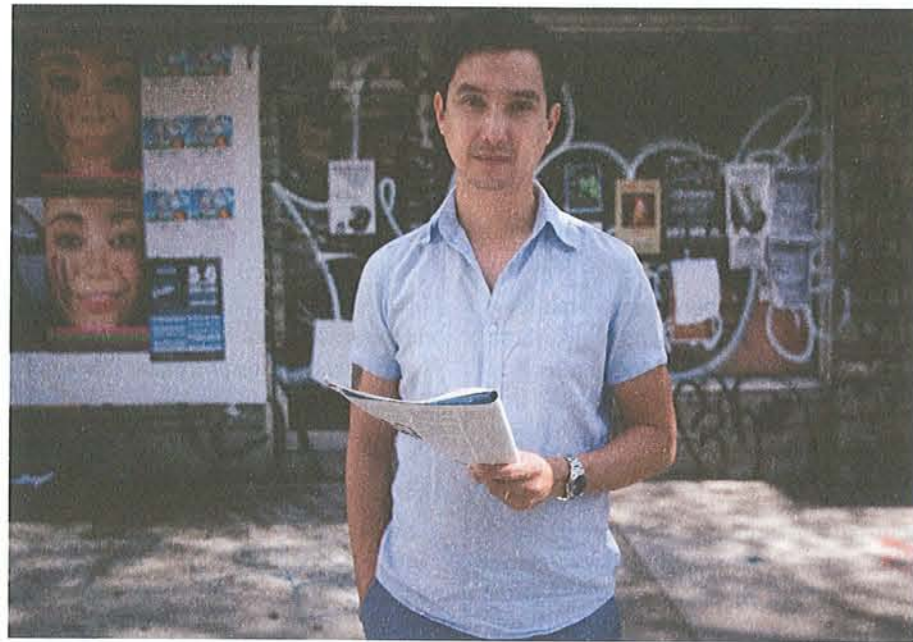


# FRONTMATTER

## MIGUEL SYJUCO'S WONDROUS LIFE

Already celebrated in his native Philippines, the adoptive Montrealer could be CanLit's next big thing



It takes six e-mails to negotiate a meeting place with Montreal author Miguel Syjuco. He insists he's happy to meet anywhere, but won't allow me to inconvenience myself with a meeting place even halfway between our neighborhoods. We finally settle on a bistro a couple of blocks from my home. When he arrives, a little late from a struggle with parallel parking, he apologizes repeatedly and is far more grateful than he needs to be for my interest in his debut novel, *Illustrado* (reviewed in this issue on p. 24).

In 2008, when the unpublished manuscript of *Illustrado* (which was written in English) won both the Palanca Award – the most prestigious literary award of Syjuco's birthplace, the Philippines – and the internationally recognized Man Asian Literary Prize, the then 31-year-old author was described by *The Manila Times* as “excruciatingly gentle and agonizingly affable.” It's an exaggeration, to be sure, but there's no doubt about it – he's an extremely polite, nice guy.

Syjuco completed the first draft of *Illustrado* – about the fictitious “panther of Phil-

ippine letters” Crispin Salvador – while working as a copy editor at Montreal's *The Gazette*, and he says he submitted it to the Palanca and Man Asian juries almost as an afterthought. The Palanca win didn't result in much international attention – the Philippines isn't exactly a breeding ground for novelists, and *Illustrado* was one of only 15 novels submitted that year – but the Man Asian win resulted in a flood of offers. He and his American agent, Melanie Jackson, settled on a pre-emptive bid by Farrar, Straus and Giroux editor-in-chief Eric Chinski, and the Canadian rights were subsequently sold to Penguin Canada imprint Hamish Hamilton. *Illustrado* has since been translated into more than a dozen languages and is set for worldwide release this month.

It's an impressive accomplishment, especially for someone groomed for a career in politics, not literature. Syjuco's mother, Judy Syjuco, currently holds a congressional seat in the Philippine province of Iloilo, a seat previously held by Syjuco's father, Augusto. “That's the way it is in the Philippines,” says Syjuco, a little sheepishly, about what might seem to

Canadians like a dynasty. It's also the Philippine way, he says, to follow in your parents' footsteps. “But I knew with my quixotic idealism, I would either be an absolute failure [in politics], or I'd be shot, or I would become corrupted. I just decided, ‘Sorry dad, I know this is going to piss you off like anything, but I'm going off to try and be a writer.’ And I've pursued that relentlessly ever since.”

