



# Gagamba: The Spider Man

*F. Sionil José*

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GAGAMBA, the cripple, sells sweepstakes tickets the whole day at the entrance to Camarin, the Ermita restaurant. He sees them all—the big men, politicians, journalists, generals, landlords, and the handsome call-girls who have made Camarin famous. In mid-July 1990, a killer earthquake struck and entombed all the beautiful people dining at the Camarin. Gagamba could have easily gotten killed—but he survived the earthquake, as do two other lucky people who were buried in the rubble.

As told by the Philippines' most widely translated author, this novel raises a fundamental question about life's meaning and suggests at the same time the only rational answer.

## **Gagamba: The Spider Man Details**

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Author : F. Sionil José

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## From Reader Review Gagamba: The Spider Man for online ebook

### Patrick says

Another great read from the master of Filipino letters written in English. The book centers around Camarin and the characters surrounding the Camarin lifestyle with the ending having Gagamba coming out unscathed while the other people who go there die. Death is the ultimate form of equitable democracy.

Gagamgba is a deformed man who God has somehow blessed with life while the "important peoples" died in an earthquake. He was a good provider and had a stable married life with a wife who was his childhood friend. The book takes place in Camarin the high end prostitute meeting place where Ermita took place. Didi, the madam who introduced Ermita to the intellectual man is retiring and is to be replaced by Fred Villa a scion of old sugar plantations in the Visayas and a Wharton graduate who breathed new life into Carmin. The hacenderos were forced to marry within the family to keep the holdings together. Fred is a philanderer who separated from his cousin/wife b/c of his philandering ways. He tries all the merchandise before he sells them, he makes sure they are all under 25 yrs old. He also prefers customers who he either personally knows or are foreigners so the discretion b/w client and customers are kept. Fred slept with his call girls before he sends them on their way to the customers. Fred called Lina, a barely 18yrs old who turned to prostitution b/c she wanted to get out of her subsistence middle class. Unfortunately for her, she has not found a man who has satisfied her when the earthquake hit and killed Lina and Fred.

Though Joe and Nancy sought the city's relative safety, they gave the safety net of people knowing you for the promise for a better future in the city. In the city, the young couple were relegated to beggar status that filled them with shame but it had to be done since Nancy was expecting a baby. Even the poor who already got shat on, died when the earthquake hit after the fact that a rich man gave them the best food to eat.

Rizal was the head waiter at Carmin who noted the customers like variety in their women. Rizal lived in a landfill with his family and despite the surrounding squalor he kept himself and his family clean. Unfortunately, his beloved and contented wife was dying of cancer and was suffering to boot. Whereas Rizal was loquacious, Mambini tended to be aloof though he gives too his neighbors freely. Mambini also likes predictability in his schedules so he does not date b/c dating would mess up his schedule. In the end Rizal envied the clientele of Carmin b/c they are able to stave off death but he settles for his wife to be pain-free in her final hours on earth.

Jim was an American white person who graduated from Cornell and whose father had a Filipino wife and daughter when he was shipped back to the US after WWII. His mom warned Jim against Filipino women b/c of his father happiness with his first wife. Jim was visiting the Philippines to find his half-sister and Filipino wife but with a pretext in a fact-finding mission for grad school. Although Jim's father loved his Filipino wife very much, he never sent money to the Philippines to support them. I like how Jim noticed the natural courteous nature and smiling personalities of the Philippines while stating Manila is grimy b/c of the lack of upkeep. It turned out that Jim's sister, Emma was beautiful and smart and b/c of her hard circumstance growing up strived to better her life and married into a successful family. Since her life turned out good, she was very generous towards Jim. Emma told Jim that her mother worked very hard to send her to school so she worked very hard in school graduating magna cum laude as well as becoming Ms. Philippines. Emma's mother's pride was when she gave Emma away in marriage as a virgin since her mother's lover left her. Although Jim wanted to stay and be friends with Emma he felt shy and wandered into Carmin where he died.

