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Tiger Orchids on Mount Mayon. By Paulino Lim. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1990.

Sparrows Don't Sing in the Philippines. By Paulino Lim. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1994.

Requiem for a Rebel Priest. By Paulino Lim. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1996.

Paulino Lim Jr. has just completed the third volume of his political trilogy on the Philippines from the sixties to the mid-nineties. Lim is a professor of English at California State University, Long Beach. His trilogy is a *balikbayan* story—clearly the view of a Filipino who has lived abroad for some time. In three different versions in this political trilogy, balikbayans return to the Philippines, only to discover the gap between sentimental memories, romanticized by distance and time, and the harsh realities of the contemporary Philippines. Is the Philippines a Garden of Eden or a volcano about to erupt? Is it what it used to be as I remember it, or is it a different world that makes me weep?

Tiger Orchids on Mount Mayon

Lim's first volume of the trilogy is entitled *Tiger Orchids on Mount Mayon*. Isagani Cruz wrote that *Tiger Orchids* is "a marvelous display of thrilling story telling, political commentary and acute (and accurate) observations" about the Philippines. The novel records the return of a critical balikbayan to the land of his dreams and memories. The three plots of *Tiger Orchids* mirror the three social institutions in the Philippines—marriage and the family, politics and government, and the Church—and reflect the ambivalence and ambiguity of each in the Philippines. The three parts record the deterioration of marriage into concubinage, civil government into graft and cor-

ruption, and the Church into superstition. The plots are also a scaffold on which Lim erects a structure of social and political criticism of his homeland as viewed by a balikbayan—which Lim certainly is!

Although his characters give voice to criticisms, it is obvious that Lim himself is the real critic and commentator of the Philippines in the trilogy he has composed. He comments sharply on graft and corruption in the government, the unequal distribution of wealth, the presence of the military on the street corners and sandbags around the Municipal Building as symbols of government repression. He uses Philippine traffic (even in the early years of Lim's trilogy) as a symbol of political and/or cultural ethos. "Intimidation, not right of way," he says, "is the traffic rule in this part of the world." Lim's criticism, probably because of his own biographical background, is aimed at the Church as well as the government and politics. His characters talk of the Church's position on birth control, priestly celibacy, priests involved in politics, liberation theology and folk attitudes towards the sacraments and ritual folklore processions, as an answer to social reality, divorce and concubinage. (Cf. the review of *Tiger Orchids* in *Philippine Studies* 39 [1991]: 402-4.) *Tiger Orchids on Mount Mayon* like the other two volumes of the trilogy, is a novel but it is also a profound and imaginative social criticism of the Philippines. Lim has done a masterly job of using fiction as a literary criticism of social, political and religious situations in the country.

Sparrows Don't Sing in the Philippines

The second volume of Lim's trilogy, *Sparrows Don't Sing in the Philippines* is an even more critical commentary of Philippine politics. *Sparrows* is a local word for assassins. Lim quotes William Chapman: "Sparrows are experts in the quick kill. The term sparrow denotes their ability to dart quickly towards a victim, kill him and flee before authorities arrive." Lim's implicit comment in the title of his second volume is rather critical and symbolic of his critical approach to contemporary Philippine culture: "Sparrows don't sing in the Philippines. They murder instead!" Cirilo Bautista notes that the second volume of the Lim trilogy is a "worthy contribution to the growing body of fiction in the Philippines that attempts to re-examine our past history in the light of our changing consciousness of the true meaning of our ideals and struggles as a nation." Isagani Cruz also comments that "Lim is a master in recreating a milieu, and he returns those of us who lived through The First Quarter Storm to that great epiphany, when it was clear who the villains were, but not so clear who the heroes were. As expected, Lim gives us a spellbinding story in this second volume of the trilogy that is hard to put down." Filipinos and foreigners, whether balikbayan or not, will find stimulating insights in Lim's stories of contemporary Philippines.

In *Sparrows Don't Sing in the Philippines*, an American balikbayan returns to the Philippines. Jeffrey Engram, an American neurosurgeon, who studied

at the University of Santo Tomas, returns to Manila to attend a class reunion at his university. He discovers that his college classmate, Mark Ledesma, has been shot in the head by communist assassins, known as "sparrows." Doctor Engram volunteers to assist at his friend's operation. Lim then uses the neurosurgery of Mark as a frame for the biography and narrative that tells of Mark's childhood, his student days at Santo Tomas, the University of the Philippines, and the First Quarter Storm.

The narrative framework of the life of Mark Ledesma also provides a framework for Lim's criticisms and comments on Philippine culture. Engram's arrival at the Manila International Airport is a vivid picture of foreign arrivals in the Philippines. His room in the deluxe hotel lists a telephone number for "Massage" as 7399, which Engram reads as SEXY on the alphabetical phone dial. Part One of the novel is entitled "The Other House" and is both a biographical and social commentary on Mark Ledesma's childhood in Bicol. Part two, entitled "Street of Concubines," summarizes Mark's student days at Santo Tomas. Mark says:

We Filipinos are a grateful people. We are grateful to Spain for making a nation out of the 7,000 islands that make up the Philippine archipelago. We thank Spain for our religion which comforts us in our sorrow and gives us hope in our times of despair. We thank America for teaching us democracy. This means our rulers are elected by the people and removed by the people. We thank the United States for teaching us English and the language of Shakespeare, Walt Whitman and Hemingway, and for liberating us from Spain in 1900 and from Japan in 1945. Lately, however, we have been questioning this gratitude. Does America really deserve our praise? (p. 51)

"First Quarter Storm" and "A Bullet at the Cistern" are two sections that record Mark's activist days at Santo Tomas and U.P.

