



Biggest Elvis

P.F. Kluge

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August 16 1977: Elvis Presley dies in Memphis, at a mansion called Graceland. A dozen years later, a man called Biggest Elvis - the oldest and fattest of a trio of Elvis impersonators - galvanizes the sailors and bar girls around the huge US navel base in Olongapo, Philippines. In their act, Baby Elvis (who does the youthful Presley) Dude Elvis (who does the movie years), and Biggest Elvis incarnate the King's evolving life. Their popularity grows: in a tawdry, anything goes town, a successful act becomes more than that, almost an obsession. But there are those who think that Biggest Elvis has to go...

Biggest Elvis Details

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Mike says

I've been wanting to read this novel for several years after seeing a recommendation in Nancy Pearl's Book Lust. Finally I found it in the EBRPL OverDrive ebook collection. The premise is that there is an Elvis act that features three Elvises, the young Jailhouse Rock Elvis, the middle Elvis (movie Elvis), and the Biggest Elvis, fat Elvis, the main protagonist. It's a great concept, made even more exotic by being placed in the Philippines, in a city by a US naval base. I was a bit surprised with the multiple narrators, being that the biggest Elvis was the best voice, but it works well enough. There's issues of colonialism, made even grittier as many of the characters are sex workers. The grittiness descends into bleakness at times, so be prepared: the exploitation of sex workers can be a difficult subject. I'm not entirely sure that Kluge found the best path out of the dark depths in order to resolve the story. But it feels real enough so that the juxtaposition of the profane and comic is justified, unresolved, and even postmodern.

Katie Hainsworth says

Fell asleep too many times so I give up.

Beverly says

A novel about an Elvis impersonator in the muck of modern life in the Philippines, It has a funny, sad twist that you definitely don't see coming.

Cynthia Lerner says

I really enjoyed this book; the main character grows and changes for the better. I read the recommendation in Nancy Purls' Book Lust and that was enough for me.

Doug says

I read this book years ago - and it has stayed with me. A little bar in the Philippines has an Elvis Show. There are three acts, three Elvii. Young Elvis does the first act, then Dude Elvis, and it ends with Biggest Elvis. The real point is to give the touristas something to watch while the prostitute-waitresses try to get their business. We learn about the three impersonators, and some of the prostitutes and bar owners and staff. But then something starts happening - the show gets good. Young Elvis sings a ballad and Biggest Elvis comes in behind him, half in shadow, accompanying him - a sad foreshadowing about what is to come. Or Biggest Elvis is singing and Young Elvis walks behind him, a flashback. So many people come to see the show - that the prostitutes start making more money in tips than they make turning tricks, and start turning down propositions from people they don't feel comfortable around. And this changes everybody's status quo and

then a lot of plot happens.

Sherry Sidwell says

I read this book about three Elvis impersonators almost like a Holy Trinity of Elvi in the various stages of the King's career marooned at a Philippine naval base years ago and it's stuck with me. It's both hilarious and depressing in capturing the effect of American and military culture on natives of other countries who are neither of those things.

David Patneau says

This is a book I wouldn't have picked up on my own. It's going on twenty years old, it's by an author I hadn't read, and the whole idea of reading more stuff about Elvis (or worse, the phenomenon of Elvis impersonators) would've initially felt like a waste of time. But my brother talked to me about the book, and then he gave it to me, and then I read the synopsis and some reviews and realized the author, P.F. Kluge, had some strong credits and at least one other book, *Eddie and the Cruisers*, I did recognize (because it was made into a movie I saw).

So I dove in. And I'm thankful that I did. The story--part adventure, part suspense, part mystery, part romance, part sociological study, part cultural analysis, part commentary on ugly Americans (individually and institutionally) and the fact that the ugliness isn't restricted to Americans, part condemnation of the exploitation of women, but at its heart a tale of friendship and perseverance--pulled me right in and kept a hold on me all the way through.

In the beginning the setting is what got my attention. For the most part the story takes place in Olongapo, the Philippines, a place I had the opportunity (if you can call it that) to visit when I was in the Navy many years ago. It was a wild place, a town built by and around the U.S. military. It may not have been the original sin city, but it had a reputation as the biggest. Hookers, bright lights, forbidden back streets, gambling, mugging, hookers, STD's, bar fights, liquor, rock and roll, and hookers. Next to it, Las Vegas was a kiddie playground at the local park. When we left port there was a long line of guys with long faces outside sick bay, hoping to get some pills for the mysterious urinary tract infection they'd picked up just recently.

But aside from relating my memories of the place to the Olongapo so vividly brought to life by Kluge's writing, I was carried along by the characters. Biggest Elvis and his two co-impersonators are strongly developed and brought to life and differentiated. They're sympathetic despite their faults. They're trying to figure out life and their place in it while trying to deal with it at the same time. They learn. They grow. They change. And the author doesn't neglect the tier of characters just below the big three, and the tier just below that one, even though there are lots of characters. The father figures and manipulators and exploiters, the downtrodden, the abused, the victims, the sailors, the laborers and servants and musicians and bar girls and good girls and people with scruples and people with none.

