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Review of So Heaven

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So Heaven

Isagani R. Cruz. Milflores Publishing, 2024. 373 pages.

Upon its 2024 publication, renowned critic, playwright, essayist, and short story writer Isagani R. Cruz’s long-awaited first novel *So Heaven* was met with—as expected—open acclaim and enthusiasm. *Esquire Magazine*’s Bryle B. Suralta described it as a piece “capturing the pain and fleeting nature that comes with human connections—set against the backdrop of emotional turbulence and societal upheaval . . . a meditation on the joys and sorrows of memory and how these shape the lives we lead.”¹ That assessment is far too self-serious for what the piece actually is: farcical rather than overly contemplative, blunt rather than metaphoric. The narrative is pointedly excessive in its descriptions of gritty, vulgar humanity, averse to sentimentality, and maximally irreverent. Complex though it may be, Cruz’s novel is steeped in sex, money, pride, and absurdity.

This is a bleakly humorous narration of the afterlife of Filipino zillionaire and publishing mogul Danny Livingstone—who earned his money by inventing the ear computer, a tiny device inserted into the ear, and the Bookamin, a pill that allows a user to summon a manuscript at will. Once in heaven, Danny meets his true love, the poet Emily Dickinson, and has the chance to publish her unaltered poems. But the Lord gives him one condition: he must prevent Annie, a doctor

¹ Bryan B. Suralta, “Our Favorite Filipino Books of 2024,” *Esquire Magazine*, December 24, 2024, <https://www.esquiremag.ph/culture/books-and-art/best-books-philippine-literature-a5102-20241224-lfrm2>.

destined to cure cancer, from committing suicide after her lover Christine, a schoolteacher, marries American billionaire George Brown. With the help of William Shakespeare and Jose Rizal (referred to as Bill and Joe, respectively, throughout the novel), Danny is sucked into zany antics meant to acclimate him to heaven's environment: from a lesbian love triangle formed by Annie, Christine, and George's daughter Faith, to arguments about how literary scholars misinterpret writers.

Grandiose expectation is automatically subverted in *So Heaven*. Cruz makes it a point to diverge from whatever conjectures were formulated about the novel and, more pointedly, from whatever are associated with the literary figures he evokes.

Cruz navigates his story through forty-five chapters that bounce from one character's perspective to another; it also utilizes five interchapters to contextualize major events through the works of writers like Ernest Hemingway and Herman Melville. Effortlessly, the novel melds its literary critique into an amalgam of raunchy jokes and plotlines that show how nobody ever lives up to who they are imagined to be. Danny is an intelligent, philandering cad that "only the sun [could] still ma[k]e . . . wonder, and that would never be surpassed by anything any human being—not even he—could make. He was happy, or he should have been, but he wasn't" (15). Christine, similarly dissatisfied, seeks out George's wealth to fund ear computers for her school (185). But the most, for lack of a better term, disillusioning revelations are that an illiterate Bill feeds Shakespearean Bookamins to his living self (114). This temporal paradox is the only reason these masterful plays exist; Bill never wrote them—whether then or now (115). And Joe was no prodigious revolutionary, merely a man who "wanted to prove that he could do what anyone else could do" (48). Ideologically, Annie is the only one appeased, satisfied by her low-paying medical work and life with Christine, but she too is a hypersexual and morally ambiguous figure. These are flawed, rambunctious, and often detestable people, so ludicrous in their desires that laughter is the only possible response.

To speak bluntly, the stakes for a reader are emotionally low, but this is by design. Cruz's novel does not endeavor to elicit lingering sorrow, anger, or joy because it is not concerned with the genuine; instead, it fixates on the hollowness of promises constructed in a neoliberal world.

Success in Cruz's hi-tech Philippines is empty and wildly hilarious in its pointlessness. Whatever victories the characters attain do nothing to ease the grotesque inequities that plague their society. It is a novel steeped in fashionable nihilism, defined by Patric Plesa as "an encounter with meaninglessness that is coupled with satire as a coping mechanism toward the systemic inequities we feel hopeless to change."² Danny's wealth may have saved the world, but he is no better than those who damned it to begin with—he bribes government officials to make his home's air space into a no-fly zone and he closes the South Luzon Expressway for a joyride (19–20). Nothing Danny improved has made the Philippines' reputation better on the world stage; rather he reifies its current decrepit status. George calls it "a sorry excuse for a country, even a Third World, a Fourth World country" (15). While even Annie's discovery that women's cum "can kill cancer cells instantly" (372) is ironic because women, viewed merely as sexual toys by George and Danny before his death, remain people "to be used" (150) for what they can provide to humanity.

The novel showcases that the Lord's will, being truly transformative in this alternative history, is "futile hope, but only those . . . in heaven know that" (116). Cruz's satirical wit is the only thing that negates the hopelessness of his world. That fact shows "[how] even the sentiment of meaninglessness can be commodified, highlighting the power of neoliberalism to transform the undesirable into the desirable."³

² Patric Plesa, "Neonihilism: Meaninglessness and Irony in Neoliberal Capitalism," *Theory & Psychology* 34, no. 5 (2024): 612, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543241258471>.

³ Plesa, "Neonihilism: Meaninglessness and Irony," 615.

There is nothing left for one to do in the face of Cruz's eclectic ensemble and his twisted humor but laugh and enjoy the emptiness of this heaven and earth, momentarily forgetting that buried among the innuendo are moments of searing literary and cultural thought. Only after the bawdy pleasure of sex and misplaced arrogance fades does the reality of Cruz's sharp, comical critique sink in—that once the chuckling and snickering has long-subsided, *So Heaven's* shallow joys reflect back the hollowness of the sociopolitical realities of today.

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