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Vicente G. Groyon,
The Sky Over Dimas

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BOOK REVIEWS

Vicente Garcia Groyon, **The Sky Over Dimas**. Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2003. 256 pages.

When we read a first novel, especially one written by someone only in his late twenties when he began it, we are ready to be kind and generous with encouragement. Vincente Groyon, however, does not need any of that, for with this first novel he has struck literary gold, and we can only hope that the next one is already in the making. Granted the amount of tedious labor that must have gone into this book, it is also ample evidence of Groyon's enormous talent that his touch is as natural and straightforward (i.e., without the craft-conscious, attention-getting flourishes) as Midas's, with nary the deadening effect.

The novel's basic plot is a rescue mission that Negros *hacendera* (plantation owner) Margie Jarabas Torrecarrion calls on her son Rafael to undertake. George, Margie's loony husband and therefore Rafael's father, has been holed up with a worker's daughter in the abandoned manor of Hacienda Dimas for three months now. It's the only kind of reason that would make Rafael, now living in Manila, break his resolve never to set foot on Negros ever again. He dutifully returns to Bacolod, spends a night there before driving to the hacienda located a few hours from the city, and takes his father back in an ambulance.

What happens in between these plot points is the literary equivalent of a fruitcake hitting the fan. From its opening sentence, the reader guesses this right away: "The fact is: George Torrecarrion went crazy" (p. 1).

Rafael's return to Bacolod triggers an explosion of reminiscences, authorial flashbacks, plot detours, minibiographies of bizarre characters, and cameo appearances of eccentric types with familiar names identified with the Negros elite, such as Cuaycong, Lizares, Jalbuena and, of course, Lopez. The only fictional names, which you won't find even in the phone book, are those of Rafael's two-pronged clan: Jarabas and Torrecarion.

George has relinquished responsibility for the "farm," a term which hacenderos—intending neither modesty nor irony—use to refer to their vast tracts of sugarland. He is besotted with a slew of *cockamamie* ideas, ranging from alien abductions to astral and time travel to pyramid therapy. Negros society decides he has finally gone "full-tilt loco" when one day he fancies himself "Bacolod's defender against evil" and sweeps into the city's most popular diner brandishing a rapier. "He lunged, parried, thrust, and touché through the smokers' arbor, harvesting white blossoms and leaves from the canopy of vines along the way" (pp. 9–10). When George's father Don Raul warns him about the sugar industry's imminent collapse and the desperate need for diversification, George responds with another brainchild, an investment in wonder fuel, which turns out to be a dud, and so he drags the family fortunes down.

Margie, his wife, is no saner. By the novel's second and third pages, she is caught shoplifting cheap plastic religious medals, goes into manic-depressive fits, does an Isadora Duncan imitation, "trailing fourteen feet of diaphanous gauze curtains borrowed from the windows" (p. 3)—a costume matched in its outrageousness only by George's embroidered muumuus—and discourses on a range of subjects as esoteric as her husbands' own interests. And this despite her daily dose of lithium for the last twenty years. When last we read about her, in the last chapter, she has turned into a hyperbolic version of the born-again charismatic, wearing "gypsy-like assemblages of various articles of clothing" (p. 253).

Rodel, the elder of their two sons, has taken over the management of the hacienda and is killed early on in a plantation fire. With Groyon's dexterous handling of time and suspense, the reader doesn't find out until several chapters later what or who causes the fire. Only Rafael survives, his mind and body intact—largely because he has escaped Negros through a scholarship at the University of the Philippines—but his soul lonely and wounded. He carries on a desultory love affair with Camille, and we are not surprised at how it turns out by the novel's end.

The novel is a photo album of hacienda proportions, and so we get vivid, if brief, stories of Jarabases and Torrecarions sprouting either directly or tangentially from the family tree. On the Jarabas side is Margie's mother, once a laborer's daughter, now clinging tenaciously to life. Margie's sister Sally settles in Manila with a partner named Sandra, who is a dancer of "the show-bunny" type. On the Torrecarion side is Dolores, the magnificent grand matriarch whose iron will is traced back to her loveless marriage with Faustino, the grand patriarch from whom the Torrecarion fortune and misfortune spring.

Some interesting characters confine their entrances and exits within one chapter and are never heard from again, because Groyon invariably kills them off. Margie's adoptive brother Ansing and his high school teacher have a passionate affair that ends in a suicide. Her cousin Bernie disappears into the United States as Mrs. Dwayne Jennings, and reappears on the Mexican border with fake papers. Brought back home, she dies soon after in a car crash.