There was an overriding tendency among the real-life sailors who walked the garishly lighted, loud, smelly, streets of Olongapo, whether they were fresh out of high school and looking for their first sexual experience or a mid-thirties married lifer renewing old acquaintances, to lump the so-called take out girls all together in one sorry category--a homogenous product, all the same, something to use and put back on the shelf. But in

Biggest Elvis, Kluge does a wonderful job of bringing these women (girls, in most cases) to life as individuals. Each has her own story, her own likes, dislikes, aptitudes, goals, her own reason for doing what she's doing, her own level of pride and self-respect despite her job and station in life. Under his telling, they become humanized and sympathetic and the shame we feel isn't for them it's for the systems, the U.S. and their own government, that exploited them.

But even these women have their limits. They're used to adversity and standing on their own two feet, and once they've made it obvious that they're not just marching-in-lockstep objects, all they need is a little help from their friends.

You may not connect with this story as I did. But the writing is exceptional, the story is engaging and unique, and the characters are memorable.

George says

I found this book in the Kenyon college bookstore in the faculty-authors section. The book has great description of life in a Philippine town that is dependent on the Subic Bay Naval Base for its prosperity, if you can call it that. The story is about three men who put on an Elvis act portraying three stages of his life, young Elvis, the movie Elvis and the bloated Elvis. In the background are the activities of the bar girls who hustle men for drinks and whatever. It's a big night when the "fleet is in." The conclusion of the book seemed a trifle constucted, but I thoroughly enjoyed this book.

Erica Verrillo says

P.F. Kluge is a magician. He can pick you up and plop you down anywhere in the world with a few well-chosen words. In this trick, he transports you to Olongapo-- the world's biggest brothel. Kluge tells the story from the perspective of three Elvis impersonators (and others as well), which gives the book a vivid and intimate feel. It is simultaneously a mystery, a love story and a slice of history--told with such humor and compassion that you will be enthralled from the first word to the last.

In Biggest Elvis, three unlikely Elvis impersonators wind up in the Philippines with their tripartite act: Elvis as a young man ("Baby Elvis," a rather thick young man who has had only one idea in his life), Elvis as a disenchanted, leather-clad sell-out ("Dude Elvis," who dreams of being a movie star), and, finally, Elvis as an overweight, drug-ridden has-been ("Biggest Elvis," a burnt-out college professor). The trio has high hopes for bookings in "familiar" places (Europe, America), but instead they land in Olongapo, a small town that serves Subic Bay Naval Base, America's largest military installation. Where there are sailors there are prostitutes. And, as the three unwitting Elvises discover, where there are lots of sailors, there are lots of prostitutes.

It is the interplay (no pun intended) between a half dozen beautiful Filipina prostitutes and the Elvis act that forms the heart of the plot. But while Baby Elvis discovers true love, and Dude Elvis winds up with a somewhat dubious version of his lifetime ambition, Biggest Elvis lands in the midst of an insurrection. As he

encounters history in the making, Biggest Elvis is transformed from being a fat, ineffectual ex-professor, to an icon, and, eventually, a target. The question is: Who wants to kill Biggest Elvis, and why?

What is so appealing about this book is that Kluge manages to combine truly memorable characters and an engaging plot with Philippine history. No, it is really our history he's talking about. The Philippines were America's first true colony, and housed our largest military base, which was key to winning the War in the Pacific during WWII, and acted as a jumping-off point for all our further (questionable) military operations in the region. If we want to understand ourselves as an empire, we really should know more about the Philippines. I am embarrassed to say that I don't, although with Kluge as my guide, and Elvis as my inspiration, I intend to. Thank you Mr. Kluge.

Meghan McFadden says

This is why I love books, this is why I love grabbing books from thrift stores... Biggest Elvis is not a book I would normally grab. It had a gaudy cover with the name "ELVIS" in shiny holographic print. There is a picture of the real Elvis on the front and on the back, looking fat and sweaty. There were no reviews, very little information about the book at all, I didn't recognize the author's name. It wasn't an award winner. So why did I grab it? Because I read the first page. That's all it took. I brought it home and proceeded to read it to the exclusion of all else.

Biggest Elvis is the story of a trio of Elvis impersonators who band together and create a show that features Elvis in three different time periods, young Elvis, movie star Elvis and "Biggest" Elvis. The story takes place in a dumpy town in the Philippines, and features a cast of true characters. I really enjoyed how the narration switched off throughout the book. It helps the reader to understand the various characters better. This is a charming story in some respects but it also has a lot going on intellectually. It's about so much more than just Elvis impersonators. It touches on America, consumerism, slavery, prostitution, immigrants, colonialism and more. I was really impressed.

