



The Pretenders

F. Sionil José

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The story of Antonio Samson is the story of many Filipinos who find themselves lost and betrayed with nowhere to run to. It is fate that is often their own compulsive making. But Antonio Samson is not just an Ilocano looking for his roots; he is also the modern Filipino who fails to act in a society bereft of decency and justice. This novel, written more than thirty years ago, continues to be read because of its contemporaneity and the insights it focuses on the dilemmas of social change. It is also the author's most translated novel.

The Pretenders Details

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Author : F. Sionil José

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From Reader Review The Pretenders for online ebook

Joaquin Mejia says

Chronologically, this is the fourth book of National Artist for Literature F. Sionil Jose's series "The Rosales Saga". I think the book takes place in the 1950's. It is actually very easy to picture the Philippines during that decade because there is actually very little difference between the Philippines of today and the Philippines of the 1950's and 1960's. Like before, we still have problems like corruption, poverty, and a democracy that only serves the rich.

The book's main character is Antonio Samson who returns to the Philippines from the United States. When he returns to his homeland, he becomes a teacher in a big university (for a while), marries a rich woman called Carmen Villa, and tries to learn more about his family history by knowing more about his grandfather. But as he stays among the country's most affluent, he only becomes less and less heroic. He was a potential revolutionary, but his courage and wisdom were slowly going away as he grows more and more like the elite who don't really care about the country.

Wealth does that to people. It can make us selfish and uncaring. Wealth can make us blind. I always thought that it is quite a shameful thing to be rich in a country like the Philippines. Being rich can usually make us blind to the sufferings of the poor. Too many people in the country end up like Antonio Samson. They lose their courage and wisdom. They fail to make changes in the Philippines because they have grown indifferent.

Another very nice book from F. Sionil Jose. I have already read four books by the author but I can't get used to the tragedy in many of the books he wrote. Like the other F. Sionil Jose books that I read, I found this one difficult to analyze. That may be a good thing or a bad thing for different people. But I found the book good. If the book is good, then it is worth reading.

BoBang says

I chanced upon this while I was in college. I was required to present a book review in one of my classes. As I searched through the library's filipiniana section, I learned about Jose. I did not really intend the whole book since the book review requires us to translate some section of the book from English to Filipino. But I read it anyways.

I was surprised to learn how one principled man can change had he been exposed to a corrupt environment. And that environment, as Sionil Jose had shown, maybe your family or the workplace that you are in.

Karl Jandoc says

The people around Tony Samson couldn't believe his luck. His life would be veered away from the trappings

of lower middle class drudgery into dreams of high society. Little did Tony expect that the people responsible for kicking away the ladder of progress for his kind would be the same people who would destroy the very ideal he held on fastidiously. In the end, his body is as broken as the lives of those he identified with.

How could one read this novel and not be indignant against the forces in society that banner progress at the expense of shared prosperity? This book does not fade away easily...

Ronald Liwanag says

i wouldn't finish yet read this book

???? ???? #BookDiet2019 says

I've noticed a pattern in the Rosales Saga since reading the previous third installment of the series, *My Brother, My Executioner*. Simply put, the issues concerning national freedom and independence as well as the struggles, prejudices and prevalent corruption that have defined the relationship of Filipinos with themselves and their own countrymen ARE STILL THE SAME THINGS that are being discussed and argued to this day in my country. Now it was under a different social context but the fight is still being fought, and perhaps is currently suffering a stagnation.

FSJ's Rosales Saga was written in 1973 (starting with the third book I mentioned above), and his insights and chronicles about the effects of Spanish and American colonialism in Filipino heritage and culture are impressive and beautifully rendered on page. My personal favorite installment of this saga will always be *Po-On* which is the first book (ironically written as the last one, chronologically speaking).

FSJ's four books so far do have common themes. They were all set in Rosales, Pangasinan in Luzon, Philippines, and the five generations of families whose relationships and crises he had tackled are all connected by the Balete tree located in the plaza of Rosales town. FSJ explored the conflicts and strife that occurred between the families of poor farmers and the oppressive *mestizos* who are the rich, abusing their power and control on the lands these farmers are working on. Other obvious themes deal with first cousins who fall in love with each other (third and fourth books focus on this), the subjugation and suffering of a father that impacted a son's upbringing as a progeny and his own man; both failed and successful attempts at social reform; and the breaking points both personal and national that the characters have to face and make decisions for. *The Pretenders* is no exception.

