

# Dogeaters by jessica hagedorn



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Dogeaters is Jessica Hagedorn's first novel.

The author returned to her native Philippines in 1988 to write the work, and it was published in 1990 when it received the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. The novel reflects the eclectic life of its author whose experiences have included acting, singing, songwriting, and writing poetry, drama, and fiction. For the most part, Dogeaters has been well received by critics and scholars who commend its experimental nature and innovative writing style. Jessica Hagedorn is a well-respected post-colonial author whose works present gender, social, and cultural themes. Dogeaters is considered one of the most widely studied novels about the Philippines and is an important example of contemporary Asian American literature. Despite being generally favored, some critics have called the novel fragmented, eclectic, chaotic, abrasive, and controversial. It is a melange of stories and themes, a kaleidoscope of motifs and a collage of characters combined to create what the author calls a "crazy-quilt atmosphere."

It is a story that cannot be told in a traditional narrative, according to the author, so despite the complaints of some critics that the novel's multiple plot lines weaken the narrative structure, the author justifies her chaotic mix of narrators, memories, dreams, news clippings, movies, radio programs, news stories, and television programs as being necessary to her purpose. Dogeaters can be a confusing novel to read. Truth and fiction are interspersed and the reader does not know what to believe. By their own admission, the narrators cannot be trusted to tell the truth. The news articles and historical excerpts that the author tosses in lend an element of realism to the narrative, but they too are only partially true. The history presented is

revisionist: part history, part memory, and part creative license. The events alluded to are based on actual historical events, but they are modified.

Martial law, for example, was not declared until the 1970s, not during the 1950s when the novel takes place. "Chaotic," cry the critics. "Exactly!" answers the author. The novel is largely metaphoric because the characters serve the dual purpose of character and symbol. Therefore, most of the characters are not complex and the author has been criticized for the number of characters that overcrowd the novel, sometimes causing a lapse in development. Critic Blanche D'Alpuget points out such a lapse with Rio's brother, who is introduced at the beginning of the novel, reappears at the end as "Rio's soul mate," but is not mentioned anywhere else in the novel. In addition, some critics have commented that the many plots and subplots leave little room for character development.

Jessica Hagedorn acknowledges those critics who have accused her of "setting back the race 400 years" with her stereotypical characters and "wanton disregard for the people." She believes that this is the purpose of literature, however. "You don't go to literature and say I need to feel good about my race, so let me read a novel," she argues. Dogeaters has a postmodern narrative style that includes fragmentation, paradox, and questionable narrators. The narrators contradict each other. There are multiple plots and subplots, none of which are sequential, so the novel is difficult to follow. The words are written in English, but in an effort to illustrate the effects of colonialism on the characters' language, there are so many undefined Spanish and Tagalog words peppered throughout the narrative that it can be annoying to read according to critics.

“ Hoy, bruja! Kumusta? Ano ba--long time no hear! What’s the latest balita? Sige na--sit down and let’s make tsismis. ” While critics admire Hagedorn’s attempt to use cultural vocabulary for authenticity, many agree with critic D’Alpuget who calls Hagedorn’s exoticisms “ tiresome, more a nervous tic than a desire to make connection across the gulf of culture. In exposing the nightmare that was Manila during the dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, Hagedorn depicts a corrupt modern day Sodom and Gomorrah, addicted to sex, drugs, food and American movies. By including marginalized and alienated characters of Manila’s subcultures (pimps, whores, sex workers, transvestites, sexual deviants), the novel comes very close to being pornographic in parts. The language and sexual situations are graphic, perverted, and offensive, so educators are cautioned to carefully consider the appropriateness of this novel for teaching purposes. Although the major theme of the novel is the evils of colonialism, unlike many Diasporic writers, the United States is not Hagedorn’s only villain. The characters and the Philippine nation are guilty of victimizing themselves.

While they may dream of escaping from a country where they can only passively watch to see what will happen, few actually do escape. Hagedorn explains that like Rio, she left the Philippines and “ settled in the country of my oppressor” because the U. S. is a “ country that allows you to reinvent yourself,” whereas in the Philippines, people can become trapped by politics, culture and money. Hagedorn has the same love/hate conflict that many Filipinos in Diaspora feel towards their country. In the introduction to her collection of poetry *Danger and Beauty*, Hagedorn explains that her work is a “ love letter to my motherland: a fact and a fiction borne of rage, shame,

pride. " Dogeaters | Introduction Dogeaters is a political and historical tale of the Philippines, enacted on a world stage, whose characters are both human and symbolic.

