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The shooting star of Filipino fiction; Miguel Syjuco's dazzling debut, *Ilustrado*, crosses every border, national and literary

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Critics, prepare your adjectives. Let loose your fancy phrases. And you'd better get on it, because some of the best are already taken. Here is a sampler of what your fleeter fellows have already blurbed on the back cover of Miguel Syjuco's debut novel, *Ilustrado*:

"Brilliantly conceived and stylishly executed," "ceaselessly entertaining, frequently raunchy and effervescent with humour," "vulnerable and mischievous, sophisticated and naive," and, not least, "great."

One might even say this 33-year-old Philippines-born Montrealer has made a dazzling debut. Winner of the relatively new and important Man Asian Literary Prize - two years before its actual publication - *Ilustrado* is being launched simultaneously by half a dozen publishers on most inhabited continents, and was being translated into 13 languages even before the first reviews rolled in - as they are now starting to do. Given the reception so far, it would be a shock were *Ilustrado* not nominated for top literary prizes in Canada and around the world.

"All this is new to me," the quiet-spoken author said over a recent breakfast at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto. Clean-cut and well-dressed in a blazer, with a crisp striped shirt and ruby-coloured buttons, every bit as polite as his novel is not, Syjuco (pronounced See Hoo Koh) seems wary of the accolades. His mind is still stuck in the four-year struggle to bring to light such an ambitious novel, which he describes as "a record of my failures and fixes as a writer" that he somehow "bumbled through."

He prefers to recall the days he literally papered his walls with letters rejecting *Ilustrado*, making ends meet by volunteering for medical experiments, including one testing the use of a special camera to treat erectile dysfunction. "So they had me sequestered in a room, pantless, on a bed in stirrups with the camera pointed at me, wearing video goggles," Syjuco says. "I watched two nature videos, then a pornographic clip, then another nature video, and all the while I'm sitting there thinking, 'Do I want to be a writer this badly?'"

Even more taxing was the agent who advised him to "quit with this fancy experimental stuff, go read *A Passage to India*, change your book and get back to me," according to Syjuco.

A Passage to Manila, *Ilustrado* is not. To the extent it introduces contemporary Filipino literature to a worldwide audience, a better comparison might be to Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*. In truth, *Ilustrado* is unique and wholly contemporary, a book

that crosses every literary and national border with tremendous aplomb.

With a structure like a shattered mirror and a new narrator for every other shard, *Ilustrado* follows the trail of a young, uprooted Filipino writer as he follows the trail of his idol, an uprooted Filipino writer from an earlier generation, named Crispin Salvador, who appears to have killed himself in exile. It is a giddy trip that folds hilarious send-ups of Filipino politics and society into universal themes of national identity and personal expression. Masquerading as a search for the Great Filipino Novel - a mysterious manuscript left behind by the late, almost great Salvador - it ends up being just that.

Narrator No. 1 is a character named Miguel Syjuco who, like the 33-year-old author of the same name, was brought up in Vancouver for the first 10 years of his life and returned to the Philippines with his exiled family after the fall of the Marcos regime. Unlike the real Syjuco, whose political father resumed the trade upon the family's return, the fictional Syjuco is the orphan of two prominent opposition leaders who died in a suspicious plane crash that happened in the dictatorship's last days.

A stand-in for the generation that has come of age since the real-life assassination of Benigno Aquino in 1983, Narrator No. 1 plunges headlong into the boiling pot of Philippine politics, the country's revolutionary past and troubled future in his search for the enigmatic Salvador's literary legacy.

The one adjective that the real Syjuco does welcome without reserve is "global." Having lived and studied in Canada, Australia and the United States, he sees the turmoil of his native land as a universal tale - and his book as being, in the words of W.H. Auden, "like some valley cheese/ local, but prized elsewhere."

The problem with achieving such a balance, Syjuco says, is that the Philippines is "a country people have almost forgotten now," subject to "all these preconceptions and misconceptions about who we are." And local writers have failed to correct them. "We've been writing in English for 100 years," he says, citing a complaint familiar on the islands. "Why is nobody reading? Why is nobody out there?"

Syjuco's solution was to go abroad to deliberately seek out an international audience. "I could have published a book in the Philippines and it would have come out with a whimper," he says. "I had to go abroad for it to come out the way it has."

That sojourn was anything but straightforward, taking

him to New York, where he obtained a master's degree in creative writing at Columbia University in New York, Australia for a doctorate at the University of Adelaide, and a variety of odd jobs in Montreal that culminated with a stint as a copy editor on the night shift at the Montreal Gazette - a job he adored.

Syjuco abandoned *Ilustrado* when the manuscript failed to make the long list of nominees for the first Man Asian Prize in 2007, beginning a new novel instead, and only picked it up again at the urging of his supervisor in Adelaide. While in Montreal, he ripped the novel apart, rewrote it entirely and re-entered the manuscript for the same prize a year later. To his astonishment, it won.

"Then, all of a sudden, agents were talking to me," the author says. "And it happened very quickly. I had an agent within a week of winning the prize and the book sold within days after that."

Another 18 months of revision under the guidance of a New York editor lay ahead. But such is the nature of instant success in the realm of high art. And the result? The adjectives say it all.

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A review of *Ilustrado* will appear in next Saturday's Books section.

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