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Fil-Am: The Filipino American Experience, by Yuson

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the question "What do you do?" with "I study how things feel in my mouth." The narrator in "The Eclipse" describes Quiapo Church as "cavernous with prayers and human pain," with numerous flowers that "fill the air with a perfume too intoxicating to breathe." And in "The Birth" Tanya realizes "what perversity it was to long for a man whose presence she hated."

Some dents and blemishes can be found in *A Normal Life*, but they do not take away much from the collection's sheen and impact. For instance, in "Now That I am Dead," the scene where a faith healer who tries to save Carlitos's life through long distance meditation is treated lightly, like a minor moment buried beneath Lisa's distress. The same faith healer, though, appears later in the pivotal party scene to dispense key lines and pieces of advice to Lisa: an appearance which comes off as somewhat contrived.

Also, in "The Eclipse" the reader is a little unprepared for Arturo's attempts at infidelity. Arturo claims to need Teresa to "bring a center of order to his inner world," but a couple of pages later, he wants "another woman's breasts against his skin:" he wants to betray his wife. This turn of events, however eye-opening, is shaky, his motives a little muddled, not strong enough for the reader to sympathize with his marital confusion.

On the whole, Arcache Melvin's collection reveals an intimate portrait of the heartscapes of characters in both inner and outer turmoil. With darkly delectable language, Arcache Melvin tells us stories of characters who are at "the edge of rupture," whose thoughts are "like drunken monkeys, tumbling over each other." However, when their moment of clarity arrives, the drunkenness is washed away with the force of tidal waves clearing out the soul's shoreline: utterly destructive and yet cleansing.

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Fil-Am: The Filipino American Experience. Alfred Yuson, Executive Editor; Eric Gamalinda, Associate Editor. Pasig City: Publico, Inc., 1999. 272 pages.

Aside from throwing up visions of tall basketball players, the word conjures up a virtual *balikbayan* box chockfull of images and thoughts: *pensionados*, veterans, green cards, California, and so much more. It is a loaded word, and one which this groundbreaking book, *Fil-Am: The Filipino American Experience*, seeks to unload. Led by two award-winning editors—Manila-based Alfred Yuson and US-based Eric Gamalinda—the writers in *Fil-Am* examine the mosaic of lives and ideas that have sprung from the struggle and stories of Filipinos living in the United States.

*Originally published in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 21 January 2000.

This is a book, Yuson says, made "in celebration of the stirring, continuing phenomenon that is the Filipino-American experience." Despite being just 272 pages, these are large pages full of text, all of it only the tip of the Mt. Apo of experiences that fit within the context of "Fil-Am." Yuson easily admits that this is the book's weakness, that it could not possibly contain all the definitive stories. Yet that is tied to the book's nature as, instead, it is an intriguing, enlightening slice of the Fil-American pie. As Gamalinda says, "for close to a hundred years, theirs has been a history of invisibility. But now the presence of Filipino Americans in the United States is beginning to be felt."

And what a presence this book presents with its symphony of voices from all over. Those who suffered and those who conquered. Those who lived quiet lives and those who shone. Those who remembered and those who are still discovering. Add to that a list of writers including Wilfrido Nollado, F. Sionil Jose, Adrian Cristobal, Randy David, Luisa Igloria, Jessica Hagedorn, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, Fidel Ramos, Blas Ople, Doreen Fernandez, Chay Florentino-Hofileña, Luis Francia, Miguel Syjuco, Karla Delgado-Yulo, Eileen Tabios, Juaniyo Arcellana, R. Zamora Linmark, Bino Realuyo, Nick Carbo, Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Llita Logarta, Beth Day Romulo, and so many others sharing their insights.

In many ways, *Fil-Am* disseminates itself through separate experiences: shopping, writing, even packing a balikbayan box. It stretches out and tries to reclaim its history through the stories of veterans and retirees. It looks forward through the eyes of Filipinos who grew up in the States. It is a way of piecing together a story of identity that has always nagged but is being answered only now.

Gamalinda posits that when he says that "the need for identity is more urgent, more necessary in America. In a land where culture homogenizes all its citizens, where everyone is expected to look the same, eat the same food, go to the same strip mall, the question "Who Am I?" becomes a burning existential question whose answer determines one's education, career, relationships, desires and memory. . . . But it is searching itself that leads to discovery, and by defining themselves, could it be possible that the Filipino American will eventually define the Filipino?"

By way of definition, *Fil-Am* journeys to the many lives that make up the fabric of Fil-Am life. And the pieces themselves are so diverse, so dizzying in their number that it may well overwhelm the unsuspecting reader. Yet the essays are compelling as they are different.

Benjamin Pimentel's portrait of aging *beterano* Ciriaco Punla brings to fore the slow demise of their adventures with Uncle Sam. Luisa Igloria's profile of poet Carlos Angeles is poetic and compelling, as is the poet's (the first Palanca winner) own life. And this profile is only one of a bountiful harvest of literature-related articles in *Fil-Am*. But there is much more still.

Franklin Cimat's frightening encounter with Uzi-wielding *Pinoy* gangsters in Los Angeles serves as grim counterpoint to M. Evelina Galang's take on Fil-

Am teenagers sashaying on stage. There are actors (Paolo Montalban), musicians (Cecile Licad), artists (Salvador Arellano), correspondents (Ronnie Alejandro), and athletes just as there are businessmen and businesswomen in the book. There are stories of family ties, trips, and even insightful stories about balikbayan boxes themselves. There are personal remembrances just as there are speeches of all sorts. The icons are discussed, like Jose Garcia Villa, and issues brought up.

A particularly bittersweet element is the piece by the late great National Artist NVM Gonzalez, a speech in which he discusses language and identity. The erudite piece begins with the pronouncement that "we Filipinos have indeed journeyed to distances undreamed of." In an excerpt calling for proper perspective and reflection regarding identity and culture, Gonzalez participates in a discussion that outlived his own significant life.

The welter of articles is accompanied by a fusillade of amazing photographs, all of which tell their own story, whether they are accompanied by an article or not. Look deep into the eyes of a *beterano* in his twilight years or explore the smiles of a Pinoy family on a sightseeing trip. These photographs are part of the Fil-Am story.

Perhaps the only truly difficult thing about "Fil-Am" has to do with its having been designed like an ungainly yearbook, with the ads nudging the articles within the book's pages, making it harder for the reader to find them or refer back to others.

Yet that size is precisely the point as it may not be enough to contain this story. The sheer size of this undertaking indicates the hidden history of the Fil-Am, a secret narrative that has always been there but is being written about actively just now. In fact, Yuson notes that a sequel is in the works, that *Fil-Am* may just become an annual. Thus, the book is but a step into unraveling that mirror of a puzzle for a people.

With its breathtaking breadth and dizzying diversity, the book comes as a celebration not only of the Fil-Am experience, but of the Filipino one as well. For as Yuson himself concludes: "What makes us essentially Filipino, Filipino American, Filipino Canadian, or whatever else, certainly enhances our eventual sense of distinction and unity as a wonderful, adventurous and determined people."

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The Bikol Blend: The Bikolanos and their History. By Norman G. Owen.
Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1999. xiv + 308 pages.

The brief chapter that closes the book, *Bikolanos and Their History* perhaps best explains the book itself. The preceding chapters contain conclusions about