



# Smaller and Smaller Circles

*F.H. Batacan*

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## **Smaller and Smaller Circles F.H. Batacan**

*Smaller and Smaller Circles* is unique in the Philippine literary scene - a Pinoy detective novel, both fast-paced and intelligent, with a Jesuit priest who also happens to be a forensic anthropologist as the sleuth. When it won the Carlos Palanca Grand Prize for the English Novel in 1999, it proved that fiction can be both popular and literary.

F.H. Batacan has a degree in Broadcast Communication and a master's degree in Art Studies, both from the University of the Philippines in Diliman. She has worked as a policy researcher, broadcast journalist, web designer, and musician, and is currently a journalist based in Singapore. She previously won a prize for her short story "Door 59" in the 1997 Palanca awards, and her work has appeared in local magazines, as well as in the online literary magazine *Web del Sol*.

## **Smaller and Smaller Circles Details**

Date : Published 2007 by The University of the Philippines Press (first published 2002)

ISBN : 9789715423649

Author : F.H. Batacan

Format : Paperback 155 pages

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# From Reader Review *Smaller and Smaller Circles* for online ebook

## LJ says

First Sentence: Some days I just can't seem to focus.

The body of a young boy is found in Payatas, a massive dump where people, especially young boys, scavenge for their existence. The severely mutilated body has been brought to Father Gus Saenz, a Jesuit priest and respected forensic anthropologist. However, this isn't a singular case and Father Gus, along with his friend, psychologist Father Jerome Lucero, is asked by the Director of the National Bureau of Investigation to help find the killer.

One should not bypass the initial page, or the subsequent transition pages, as these provide insight and a bit of humanity to the killer and, in fact, add to the story's suspense. However, this is also one of those times when the prologue really works. In the midst of horror, there is note of tenderness and caring which establishes the tone of the story.

Batacan has created a strong cast of characters. Father Gus is frustrated by the Church turning a blind eye to a pedophile priest, Father Jerome who started as Saenz' student and is now his friend; Director Lastimosa, the elderly head of the NBI, the very egotistic and ambitious Attorney Ben Arcinas, and reporter Joanna Bonifacio who was also a former student of Saenz. The combination works to bring the story truly to life, and the animosity between some of the characters is palpable; a sign of excellent writing.

It is interesting to learn about the culture and policing in the Philippines. One can't help but notice the focus on bathing and snacks, but we also learn of the complete inadequacy of their record keeping, technology, and inability to deal with missing persons. Much of that goes to explaining why the Director of the NBI would turn to the Father Saenz for help.

The author's descriptions are so well done yet often difficult to read..."the man's left shoulder touches the woman's right one, but the corresponding hips don't touch, as though they're used to leaving room there for a child...", particularly when dealing the sights and smells of the dump as contrasted by the evening at the opera with the elite. The contrast is very well done. Batacan's inclusion of the meeting with the mothers and families of the child victims lends a poignancy and humanity to the story.

There are three, equally important, threads to the story; the murders, political power-mongering, and the irresponsibility of the Church's insufficient handling of internal corruption and criminality; particularly pedophilia. The forensic information is fascinating. It also provides a very small look into the dictatorship under which the Philippines had previously lived.

Batacan's dialogue is so well done. The very natural..."You have to wonder what ones on in people's heads." "No, I don't," Saenz says, pouring Jerome a cup of coffee. "And I'm a much happier man for it. Come, sit, sit. No use complaining about the world's free press-we fought for it, we got it, now we have to live with the nonsense that it spews out.", and often humorous, exchanges between the two priests provides much-needed lightness to a very dark story, and solidifies the close friendship between the two men.

While many may guess the identity of the killer, and the events of the climax are rather unsurprising, it is very powerful, effective, moving and not without a good degree of suspense. The offshoot is sadly common everywhere, yet confirms that we must hope, always hope, for change.

“Smaller and Smaller Circles” is a very good, well-written book, and one which is a very affecting read.

