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Review of Oha: A Story Told in One Eternal Second

Celeste Aida Abad Jugo
cyan.abad@gmail.com

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Oha: A Story Told in One Eternal Second

Krie R. Lopez. Milflores Publishing, 2024. 256 pages.

The first intriguing thing about the novel *Oha*, is the claim of its subtitle: “a story told in one eternal second.” How this might be possible—a second, a very short unit of time, stretching out to an eternity, the longest unit of time—may only make sense if time itself becomes meaningless, that is, in death. Indeed, the short-lived protagonist, Mia, dies within the first forty pages of the book. Hereon after, the rest of her life unfolds in the hereafter.

In keeping with the meaninglessness of time in death, Mia is forever fifteen, haunting the house her father had built for her in Baguio in the 1940s after the Second World War. The house—an architectural marvel—becomes no better than a mausoleum, for her father leaves the house in the hands of the Ifugao caretaker, Manang Nita, and decides to live in Manila, visiting once a year on her birthday. This could be read as an effort, no doubt, to affirm her life rather than remember her death.

The book is divided into two parts: the first part being Mia’s transition from life to death; the second, her transition from death to life, more specifically, a life in the afterlife. Structurally, the book plays around with our expectations of the trajectory in a traditional story: our young protagonist dies before she lives, then has a metaphorical growth spurt, gaining health and vigor as a spirit, followed by a fading consciousness, before she is jolted back into the second part of the book where, eventually, she reaches maturity.

In Part One, right at the novel’s exposition, Mia finds herself at death’s door and is granted her three wishes at once. Following this,

she lives vicariously, when neighbors move in to the vacation homes built alongside her house upon the lonely cul-de-sac. In this new life she experiences a happy childhood and young adulthood, something she could not have had as a living human being. As an extremely sickly child, Mia was deprived of neighbors, classmates, and friends; but as a ghost she is finally able to experience such things, including the onset of infatuation, young premarital love, and heartbreak. Other than finally coming to witness and know the ups and downs of young life, Mia remains unchanged for decades until 1990 when her consciousness has all but merged with the plant life in the garden. This seems more aptly called sleeping action rather than rising action.

Part Two begins with the earthquake that struck Baguio in July of 1990: that which renders thousands dead is what rouses Mia back into living. She joins a group of ghosts living in the Casa next door. The events following build up swiftly to a climax of discovery: how life continues to be a sacred mystery even to the dead, and how both the brightest and darkest things on earth, from the most positive instances of love and forgiveness to the depths of self-hatred and despair, spring from the human being. The ghostly group's interactions raise a lot more metaphysical questions about life and death, and about their purpose as ghosts in the earthly realm; questions which echo, reprise, and build upon Mia's own musings in Part One.

The book is a delightful and logistical imagining of what it might be like to be a ghost, navigating around a house with walls and doors, photographs, books, and gardens; or around a neighborhood, walking down Baguio's streets, parks, churches, and other spaces. It gives us a glimpse of Baguio's history through its narration and through old photographs at the end of every few chapters. It also offers a literal ghost story from the point of view of the ghost, who witnesses both worldly and otherworldly frights and wonders. From the stories of different characters, we learn about folk beliefs and religion, gender and class

divisions, human weaknesses and human triumphs, hand in hand with human good and human evil. Finally, the meaninglessness of time leads to the discovery of the perfection of time: “*kasiyana sa*, all in perfect time” is the novel’s most repeated phrase. Dead or alive, Mia comes of age at the right time, in the right place, among the right people, having understood and come to terms with life lived on earth and lived again.

CELESTE AIDA ABAD JUGO

cyan.abad@gmail.com