the white one he wishes he could claim, not out of any feelings of racial inferiority but for the sense of belonging and authority it would have conferred.

This edition contains various appendices, including a letter to Josephine Patrick—Bulosan's companion—and a facsimile of some manuscript pages of *The Cry and the Dedication*, which, although I haven't read it, sounds like a companion work to *Conspirators*. And then there's the short story "The Filipino Houseboy." In its understated elegance the tale quietly explores the power relationship in the seemingly perfect domicile of a young white writer in Hollywood. Brief, indeed, but brief as a waning though glorious fall afternoon.

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AUGUSTO FAUNI ESPIRITU

Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. 312 pages.

Given the exodus of many Filipino professionals to the United States and elsewhere, *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals* by Augusto Fauni Espiritu is a timely publication.

The book discusses the ways by which Carlos P. Romulo, Carlos Bulosan, Jose Garcia Villa, N. V. M. Gonzalez, and Bienvenido Santos "imagined the Philippines, Asia, and the rest of the world from their exile in America"