SMALLER AND SMALLER CIRCLES (Myst-FF Saenz and Lucero-Manila-Contemp) - VG+  
Batacan, F.H. – 1st book  
Soho Crime – Aug, 2015

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### **Biena (The Library Mistress) says**

Stuck between 4 and 5, in the end, I think, I'm giving this a 4.5. :D

I want to be Joanna Bonifacio. Ugh, I really want to be like her. Hahaha. But I'd prolly do a better job in producing a fun and youthful show than a crime-driven program as I am as soft as Fr. Jerome.

Oh well, what can I say? I enjoyed this book very much.

I'm not afraid of crime novels anymore.

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### **Jr Bacdayan says**

One man's trash is another man's treasure, I'm sure we've all heard of this overused line. However in my country, sadly, this is to be taken literally. There are people who depend on trash as their main source of income. A sad reality where both adults and kids usually go through the dumps and scavenge anything they can from recyclables to broken electronics and even half-eaten food. Forced by abject poverty, immune to the stench, these people depend on foul, rotting garbage because it is the one thing that sustains them and their families. In one of the harshest conditions, a very gruesome setting, this tale takes place.

Smaller and Smaller Circles is a crime-fiction mystery set in the poorest slums of the Philippines. The infamous Payatas, a community of waste and decay with miniature rubbish mountains dominating the area, a place where the main livelihood of people is scavenging. Here a string of poor, malnourished kids are murdered. The police do not seem to care, the victims are piss poor anyway. Authorities are too busy catering to problems created by people of privilege, parents are too uneducated and defeated to know what to do, so for a good while things go undetected. In this scummy setting, two priests, a forensic anthropologist and a psychologist, find a pattern that leads them on a search for the painful answers we don't always seek, to help people who never get the opportunity.

The space for serious literary writing in the Philippines is insignificant for some odd reason. Especially for a country where a good majority of the population are English speakers, there have been only a handful of serious books to come out of the past century. I have more fingers in my hands than names I could mention of decent authors to come out of the country for the past ten years. That's why I'm going to make it a point this year to feature some of the few highlights of Philippine literature and this book is certainly one of them. Winner of the Palanca Award, my country's version of the National Book Award, this piece of crime-fiction is not only important because of its literary merit but also because of its socio-political commentary about

our judiciary system and the state of law enforcement. The portrayal here is harsh but spot on, law enforcement agencies and officers are not only incompetent but also corrupt. I'm not generalizing all of them, but that's the public perception in the country where most people believe that justice is only for the rich, and punishment is only for the poor. It's ugly, but it's the truth, and with our current president's brand of vigilante justice and the police force being given too much power, I don't see things improving any time soon. Literature plays an important role not only in highlighting something people already know but are too numb to feel, but also in ensuring that a record is kept for the future so that the generations to follow would not commit the same kinds of atrocities and mistakes.

Another important issue raised by the book is child labor. It's hard to fault impoverished parents whose children work, not because they're forced to, but because they both want and need to. In *Payatas*, a good number of the scavengers are children because they're the ones agile and limber enough to climb the pseudo-mountains and cranny nooks formed by the refuse and garbage. Child labor is not only limited to scavenging, there are a lot worse like mining, oil spill diving, etc. This might be a failure of parenting, sure. But on a more important note it is a failure of the state. It should never allow a system created where children are forced to labor because of poverty. If you stop these children from working, they will have nothing to eat. So what can the state do? It's a very sobering reality where ugliness and misery go hand in hand. And so when a more horrendous form of injustice happens, it's hard not to feel angry about the whole situation. In a sense the fiction might be a little bit too emotionally charged, but it is a forgivable case, because here reality might even worse than fiction.

F.H. Batacan's literary debut is an eye-opening journey into the barest face of a third world country, but at the same time it's also an interesting literary piece of crime fiction. It might not be the best whodunit, but it gives a voice to the millions of poor, suffering children who were never important, those children no one listened to when it was their turn to scream their last.

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## **Maria Ella says**

I hope the expanded edition of the first novella will not disappoint.

