

A love story--of sorts:

Book review of Gina Apostol's (AB'84) *Bibliolepsy*

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***Bibliolepsy* by Gina Apostol is not a book for everyone. Readers who seek the familiar arc of a story, that breathless rise to a climax and subsequent slide to a resolution, will be disappointed. The flow of this story is not linear and easy to follow--it skips, repeats, digresses. The main character's motivations are not always clear and comprehensible even to herself.**

What Bibliolepsy is, is a book for those who can be swept away by the graceful and meaningful turn of a phrase, those who love a smart joke and who won't mind, once in a while, putting the book down for a bit--to muse on some cryptic phrase, perhaps, or to mull over two characters' opposing viewpoints.

This is the story of Primi Peregrino--born to an animator and an amateur taxidermist, orphaned at the age of 8 and who, as a young woman, occupies her days reading and seeking out and having sex with writers. "Like any citizen in a passionate country, I keep looking for some chimera; in my case, that fabulous monster of incongruous parts--text and body, manual and man." Part One relates her childhood in Tacloban. Part Two is about her young adulthood in Metro Manila, in the mid-80s.

Part One is an unequivocal pleasure to read; the episodes are funny or fascinating, often both, and Primi's parents, Prospero and Prima, are wonderful characters--loving but not cloying, unusual and yet utterly convincing. Just as interesting is Primi's sister Anna, who goes on a hunger strike to protest their Abulieta's tyranny, and almost dies as a result. It is in this first part that the seeds of Primi's bibliolepsy--an excessive love of words and books, "the endless logo-itch"--are planted. It is also in this first part where we as readers are stunned by Apostol's way with words, by her power to describe scenes and people and sensations, often with a rare and twisted wit: "Atorni Sugba, as he was called, has a lean, scholarly face that came from his having had to take the Bar four times. " Or, regard "30-year-old Joaquin, who had such an unerringly awful sense of fashion I think it was his way of elevating himself to myth."

But there is something else that Bibliolepsy achieves in this first part, seeming effortlessly. Despite the main character's "misplaced aptitude for a foreign language", these passages have a soul that is essentially Filipino, which is rarer in our literature than it should be. Glimpses of history and landscape meld naturally into the narrative, and we are charmed by their accuracy and vividness. The details are just right--Apostol does not come off as trying too hard, as striving for authenticity.

It is when Primi moves to the city and enters college that the book becomes, for lack of a better word, more difficult. Even the writing in the second part becomes more florid, more alliterative, almost as if Apostol believes--as Primi at one point wants to--in some deeper meaning inherent in the alphabetical ordering of word. (One wonders; is it an effectation of the writer, or the narrator? Whose tricks are whose?) Paradoxically, it is when Primi discovers her goal in life that the story starts to meander: "I was 18 and I felt my life was coming together, gathering ino some purpose: I knew what I wanted."

What Primi wants is to seek out men who are writers, or in some way connected to the act of writing, and to make them her lovers. It begins with an unplanned encounter with her poet brother-in-law. She then proceeds to seduce a typewriter repairman and afterward a writer she meets at her first poetry reading. As we follow her from man to man, poet to fictionist to politician, we are treated to a scathing overview of the local literary scene, with its pedantry and pettiness, its small satisfactions. Primi's account of her dalliances ends with an appointment of sorts with history: the EDSA Revolution of 1986. But it is an appointment that she, in the strictest sense, fails to keep, occupied as she is with her latest chimera-component, the "intolerably beautiful" motorcycle-riding boy named Fernando, who borrows a book from the British council at the height of the country's upheavals because, well, it was open.

"I speak--writing mainly on the impulse of love," Primi then narrator informs us. But Bibliolepsy, despite all the couplings and uncouplings, is not a love story, or at least not a typical love story involving a man and a woman. It is, as the title implies, about an obsessive, overpowering love of books that is both pathetic and awe-inspiring. For those of us who have gotten down on our hands and knees to thoroughly search bargain book bins--from the clean and well-lit to the downright grimy, from Morato to Recto--we will find our fervor echoed in the character of pale biblioleptic Primi, and find

Bibliolepsy a dizzyingly eloquent, slightly disturbing, but ultimately strangely comforting read.

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