Hiroki Sato a Japanese executive, loved Filipino sincerity of feeling in that they would do anything for a stranger without expecting any compensation. He was the Japanese friend of Mars Floro for whom Fred was procuring the services of Lina. With the logging industry, Hiroki felt bad that Filipino's were denuding the

forest of trees but figured it was up to the Filipino's to protect their own natural habitat. He also learned that Filipino's had a short-memory of bad things happening to them that is the reason why they were able to do business with the Japanese. Mars was a Marcos crony who got his ill-gotten wealth during the Marcos regime and regained it during Cory's regime so Hiroki concluded that nothing in Filipino politics has changed. Mars Floro had 12 children all but 1 of them is illegitimate. But his one daughter was having an affair with a married man so he believed what his wife told him that the sins of the father visits the daughter. While Hiroki said that Filipino's were incompetent in a corporate setting as well as professionally, he liked their friendliness and they succeed in the pleasure industry. Unlike the common Filipino man, the leaders are greedy. Meanwhile, Mars was pissed off that his 19 yrs old daughter was going to marry Dave, the married man with 4 kids so Mars was mulling what to do about it. But, he had to meet Hiroki at Camarin where he died. Hiroki liked the young women @ Camarin b/c it made him feel more vigorous and youthful.

While Gatsy was from the middle class and continued his human rights activities, Eric a poor boy went to the US and thrived in Yale. He came back to the Philippines and started working for a corporate law firm. While Gatsy was outspoken, Eric was quietly calculating only telling certain people his thoughts. Rudy Galangco was a Marcos crony whom he taught that everyone had a price so one only needs to find what it is and exploit it. Rudy wanted to rehabilitate his image so he hired Eric to put a committee of things that he could improve on for the country. Eric, for his part, wanted to believe that Rudy was the way forward to change the country so he talked Gatsy into meeting Rudy to form a think tank for Rudy. Gatsy found Rudy to be charming and self-effacing with the possibility of liking his sworn enemy. When Gatsy cross-examined Rudy, Gatsy went for the jugular and accused Rudy of tax evasion to which he responded that he owned the paper that Gatsy was working for.

Senator Reyes and media magnate Eduardo Dantes were retired living their last days in relative obscurity. They bonded their anti-American impulse and nationalism and as a member of the elite sugar plantation owners. The Senator saw Gagamba as the essence of the Filipino people malformed, yet capable of survival, of virile locomotion with which to pursue the dream. While he was never poor and loved the position of power which let him enjoy food, women, drink, and high office, he shaped himself as the champion of the masses. They hated getting old as it means they could not get hard anymore. While Senator Reyes remained vigorously fit, Dantes seemed to look his age, that of a man approaching 90. They both loved talking about money and women. Since Senator Reyes told Dantes they were living on borrowed time, they threw caution to the wind and lived their lives with gusto.

Dolf Contreras had a successful real estate business and convinced Elisa was worth more than being a prostitute. Elisa independent mind attracted Dolf Contreras to her while he always reminded her of her past. The idiot always wanted to compare himself with the other men that Elisa has had so thus reminding her of her Camarin past meanwhile he declares her love for him. Elisa hated this line of questioning. Elisa was initially drawn to Dolf b/c he was an unapologetic sensualist. Dolf luxuriated in every inch of her body but despite this she was just one of his many ceridas. He told his women that he was not the marrying kind though he would shoulder the load of responsibility if they ever got pregnant. Elisa came from a poor farmers village and was raped by her uncle in Manila. Didi convinced her to work in Camarin. With Dolf, she was the perfect elegant woman but marrying her was an issue b/c he did not know how she would fit in his upper class society. Although lacking in schooling, Elisa has the bearing and the intelligence of the well bred woman. Dolf loved lounging around after their love making sessions and talk to her as though they were soulmates. After Dolf saw where she lived and the way she spent her money in helping her siblings through school, he bought her a home in Parañaque. Dolf forced Elisa away by obsessing about her past men while Elisa was prayerful and into social services. B/c Dolf constantly reminded her of her past, that Elisa left him and found peace in God as a nun. It was only when she was not there that he realized what he lost as a woman who was the love of his life. Camarin women preferred older men b/c they were considerate towards their women and did not force them to do anything they did not want to.