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## **Joy Bordador says**

F. H. Batacan's "Smaller and Smaller Circles," one of seven novels released as part of the U.P. Jubilee Students' Edition, is a rarity in the Philippine writing scene because it is a crime novel set in the Philippines. It is touted by the U.P. Press, its publisher, as more of a pocketbook than a piece of required reference material with its slick pacing, its engaging story and its late 1990's sensibility.

At the start, a series of murders are discovered in and around the Payatas district in Quezon City, leading many to believe that a serial killer is on the loose. Now the killer's style is different in the sense that instead of just KILLING the victims – all pre-adolescent boys – their faces and hearts are all missing. To be more exact, the body parts mentioned seem to be ripped out from the skeletal frames. Father Emil, the parish priest of the area, gives this information to Jesuit priests Augusto "Gus" Saenz and Jerome Lucero, a criminal anthropologist and a clinical psychologist respectively, who are working on this case in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Assisted by Joanna Bonifacio, described as a "one-woman NBI (National Bureau of Investigation)" operative, who works as a reporter and writer for a weekly current affairs

program in a large television network, the two priests try to trace the suspect and his motives for killing. However, Attorney Benjamin Arcinas of the NBI – a villainous coward in the “tradition” of real-life bureaucrats in Philippine politics – keeps obstructing them from obtaining the truth, which is actually a lot closer than any of them have thought...

Criminology and forensic science in this book is well researched and can be easily understood. It's obvious that the author's experience as a broadcast journalist has helped a lot in delivering the facts straight without confusing the first-time reader too much. Instead of bombarding one with strange criminological terms, she instead piles up detail over detail with words vivid enough to conjure the crime scene in the mind. There is a conscious effort to invite, not alienate, the reader, although the more gruesome particulars of the specimens being examined WILL disgust the weak of heart or stomach.

The whodunit element is also played up magnificently. It isn't lost underneath all the humorous banter and asides, whether they pertain to the crimes themselves or otherwise. In fact, the use of Fr. Jerome's dreams as a method of analyzing crime is very effective to show this (though she sadly abandons this device later on), as is the feeling of paranoia subtly wafting within it. It only reinforces the fact that he is an esteemed psychologist for a good reason, and that he has learned much about criminals thanks to his “apprenticeship” under Fr. Gus. But as soon as possible suspects in the middle of the story are mentioned, the realizations come fast and furious. You just KNOW who the killer is – the author stops short of practically giving him away.

Each of the major characters is nicely endowed with three-dimensional depth. Fr. Gus is über-cool on the outside, but skillfully hides a need for female companionship (although not the distaste for dentists) beneath. His former student, Fr. Jerome, is hot-tempered especially when stuck in traffic jams (also added in the book for a more realistic and wry touch), and is weak in constitution. (He throws up a few instances in the book.) Joanna is found sleeping with a married man in one chapter before running off to work early in the morning, if not gently teasing her mentor in the network she works in. The criminal – I won't spoil the fun of divulging who he is – is seething with rage underneath his shy but collected exterior not unlike the priest who would eventually lure him out into the open.

There are characters inflicting anger within the book – the criminal against his tormentor and former companions, who his victims represent, and the NBI bureaucrat against his past. But underlying all these is fury directed at the phenomenon of poverty so prevalent in the Philippines. Arcinas makes his way up the ladder of success because he wants to forget his roots in Tondo, the notorious slum district in Manila. The suspect lives under the cover of being a skilled middle-class dentist because it enables him to hunt down little boys who remind him of his past friends, all abused like him by a PE teacher in Payatas High School. He, like Arcinas, was not born rich, though because of his intelligence he is more able to hide it from most outsiders. But to illustrate that the ends do not justify the means, Ms. Batacan ensures that Arcinas is nearly sacked for his incompetence in handling the case. On a more bittersweet note, the suspect meets his demise near the final chapter of the novel, without making it clear how or why exactly this happens. Whether this implies that the fight against destitution is an exercise in futility is anyone's guess.

