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**Gonzalez's Season of Grace:
A Season of Grace
by N. V. M. Gonzalez**

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Book Reviews

GONZALEZ'S SEASON OF GRACE

A SEASON OF GRACE. By N. V. M. Gonzalez. Manila. The Benipayo Press. 1956. Pp. 210.

THIS is a remarkable book—somewhat tiresome on first reading, fascinating on second, and on third reading (if one has the good sense to attempt a third) enchanting. The third reading should of course be done by parts, dipping into the book now and then, and skipping whole sections that do not merit a third reading. And thereby hangs a tale: for N. V. M. Gonzalez is a splendid writer of parts; he is less successful in dealing with wholes.

On first reading, the book may be tiresome if one approaches it with the wrong preconceptions. One reads novels generally for the sake of the story, but it would be a mistake to look for a story in this novel. There is indeed a story, but it is tenuous, uninteresting, humdrum. It is not the story which is worth reading but the incidents that make up the story and what is generally called almost "total recall."

The story, ostensibly, is that of a man (Doro) and his wife (Sabel) and of how they eke out a hand-to-mouth existence among the kaingin of "Sipolog" (i.e. Mindoro); of how their first baby is born and how their second; of how they get into debt with Epe Ruda the firewood concessioner from "Batangan" (i.e. Batangas); and of how, having gotten nowhere in their previous attempts, they decide to try again in a new kaingin. That is the story at first sight.

That, however, is only the string upon which the beads are strung, and the beads are remarkable. The beads are the real

story. This is a story of the land: of the river and the mangrove forest by the river and the coming in of the tide; of the trail through the tall grass and the carabao and the sled; of the tall trees in the forest hiding the sky, and how the sky becomes bigger and bigger as tree after tree falls in the kaingin; of how the rice ripens on the stalk and how the rats swarm upon the riceland and eat up the ripening grain; of how the sheaves are cut and how the harvest is divided and how one gets into debt and how the debt is doubled and redoubled and how the more one tries to pay off the debt the deeper one sinks in indebtedness. This is a story of how babies are born and how mothers take their first bath in the river after childbirth; of how old men die and how those who are living celebrate with feasting and merriment the old people's passing. This is a story of greed and of kindness, of abject poverty and spendthrift extravagance, of mutual fidelity and violent quarrels, of meagre meals and the hunger for new rice and the hunger for fresh fish. This is a beautiful story. It is a truly Filipino story, simply and beautifully told. That is why it is fascinating on second reading and enchanting on third. It is more than enchanting: it is moving.

When this book first appeared, the publishers gave me the courtesy of a complimentary copy and the Writers' Club of the University of the Philippines gave me the honor of an invitation to participate in a symposium on the merits of the work. There were some excellent papers read at that symposium; for instance a sensitive analysis by Mrs. Dolores Feria who is an excellent critic. I was particularly impressed by the paper read by my friend, Dr. Donn V. Hart, the cultural anthropologist, whom I had known at New Haven when we were at school together. His paper boiled down to this. He was appalled by the primitive conditions depicted in Professor Gonzalez's book. Mindoro is only forty-five minutes by air from Manila but in culture it is many centuries behind. Dr. Hart noted in particular the total absence of schools and the almost total absence of the Church.

My own paper dealt with generalities. Having at the time read the book only once and not having found much to say about it, I preferred not to say it and spoke instead on what Mr. Gon-

zalez appears to have had in mind, the depicting of truth in literature.¹

In this he has succeeded brilliantly. He has depicted the truth both literally and symbolically. The hawk that swoops down upon the helpless chicks reminds one of the predatory couple (Epe Ruda and his wife) and the predatory officials from the town who swoop into the barrios and carry off what they could of the poor people's scant belongings. And it is surely not without significance that Doro and Sabel, poor as church mice as they are, have two babies and the hope of many more to come, while the wealthy Epe Ruda and his predatory wife are childless, their hope of offspring buried in darkness beneath the house with their last abortive fetus.

These are the things that make N. V. M. Gonzalez's novel a work of art. In other respects the work is defective. There are episodes which are vague and hard to follow. The characters are flat, unconvincing, some of them mere names. The one exception is Sabel. Doro occasionally comes to life, but Sabel is charming (witness the dialogue with the crippled girl). Curiously enough, it is Sabel, not her husband, who seems to be the mouth-piece through which N. V. M. Gonzalez speaks.

Mrs. Feria, in her analysis, raises an important question: how to write a novel in English and still convey the impression that the characters are conversing in the local dialects. We might raise a similar question: the propriety of reproducing literally in an English work the titles and handles which rustic etiquette in the Philippines gives to persons of varied rank. Thus an older boy is called "Nong" Jose (from *Manong*) and an older woman is called "Nay" Kare (from *Nanay* or *Inay*, Mother) and a wealthier man is called "Epe" Ruda (presumably from *Jefe*, Chief). But it is all very distracting: the pages are cluttered with *Nong* this and *Nay* that and Epe the other: to the casual reader clumsy, to the fastidious painful.

There are other unpleasantnesses. But these are the things one omits on third reading. There are enough of the beautiful things to merit one's attention: the sound of birds, the smell of grass, the coming on of night and the fragrance of ripened rice.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

¹ This paper was first printed in an undergraduate magazine of the University of the Philippines, then reprinted (though in an abridged and somewhat incorrect form) in *Panorama* Vol. IX No. 6 (June 1957) pp. 66-70.