Tony Picazo's father was charged with corruption even though he still lived in a middle class home. The

priest was sad that the President did not defend honest professionals who want to help the country. While Tony wanted to keep the idealism of his father, he also wanted to go abroad to provide for his family's basic needs such as education, food, and shelter. How does one find professionals who are corruption free in the midst of a society where corruption is endemic? How does one move a lethargic nation? The Priest sided with the people who are enacting land reform for peasants for the lands. Seeing his friends who went to school with him become corrupt, he decided to go the US instead and lead a decent corrupt free life. The Priest who has lived all his life with the poor felt guilty for eating in a restaurant even if it is Tony's treat b/c his food in the restaurant is what poor people would collectively earn in a month. How does one raise the standard of living instead of depressing everyone's standard in a corrupt society?

General Primo's job was a man with who graduated from West Point and was fond of looking for women in Caramin. Major Sol, General Primo's bodyguard, was pro-US bases for the reason that his people would muck up everything that the American's made and make it ugly, a desperate desolation pervaded the place. Although the military academy had as an ideal how well they run the country, the reality is they looted for goods that accrued to people who knew how to bribe the right people. B/c he kept his own sense of professionalism and refused to pander towards the powerful politicians, Major Sol was shunted to a day desk job instead of the field where she belongs. B/c he was incorruptible when it came to Filipino's, the Colonel tried to convince Major Sol to smuggle drugs into the US in order to pay for his house while at the same time getting rid of the drugs from the Philippines and giving it to the US so the drug problem would be theres not stay in the Philippines. But, Major Sol wants to be a guy beyond reproach since he has seen the destruction that drugs has done and wants to continue being a professional soldier. At least Major Sol's wife has simple taste and does not want anything that they cannot afford so in the end Major Sol went back to Caramin to refuse the Colonel's drug smuggling operation and died waiting.

In the end, the only survivors of the earthquake is Gagamba and homeless Joe's small female child whom Gagamba adopted and named, Namnama, and Fred Villa who survived death only to learn that he was paralyzed from the waist down so he could no longer bed the women of Camarin (Divine Justice). I love the ending when Gagamba learns that perhaps God was correct in saying "blessed are the poor, and blessed are the meek", although all his life he felt like the outcast.

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## Joe says

First book read for the year. No regrets at all. The book reads like an anthology but well stitched together to tackle the grander themes of fate and the nation.

Was hoping for a cameo of Ermita Rojo though!

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## Lyanndra Reads says

I'm glad that a friend of mine's school library had a copy of *Gagamba* since I said I wanted to read more F. Sionil Jose books, and this particular title was actually the one I wanted to read in the first place. This book is really thin, which is why I finished it so quickly, but so engaging and poignant.

Much like *The Feet of Juan Bacnang*, this book discusses the many harsh conditions of the Philippines. At the famous *Camarin* "restaurant", people from different walks of life arrive, as if pulled by the hand of fate,

and on that day at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, a massive earthquake hits. The whole book moves from different points of view, zeroing in on the lives of the many characters who arrive on that fateful afternoon, showing a lot of their histories and their secrets. I thought this technique was unusual, but really effective. It was really interesting going through the different characters, and I switched from pity, to horror, to disgust and slight admiration while I read, depending on the character being presented. Some characters were utterly despicable and some were downright living in hell on earth.

F. Sionil Jose's writing is really one of the things I love most about his books. It's amazing how much he can make you *feel* just by using a few choice words. He also has a knack for unexpected twists, and situations where you'll feel as if you're really part of the story. The ending of the book made me feel so sad for some reason. The author seems to have a knack for that too.

All in all, a good, thought-provoking read!

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### **Ayban Gabriyel says**

Hmmm... I think this is my least favorite novel/story from my favorite National Artist for Literature and writer F. Sionil Jose. I personally didn't like it, I don't know...

The title is Gagamba literally means spider, he is a limbless man who is selling lotto tickets to whoever enters the restaurant Camarin, the novel is not primarily about gagamba or about anything that concerns him. But he got his cameo in every chapter of the book, he greets everyone who enters the restaurant on that special day in the month of July.

Every chapter in the book is like reading a short story, new characters, new story, different walks of life, different views and beliefs and different agendas, and coming in Camarin with one common ending. Death. A great earthquake struck and brought the building down on that gloomy Sunday afternoon. A bitter end for all of them, luckily Gagamba survived and a baby, that was saved from the rubble after the quake. In the end, Gagamba tries to figure out why he was spared from the tragedy, leaving a limbless man questioning God why?