An interesting thing about this book is its slightly self-effacing humor, because no matter how difficult the case may be to solve or how disgusting the procedures of forensics science are, the book can skip from grim dialogue to bits of playful witticisms and banter and back without missing a beat. There are numerous references to pop culture thrown here and there, like Fr. Saenz's unconventional (by clerical standards, anyway) choice of music. Sometimes it actually feels like a parody of detective shows on TV today, such as “The X-Files” or “C.S.I.” (of which the author is reportedly a great fan). A particularly comedic side-story is Fr. Saenz's impacted tooth, which becomes all the more hilarious each time the novel uses it for comic relief.

Strangely, it doesn't seem the least bit tired; it is indeed to Ms. Batacan's credit that she can make a recurring topic funny for as many times as she can return to it, especially after a heavy discourse on homicide.

The best thing about the book is that it is a fast read (a moderately fast reader can finish it in 4 to 6 hours), in spite of the careful attention paid to details. It may lead both the protagonists and the readers in circles at first but halfway through the novel the direction it wants to take them becomes crystal-clear. There is a freshness to it: subsequent re-reads do not make it feel tedious or staid. However this same brevity also works against the novel somewhat – there is little room for character development, and sometimes the story is hard to follow once the pace picks up. In some cases, in the middle of the book one feels like crying out loud "How?" or "Why?" because it is too easy to get lost in the statements and particulars peppered all over the pages.

But all in all, "Smaller and Smaller Circles" is a breath of fresh air in a literary scene littered with nothing but obscure poetry and overly sentimental short stories and novelettes. Hopefully, this Carlos Palanca award-winning book will not be the last either from the author, or of its kind.

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### **Katie says**

I will write a review but I want to ask Clarisse some questions about life in the Philippines before I do so I don't make any ridiculously untrue comments.

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### **Nancy Oakes says**

plot and more at my online journal's crime page -- [here](#).

Let's face it...serial killer novels these days are a dime a dozen, so there has to be something to differentiate the good ones from the ho-hum and the same old same old. Author F.H. Batacan has found the way to do it. Her book *Smaller and Smaller Circles* is not your average hunt-for-the-serial-killer story, but rather a look at how politics, corruption, the power of the church, and the desire for power all get in the way of getting to the truth to save innocent lives. Heck, I got angry reading this book, and I don't even live in the Philippines.

The story is told via third-person narrative, interrupted every so often with the thoughts of the killer, whose identity remains hidden throughout the story. Truth be told, this is the gimmicky part of this novel, but fortunately, being inside the killer's head only lasts for a short time here and there. Most of the book centers on the ongoing investigation, but the author manages to weave a great deal of social commentary into her story. I will also say that for me, the discovery of the "who" was sort of an anti-climax, almost as if the author got to the point of having to tie the various storylines together but wasn't quite sure about how to do it. On the other hand, it really didn't matter because like most novels I really like, it's much more about the getting there than the actual solution of the crime. Ms. Batacan writes very well, lifting this novel well above most serial-killer novels that are on bookstore shelves as we speak.

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### **Lauren says**

This is an intriguing mystery set in the burroughs of Manila, Philippines. Two Jesuit priests, a medical

anthropologist (Fr. Saenz) and a psychologist (Fr. Lucero) assist the NBI (the National Bureau of Investigation) with a string of grisly murders taking place in and around a poverty-stricken area surrounded by a municipal trash dump.

The crime story follows the procedural path (it is a pageturner!), but the strength of the book is in the details about Filipino daily life, socioeconomics, and culture. Batacan is a journalist who originally wrote this book in 1996, but updated it in 2013 to reflect the continued "complacency and corruption" that takes place in her home country.

I would definitely read more of her work and her featured characters of Augusto Saenz and Jerome Lucero.

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*Read for Book Riot Read Harder 2018 challenge "a mystery written by a person of color"*

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### **Lynai says**

A brilliant crime fiction by a Filipino author in a Philippine setting. I am impressed. I want to read more Filipino books like this. More thoughts soon.

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### **Bethany (Book Noy) says**

Masterpiece!...exciting, moving, amusing, and intense in chasing the killer.

For me this is like the Filipino version of Silence of the Lamb, Hannibal Lecter, and the movie Identity starring John Cusack.

