

**MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology
School of Graduate Studies
Master of Arts in English Language Studies**

**ILUSTRADO BY MIGUEL SYJUCO:
A WRITTEN REPORT**

Literary Forms
English 240 – AAA

Submitted by:
Norkhan D. Macapanton
MAELS I

Submitted to:
Prof. Anthony L. Tan, Ph.D.

October 16, 2011



Miguel Syjuco

(November 17, 1976 - present)

Miguel Syjuco is a Filipino writer from Manila and the Man Asian Literary Prize grand prize winner for 2008. Syjuco is the son of Augusto Syjuco Jr., a politician allied with the party of Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Syjuco graduated from high school in 1993 from the Cebu International School. He received a degree in English literature from the Ateneo de Manila University in 2000 and completed his MFA

from Columbia University in 2004. In early 2011 he completed a PhD in English literature from the University of Adelaide.

His novel, *Ilustrado*, won the Grand Prize for the Novel in English at the 2008 Palanca Awards. In November of the same year, he won the Man Asian Literary Prize also for *Ilustrado*. In 2010, the novel won the QWF Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction, Quebec's top literary prize, and was a New York Times Notable Book of 2010 as well as a Globe & Mail Top 100 of 2010. The novel was also a finalist for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, a finalist for the Amazon First Novel Award, and a finalist for the 2010 Grand Prix du Livre de Montreal, one of the rare English-language books ever to make the final round. In 2011, *Ilustrado* joined books by David Mitchell, Aleksandar Hemon, Marie NDiaye, and Wells Tower for the Premio von Rezzori, an annual prize for the best international fiction translated into Italian. It has also been shortlisted for the Prix Jan Michalski, an annual Swiss prize for the best international books translated into French, as well as the Prix Courier International, which honors the best international books translated in France.

In late 2010, *Ilustrado* was published in translation in Spanish (Tusquets), Swedish (Natur och Kultur), and Dutch (Mouria). In 2011, it was published in translation in Serbian (Geopoetika), French (Editions Christian Bourgois), Catalan (Tusquets), Italian (Fazi), and Brazilian Portuguese (Compahnia das Letras). Syjuco is represented by Peter Straus at the Rogers,

Coleridge and White Literary Agency in London, and by Melanie Jackson in New York City. He currently lives in Montreal. He has already sold a second book to North American publishers. 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, *Ilustrado*.

In 2008, when the unpublished manuscript of *Ilustrado* (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 *Ilustrado* – about the fictitious “panther of Philippine 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 *Ilustrado* 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. *Ilustrado* 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 *Ilustrado*. 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.”

Ilustrado 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 *Ilustrado* 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 *Ilustrado* 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 [*Ilustrado*] 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."

ILUSTRADO BY MIGUEL SYJUCO

It begins with a body. On a clear day in winter, the battered corpse of Crispin Salvador is pulled from the Hudson River—taken from the world is the controversial lion of Philippine literature. Gone, too, is the only manuscript of his final book, a work meant to rescue him from obscurity by exposing the crimes of the Filipino ruling families. Miguel, his student and only remaining friend, sets out for Manila to investigate.

To understand the death, Miguel scours the life, piecing together Salvador's story through his poetry, interviews, novels, polemics, and memoirs. The result is a rich and dramatic family saga of four generations, tracing 150 years of Philippine history forged under the Spanish, the Americans, and the Filipinos themselves. Finally, we are surprised to learn that this story belongs to young Miguel as much as to his lost mentor, and we are treated to an unhindered view of a society caught between reckless decay and hopeful progress.

Exuberant and wise, wildly funny and deeply moving, *Ilustrado* explores the hidden truths that haunt every family. It is a daring and inventive debut by a new writer of astonishing talent. "Ilustrado" is a term used to describe the well-to-do intelligentsia of the Philippines. At the heart of the novel are two strangely similar examples of this class, writers living in New York as voluntary exiles from their wealthy and influential families in Manila. The first is the internationally famous man of letters Crispin Salvador, till recently a teacher at Columbia. Over the course of his life, Salvador has been the author of hard-hitting reportage, every sort of literary fiction, children's fantasy novels, James Bond-like thrillers, steamy romances and a scathing memoir. Passages from his various books are quoted throughout "Ilustrado," along with exchanges from his notable interview in the Paris Review.