It is a spectacle, a parody, a fantasy, a farce, a roman a clef, and a bildungsroman. It is a postmodern, satirical, allegorical, realistic, stream of consciousness, dramatic narrative that is at times pornographic. It is an indictment of colonialism, dictatorship, and religion. It is angry, sad, poignant, repulsive, violent, disjointed, and funny. Its themes explore colonization, exploitation, reality, sexuality, politics, religion, and the search for identity. Its characters include mothers, fathers, grandparents, children, political leaders, movie stars, porn stars, pimps, prostitutes, generals, and guerrillas. There are three main narrators and two minor ones who have different versions of the truth.

The timeline is disjointed and unstable, making use of flashbacks and flash forwards. It is a chaotic tale of a third world " banana republic," set in a former United States colony whose people both emulate and revile America. The novel is a mixture of the history, memories, and images of life in Manila during the Marcos regime. Dogeaters is a hectic cacophony that challenges the boundaries of the traditional novel. Dogeaters is the first novel of Filipina-American author Jessica Hagedorn. It was published in 1990. In 1998, Hagedorn turned the novel into a play that was performed first at the La Jolla Playhouse and then at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre in 2001.

Most of Hagedorn's work focuses on the identity struggle of Filipino Americans trying to assimilate into American culture without having to

relinquish their roots. Although *Dogeaters* is considered the best known and most widely taught novel about the Philippines, many were offended by its title, an insulting slang expression for Filipinos. The pejorative term was coined by American soldiers during the Philippine-American War. It is a reference to indigenous dog-eating tribes in the Luzon area of the Philippines. The author defends the title, however, calling it “ a fittingly harsh, confrontational title” for a novel that portrays a turbulent period in Philippine history. *Dogeaters* | Summary It is 1956. A young Filipina girl, Rio Gonzaga, narrates her family’s story.

The Gonzagas are an upper middle-class family consisting of Rio, her older brother Raul, her mother Dolores and her father Freddie. Rio’s maternal grandmother, Lola Narcisa Divino, lives with the family in a guest room next to the kitchen in the back of the house because her husband, Rio’s American grandfather, Whitman Logan, is ill in the American hospital with what Lola Narcisa insists is the mysterious *bangungot* disease that only affects men. The American doctors do not know what is wrong with Whitman, dismissing *bangungot* as mere Filipino superstition. Rio and her cousin Pucha Gonzaga are American movie fanatics. They are particularly fond of American actresses Jane Wyman, Agnes Moorehead, Gloria Talbot, Ava Gardner, Debbie Reynolds and Rita Hayworth. Rock Hudson and Tab Hunter are their favorite actors. Rio and Pucha attend movies every chance they get.

Afterwards, Pucha likes to go to cafes, drink TruCola and flirt with boys, especially Boomboom Alacran, whom she plans to marry someday. Rio is four years younger than Pucha and not interested in boys. Rio enjoys sneaking off to her grandmother’s room at night to listen to the famous

Filipino radio drama, *Love Letters*. Lola Narcisa rarely speaks, but she and Rio enjoy listening to the soap operas with the servants while they eat traditional Filipino food with their hands and “cry unabashedly. Rio’s father is a respected businessman who works for the very rich Alacran family. He often complains of being a “guest” in his own country because although his parents are both Filipinos, they grew up in Spanish colonial Philippines and moved to Spain when the Spanish ceded control of the country to the Americans. Rio’s “Rita Hayworth Mother” Delores is a former beauty queen who lives to maintain her beauty.

She and her husband do not get along and each of them has a lover. Rio’s family is close with Pucha’s family. Pucha’s father, Agustin Gonzaga, is Freddie Gonzaga’s brother. Freddie has secured a job for his brother with the Alacran conglomerate. Once a year, the paternal grandmother Abuelita Soccoro travels to the Philippines to visit her two sons Freddie and Agustin, bringing her two other sons and their families. Abuelita Soccoro is a formal woman, religious and strict. She is very different from Rio’s maternal grandmother, the Filipina Lola Narcisa.

The children dread these visits, especially since they do not speak Spanish and their uncle must translate. The dysfunctional Gonzaga family saga intersects with the more volatile and bizarre Alacran family story. The Gonzagas are close friends of the Alacran family, even though the Gonzagas are Alacran employees (the Alacran family story is told by a third person narrator). Both families attend the same country club, play golf together and socialize with each other. The Alacran and Gonzaga children are encouraged to call the adults “Tito” and “Tita” (Aunt and Uncle). Severo Alacran is the

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richest and most powerful man in the Philippines. He flies his own plane, collects primitive art, smokes expensive cigars and lives in a museum-like home.

He owns several companies and was once nominated for president. He is married to Isabel, another former beauty queen. Isabel and her husband have frequent vicious fights. Severo has several illegitimate sons whom he refuses to acknowledge. They have one daughter together, Baby, who is a burden to them both. Baby is not beautiful like her mother. She is shy, soft, plump and short.