In fact, many would consider this to be the climactic part of the series.

"I think that revolutions for a better life are never made by the rich and the intellectuals. They have everything to lose and they are not brave. Revolutions are made by small men--poor men--for they are the ones who suffer most. They care the least about status quo."

I remember when I first started reading this series two years ago. Each installment took a hold of me and ripped me in new ways I never thought I could be ripped. The precious details and tremendous moments of insights that F. Sionil Jose has imparted in each book will forever be engraved in my soul. That being said, the third book *My Brother, My Executioner* was somewhat alienating but mainly because of the romantic subplot concerning the lead male character and a peculiar woman which I found rather tedious because I wasn't emotionally invested enough on their characters. For *The Pretenders*, we get yet another romantic relationship, this time between Antonio Samson and Carmen Villa. Their marriage is a contested one, given his humble roots and her well-to background, but because there is love between, they both make it work; more so on Tony's end because he was the one who feels he has to prove something to the Villa family. This, for me, is the highlight of the novel.

Tony Samson is a free thinker at heart; educated in America and very much both cynical and hopeful that he could still contribute some changes in his homeland's politics and way of life. He used to participate in ideology and social reform discussions and writings with fellow intellectual compatriots whom he had grown estranged with the more he became a part of his wife's family. In doing so, he becomes even more entrenched in the corrupt system between the rich mestizos and the poor peasants and farmers who work for them but have also been rebelling against them for years. His marriage to the lovely Carmen has driven him right at the heart of the monster that he and other like-minded scholars had expressed the wish to bring to its knees, when he became friendly with Carmen's father Don Manuel Villa. By having a more personal connection to the man, Tony began to examine things about his own principles and his past.

"The fight for freedom must be constant. Don't forget that men can be enslaved by their own people, by their own prejudices, by their own rulers. What I am saying is that the ilustrados were not the real patriots. They wanted nothing more than equality. They didn't want freedom. It was enough that they could dine with their rulers, argue with them. But is another thing to be free. A revolution should not have to eat its own children. In fact, it is those who are in power who could very well initiate revolutions. Let us not be old-fashioned and think only of armed uprising of minorities as revolutions."

There are many discussions to be had about national icons and expressions of nationalism, some of them concerning the contrast between Jose Rizal's call for reformation and equality with the Spanish conquerors, and Andres Bonifacio's more radical revolution for the country's total independence and freedom from colonizers. *The Pretenders* is for me the most mediative installment of the Rosales Saga told in the perspective of a man who is torn between two worlds; the one he longed for in his heart as a freedom fighter, and the one he had to settle in since he married into its family. I like the internal struggle that Tony Samson has undergone during this novel because his transformation was poignant and challenging. Carmen Villa, his wife, was a vain, pampered and materialistic woman who unexpectedly understands Tony better than I would have given her credit for. It doesn't make her any likable for me because something about who she is and the role that she played in the story that just never sat right with me, but I certainly do believe she was well-written. I believed her characterization even if it was something I feel repelled by.

A key conflict that is highlighted for *The Pretenders* is Tony's dilemma between his humble roots and heritage and his new life as a privileged man in relation to him marrying rich. Suddenly he was being judged and often condemned for his choice, but it was nothing compared to his own brand of guilt because he felt as if he has more obligations to his country and ideology rather than to his own wife, and this was how his relationship with her slowly deteriorated.

There is more tension and strife among the classes of the country which take place both in the local lands and in the universities of foreign lands where Tony along other scholars get caught up in. Tony acknowledged that he is indeed among the privileged ones but it doesn't make his desire to fight for his country any less noble than his poorer and uneducated counterparts in small towns, nor does it diminish his capacity to be a tool for change and prosperity for his homeland. Tony Samson can be likened to the modern Filipino still finding his place in the world. His story connects him to a past that chose him, and it's also our story.

"...because any movement that seeks to overhaul established attitudes is, I think, a revolution."

The Pretenders is a novel that tries to unmask the players who truly want to contribute something meaningful for love of country, while also revealing the hidden ones who only wish to gain an advantage that feeds their own self-interest and egos. Much like FSJ's earlier books in the series, it was superbly written with crisp prose and riveting exposition and character portraits.