Salvador is, in fact, a man who has lived many lives, and "his work borrowed liberally and embellished" each of them: "his upbringing as the son of a sugar plantation owner, the sentimental education in Europe, Mediterranean evenings spent womanizing with Porfirio Rubirosa or drinking zivania with Lawrence Durrell, the meteoric fame from his scoops as a cub reporter, training with communist guerrillas in the jungles of Luzon, the argument with the Marcoses during dinner at Malacanang Palace."

While Salvador constantly renews himself, he nonetheless remains consistently flamboyant and outrageous. According to rumor, he gave Manila's leading critic "that scar on his face during a duel with butterfly knives." Once he "drunkenly, though surreptitiously, vomited in the seafood chowder bowl at a George Plimpton garden party in East Hampton." At the same time, his usual "fastidiousness of manner . . . opened him to rumors of homosexuality, yet he was criticized for being a womanizer 'with the lascivious energy usually found in defrocked clergymen.' And he could never live down his 1991 TV commercial which showed him being served lunch in a book-lined study, shaking a cruet over his food before turning to the camera to deliver the now immortal words: 'Silver Swan Soy Sauce, the educated choice.' "

The other major character in "Ilustrado" is a young Filipino editorial assistant at the Paris Review and a former student from Salvador's writing class at Columbia. His name is, yes, Miguel Syjuco, and he has decided to research the life of his mentor, discover the whereabouts of the great writer's missing masterpiece, "The Bridges Ablaze," and even, perhaps, solve the mystery of how Salvador came to be found floating face down in the Hudson River. Was it suicide, casual murder or planned political assassination? The search naturally enough takes Miguel back to the Philippines.

At this point "Ilustrado" has begun to spool out three major plot lines. First, there's the gradual revelation of the narrator Miguel's previous life, especially his traumatic relationship with his powerful politician grandfather, nicknamed Grapes, and his memories of an intense two-year affair with "the unfathomable Madison Liebling."

Second, Syjuco provides a potted history of the modern Philippines recounted through the lens of Salvador's family, with flashbacks to the colonial era, the battles for independence from Spain, the Japanese occupation during World War II, and the present day. Corruption is pervasive in every generation. What happens when Miguel's grandfather's inheritance is contested? "Having funded the appointment of a Supreme Court justice years earlier, Grapes won every suit."

In the novel's third plot thread, we follow Miguel's adventures in contemporary Manila as he interviews Salvador's aging sister and friends while also hanging out at the Club Coup d'Etat with his own spoiled former classmates and getting involved with a sexy, Manolo-Blahnik-wearing Filipina named Sadie. Every day, moreover, brings news of terrorist bombings and

horrific crimes. A wealthy couple force their maid to drink Clorox after the distracted young woman allowed their child to drown in the bathtub because she was busy texting on her cellphone. This ongoing story grows increasingly sensational, the stuff of National Enquirer dreams.

And like the tabloid, "Ilustrado" itself increasingly blurs the line between the real and the fake. Narrator Miguel mentions that he wears an ersatz Oyster Perpetual that is virtually indistinguishable from a genuine Rolex. He attends a concert that includes Vinteuil's Septet -- a piece of music that exists only in Proust's "In Search of Lost Time." Toward the end, Miguel even discovers a copy of "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," by the Bombay lawyer Mir Bahadur Ali. This is a book -- part detective story, part metaphysical quest -- imagined by Jorge Luis Borges, who clearly inspired the conclusion of "Ilustrado."

And that, I think, is the only cavil one can raise about Syjuco's extremely enjoyable novel. Throughout, the book has been an example of "literary bricolage" -- bringing together Filipino jokes, transcripts from "The Burley Raconteur" blog, real history and people, made-up footnotes and the narrator's increasingly nightmarish dreams and experiences, some heightened by snorts of cocaine. In its last pages, however, the book seems to be going in several directions at once, as it grows phantasmagoric and then suddenly stops, before a final, not wholly unexpected, revelation.

"Ilustrado" is, then, more a novel of wonderful parts than a completely successful whole. But Syjuco is only in his mid-30s, and he already possesses the wand of the enchanter, conjuring up striking scenes like this one: After buying a tiger for a pet, Salvador's blustering father decides to hand-feed the wretched animal some bacon. Utterly terrified, the "king of the jungle" retreats to a corner of its tiny cage:

"My father threw the bacon at the tiger and hit it in the face. This puddle of piss formed under the animal, like some fluorescent toxic spill. I can see it like it was yesterday. The tiger cowering in its urine. Papa standing over it screaming. Mama still reading. We children averting our eyes, watching the flies land on sliced mango on the fine china in front of us."