After finishing a degree in English Literature at Ateneo de Manila University, Syjuco moved to New York City in 2001 and completed his MFA in creative writing at Columbia in 2004. While living in New York, he worked as a fiction reader at both *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review*, experiences he describes as discouraging. “I'm a guy who's never been published and I'm rejecting everybody else,” he says. “After I started submitting to journals [myself], I kept thinking of someone like me sitting there – some pimply faced guy with a bad attitude who hates everyone else's work – rejecting me.”

It was at *The Paris Review* that Syjuco came up with the idea for *Illustrado*. He was working as a fact-checker for the magazine's Writers at Work series, which consisted of interviews with famous authors, and he would spend hours at the library every day sifting through stacks of biographies, memoirs, news clippings, etc. “It occurred to me,” he says, “that this would be a really interesting way to create a portrait of an artist.”

*Illustrado* opens with the discovery of Crispin Salvador's body floating in the Hudson River. The mystery of his death, and the story of his life, is revealed by the novel's narrator, Miguel, via excerpts from Salvador's work – his novels, his autobiography, and iconoclastic essays like “If God Exists, Why Does He Make Us Fart?” – and via Miguel's own blogs and e-mails. Syjuco worked with FSG's Chinski for almost a year re-writing the manuscript. “The characters got deeper, the loose ends were all tied up, and it felt much, much tighter – to the point where I'm actually happy with it,” he says.

Syjuco's editor at Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Canada publisher Nicole Winstanley, has high expectations for the book's success here. “We're absolutely submitting it to all the Canadian prizes, and we're expecting it to appear on those lists,” she says. Though the book isn't set in Canada, it's a thoughtful but quite biting satire of a country that has always been a little insecure about its own literary traditions, which could well appeal to Canadian readers and critics.

Syjuco, who moonlights as an occasional book reviewer for CBC Radio, is a voracious reader of Canadian and American literature (“I cried when John Updike died”), and he cites Chilean author Roberto Bolaño as a major influence. But comparisons will probably be made to Dominican-American author Junot Diaz, who also pulled off the difficult balancing act of blending history and pop-culture in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Syjuco says he hasn't read Diaz's book yet, though it is on his “to read” stack. Perhaps a better comparison might be to Canadian author Stephen Marche's *Shining at the Bottom of the Sea*, a faux anthology of post-colonial literature from the invented country of Sanjania. Syjuco loved Marche's book, and says he'd be happy for *Illustrado* to stand in its company. “It's so good. You forget that it's all written by one person,” he says.

It's obvious Syjuco feels a strong connection to his adopted country. Though he has been living in Montreal since 2007, he spent 10 years in Vancouver as a child after his parents temporarily abandoned the Philippines to escape the repressive Marcos regime. His more recent move from New York to Montreal was due to his Australian girlfriend, who was doing an exchange year at McGill University. The couple fell in love with the city and now hope to stay here indefinitely.

With *Illustrado* completed, Syjuco is currently finishing up a long-distance Ph.D. in creative writing from the University of Adelaide in Australia, and he is in the final stages of completing his second novel (which has already been bought by Hamish Hamilton) about a notorious political mistress. Ultimately, Syjuco says, he wants all of his work to be politically engaged in some way. “I hope you write that and hold me to it,” he says as our interview ends. “Because if [*Illustrado*] does well, I want to be reminded that I still need to do something with my writing. I'm writing because I want to make a difference.” – Juliet Waters

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARCOS TOWNSEND / COURTESY OF PENGUIN CANADA

## THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

Q&Q assesses the latest book apps so you don't have to



### LOCAL BOOKS

**COST: Free**

**What does it do?** Modelled on find-and-dine restaurant

apps such as LocalEats and UrbanSpoon, the Local Books app pinpoints nearby bookstores and libraries and book-related events. Users can also sort venues by distance, name, or type. The app is powered by LibraryThing Local – an online database of 51,000 libraries and bookstores submitted by LibraryThing members. Additional event feeds come from IndieBound.org, Barnes & Noble, Waterstone's, and Indigo.