She has acne, flat breasts, wide hips and "peasant legs." She sweats like a man and bites her nails. One night at dinner, the pathetic Baby announces that she is going to marry a soldier, Pepe Carreon, the protege of the powerful and fearful head of the Philippine military, General Ledesma. Her mother is horrified, but her father is secretly delighted and relieved that someone actually wants to marry Baby. When her parents refuse to allow her to marry until she finishes high school, Baby takes to her bed and develops a hideous rash that the doctors cannot cure. Just as mysteriously as it appears, however, it disappears and Baby elopes with Pepe Carreon. She is pregnant.

In typical Philippine fashion, rumors fly. Baby has been captured by the Communists. Baby is being held for ransom. Baby returns and a hasty but traditional Catholic wedding is planned. It is the wedding of the decade. The President and First Lady are honored guests. Shortly thereafter, Senator Avila is assassinated as he steps out of his car.



Senator Domingo Avila is a popular left-leaning senator. He leads the opposition to The President and The First Lady. Although Avila is a distant relative to the powerful General Ledesma, he despises the cruel general. Their two wives attend the same church and the men are cordial to each other in public, but General Ledesma has been overheard saying that Senator Avila "should have been assassinated long ago. Senator Avila wants to unite the many warring factions that make up the Philippines and form a government in opposition to the current dictator. He is a man of the people that wants his country to break free of its colonial legacy, but the government-controlled press vilifies him and the passive Filipino people would rather watch movies and listen to soap operas than get involved in politics. There is a growing revolutionary movement, however, which reveres Senator Avila and circulates his pamphlets.

Senator Avila is married to a "controversial professor of Philippine history," Maria Luisa Batungbakal Avila. She shares her husband's passion for his country. They have two daughters, Daisy and Aurora. Daisy wins the Young Miss Philippines annual beauty pageant. Her mother believes such contests are demeaning to women and refuses to attend the pageant or let her younger daughter watch it on television. Instead of being excited about her win, however, Daisy plunges into a mysterious depression. For days, and then weeks, she refuses to come out of her room.

Newswoman Cora Camacho tries to bribe the Avila family servants to find out what is going on. The beauty pageant sponsors are worried and angry. People are camping out on the Avila driveway taking bets on when Daisy will appear. Even the First Lady declares on national television that "Daisy Avila

has shamed me personally and insulted our beloved country. " Daisy finally agrees to an interview with Cora Comacho in which she denounces the beauty pageant as a farce and " a giant step backward for all women. " She accuses The First Lady of deluding Filipina women. English banker Malcolm Webb sees Daisy on television, becomes enamored with her and calls her on the phone.

Daisy impulsively marries Malcolm Webb and abdicates her title. Malcolm soon tires of the spectacle, however, and returns to England. Daisy Avila has become " the Rebel Princess" of the Philippines. Daisy escapes to her cousin Clarita's art studio. Clarita is a controversial artist of erotica. Her paintings embarrass her own mother who refuses to look at them. In Clarita's studio, Daisy meets the exciting revolutionary Santos Tirador, who falls in love with Daisy.

While she is still married, they run away together to the forested mountains in the North where the guerrilla hideout is located. There, she joins the revolutionary movement. Literature has its anti-heroes and Dogeaters has its anti-families. Joey Sands is the son of a " whore of a mother" and an African American serviceman. Joey's mother drowned when he was young and Joey was raised by a pimp and drug dealer whom he calls " Uncle. " Joey grows up in Uncle's " family" which consists of other orphans he has " adopted" and turned into drug addicts and male prostitutes. Joey makes occasional visits " home" to Uncle's shack in the Tondo barrio where he sleeps on a dirt floor next to chickens and pigs and Uncle's mangy dog, Taruk.

The shack is the only home Joey has ever known and in a twisted way, he feels comfortable there. Uncle has been Joey's "savior" - raising him "like his own son," along with Boy-Boy, Chito and Carding. Uncle's "sons" have outgrown him, however, and all are off earning their ways as hustlers, sex show performers and male prostitutes. They return "home" whenever they can. Orlando "Romeo" Rosales is not a member of any family. He lives alone in Manila. He is a waiter and actor wannabe.

His childhood friend Tito Alvarez has become a famous movie star and has promised a role to Romeo "someday." Romeo is good-looking and attends countless auditions, but he cannot seem to land a role. Romeo is encouraged by his girlfriend, Trinidad Gamboa, who is hoping that Romeo will eventually marry her. Romeo and Joey cross paths with the Gonzaga, Alacran and Avila families when Senator Avila is assassinated. Joey has been having breakfast at a fancy hotel with a wealthy gay client, the German film producer Rainer Fassbinder. Joey has just stolen money and drugs from Fassbinder and is escaping into the street when he hears gunshots. He turns around and sees Senator Avila lying dead on the sidewalk.