\*one interesting thing though, there is a character here that was already used in one of his short story compilation.

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### **Tam Patapat says**

I've read some of F. Sionil Jose's books and short stories, and this is my favorite collection because, even though I greatly respect his views on politics and the Filipino psyche, Gagamba has nothing to do with either of these topics, at least from what I understood and remember.

The book revolves around the stories of the people who had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and as if miraculously, a mis-shapen man the size of a hobbit, who bore a resemblance to a spider or 'Gagamba', survived, along with a new-born baby. Of all the characters in the book, you would think these two had the least chance of survival.

But life does not discriminate, and neither does death. In the end, death is the ultimate equalizer.

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### Janice Acosta says

One event, one tragedy various points of view. But the most striking part or viewpoint was that of Gagamba. An act of God and act of nature - explained how the character looked like a "spider-man."

Another novel mirroring the harsh and beautiful lives of people living in Manila. Touching and thought-provoking. I am such a fan of Mr. Sionil Jose.

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### K.D. Absolutely says

I share my friend Ayban's sentiments captured in his review of this book. The book is like a collection of short stories with the main characters going inside the high-class whorehouse/restaurant in Manila called *Camarin* when big earthquake (July 1991) hit the country. On that day, only *Camarin* fell and so it buried all those characters who happened to be eating their lunch in that building at exactly 1:00 p.m. Reading the book felt similar to the experience I had reading Thorton Wilder's Pulitzer award-winning book, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (4 stars). However, there are only 5 characters in Wilder's book when the bridge collapses while here in *Gagamba: The Spider Man* there are 10 and reading each of their stories (prior to entering *Camarin*) can just be so awfully tiring.

Well, oh anyway, that was just me. Maybe because this is my 11th book read by F. Sionil Jose and those 10 short stories felt like a rehash of those that I've already read. We all know about Jose's deep-seated intolerance towards the rich people who are insensitive to the plight of the less-fortunate ones. We all know about his huge hatred against the Marcoses and his henchmen (cronies). We all know about his love of the country and his compassion for the unwashed. We all know what he stands for and what he is up against.

This book, just felt okay though. There are still his skillful style in storytelling. His characters, especially those that are hard not to be sympathetic about, leap from the pages of the book. The particularly like the waiter **Pete Domingo** whose wife is about to die of cancer and **Joe Patalinhug** who leaves his town in the Visayas because of politics only to let his pregnant wife beg in the streets of Manila for food. (view spoiler). My heart broke down crying reading their stories. These are enough for me not to hate this book.

So, if you have time, read only the first 4 chapters of this book and go straight to the last one for the denouement. Ignore the rest and you might as well read his *Rosales Saga* or *Ermita: A Filipino Novel* (3 stars). I really like the 5-book *Rosales saga* and Jose was particularly brilliant in the first book, *Dusk* (5 stars) and second, fourth and fifth books (all of them I gave 4 stars to).

However, a word of caution: don't expect too much from the last chapter of this book. There is nothing like Wilder's thought provoking philosophical question here. After all the lengthy stories, everything leads to a few pages of denouement and I could not help feel unsatisfied or longing for more, if not totally cheated.

Don't get me wrong though. I did not feel that my time was wasted. I definitely have not felt that way after finishing an F. Sionil book. His writing is something I go back to from time-to-time. For me, he is still undoubtedly one of the best Filipino novelists and storytellers.

## Bernie Gourley says

This short novel revolves around a real world event, the devastating earthquake that struck Luzon, wreaking havoc on Manila, in July of 1990. The novel is written in an unusual format. The chapters could be described as character sketches offering insight into various people who were in (or next to) the Camarin building when it collapses in the earthquake. Rather than the usual narrative approach, F. Sionil José offers captivating slices of the lives of these individuals that include insight into what brought each of them into the doomed building.

In the book, the Camarin Building houses a popular Spanish food restaurant called “the Ermita” that attracts wealthy movers and shakers both for its cuisine and for the ladies-of-the-evening who ply their trade there. The book presents an interesting contrast between the powerful military officers, businessmen, politicians, and expats who came there to dine and the common folk who work or live in the shadow of the building. The latter includes the character for which the book is named. Gagamba means spider in Tagalog, and it’s the nickname of a beloved man who sells lottery tickets outside the Ermita (because his deformity gives him an appearance reminiscent of a spider.) We see how all become equal in the cross-hairs of Death.