People at the fringes who contribute to the havoc wrought by the Torrecarion family on themselves are hacienda neighbors and a hacienda worker named Rodel. The neighbors are a German couple named Müller, who have a mongoloid son. His innocently destructive tendencies figure significantly in the novel's numerous plot twists and turns. He, too, vanishes at his chapter's end. The most intriguing of these vanishing acts is that of Rodel, a hacienda worker after whom Margie's son Rodel is named. Being a high school graduate, the elder Rodel is a cut above the other workers and becomes Don Carlos's protégé. He loses favor with the Don when he plants the seeds of rebellion, but wins that of Margie with the same insolent charm. When he and Margie elope to Aklan, they are forcibly taken back to Bacolod and he is never seen again. Margie meets George soon after, they marry, and they have a premature baby that Margie insists must be named Rodel Carlos.

Then there's a parade of characters illustrating the cross section of Negrense society: bored hacendero wives, deferential and diffident workers, Margie's half brother who is the fruit of an illicit union between her father and a *lavandera* (washerwoman), the loquacious family driver, and so on. Eliciting one of the most hilarious moments in the novel is the chapter set in the retreat house run by the pragmatically charming Father Tony. How Margie attempts a grand escape by crawling away in the dark during the "sharing" session is the quintessence of

camp mayhem. Equally hilarious are the parodies of Bacolod's version of People Power, Filipino adult films, the Holy Week rituals, romance in an Amorsolo-like setting, and so on ad absurdum.

Hovering ubiquitously around the characters is the collective voice of Negrense society, which blends indistinctly with the narrative voice. We are bombarded with deliberately hedging expressions that constantly put the author's own realistic statements in doubt: "all of Bacolod agreed that," "many such stories circulated," "Bacolod's rumor mills." Hence, when the novel meanders into the historical, the question of accuracy and factuality should no longer count (except perhaps for Negrense history buffs).

Sky over Dimas includes an elaborate back story in the form of a memoir-within-a-memoir. It is written by George summarizing his grandfather Faustino's own memoir and alternating in italicized chunks with the contemporary accounts. The raw material that Faustino's self-mythification consists of is riveting, and is obviously the product of some (but perhaps not enough?) research. This mythified history is a virtual novel in itself and, recounted as it is in fragments, creates shifts in style and scene which are jagged. The memoir-within-a-memoir device points to Groyon's proclivity toward the breezy, realistic style and not that of the mythmaker or the historical fictionist. This novel, however, is an ambitious, high-wire act. We are willing to overlook the fact that George-the-memoir-writer and Groyon-the-author express the same level and texture of insight, because the comedy—often knockabout, sometimes sly, always engaging—remains undiluted.

While the humor is always irreverent, it is never forced nor distasteful. The novel is written in consistently flawless and elegant prose that confirms the credo that fiction is twin sister to poetry. In less competent hands, time merely passes or stands still. In Groyon's, it takes on a nuanced face: "Each month that passed was pocked with numerous blank spaces that would come to torment him" (p. 135). For a characterization of the hacienda worker, here is a synecdoche: "The feet would invariably be broad, solid, like the roots of an ancient tree, creased and cracked, chalky ridges limning the whorls and calluses, skin the texture of guava tree bark. They made respectful padding noises as they approached" (p. 110). There are several such outstanding descriptions, such as those of Faustino's walking cane, the Jarabas mansion, or even just a chandelier. It is this meticulous exterior eye, plus the author's

astute understanding of the human (hence, Negrense) psyche, that leads one to suspect that Groyon may have mined his own life—young but decidedly rich in material—for this prodigiously detailed novel.

The Sky over Dimas ranks among the best Filipino novels in English to appear in years. If one wants to know how it ends, suffice it to say that beneath the author's lyrical prose and the sheen of precocious wisdom beats a heart of pure pulp.

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Rolando B. Tolentino (ed.), **Geopolitics of the Visible: Essays on Philippine Film Cultures**. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000. xxi + 384 pages.

Geopolitics of the Visible is an anthology of sixteen scholarly essays exploring the ideological uses of film in the Philippines. Rolando Tolentino's introduction sets the tone of the anthology, which apparently takes as its primary objective the critique of fascism and neocolonialism. Tolentino writes that the growth of the film industry in the Philippines coincided with the expansion of American imperialism, portrayed in early documentaries as humane and civilizing. Film reproduces the imperialist ethos on the one hand but it also allows the expression of resistance and anti-imperialist sentiments of the oppressed. It is important, therefore, for film critics to examine how films carry out the objectives of their makers and how their viewers read them.

In "The Filipino OCW in Extremis," Alice Guillermo analyzes three filmic representations of the life of Flor Contemplacion, an overseas contract worker (OCW) accused of murder and sentenced to death. Guillermo says that such films are protests against the government's sending Filipino women to work abroad, especially as domestic help-