RECOMMENDED: 8/10

DO READ MY REVIEWS AT

Bianca Trish says

finally finished reading this book for HUMALIT :)

Benedict Santos says

EPIC

K.D. Absolutely says

The 4th book in the Rosales saga. This saga is the only one in Philippine literature written in English. Written by National Artist for Literature F. Sionil Jose, this saga encompasses the most tumultuous 100 years in the nation's history that start in the late 19th century with the end of the Spanish occupation. This book, *The Pretenders* is set during either the 50's or 60's when there was an influx of professionals, including teacher-scholars for doctorate degrees, to the US.

Tony Samson is a young professor who has just returned from Harvard where he took his doctoral degree. Tony's father is Antonio Samson, Sr. who is the elder son of Estaquio "Istak" Salvador/Samson of Book 1 Dusk (5 stars). Antonio Samson, Sr. has joined the guerilla movement against the government and landowners so he gets imprisoned. Tony Samson, ashamed of his father, keeps this fact about his life a secret to his circle of friends. Upon returning to the Philippines, he gets employed as an assistant professor of

history in a big university. He again meets **Carmen Villa**, the youngest daughter of a rich businessman, **Don Manuel**, who he had earlier met in Boston. They fall in love and he brushes aside the fact that he has a girlfriend, his first cousin **Emy** who he has left waiting for him in his hometown in Rosales, Pangasinan.

The title refers to the characters in the novel who are pretending, i.e., who are double-faced or those who are ignoring the reality or truth at the expense of having a more favorable life. Life in the Philippines during that time was harsh in general. The U.S. Military Bases were still here and America had strong influence in running the affairs of the government especially the economy. Foreign nationals (Americans, Japanese and Chinese) run big corporations and since the Huk rebels have lost their battle in Central Luzon, the feudal system and the displacement of farm workers continue and has now moved to the rest of the country including Mindanao.

The internal conflicts that I saw and like in Book 3 My Brother, My Executioner (Rosales Saga, #3)'s (3 stars) main protagonist, Luis Asperri is also present and stronger, in the mind of this novel's main man, Tony Samson. However, the choices left to Tony Samson are impossibly easy to do compared to that of Asperri. Even if this is one of the weakness of this novel, Jose's storytelling here is better than most of the books in the saga. I really love it when the author is withholding something and leaving those to the readers to interpret and imagine. That trick got me in awe and mesmerized when I finally closed this book. The unsaid and the nearly unsaid made this book more interesting and impactful. Jose's taut and solid prose is a luminescent and heartbreakingly beautiful at the same time.

Aside from the over-thinking protagonist, my other minor complaint about this book is the boring middle. That part is unbelievably uneventful and feels like a plot straight from television serials. However, the last four chapters more than made up for it and deliver a tour-de-force ending that I did not see in any of the four earlier books.

I am now raring to read the final book, the 5th, Mass. Thank you Ben for being an excellent reading buddy. Thank you for pushing me to finish this book when we hit a slump somewhere in the middle.

Janross Ayson says

I would reiterate that F. Sionil Jose's 'The Pretenders' is a timely book that has a modest significance on the role of social realism in flourishing Philippine literature for it catches our attention on the Filipino nation's chronic social crisis and the dilemmas of a social revolution. Antonio Samson, the main character of the novel, is symbolically torn between his rhetorical talk on genuine social change and his pathetic life in the status quo as the disgraced son-in-law of Don Manuel Villa who believes that every man has a price, so this book is a mere reflection of our continuing soul-searching about the important role of ordinary Filipinos in this nation's continuing quest for mass nationalist awakening and social justice.