**How well does it work?** Venue listings earn a shiny gold star. In several Canadian cities we tried, the app quickly pieced together an exhaustive list of bookstores and libraries, making it perfect for travel. Event data, however, lags far behind (a Vancouver-area search turned up just three bookish events within a two-week period), and keyword-based queries were equally unproductive (typing in “kids” and “children” produced nothing in either the event or venue categories).



### WATTPAD

**COST: Free**

**What does it do?** Billed as the Web's most popular

online e-book community, Wattpad allows readers and writers to connect and share their work. The Wattpad app brings that same experience to smartphones. Users can read both amateur and non-copyright-protected novels and short stories, as well as fan fiction, poetry, and essays; vote and comment on works-in-progress; and communicate with other Wattpad members through profile pages and message boards.

**How well does it work?** All of the cringe-worthy teen fiction and tales of star-crossed werewolves can make for amusing, if frequently painful, reading. Overall, the app is clean and easy to use, and the auto-bookmarking function makes it simple to pick up where you left off. You can also choose a scrolling speed and read the text as a single vertical block or move horizontally from page to page with a quick finger tap.



### 3D BOOKSHELF CLASSIC LITERATURE COLLECTION

**COST: \$0.99**

**What does it do?** This novelty reading app allows you to pretend your dingy apartment is a tobacco-scented Victorian library. Twenty-two classic titles – including *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *Dracula*, and *Sense and Sensibility* – are arranged along a virtual wood-panelled bookshelf. Choose a title, load it onto the virtual desk, and hear pages turn and leather covers creak while you read. The app offers auto-bookmarking, old-style typography, and the ability to listen to background music from your iPod.

**How well does it work?** The app is surprisingly slow to download. Also, the Lazy Susan-style bookshelf spins too quickly, and you can't view a book's text horizontally by turning your phone on its side. On the upside, the bookmark (rendered as gilt-stamped red leather) works well.



### BOOK BAZAAR

**COST: Free**

**What does it do?** This straightforward app offers

one-stop comparison book shopping. Users can search by ISBN, author, title, or keyword, and compare prices from an aggregated list of major online retailers including Amazon, AbeBooks, Indigo, Borders, Walmart, and Barnes & Noble. Also, the iPhone location data allows you to access inventory records from local bricks-and-mortar stores.

**How well does it work?** Canadians will likely come up empty-handed in the local bookstore listings; the app is far more useful for online shopping. A search for Mary Novik's 2007 novel *Conceit* turned up titles at Amazon, AbeBooks, and Half.com. A hunt for Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* produced at least double the hits, including listings from Powell's, DeepDiscount.com, and eCampus.com. It's a bare-bones app and it works – even if it won't win any fans among indie booksellers. – Cheri Hanson

# REVIEWS



■ Joey Comeau's quirky novel is a playful and inventive take on the horror genre

## FICTION

### One Bloody Thing After Another

Joey Comeau; \$14.95 paper  
978-1-55022-916-5, 160 pp.,  
5 x 8, ECW Press, May Reviewed  
from advance reading copy

Following 2009's *Overqualified*, Joey Comeau returns with another slim, quirky novel. The earlier volume contained a series of faux-confessional job application letters. Taking up where that book left off, *One Bloody Thing After Another* opens with a job interview gone horribly wrong. Not only does the applicant fail to get the job, she abruptly flees the interview after vomiting a "wet, bloody chunk of god knows what" onto the table of her would-be employers.

Meanwhile, Jackie, the novel's adolescent protagonist, is struggling to deal with her violent tendencies and her mother's ghost, all the while harbouring an un-

requited crush on her best friend, Ann. Unbeknownst to Jackie, Ann keeps her own mother (the unfortunate job applicant from the opening scene) chained in the basement, for good reason. Her mother's insatiable appetite for living flesh forces Ann to perform unspeakable acts on neighbourhood pets. When her sister succumbs to the same condition, Ann must go a step further, perpetrating an act of violence that the plot – half tongue-in-cheek though it may be – cannot quite sustain.