The plot is good and descriptive about the events.

Recommended for science and medical field topics.

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### **Leigh says**

I remember reading this for our Philippine literature class in college, several years ago, but I don't remember the story. I was surprised to see this title last year in bookstores, with a very nice cover change. And then I learned that it's also being sold in other parts of the world. This really made me happy, that it's getting the attention I think it deserves.

Simply put, this follows the investigation of a serial killer case. I thought the flow of the story is 'by the formula', just like many other crime novels, so you won't have a hard time following it. The real gem in here are the characters. Each of them represents different types of people we are all too familiar with. They represent different social classes, the poor and the rich, government, religion, those in control, those who want control and those who are being controlled, all with good and bad sides. And this is why you have to

read the book and read about these characters for yourselves. And then talk to me after. And let's hate and empathize and sympathize and agree to disagree and what not. So many good underlying issues presented on this book, much more than the main plot itself.

Actual rating: 3.8/5

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## **Maria says**

I like *Smaller and Smaller Circles*.

... So I must have read or watched too many crime stories already, because this was just okay for me. But considering that a Filipino author penned *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, I will admit it was a little impressive.

Two Jesuit priests are being consulted over a series of murders in the slums of Manila. They do have credentials as consultants, I think the background is anthropology..? Anyway, the victims are boys within the cusp of puberty. As soon as they went missing, it won't be long before they found the grisly, mutilated bodies lying blatantly in the slums.

It's a short read, and I liked that I did not feel shortchanged with the story. I liked the gore, on how the killer went on his ritual with his victims. I liked the back story too, on how the priests were able to profile the killer. I guess it did not just struck me as unique or inventive. Like I said, I was already too immersed with *Dexter*, *Criminal Minds*, and *CSI* to really enjoy the novelty of *Smaller and Smaller Circles*.

I might still recommend it, but if you are a hard-core fan of bloody murders, psychotic killers, and insane killing rituals like me, this will be just an ordinary "murder scene investigation".

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## **Book Riot Community says**

The thing about voraciously reading mystery/crime/suspense is that while you still enjoy the books, you inevitably hit a wall where you're rarely surprised and you can easily guess all the tropes to come. So color me happily surprised to start reading *Smaller and Smaller Circles* to discover two Jesuit priests (a forensic anthropologist and psychologist) are asked to consult in order to help identify and stop a serial killer—definitely one I've never read before. This book was dark, smart, took me to the Philippines, had a fantastic relationship between two priests, AND being set in an impoverished community not only are the priests dealing with corruption but there aren't labs and machines and technologies that quickly take the evidence and point to a suspect. If you're a fan of mystery/crime/suspense and regularly find yourself watching true crime/Dateline you won't want to miss this book. — Jamie Canaves

from The Best Books We Read In December: <http://bookriot.com/2015/12/23/riot-r...>

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## O says

Smaller and Smaller Circles is one of those rare one-of-a-kind books that you discover by some lucky stroke of fate and treasure for a lifetime.

This probably sounds like an exaggeration, but it's certainly true for me because:

1. **It's written by a Filipino author.** We don't exactly have a bazillion authors here spewing out books of all kinds for us to read every day. (Well, I suppose Wattpad stories are all the craze nowadays, but I'm not part of the target audience and am not interested in reading any of them for now.) In this third world country where finding a practical job is the norm, there aren't exactly a lot of people writing fiction (although, again, this seems to be changing because of those Wattpad stories). So when you find a good fiction novel written by a Filipino, it's definitely a nice surprise.

2. **It's a *crime* novel.** Do you know how many crime novels I've heard about or read that were written by Filipinos? I can think of probably less than five at the top of my head...and I know my Pinoy lit knowledge is limited. However, at a recent Meet the Author event I attended with friends, the Pinoy author we talked to mentioned that we severely lack novels in the crime genre.

3. **It's not just a crime novel, but one that fits perfectly in the Philippine setting.** It deals with a serial murder that occurs in the slums and the descriptions are so vivid that I could imagine myself trudging through Payatas along with the priest and the children in the midday sun, amidst the heat and the smell, right up to the part where they discover the first body. The revulsion and horror is so real that I had to close my eyes for a minute to calm down.