What makes these stories about the victims all the more intriguing is that we know from the book blurb that two of the characters (in addition to Gagamba) will survive the building collapse. The author does a good job of creating characters who are intriguing and who we want to know more about. There is the military officer who is aide to a high-ranking General but who is made a lucrative proposal from a superior officer to mule drugs (this being pre-911 days in which VIPs and their assistants might plausibly be exposed to little to no screening.) There’s a Filipino-American who is taking a priest and family friend out for a fancy dinner. The priest’s ominous discomfort with the setting of the meal – a feeling that we can’t tell is (as he says) because he’s uncomfortable with the cost or because he has an unspoken discomfort with the vice know to occur there – makes one wonder. There’s a homeless couple who lived in the alley beside the Camarin with their infant child.

I enjoyed this book. I think it offers some insight into Filipino culture and the chaotic nature of disaster. I’d highly recommend the book for readers of literary fiction, particularly if one also has an interest in foreign literature.

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## Apple says

This book offers many insights on what it is to be Filipino - that we have the capability to deal with the realities given to us, that family always comes first, that we always yearn for better things, that unfortunately corruption in the government has somehow become a fact of life. It also exposes many of our unpleasant idiosyncrasies. In a way I was slightly offended by the negative portrayal of the many Filipino characters, after all most of us do have some positive characteristics, however, I guess the narrative is F. Sionil's way of opening up the eyes of his readers, to what could be or what is actually happening. The main lesson I am taking away from the book is the reality that whoever we are, whoever we become, we are only as good as our actions, our thoughts, our words and our values. And in the end, regardless of how much money we have, how much power we've amassed, we're still vulnerable to the many twists and turns of life, and more importantly in death, we will face judgement not by the people we know or our families and friends, but by God.

## **BookNoy (Pinoy Reads Pinoy Books) says**

Gagamba The Spiderman ni F.Sionil Jose

Isa sa pinakapaborito kong awtor si F.Sionil Jose kaya naman lagi akong nagpapapirma sa kanya ng binili kong aklat na Gagamba. Pinupuntahan ko siya sa mga bookfairs, at sa Solidaridad Bookshop.

Sa aklat ng Gagamba, ang bida ay hindi isang superhero kundi isang pulubi o may abnormal na bahagi ng katawan. Tinalakay sa kwento ang isang trahedyang kumitil ng maraming buhay ng tao ang Lindol. Maraming tao ang namatay tulad ng mga sikat artistang tao, prominente, may posisyon sa gobyerno, mayayaman, at kasamana ang mga ordinaryo at mga kapuspalad na tao. Nabuhay si Gagamba dahil ba sa siya ay may pambihirang lakas sakabila ng pagiging abnormal, may mabuting puso, at tapat?

Hindi natin alam kung bakit nangyayari ang mga trahedyang kalamidad, aksidente, o masasamang pangyayari at may nababalitaan tayong nakaligtas o nabuhay pa.

Ang tanging alam natin ay binuhay pa sila ng Diyos sa kabila ng trahedyang upang ipagpatuloy pa ang kanilang misyon sa buhay, pasalamatang ginawang pagkaligtas at magbigay leksyon sa tao.

Sa panahon natin laganap ang trahedyang paglindol, pagputok ng bulkan, banggaan ng mga trak at sasakyan, pagbagsak ng eroplano, atbp. Dapat tayong mag-ingat, laging manalangin at ipaubaya sa Diyos ang ating kapalaran dahil siya ang tanging nakaka-alam ng ating buhay at sakanya tayo nanggaling.

“Blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek-he always known that words as belonging to God; could this be truth in them after all? He have to go on living, salt of the earth, surviving as beast, to feel its whims and knows its pulse when again it would be wrecked by anger”.-F.Sionil Jose, Gagamba:Spiderman?

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## **Aica says**

wish all Filipinos will get to read this book.

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## **Kristine Cervancia says**

We are in a big web of life that has bound to end no matter who we are or what we have done.

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## **Otakore Literantadodist says**

I bought this signed copy from Anahaw Books.

Reading the story, I feel a déjà vu. Of what's happening back then is happening also at the current time.