The horror genre represents a departure for Comeau, but the themes here are strikingly similar to those he's previously explored: anti-authoritarian rebellion and youthful romance overshadowed by a heartfelt sense of loss. The gore and supernatural elements are a fitting complement to his characteristic blend of pathos and black humour.

Comeau's prose is simple and direct, and the short chapters – many less than a

page – make for a quick read. Though the book contains a good deal of grue, the plot is more playful and inventive than horrific or suspenseful. The reader gets caught up in Jackie and Ann's adolescent exuberance; elsewhere, the vandalism and violence appear as half-formed expressions of hollow desperation. By ending with a Grand Guignol punchline, however, Comeau undercuts the reader's sympathy for the subtler, emotional suffering of the novel's characters. – *Devon Code, a writer in Toronto.*

### ★ *Ilustrado*

Miguel Syjuco; \$34 cloth 978-0-67006-395-6, 256 pp., 6 x 9, Hamish Hamilton Canada, May Reviewed from advance reading copy

In 2008, Montreal author Miguel Syjuco's debut novel nabbed both the Man Asian Literary Prize and the Palanca Award (the Pulitzer of the Philippines) – quite a coup for a first book. Given the noisy buzz that the prestigious accolades generated, and the two-year wait for the book to appear in Canada, one might easily wonder whether it can live up to the hype. *Ilustrado*, however, exceeds all expectations.

When the body of Crispin Salvador – "the Panther of Philippine Letters" – is found bobbing in New York City's Hudson River, Miguel, Salvador's biographer, is convinced of foul play. After all, Salvador, who spent the last several years exiled in New York after a fall from grace with critics in his homeland, was on the cusp of completing the masterpiece that promised to revive his reputation and "return him to the pantheon." Now, the manuscript, which was meant to reveal the unscrupulous malevolence of the Filipino ruling class, has gone missing. And so Miguel books a flight to Manila in search of answers.

But *Ilustrado* is not a crime novel. It's an illustrious, evocative, intricate story that chronicles 150 years of Philippine history by employing a wide array of narrative mechanisms: newspaper clippings, blog rants, excerpts from Salvador's colossal body of work, interview snippets, extracts from Miguel's biography, and, of course, our protagonist's own tumultuous journey through the "tapestry of disorder" he

confronts in Manila. Miguel's pursuit of Salvador's manuscript is shaded by various "fingers of darkness" – his own familial disenfranchisement, a painful secret, the chaos of new love, and the random bombings and desperate protests that mark Manila's socio-political unrest.

Miguel's narration is often unreliable. There are out-and-out lies: "That part about my seatmate in the plane ... didn't happen exactly as I recounted.... From this point on, I should promise to tell the truth." There are omissions: "I forgot to mention what happened last night..." And there are reluctant confessions: "I don't know why I'm admitting this." These levels of reliability brilliantly challenge notions of authenticity and make the book's final twist all the more fascinating.

Like Salvador's own writing, Syjuco's "metal slugs of type bang like bullets into the white sky, leaving black letters suspended." *Ilustrado* is a staggering, indelible debut. – *Lisa Foad, author of The Night Is A Mouth (Exile Editions).*

### Walt Whitman's Secret

George Fetherling; \$32 cloth 978-0-67931-223-9, 368 pp., 5 x 8, Random House Canada, April Reviewed from bound galleys

Frequent Q&Q reviewer George Fetherling's third novel is an intriguing look at one of America's most influential poets. The novel focuses on the last years of Whitman's life as observed by his real-life friend Horace Traubel, who wrote the nine-volume *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Whitman was 72 when he died in 1892, and Traubel knew him only after Whitman had suffered a debilitating stroke. Fetherling has borrowed from Traubel's work to the extent that he often uses words that Traubel attributed to the poet. In this fictionalized version, Traubel sends his material to Flora MacDonald, the Canadian suffragist and Whitman fan, who appears as a character.