Our president acknowledges that higher education has fallen into disarray and asks the university to be involved in the life of our communities. Let me quote him: "I would like to see the realities of our national society become the preferred subjects of our scholarship. Let the political issues of our society serve as the raw material of our political scientists, national integration the preoccupation of our sociologists, economic development the inspiration of our economists, our national identity the common concern of our artists, writers, historians, and everyone." (p. 80)

These strands of stories are autobiographical but also politically critical of the Philippines.

Requiem for a Rebel Priest

Lim's third volume, *Requiem for a Rebel Priest*, relates the return of another balikbayan to the Philippines. Ex-Jesuit and ex-priest Gene Redentor, now married and living in California, returns to Ateneo de Naga, his old school in the Philippines. Redentor was sent to the University of San Francisco by his Jesuit superiors in the late sixties. He studied at the Ateneo de Naga and later at Woodstock College in the United States before being ordained at the age of 33.

"Introit," part one of "Requiem," is an account of the Jesuit and priestly background of Redentor. He later leaves priesthood and marries Helen, with whom he has two children. The novel begins with Redentor's return to Naga to share his teaching skills with his former school faculty. He takes with him Berlioz, the family dog, which Lim uses as a literary tool for the monologues and reflections of Redentor. In a literary sense, Berlioz seems to mirror Redentor's views on the Philippines. For example, he says "Berlioz cracks me up! In less than a week, he already prefers *adobo* and rice to canned dog food" (p. 123). The dog is also an object for the soliloquies of Mark:

I used to preach, Berlioz, that breaking the moral law was like incurring a debt. To a Filipino, a debt means more than the sum of money owed. It includes loss of face for the demeaning act of borrowing, as well as gratitude for the lender's goodwill. It isn't just a debt of a thing. It becomes a debt of being, an *utang na loob*. You can repay the money owed, but you do not completely recover loss of face, nor free yourself of the gratitude that you feel, or in the eyes of Filipinos ought to feel, even though you paid interest. One of the most insulting epithets you can throw at a Filipino is *Walanghiya ka!* It insults him as ingrate and shameless, with no regard at all for *utang na loob*. (p. 134)

Berlioz, I'm ready to go back to California. Let me first help Danny with the garlic harvest, and be useful for a change. Then we'll take the trip to Camalig and visit the old high school. (p. 135)

I'm glad you're here, Berlioz, but I must leave you behind. You won't hate me the way Balaguer does. He despises me. In his eyes I am worse than a crony, the educated man who prostitutes his talents to serve a tyrant, and more pitiful than the teacher who goes abroad. It is uncanny, Berlioz, to be despised and pitied, all because I left the priesthood. Fr. Pelagio, who puts sacramental duty above promise, has given me this chance. It's a small gesture. But Balaguer will thank me, or at least hate me less. (p. 216)

In the background of *Requiem of a Rebel Priest*, Corazon Aquino is still the president of the Philippines. Segments of a restless military have attempted to

topple her regime and she has declared war against the communists. This novel is also set against the tumultuous events of Seventies and Eighties, including the student riots, the declaration of martial law and the breakdown of negotiations between the Aquino government and the Communists.

Redentor visits the school in the shadow of Mount Mayon where he used to conduct retreats for students. There he meets the rebel priest, Gus Balaguer, and Father Pelagio who is the genial parish priest in *Tiger Orchids on Mount Mayon*. Some of the most interesting passages in the volume are the discussions of the political and social conditions of the Philippines by the various priests who have come together once again in Bicol. This novel also provides an interesting framework for Lim's comments on and criticisms of Philippine society. The view through the eyes of priests and ex-priests is stimulating combination of political and cultural comments. There are Redentor's intellectual Jesuit reflections, the Marxist and social comments of the rebel priest, Balaguer, and the more spiritual and theological reflections of the faithful fathers, Marquez and Pelagio.

For example, Fr. Pelagio prays:

Dear God, I'm not trying to excuse my weakness, but your rebel priest did catch me in a weak moment. How I pity him! He's suffering! I sense he wants to end suffering with a martyr's death. Forgive me, with my word the deed is done. I've compromised my ministry, intending to secure trust for a deception with my parish priest's credentials. Do I have the courage to run to the hills? I don't think I can even fire a gun, so afraid am I to die the messy death of being torn by a bullet. I would like to beg for your protection, Dear Lord, but it doesn't seem right to pray for safety while I pick up the smuggled weapons for the revolution. So Please forgive me...I hear the sacristan unbolting the doors of the church for the six o'clock mass! (p. 202)

Ka Gaby, Nom de Guerre

In the *Rebel Priest*, ex-Jesuit Gene Redentor meets Ka Gaby, a rebel nun who leads a raid on the town's municipal building. Paulino Lim says he is now at work on another novel which he calls a coda to the trilogy on Philippine politics and culture. The fourth novel, Lim says, will be called "Ka Gaby, Nom de Guerre." We can look forward to another Balikbayan view of the Philippines—that of a rebel nun, written in Lim's entrancing language that contains intriguing fiction, and sharp criticism from the eyes of a balikbayan.