Smaller and Smaller Circles gave me chills. It wasn't just the murders and the gruesome way they were carried out. It wasn't the fact that the victims were kids, dying, one after another, while people struggled to find out who the killer was before he got another one. It wasn't just the psychological mindfuckery that made my head reel.

It was the reality of it all too. The claims that while the government declares there are no serial murders in the Philippines, how could one ever be sure this is true when people are constantly covering up shit to save their asses? The incompetent policemen, red tape, the politicians who would do whatever it takes to become famous instead of preventing more murders. Those priorities, man. Ugh. The few brilliant people who would do anything to prevent another murder, only to be thwarted by idiots with more power and ambition but have no care for justice. The poor people who had nothing, could do nothing even if murders occurred in their backyards. People who would turn their heads the other way because they were helpless or knew nothing would be done for them because they were nobodies. There was so much truth in the social setting that it disgusted me and made me tear up at the same time. This is fiction, yes, but it's so realistic that it hurts.

This book isn't good just because it's a Philippine crime novel. This isn't a "love-and-promote-your-own" sort of thing. Okay, maybe it is, but I only appreciate things that are worth it. And it's more than that. The fact that it makes you think about the truth it represents makes it one helluva book.

The plot itself sucks you in. Despite the fact that I'd already guessed who the killer was early on, I was still thoroughly enthralled by the book. The writing, the twists and turns, the quirky priests-slash-forensic-scientists (!!! That's certainly an interesting protagonist in the world of crime, don't you think?), the killer himself were all interesting and well-written.

However, it's **the truth about the justice system** that speaks out loudest to me and stays with me, although it's been a while since I read this book.

The justice system in the Philippines is weak. You only have to look at cases like the Maguindanao massacre, a terrible incident that happened in 2009, which still has not been resolved, despite all the evidence and media coverage. Shit, we've got news of witnesses getting ambushed and killed. (Paging the witness protection program, if you exist or whatever, you're doing a shitty job.) Or a case such as the Vizconde massacre, where the suspects were proclaimed guilty, only to be acquitted several years later.

While one cannot proclaim who is guilty or not, the niggling thought that cases can go on for years and years without being resolved is...disappointing. Sad. Horrifying. Families suffer through this shit for years. And those examples are crimes that have suspects and witnesses and evidence. We're talking about cases that are high-profile because the suspects or victims are famous, and thus reported by the media. What about the cases where common people are kidnapped, raped, or murdered? Do their families ever get justice, closure? Is justice ever truly served in our country?

These are the kind of thoughts you get from reading this book. It makes you uneasy. It definitely doesn't help you sleep at night, because the knowledge that you aren't as safe as you thought you were and the probable lack of justice should you ever be a victim (Heaven forbid) is just too terrible to think about. But it's an eye-opener, and while the truth is terrible, at least you've become more aware of how shitty the world can be.

Apparently, a new publication of this book will be out on August 18, 2015. I'm not sure if it's going to be different from the original story or not. But I will definitely be ~~stalking~~ watching the bookstores until I find a copy to call my own.

This review can also be found on my blog, [Lambent Lights](#).

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## **Rob says**

A reread.

This is a straightforward detective fare, the sort of material you wish you'd see more in local bookstores, less of the shit romantic taglish stuff. It's CSI: Philippines with priests. Batacan's priority was to tell the story, not to make a guessing game for the readers. Virtually no one believes the Philippines has a bunch of serial killers on the loose; Batacan makes it plausible using 'missing' statistics that the overworked/inept police don't keep track of.

The characters are fairly lovable, but if this we forget this is also a literary piece, the way Batacan fleshed them out smacks of pretention. Fr. Saenz and Fr. Jerome are the archetypes you see on long running pop crime shows like CSI and Bones: they are not bogged down by angst or the mystery of why an ever omnipotent, ever benevolent god allows evil. Joanna, the upgraded version of Lois Lane, leaves the NBI and the police in the dust with her social savvy and nose for information. Joanna learns the identity of the killer as quickly as Saenz and Jerome, although her sleuthing is unwritten half the time. The novel suffers from the Smurfette Syndrome: the important ones are all male, save for one lone female. For the peripheral characters, there are mothers, fathers and boys; there's a lack of girls.

