



Patron Saints of Nothing

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Editorial Choice:

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In a few weeks, Jay will graduate from High School. He doesn't have anything much planned for the summer. Maybe he'll work on his video gaming skills and hang out with his friend Seth, before heading for the University of Michigan. U. of M. is okay, but it's not the Ivy League School which his father had longed for Jay to achieve. After all, Dad had uprooted the family from the Philippines sixteen years ago to settle near Detroit to ensure a good education for the kids. For Jay's American Mom, that had meant a return home, but for both parents the move had involved hard work and sacrifice.

Suddenly, Jay tells us, news comes from Dad's brother, Tito Maning, in the Philippines. Jay's cousin, Jun, is dead. No explanation, no funeral. Jay is devastated. He was ten when his family had made their one return visit to the Philippines; he and Jun, just three days younger, had found a friendship beyond anything either had ever known. As they grew into their teens, they'd exchanged long letters, sharing everything. Then Jay had let the correspondence slide. Jun had persevered, then gently said he'd stop writing, not wanting to intrude. A while later, they'd heard Jun had left home. Years of silence, and now this. Jay can't understand *why no funeral?* He won't let it go and eventually his Mom tells him what she knows. Jun had ended up on the streets and started using. He'd been shot, a casualty in the war on drugs, promised by President Duterte in his election campaign. The police and even civilian vigilantes had been given a free hand to arrest and kill users and pushers without warrant or trial.

The subsequent plot is driven by Jay's response to the news. He blames himself for Jun's death - a reaction which some readers might find difficult to credit. If only he'd not stopped writing, had listened more closely to what he now thinks were his cousin's cries for help in his letters. Desperate to know more, Jay persuades his parents to let him go to the Philippines during spring break. Sensing his son's determination, Dad sorts out a ten day trip for him; he'll stay first with Jun's family, then his aunt and her partner, then his grandparents in their remote rural home.

UK readers may already have found Jay's life in Michigan interestingly different. Now they'll be immersed in a country where family values, environment and languages are alien to them - as they are to Jay, whose insights into Filipino people and culture are often naive. Sometimes he's daunted, but he tries to be honest with himself and others, qualities which make for a revealing viewpoint for readers. Jay's arrival in Tito Maning's home is hardly welcoming. Jun's father is an autocratic police chief who buys into Duterte's policies absolutely. At home, he rules through fear. Tito

Maning soon makes clear his ferocious disapproval of his nephew's dissolute American upbringing. Elsewhere, Jay finds caring understanding and warmth.

The secrets of Jun's story unwind at pace. Given the plot has only ten days to play with, clues, encounters and revelations come thick and fast, though Ribay doesn't settle for glib resolutions. Confronted by the harsh life of the Filipino underclass, Jay begins to reach beyond his self-absorption to an awareness of others. They seem to be able to bear sorrow and confusion and still be positive, at times even joyful. Maybe he'd better look again at that drift into summer and a future he's not thought through.

Back home in Michigan, what he's learned opens up a new kind of dialogue with his Dad, who himself has much to discover about talking with his son. It may be that Jay's guilt about allowing his correspondence with Jun to lapse tests belief, but this remains a rewarding novel in its geographical, political and emotional ambition.

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