While the novel focuses on the poet's final years, it also gives glimpses into Whitman's early days. Although critics disagree about Whitman's sexual experience, Fetherling has him acting upon his homosexuality, engaging in serious relationships with at least two men and having many casual encounters. But that isn't the secret of the novel's title. The secret is something else entirely, something political in nature that the poet vowed not to divulge until he was at death's door.

Fetherling excels at creating appropriate voices for his characters. He also provides an excellent and sensitive picture of a gifted man whose body disintegrated long before his mind.

Many of the book's characters live compartmentalized lives curtailed by the restrictions of their repressive society. The free-thinking that marked Whitman appealed to his devotees. From the perspective of the 21st century, it's difficult to imagine how troublesome free thought was once considered to be.

Fetherling has written an engaging and illuminating novel, full of life and history and poetry and remarkable people. *Walt Whitman's Secret* will make readers drag out their copies of *Leaves of Grass* to experience Whitman's genius again. – *Candace Fertile, an English teacher at Camosun College in Victoria.*

### Such a Good Education

France Théoret; Luise von Flotow, trans.; \$21 paper 978-1-89715-148-8, 200 pp., 5 1/4 x 7 1/2, Cormorant Books, Feb. Reviewed from finished book

There is one word that overwhelmingly comes to mind while reading *Such a Good Education*: bleak. The novel, set in Montreal during the waning years of "The Great Darkness" under Maurice Duplessis, practically reeks of despair.

It is the fall of 1956, and the narrator, Evelyne, is about to turn 14. Her family is taking possession of a cold, rat-infested apartment in the beleaguered neighbourhood of Saint-Henri, where her misguided father believes he will make his fortune running a dilapidated grocery store.

Evelyne quickly discovers that only through academic knowledge can she begin to envision an escape from the deplorable life she is living. She recognizes that her options as a young female are extremely limited, but she is determined to make the most of her strict Catholic education and escape destitution. Her family's continued slide down the socio-economic ladder almost scuttles her ambition, but her extraordinary intelligence allows her to struggle on.

Evelyne is incredibly introspective, constantly analyzing her thoughts and emotions. She is fundamentally aware of the limitations placed on her by her family, class, and society, and she grapples with how to balance the expectations of being a good Christian woman – one who is selfless,

obedient, and respectful of authority – with her (perceived selfish) desire for knowledge and a better life.

Author France Théoret is an established voice in Quebec, and here she uses her young protagonist as a symbol of the plight of women during the Duplessis years, when a "good education" referred to not only the morality espoused by Catholic teachers but also the absolute surrender to a misogynistic ideal of obedient femininity.

Luise von Flotow's translation employs a combination of tenses and expressions that is at times choppy and distracting. Still, Théoret's voice and the strength of her writing come through, though the novel's constant dreariness may prove too much for some readers. – *Dory Cerny, an editor and writer in Toronto.*

### Brown Dwarf

K.D. Miller; \$17.95 paper 978-1-89723-188-3, 144 pp., 5 1/4 x 7 1/2, Biblioasis, April Reviewed from bound galleys

There are several ways to pen a story concerning young girls and criminal acts. One method: treat it lightly, à la Alan Bradley's Flavia de Luce mysteries, playing the crime as an old-fashioned puzzler. Another technique: follow K.D. Miller's example in *Brown Dwarf* and examine the more serious ramifications of such events. In her debut novel, Miller eschews a "sepia-tinted past that smells of lavender and old books," and instead focuses on the ways in which youthful decisions result in untold damage.

Miller employs two intertwining timelines. The first takes place in the 1960s and features Brenda Bray, a young girl saddled with weight problems and a manic-depressive mother. Brenda is the Brown Dwarf, an "astronomical wannabe ... [floating] through space, lifeless and dull." She falls in with Jori, a disturbingly self-possessed girl who latches onto Brenda with enthusiastic glee. Jori has decided that the duo will find and apprehend the notorious Clarence Frayn, a fugitive serial killer with whom Jori is infatuated.

The second narrative strand is set in the present. Brenda, who now goes by the name Rae Brand, is a successful writer of historical mysteries. Rae has never actively confronted her girlhood actions, and the interplay of childhood bewilderment and mature repentance lends *Brown Dwarf* much of its exceptional edginess.

Possibly basing her tale on the real-life