

Boston Globe Aug. 1996

## THE GANGSTER OF LOVE

By Jessica Hagedorn

Houghton Mifflin. 311 pp.

Something disastrous happened to the peace and love generation around 1970, causing the flower children to fall hard upon a bed of thorns.

Perhaps they fell hardest in the hippie mecca of San Francisco, where Philippines-born Raquel "Rocky" Rivera, protagonist of Jessica Hagedorn's bleak second novel, brings her poetic gifts to founding the proto-punk rock band Gangster of Love.

The band's oxymoronic name grows quickly appropriate, as Rocky gropes for love ceaselessly throughout the book. But she searches in such barren places and with so mistrustful a heart that love seldom proves more than what a nun announces on the first page it will be: "a fatal mosquito bite."

Still, Rocky's search propels what begins as one of the most auspicious literary novels about the rock scene since DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*.

Just as Romanticism sickened and died a century ago, the make-love-not-war decade of the sixties withered on its hopeful premise of a perfectible society. Singers with flowers in their hair yielded to the spiked purple punkers of Hagedorn's world, screaming their three-chord disillusionment in what amounts to a mantra of "Let's smoke, snort, have meaningless sex and be miserable, for tomorrow will be worse."

For Rocky it's worse than for most. She's struggling with not only historical but cultural enigmas. As in Hagedorn's first novel, the National Book Award finalist *Dogeaters*, Rocky must wend along the jagged seam where her Filipino roots enter American life. Or, as Hagedorn puts it in a mirthless joke: "Why did the Filipino cross the road? Because he thought America was on the other side?"

Early on, Rocky is surrounded by a colorful cast. Her mother--"a volatile presence, vampy, haughty, impulsive"--leaves Rocky's powerful father in the Philippines and takes Rocky to California. With them is Rocky's tormented brother Voltaire, whose dramatic depressions and mood swings their mother attributes to a curse by "malevolent spirits who coveted his beauty while he was still in her womb." Voltaire's ups and downs might also be due to believing his grandfather invented the yo-yo.

Voltaire brings home an interesting menagerie, like a girl from Rocky's English class who'd once been Susan Levine before resurrecting herself as "Eurydice." More importantly, he soon introduces Rocky to Chinese-American guitarist Elvis Chang. Instantly smitten, Rocky asks and answers for herself the question that has doomed any number of love affairs: "Can he save me? From what, I'm not even sure, but of course he can." Rocky observes, "My virgin crotch tingles with love and anticipation, but like any good rebel Catholic, I know how to wait." A week later, she moves in with him.

Her savior? Not when she's not sure what she needs saving from. Not when Rocky miscarries a baby, cries hysterically, and finds that Elvis's idea of consolation is, "Shit, baby, that's life."

Equally insipid and egocentric characters drift into Rocky's sphere. There's Sly Washington, a drummer, who Rocky notes "brought out my worst instincts. We enjoyed an edgy camaraderie, and I loved getting high with him. Sly didn't know the meaning of guilt." And there's Rocky's best friend, Keiko, a photographer who follows the band to New York where she experiences enormous and mysterious success.

So, too, does Rocky's band. But, as pop icon Sting has noted of his own career, at the height of her success Rocky's life is falling apart. Sadly, it is also at that point, barely a third of the way through the novel, that the plot sputters and all but dies.

Of course, many readers may long since have grown disenchanted with the joyless, jaded hedonism of the sordid milieu, although it will prove tame enough to those who've gotten their kicks in the mosh pits.

The novel hits its downward spiral for two reasons. One lies in its unfortunate structure. Hagedorn reverses judicious construction by propelling her plot masterfully early on but then veering off it in favor of tangential character development late in the game. The other, more fatal problem lies in trying to enlist sympathy for characters who are already mired in self-pity.

Hagedorn attempts any number of means to jump start her stalled plot. She has Rocky take a job with a holistic medicine practitioner whose prescription for weight control is not diet ("Diets don't work because they're all about denial") but ingesting a tapeworm until the patient reaches the desired weight. Hagedorn has Rocky give birth.

She has Rocky's mother visit New York. She creates health crises for one then the other of Rocky's parents. She plunges into Philippines political events, "Imelda's daily sideshow." She has a band member capriciously murdered.

Although her plot frays and fizzles, Hagedorn always proves an energetic and imaginative stylist. She provides copious narrative variety with kaleidoscopic changes of viewpoint, tense and format. And even if many readers will lose patience with Rocky's angst, Hagedorn sifts it perceptively, exploring its sources in contemporary life.

It has been said that girls, looking for love, will undertake sex they are not ready for while boys, looking for sex, will toy will love they are not ready for. Like drugs, Rocky constantly experiments with both sex and love and finds fulfillment in neither. Rocky's mother had once told her, "Sex is for men and animals."

And who is love for? Rocky says of Elvis, "I never quite relaxed around him, and so I stayed in love longer than I expected. He fulfilled my notion of love, which meant no one would ever get what they wanted. Love for me had never been a source of comfort, but of anxiety and longing, desire and regret. It was a terrible emotion, really." The reason, Rocky proclaims, is that she had never seen anything like loving warmth between her parents. How do we learn intimacy if we don't see it?

This novel may be far less surehanded than Hagedorn's first, but in an era when, as Rita Rudner says, a marriage is considered successful if it outlasts milk, this may certainly be a novel for our time.