Saenz, Jerome, Joanna (I'll refer to them as Saenz trio for ease) are polyglots, educated abroad, and culture

ooze from their pores. One thing I know this country is that these are indicators of high social status and it can overshadow the fact that education, languages spoken can be intellectual indicators ("Good taste" for Bach and Mozart and the rejection of the Biebers tells someone has enough resources to know the gems from the fads). Saenz's wealthy background is emphasized and juxtaposed with the killings embroiled in poverty, in a dump site, Payatas.

Saenz himself is not rich, but his family is rich enough to support his education, priesthood, CD-collection, emergency travel expenses while he works in a lab in which the equipment is (sometimes) supplied by grants. While this can be read as pop-fare detective novel, the "haves" and "have nots" don't go away. The scene where one of the mother of the victims thanks Saenz for 'doing everything he could for her son' is not a thanks related to finances, but for solving the crimes and helping identify the victims — Saenz's most important job, although there's that elephant: had anyone given these boys or a particular boy a chance, the killings may not have occurred. The politician who forgoes sleep to help Saenz and Jerome is the anti-stereotype of "lazy money-grubber". Nothing on the politician's finances, but usually those who run for office in this country are moneyed. Maybe politicians are men of action when it comes to good friends, like everybody else. Meanwhile, Arcinas, the bureaucratic character who rose from poverty to a civil servant somebody, is vainglorious and a deterrent to everyone until he was checked by his superior.

Perhaps Batacan was writing against poverty and that Saenz trio, flawed they may be, are the ideals born from secure finances? Who knows? There's enough sartorial morality here for the music lovers – it seems Batacan has genuine appreciation for it, having worked as a musician. In contrast, the peripheral characters don't have this wee problem, and the short paragraphs Batacan gives them makes them more believable, endearing and their poverty, heart-breaking.

(view spoiler)

One very disturbing scene was the confrontation between Saenz and the killer. The killer, mentally unhinged by prolonged sexual abuse, is lured by Saenz by impersonating his abuser. Anyone who cares enough to know how some Catholic churches spend Sunday donations finds out the Vatican has protected one too many priests who evaded the law and abused more children. While there's no hint of the predator in Saenz, only the conscious lack of frigidness, it does bring this ugly issue to the forefront. Those damaged by abuse are lucky if they have some sort of redemptive closure that does not involve death. Either these details are unintentional, or Batacan is more skilled than we give her credit for.

"Not everybody can be saved." It's an acknowledgment that sometimes grates against our wishful notions of good and evil. Saenz and Jerome will remain priests. This is a detective novel, not a philosophical contemplation. Tomorrow, many people will thank deities for the good. Evil and suffering remain.

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## **Cher says**

### **3 stars - It was good.**

A fairly predictable mystery, but I really enjoyed the Filipino cultural inclusions in the novel. I had also never read a murder mystery where Jesuit priests are collaborating with the police to solve a case, which made for an intriguing juxtaposition.

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**Favorite Quote:** We are powerless when we wait for other people to act on our behalf.

**First Sentence:** Emil is running after his slum kids, panting in the noonday sun, loosening the high collar of his shirt as he goes.

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### **Rincey says**

Maybe it is because I really was in the mood for a mystery/thriller or maybe it is because I reached the epic ending of the book the night of a thunderstorm, but man that was a good book. Definitely some unevenness and shows the signs of being a debut novel, but still really good. Watch my full review:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wImCI...>

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### **leslye says**

I'll give this book three stars because of the unique locale, interesting characters, and good descriptive writing. A crime novel set in the Philippines with two priests acting as detectives is not exactly run of the mill. The story is centered on the mutilation murders of young boys- the poorest of the poor in Manila.