See my full book review at the following link:

<https://www.literateknolohitura.com/2018/09/gagamba-by-f-sionil-jose-book-review.html>

Thanks!

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## **Bennard says**

from The Book Hooligan

"There is something so equal and democratic about dying, certainly not living though all men may live in sin - the poor who seek salvation in prayer or in a sheaf of sweepstakes tickets are sometimes left with nothing but the benediction of a new day." - Gagamba's Narrator

Martial Law-era Philippines was one of the worst periods in Philippine history. Not only graft and corruption were rampant during those times (issues such as these were present even before Martial Law started), but also the stifling of free speech; the unjust detention of know political enemies of Marcos; the extrajudicial disappearances and killings of political dissidents; and so much more. So imagine (for that is all post-Martial Law babies like me can do) the relief of the Philippines when Marcos was overthrown and subsequently left the Philippines in shame.

However, a few years later, what has actually changed since the years when Marcos led this nation to ruin? Did the political situation of the Philippines change? In one of my past Political Science class, we discussed how the tyrannical rule of Marcos changed into an oligarchical rule by the landed elites which did not alleviate the sufferings of the poor and of the oppressed.

This is the situation of the Philippines post-Martial Law and F. Sionil Jose portrayed this in a very human manner by focusing on the characters instead of Philippine society as a whole in his novel, Gagamba. There are twelve chapters in the book: two of them deals with the title character, Tranquilino Penoy more known as Gagamba because of his deformations, and the other ten deals with the different people of Filipino society.

The narrative focuses on Camarin, an exclusive restaurant that caters to the very rich, and the characters within which is representative of Filipino society. Inside the limited sq. area are politicians, businessman, men of influence, waiters, activists, expats, poor people, foreigners, and more. They represent the melting pot that is Philippine society and, within Camarin, they air their victories, grievances, and lusts. They banter or argue with each other up to no end. However, as their respective narratives within the novel come to a close, they all suffer the same striking hand of Death in the guise of a powerful earthquake.

The novel is a well-written account on the different people that populates the Philippines. Each aspect of our society is explored such as poverty, corruption, inequality, injustice, and other ills that are still prevalent even if we got rid of the dictator that we kept on blaming for everything that is wrong. By focusing on the people that are the causes and that are affected, F. Sionil Jose encapsulated the corruption of the powerful and the plight of the poor.

In the end, Camarin was destroyed and everyone within was killed. Poor and rich, just and unjust were not spared. Only Gagamba, the man born with deformities left relatively unscathed and left him with survivor's guilt. Why, of all the people, was he spared? He lamented why would God give him horrible deformities if he was to be spared in the end? He laments like a Filipino John Donned as he is befuddled by the sudden generosity of a God who gave him deformities.

This may be the main point of the book, aside from commenting on the sociopolitical and economic ills of

our country, that death chooses no one and we all suffer the same fate whatever we do with our lives.

My only problem with the book is its multiple narratives. Normally, I like books with multiple narratives but this one seems overdone. Reading this is tiring as the clock is rewound with every new character that, at the halfway point, you are already curious about the aftermath of the earthquake. It is a good thing then that this book is short so the multiple narratives is not that much a problem and it does not negate the redeeming quality of the book as a microscope on the people that populate Philippine society.

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### **Becky Simplyme says**

I never read F. Sionil Jose, but those forgotten short stories-The Refugee, Graduation?

To my mind this book is not about the existence of God or the none existence of God, not about how we meet death nor how we survive. This is about the co-existence of the good and bad, the weak and strong, the sinner and saint. "Gagamba" knits the lives of each character, in one setting and one sitting, Camarin. The use of heroes' names in chapter 4 is beneficial but not to the characters themselves. The use of one o'clock in almost every chapter, where a different story is about to end, at the same time about to begin. By the way, eleven is also two number one, which the last story about high ranking military officials as drug lords is presented. Though dominated by male characters, each one shows a how males think about the their lover, mistress, boss, co-workers, children, sister and friends, how they handle certain problems.

Fred Villa and baby Namnama(named by Gagamba himself) survived that earthquake, sinful representation of the world and the latter the innocence which the world need,in order to build a new beginning.

Still, there was Gagamba selling sweepstakes tickets, his feature, a source of luck to others but a curse to himself.

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