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Lalaki sa Dilim, by Pascual

Review Author: Nenita Escasa

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Book Reviews and Notes



Lalaki sa Dilim. By Benjamin P. Pascual. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1997. xii + 244 pages.

As the introduction of this novel unabashedly admits, here is another of those romances which once saw print as serials in a magazine. And indeed the formula is there: a blackheart of a handsome, rich doctor (Rafael) is tamed by an impoverished but beautiful young woman (Ligaya) whom he had raped after a night of drinking. Unknown to him at that time, Ligaya is blind, and the discovery of such so stabs his conscience that he secretly sends her the then (1976) incredible sum of P50,000, with the suggestion that Ligaya see an ophthalmologist, who happens to be himself. Ligaya does go to his clinic, and there another discovery stuns him: the beautiful blind girl is pregnant, and he, of course, is the cause. It is clear by now that the handsome young doctor has fallen in love with the beautiful teenaged mother, now fully sighted after a successful operation. All this, despite Rafael's recent marriage to Margarita, a talented and respected opera singer, who, to everyone's shock, is carrying on an affair with Nick, Rafael's close friend who is himself married to Marina.

But the reader need not worry. In the end, Rafael shows all the signs of becoming a devoted husband to Ligaya and proud father to their love child (with a marriage soon to follow), what with Marina shooting dead Nick and Margarita in a hotel room.

Twenty-two years after *Lalaki sa Dilim* first saw print, the reader of the nineties might find it more interesting to take a closer look at the women characters. Never mind the metaphorical *Dilim* in the title as juxtaposed with Ligaya's blindness, or Ligaya (that name!) as the happiness Rafael pursues and finds. With women so empowered these days, Ligaya comes out as the classic woman of legend: beautiful and virtuous, but helpless without the largesse from some man of strength and wealth. She (with her mother and brother) betters her position in life, but not through her own efforts. She did show unwavering calm in refusing to have her pregnancy terminated

(as suggested by Rafael) and deciding to raise her fatherless child, but even here, there is a strong evidence of resignation: "Bahala na ho sa 'kin ang Diyos." It is Margarita, the "villainess," who shows greater control of her life and a determination to remain herself despite marriage and the demands of conventional society. She is defiant when commanded by her husband: "Huwag kang lalabas!" "Doon ka sa kuwarto!" "Umuwi ka na!" She lies and she cheats and she runs away to meet her married lover. In the end she dies in the hands of an equally driven woman (Marina), but not before she has lived her life the way she wanted.

It is perhaps typical of the time the novel was written that the desirable woman still evinced Maria Clara traits, and the assertive woman was not the norm. But then, this was sometime before Lea Bustamante of Lualhati Bautista's *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa?* charged onto the literary scene, with her fierce banners proudly raised.

*Nenita Escasa
Filipino Department
Ateneo de Manila University*

Coming Home. By Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo. Pasig, Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1997.

After the multi-awarded historical novel *Recuerdos*, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo returns to what she does best. *Coming Home* is a collection of her magazine articles, newspaper columns, journal entries, and conference papers written within the last few years. The contents are varied: reminiscences, literary criticism, confessions, reviews, an interview with fictionist Gilda Cordero-Fernando, and of course, travel essays, probably Hidalgo's forte.

Nostalgia is the keynote of much of the collection. Hidalgo revisits antique haunts and familiar faces, relives childhood pleasures and adolescent mischief, celebrates old family rituals and social ceremonies, now only half-remembered and even less enjoyed. Her essays are peopled, for the most part, by old teachers, maiden aunts, itinerant friends, priests and nuns, writers and academics, some of them already gone but all lovingly recollected from, and perhaps also mystified by, the magic of memory. There are Sister C- and her mother, "an elegant, old lady with her hair pulled back in a bun, always dressed in a *terno*," Tita Pacita who was a "wonderful storyteller," Miss Molina in "sheer stockings with seams running down the back in clear, straight lines," and Mr. Soli, the "burly ex-G.I." who sold coffee and pancakes.

In her reminiscences, Hidalgo brings to mind, except for the suburban settings in some of them, scenes from Amorsolo's idylls or stills from a well-