There are three themes to the story: the murders, the political corruption, and the irresponsibility of the Catholic Church. The social conscience themes definitely come through in the background of this story.

Overall, it's not a bad book. The mystery is just so-so. You will guess the identity of the killer early on, and the ending is unsurprising. However, because of the setting and rich character development, it was still worth the read even without a good deal of suspense.

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### **Ranee says**

10-9-8...A circle is formed in the middle of the ground. Those found outside are dead. Ravaged by unknown beings in the darkness. Those that remain in the circle lives.

7-6-5... But the circle grows small. More and more people fall off the edge and is smothered by the dark flames. Makes you want to think, "Is this hell?" But the silence in the darkness just covers your voice. You squeak now, and then you realize, all that remains is you, alone. The circle continues to shrink below your feet until it does not even fit your own shadow. You wanted to seek your own corner and hide there for eternity. But the curves tell you other wise.

4-3...The circle suffocates you now. Heaving, large drops of sweat falls. Heaving.

2-1... SCREAM!

Zero. Wake up now! It was a dream after all. You sigh in relief. A relaxed smile forms, the corner of your eyes blurs with tears readying to fall. You may laugh now, you tell yourself. It was only a dream, you comfort yourself. But your laughter is drawn in by an unexplainable thing. You see, a circle is forming in the ground.

You can't run away.

The circle has no end.

Before I considered surrendering myself to being a physician, I wanted to become a forensic psychologist

and this book dissected the two in creating the main characters. A Psychologist and an Anthropologist. Odd, they had to be priests, so can't really try *crushing* on them without feeling any guilt. But I love them anyway. So how could two religious people do a job that called for science? The curious one in me savored the complexity of their character development, I see how they err as humans and see their divinity in the end. And I was equally satisfied by the supporting casts. I liked the twist in the mind of the suspect and the attempt of his family for retribution. The only person I was seriously doubting regarding her role is the reporter. Her existence in the story, even after knowing her prestigious background does not contribute anything in the plot, except maybe for having a third party to witness the relationship dynamics of the two priests. This book is well written and well researched. Even the contrast of the settings from Payatas to the rich subdivisions of Makati was well portrayed. A story set to thrill you, although not quite to stir you in your dreams but real enough because of the scene's familiarity, these are its strong points. And when you least expect it,

the circles, they come.

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### **K.D. Absolutely says**

Kudos to F. H. Batacan for writing the only contemporary detective Filipino novel in English. She, who now resides in Singapore, made a breakthrough with this book as it proved that Filipinos do read and appreciate good books outside our usual genres: love, romance, family drama, humor, politics and comics.

Well, aside from the fact this book being a required reading in some colleges particularly in Philippine Literature courses, I think there are still some of us who read this for pleasure. I think Filipinos reading our local books are not still not totally extinct.

The book is a legitimate mystery-detective-crime novel. I would not say that it is at par as those of Agatha Christie's, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's or Raymond Chandler's. Still it is quite a good try especially as it is Batacan's debut novel. The first half is very interesting. Characters are built thoroughly, the milieu is described vividly, the situation is clear and engaging, the prose is direct and *almost* no frills. Almost because the irritating phrases in different languages spoken by one of the secondary characters are proven, in the end, to have no purpose but for Batacan (is she a polygot?) to show off. The type of killing of the unknown (in the first half) serial killer is also too close to what has been shown in the 1991 Oscar Best Picture winner, *The Silence of the Lambs*.

The second half of the books seems to have been rushed through. It is as if Batacan took a sweet time going through her first half and she is afraid to exceed the prescribed number of pages so she just tied up the loose ends haphazardly. Too bad because she is able to engage me thoroughly in the first half only to pique interest in the second. The identity of the author is also revealed too early, i.e., right at the start of the second half that is atypical of the writing convention for mystery novels. That made the last few pages anti-climactic if not unneeded.

Overall, again, this is a breakthrough book. I had never read something like this in the Philippine literature until now. I hope to read more Batacan novels very soon.

Thank you, Kristel for giving me a copy of this book. Mabuhay ka!