Ayban Gabriyel says

Wohoo! Rosales Saga done! :)

Francis Quadrean says

The pretenders
by Francis Sionil Jose

The story is about master-and-servant relation in the “industrial world” of Manila, Philippines. Tony got lucky because he married a wealthy woman named Carmen. Despite that he didn’t get the blessing for marriage from Carmen’s mother they still continued the wedding secretly. Although Tony is poor - he is a hard working man and good with business that is why Carmen’s father likes him. I think society should not discriminate people who came from poor family. Not all men or women who came from poor families are lazy. Throughout the whole novel, the main issue is class struggles. Those struggles are the reason that Tony is being "the pretender". This is the reason why Tony is confused at the end of the novel. For me, Tony is the one who's the pretender. He is trying to be a rich person but he's really not, for his roots are from the poor. He tends to forget that he came from a poor family and doesn't want to talk about it for he's embarrassed. These issues for me are the main points that should be pointed out in this novel. Those things are the reasons why Tony pretended. Being married to a rich person doesn't mean that you should forget your roots just because you're hypnotized of wealth and power. These things must be that reason that you're keeping your feet on the ground and not let wealth and power changes you completely.

There could be many possible themes for this story, but I'm not going to talk about one right now. I'm going to try to reveal the main issue in this novel. Tony, Antonio Samson, in this story has a poor background who turned rich because of her wealthy wife. For me, the main issue here is the use of your newly acquired wealth and power to forget all about where you came from. Wealth and power is one of the most important things for some people right now. Same goes with Tony, he's hypnotized with all the wealth and power he now have to change himself and be embarrassed in telling stories of his family. Antonio Samson's character here is somewhat wide open to a huge change, but he does not know that it's the change that would let him lose his true friends and would lead to his death.

If i got the chance to marry a rich woman whom i really love, I will grab the opportunity despite of being poor and lack of support in the family of the woman. I will fight for my honor and my right to do whatever i want to do that is not illegal but i wont turn my back on where i came from.

Both of them will struggle on their life because they pretend too much. For relationship to work you to trust each other and you have to be honest.

Life is always sad. That's what makes suicide so tempting because life is all that we really have and haven't. Death makes us equals, too, because the foul and the good all die. The past, the present, and the future-what escape is there from these? None-and yet sometimes we are life's happy victims.”

I did not hesitate to tell them that I not only had the authority of facts, but that it was my conviction that our worst enemy was ourselves, our vanity, our pride and our desire for honor.”

But you must be sure of what you want the land for. And as for your tenants, if they don't own the land, don't

expect them to make sacrifices. It never works, you know. Besides, the transition shouldn't create dislocations. It isn't easy to shift from agriculture to industry

All her life, she was used to being pampered, to having everything she desired, but the things that she valued were never those that could be bought but those small tokens of truth and dogged fidelity which she, herself, could not give to anyone."

Chris Denver says

An eye opener. A must read!

"Equality could be won on paper. But once it is won, that is the end of it. Freedom and the fight for it must be constant. It must never cease. And do not forget that men can be enslaved by their own people, by their own prejudices, by their own rulers... What I am saying is that the 'Ilustrados' were not the real patriots. They wanted nothing more than equality. They didn't want freedom. It was enough that they could dine with their rulers, could argue with them. But it is another thing to be free. And that is why I do not consider Rizal a hero. He was great in his way -- but Marcelo H. del Pilar was a greater man. He died a pauper in Spain. In the end, none of the 'ilustrados' could approximate the stature, the heroism of Bonifacio. There was a man -- he was far more heroic than Rizal. He was a laborer, he was illiterate compared to Rizal. But he fought for Freedom. Rizal merely wanted equality. Perhaps, the new nationalism can address itself to this a new sense of values." - Tony Samson

Alds says

There were some chapters where the narration was a bit too long, but in these long narrations were woven the experience of being a Filipino that the author was imparting. What I don't like is that the Filipino communities presented here were only extremes-- either you were very rich, or very poor-- and it presents a very bad image for the Philippines. Yes, those extremes exist, but those extremes are not all that the country has.

But then there are the other chapters, which were so well-done. I loved the writing here. So deep and thought-provoking. Here we witness how badly the main character fucked up. In the end, his worst enemy turned out to be himself... and he was able to beat that enemy in the only way he knew how. And it leaves the book ending on a very depressing note.

The book draws parallels to El Fili, with its revolutionary tone and depressing ending, and I like it. I hope more of us read it... and that all of us learn from it.

Sheryl says

Everyone starts with good intentions, for the most part but not everyone can say they end with the same.

2017 Book Riot's Read Harder Challenge: Read a book you've read before - 6/24 (Read this back in college as lent to me by a fellow TWG member).

John Exos says

Very powerful.