As Joey is running past Senator Avila, he passes a stunned young man standing on street waiting to break up with his girlfriend. That young man is Romeo Rosales. There is pandemonium. People are running everywhere. The police spot Joey as he runs past Romeo. They shoot and Romeo is hit. Needing a scapegoat to blame for the assassination, the police, The President and The First Lady claim that Romeo was the man who killed Senator Avila.

He is arrested by General Ledesma's men and taken to Camp Dilidili where no one hears anything more about him. The rumor is that he is dead.

Romeo's girlfriend Trinidad has given her testimony in an attempt to prove that Romeo is not guilty of anything. Trinidad then disappears. Joey is still running away. Fearing he will be picked up for questioning by either the police or military, a strung-out Joey seeks shelter in Uncle's shack. Joey tells Uncle what has happened.

Uncle gives Joey more drugs, puts him to sleep and leaves to betray Joey by selling the information to the police. Joey wakes up from his drugged stupor and sees that Uncle has left his dog outside the shack to make sure Joey cannot escape. Joey realizes that Uncle has betrayed him and is angry, then full of despair. He has been waiting for this all his life. "For the right price, he [Uncle] was capable of anything," Joey reminds himself. Joey ransacks the shack, overturns the boxes of Uncle's belongings, tears up Uncle's porn collection and in a final act of contempt, urinates over everything. He stabs the dog, Taruk, to death and runs away to Boy-Boy's place.

Boy-Boy hides Joey until he can make arrangements for his revolutionary friends to come and bring Joey to their guerilla camp in the mountains. Daisy Avila has been captured and detained by General Ledesma. She is brutally tortured and raped by Ledesma's men while the General plays the radio soap opera Love Letters in the background. Daisy is pregnant with Santos Tenador's child. She survives the torture and rape, but her baby girl is born premature and dies. General Ledesma agrees to release Daisy if she promises to remain in permanent exile, but she secretly returns to the forest and joins her cousin Clarita in the leftist underground guerilla

movement. Later, Joey Sands joins them as he hides out from the government and Uncle.

Daisy teaches Joey how to shoot a gun. Rio brings the reader up-to-date after all these events have unfolded. Her grandfather Whitman Logan has died and his wife, Lola Narcisa, has moved back to her rural home. In Spain, her Abuelita Socorro has died and left all of her money to the Catholic Church, just as everyone expected. The Gonzaga family flies her body back to Manila to be buried by her husband. Uncle Cristobal spends a fortune tracing the Gonzaga family genealogy back to Christopher Columbus. The American counsel and his "madwoman" wife are being transferred to Saudi Arabia and Rio's mother gives them a lavish going away celebration with all sorts of "made in the U.

S. A. "gourmet delicacies such as Libby's succotash, Del Monte asparagus spears, Hunt's catsup, French's mustard, Kraft mayonnaise, Jiffy peanut butter, Velveeta cheese, Jell-O and Ritz crackers. Rio's brother marries twice and has five daughters by two women. He becomes a fundamentalist preacher. Pucha marries Boomboom Alacran but the marriage lasts "barely a year." Pucha gets an American divorce.

Rio's father loses all of his money. Rio's mother becomes an artist, inherits money from her father and announces she is leaving for America where Rio will attend school. They live in New York, then Boston. Rio comes back to visit Manila and is disappointed when she visits her abandoned former home, about to be demolished for urban renewal. Pucha remarries and stays in

Manila but remains childless. Lola Narcisa lives to be a very old woman. Rio returns to the U.

S. and moves to the west coast. She describes herself as being "anxious and restless, only at home in airports. The penultimate chapter is the only one narrated by Pucha. She accuses Rio of making up most of her story. "You've got it all wrong!" she says. She reports that she was never married to Boomboom, that her first husband's name was Ramon Assad.

"Your mother's father is alive," Pucha tells Rio, and "Lola Narcisa is dead." Further, "Abuelito and Abuelita Soccoro are alive and well and living in Mallorca with Tito Cristobal." Rio's father is not poor and he is still married to Rio's mother Delores. Raul is still married to his first wife, Belen Garcia. The chapter ends with Pucha admonishing Rio to stop mixing things up and "leave well enough alone." The final chapter is a "Kundiman" - a traditional Filipino love song. It is a blasphemous reworking of "The Lord's Prayer" in which the Virgin Mary is called "Our Lady of Most Precious Blood, Wild Dogs, Hyenas, Jackals, Coyotes and Wolves" who will be cursed in "Waray, Ilocano, Tagalog, Spanish, English, Portuguese and Mandarin" - all languages spoken in the Philippines.

The Kundiman is both a curse and a prayer to the Philippines by an unidentified speaker. It is a love song and a lament.