The Philippines, it might be said, is a country in search of an identity. Its colonial Spanish rulers brought with them the Roman Catholic Church, making the archipelago the largest Christian

state in Asia. Adherence to church doctrine has given the country one of the world's higher birth rates, but the church's moral teachings haven't made much of an impact. Having a mistress is de rigueur for political figures. Young prostitutes ply their trade in Manila's strip clubs, then go to Mass on Sunday. After the Spanish departed, the Americans left their mark. "We will become American," says Cristo, one of the characters in Miguel Syjuco's ambitious new novel about the Philippines. "Our children will learn to speak American. When they are ready, we will send them to America to be educated."

"*Ilustrado*" is filled with complexities, layering fiction with fiction — and nonfiction. Cristo is a character in a novel within the novel by a writer named Crispin Salvador, and he may be Salvador's grandfather's alter ego. In turn, Salvador, the principal figure in "*Ilustrado*," may be its 33-year-old author's alter ego. In a daring literary performance, Syjuco weaves the invented with the factual, putting himself directly into his own fiction — at times under his own name and elsewhere as "our protagonist." He also creates essays, poems and novels written by Crispin Salvador, as well as Salvador's autobiography, "*Autoplagiarist*."

A noted writer, Salvador fled the Philippines in 1972 on the eve of Marcos's declaration of martial law. At the outset of "*Ilustrado*," we learn that Salvador was in exile, serving as a professor at Columbia University, when he was found floating in the Hudson River in February 2002. His researcher and acolyte, Miguel Syjuco, is determined to discover the cause of Salvador's death — suicide or murder? — and find the manuscript of a book Salvador had been working on for 20 years, "*The Bridges Ablaze*," in which he intended to expose, as he put it, "the generations-long ties of the Filipino elite to cronyism, illegal logging, gambling, kidnapping, corruption, along with their related component sins." In his fictional role, Miguel Syjuco (who in real life and in the novel is a Filipino expatriate living in North America) undertakes to write a biography of Salvador. In keeping with its subject's professional and personal preoccupations, it will be "an indictment of my country, of time, of our forgetful, self-centered humanity."

There is much to expose, to indict. The Philippines is a country in which a man of morals can't be president, in which a politician who hasn't been linked to any wrongdoing isn't assumed to be honest, but merely better at hiding his corruption. (Or so says Salvador in a fictional interview with *The Paris Review*.) This is a country in which the rich live in mansions behind high walls in gated communities, their manicured lawns tended by impoverished laborers. The poor are reduced to stealing manhole covers to sell for scrap, and in the torrential rains that routinely

flood Manila's pathetically maintained streets, a man can easily be sucked into a drain and drowned. In the novel and in reality, the police routinely steal from street urchins.

Like the novel's author, Crispin Salvador was born into a wealthy family. The Salvadors' fortune came from sugar cane and political graft. When Salvador's mother was dying of cancer, his father made a trip to the Vatican and donated a fortune to the church. "Just your typical rich family," Salvador's sister sighs, while a maid in a mint-green uniform fans her, shifting from one hand to the other when she gets tired. Salvador resented his father, saying he had no scruples. "You can't govern well if you have scruples," Salvador's sister replies. She, in turn, is appalled that Filipinos who can't write their own names are allowed to vote.

These are not caricatures, and this is not satire. Filipino readers will recognize figures in Syjuco's cast, even though some of them are composites. The same handful of wealthy families rule the country today, much as they did 30, 40, 50 years ago, and they don't do much to hide their contempt for the poor.

"*Ilustrado*" is being presented as a tracing of 150 years of Philippine history, but it's considerably more than that. Just as this country is searching for its identity, its author seems to be searching for his own. What does it mean to live in exile? What does it mean to be a writer? The fictional Syjuco tells Salvador that he wants to change the world through his writing. "Changing the world is good work if you can get it," his master replies. "But isn't having a child a gesture of optimism in the world?"

"*Ilustrado*" received the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2008. Spiced with surprises and leavened with uproariously funny moments, it is punctuated with serious philosophical musings. Searching for the cause of Crispin Salvador's death, and for his missing manuscript, Syjuco comes across an old woman, formerly a photographer, who knew Salvador in her youth. When she last saw him, she reports, he too had been searching. "Angry men," she reflects, "have little to live for when their rage becomes ineffective." The reader senses that this possibility worries the author of "*Ilustrado*" as well.