Tim says

Flash, size, indulgence. Both Elvis Presley and America are hard to ignore.

The three ages of Elvis are on energetic display in "Biggest Elvis," P.F. Kluge's excellent novel set in a Philippines town that feels the influence — good and bad — of an American military presence. Former teacher Ward Wiggins is the "Biggest Elvis" of the title, a 40ish man of late-period Elvis girth who follows the Lane brothers, Chester ("Baby Elvis," the pure, rockin', energetic early years) and Albert ("Dude" Elvis, the glitzy movie years) in a three-pronged Elvis act that becomes the toast of Olongapo, Philippines. The Elvis impersonators aren't the only ones swiveling their hips at the rechristened Graceland, a club they've put on the map. The "Elvises" and their relationship with a group of Graceland lovelies who service, in every way, the sailors from the nearby U.S. naval base forms the core of this novel. The women's fathers may live off the land, but the daughters live off the fleet.

As a character in the book says: "What happened at Graceland symbolized the whole sick thing: Americans with beers in one hand, money in the other, standing unsteadily while a beautiful nation went down on its knees."

Told alternately by the three Elvises, the man who brought their act together, Graceland's female manager, one of the Graceland girls and a local priest, what the format of the novel loses in structured momentum it gains in insight. To the priest, Biggest Elvis in particular is another priest in the neighborhood, one whose magnetism he feels is hurting the town.

As the act grows in popularity, some people think Elvis has to go.

The premise sounds fun — and it is — but Kluge usually has more serious issues in mind than a hunka hunka burnin' Elvis. His tackling of the relationship between the Americans and the Filipinos is intricate and moving. The coda to this baby initially seems like an encore that goes on too long, but after it's all over, you realize how much you love it.

You don't have to be an Elvis fan to warm to "Biggest Elvis." Kluge has created something very special here.

Punk says

Fiction. A depressing book, set in the Philippines after the US Naval Base at Subic Bay has been closed. It centers around a bar and its three Elvis impersonators, with the biggest, fattest Elvis as the narrator. Enough prostitutes and economic depression to choke even the biggest Elvis.

Four stars. It might be depressing, but it's also damn good. Now that ten years have passed, I think I'm ready to read it again.

DW says

The last couple books I've read for the one reason that they were set in the Philippines were disappointing, so I was surprised by how much I liked this book. Given the setting in a whorehouse, I still wouldn't recommend it to my mother, though.

I liked the story and the characters, and I liked how Dude changed but Baby Elvis and Biggest Elvis didn't. I liked the setting, and I really liked how the author captured the way Filipinos speak English. I wish the author made more of a distinction between Dude's voice and Baby's voice when they were narrating; there was at least twice when I thought one of them was speaking until another character addressed him. I also thought Biggest Elvis went on a bit too long with some of his poetics, though I realize that's the character.

I was surprised by the people at the end, though it was sadly believable. I thought Biggest Elvis's last stand was a bit overdramatic, but it worked.

Esther says

I bought this at a used book store a couple of years ago at one end or another of a long trip, and it never quite managed to get read. Given that it's about a trio of Elvis impersonators, how did that manage to happen? The conceit is actually the thing that's the most fun: the book shifts around between POVs, many of them belonging to the three Elvises, whose act chronicles the rise and fall of the King. There's Baby Elvis, who sings the earliest stuff; Dude Elvis, the jaded movie star; and Biggest Elvis, the culmination. Baby Elvis and Dude Elvis are brothers born in West Virginia and raised in Guam; Biggest Elvis is a washed-up English professor named Ward Wiggins, and somehow their act becomes this happening at a come-and-go club in Olangapo, the Philippines.

To be truly honest, I'm not sure how to approach most of what I read about the Philippines and the Pacific here. Obviously colonialism and the American military were a huge feature, and Kluge paints a very vivid picture of how the presence of an American military base affects the island. The book... hmm. It doesn't seem to have much focus, plot-wise: it meanders throughout, and the fourth and fifth act kind of spiralled out of control, despite having some heart-wrenching situations with very sympathetic characters. We hear a lot about (and from) the Filipina women, and how they survive and suffer and support each other (or don't). We hear a lot about contract workers, and how they're perceived and treated. One of the POVs is a Catholic priest, who's an interesting, complicated guy. I wish I could offer actual intelligent commentary, but truly, I don't feel like I'm even close to leaving the "listen until you have something to add" point, and I have a lot more listening to do. It's a book that takes on a lot of problematic perspectives and events, and I don't have the history to know more than that I'm unsettled.

(Really, though, the book's problem as a book is that it's all over the place. I do know that much. I was definitely invested in the characters, though, so it had that going for it.)

David Geissler says

What a sad twist at the end. I am not sure how much truth there is to the style of life in that region of the world, but man did this book go from happy-go-lucky to tragic in a heartbeat. Ward's actions are mostly predictable throughout the story, but he really commits to it in the end.
