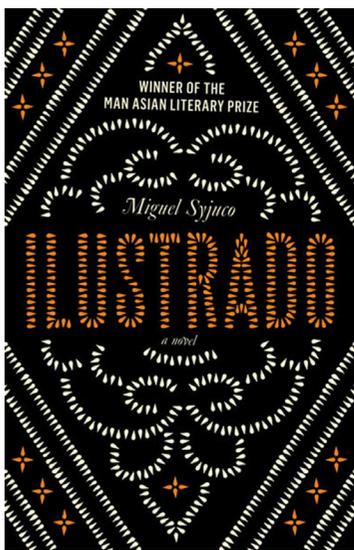


# A Suitable Boy

When you hit the lit-prize jackpot with your debut novel, posits STEPHEN MCCARTY, what do you do for your next trick? As MIGUEL SYJUCO is discovering, fiction is a fickle mistress



"I'M A STONER fuck-up who loves *Downton Abbey*, video games and comic books," declares the recipient of the Man Asian Literary Prize 2008. "My star has faded. Eventually the money runs out, [so] I must finish this bloody book or find paid employment. Maybe a teaching gig that gives me time to write."

Hold the bus. Call the National Guard. What has happened to the poster boy of Philippines literature, an artist feted by the likes of photographer Beowulf Sheehan, whose lens is accustomed to caressing the features of Bono, Rushdie and von Teese? In 2008, on a starry night for the literary good and potentially great at a Hong Kong Peninsula hotel throbbing with anticipation, Syjuco had experienced a head rush of celebrity G-forces on hearing his name

BEOWULF SHEEHAN / IMAGINECHINA

MIGUEL SYJUCO IS WRESTLING WITH THE FOLLOW-UP TO HIS DEBUT NOVEL, *ILUSTRADO*





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called from the stage. Later, at swanky bar Felix, during an evening that was to finish some time the following day, he would hear it repeatedly from throngs of his new best friends. Urbane in winged-lapel dinner jacket, spectacular girlfriend on his arm, the coiffed Syjuco was gracious throughout in victory and looked born to the role of gentleman author. But it was as though he couldn't quite believe it was his name on the trophy. (“I felt like a fraud, like I always do,” he recalls. “Everyone was so chichi and I was in a second-hand, \$50 tuxedo. I'd had to have the sleeves lengthened – I think it had been worn by a woman.”) Could it be that he now feels pressure to repeat the trick – without quite knowing where he put the instruction manual?

The book that begat the tux was *Ilustrado*, described by the *The Washington Post* as “wildly entertaining”. *Ilustrado*, Spanish for “enlightened one”, usually refers to the affluent, European-educated Filipino intellectuals of the 19th century. Syjuco's novel revolves around two of their modern number, both recently in voluntary New York exile. One is lion of lit Crispin Salvador, whose thrillers, reportage and interview bons mots are quoted throughout *Ilustrado*. The other is a member of *The Paris Review* literary magazine staff and an ex-student from Salvador's creative writing class. He is called Miguel Syjuco and his mission it is to find his mentor's missing masterpiece and reveal why Salvador was found dead in the Hudson River. The quest launches our hero into the haze of Manila politics and the maze of Manila nightlife, rakes over colonial-era controversies and requires some nose-holding at the stink of corruption.

Calling to mind epics such as *Don Quixote* and 2666, *Ilustrado* was described by one blogger as “torrential”, doubtless because of its cataracts of detail and maelstrom of characters, plot lines and escapades. And it is a satire with deep roots: the flesh and blood Syjuco, 37, hails from a political family of means, meaning he's well acquainted

with the elite class he skewers.

Which brings us to that “bloody book”: part two of a loose trilogy. *I was the President's Mistress!!* features a minor *Ilustrado* character, Vita Nova, in the starring role – and is proving a major headache.

“I'm 450,000 words into this 120,000-word book and I've got to sculpt it down to something reasonable,” says Syjuco. “It's a bloody mess. I'm on the final stretch, I hope,” he adds from his Montreal home. “I can see the summit but I have to finish by May – that's when the fellowship stops giving me money.”

Syjuco's academic sugar daddy, at which he is a fellow, is Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute – not, perhaps, the expected breeding ground for a novel dressed as an autobiography-cum-memoir that is, he says, about “sex, corruption, cheesy music, Third-World celebrity and a starlet who sleeps her way to the top”. The book's “political figures are amalgamations of people who exist” but the Philippines is not specified as the scene of the action. Yet Syjuco's moral compass has steered him into a notable political squall during the writing of *President's Mistress!!* Syjuco eschews email (“I hate it – it's a particular distraction and one aspect of modern life I despise. It's a Pandora's box”) but embraces other social media. “I like Facebook because it's a public forum for like-minded people or those who challenge you. Then you're forced to explain ideas that aren't

## MOVE OVER, VITA NOVA

Memorable memoirs of questionable veracity

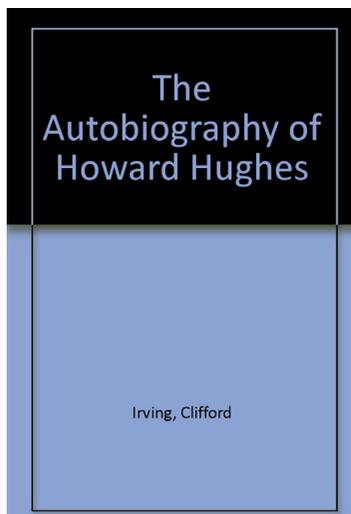
fully formed. Without Facebook I wouldn't have got that," he admits.

In 2012, Syjuco used Facebook to expose Senate majority leader Tito Sotto, who was opposed to the Philippines' reproductive health bill. Syjuco revealed that Sotto had plagiarised various sources in his speeches – not least late US Senator Robert Kennedy, whose daughter Kerry was alerted to the fact by Syjuco (who, for his pains, was accused of "moral posturing" by bloggers he dismisses as "religious right-wingers").

"Facebook was effective because it created a debate," says Syjuco, "and it helped me rethink *President's Mistress!!* It forces me to see the other side of arguments."

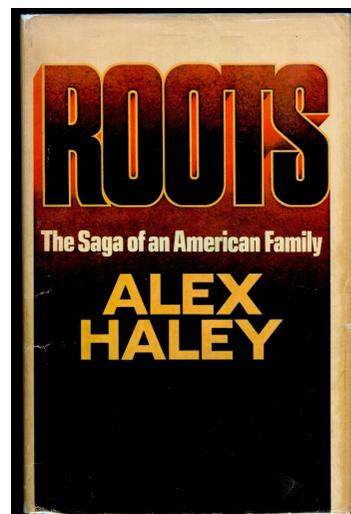
While he's hardly ivory tower-bound, Syjuco has removed himself from the whirlwind of literary festivals, interviews and press jamborees while he wrestles with *President's Mistress!!* "I've sworn off doing interviews and literary festivals until I finish this book," he says. "I was still going to festivals four years after *Illustrado*, which meant a lot of travelling and talking instead of writing."

Syjuco is sweating on a 2015 publication date, but in the meantime he knows where to go for reassurance. "Hemingway said that most first manuscripts are shit, and I take great comfort from that," he says. "I'm just trying to live up to, and do something good with, the gifts I've been given. It sounds disingenuous but it's true. I'm trying to do whatever good I can." 



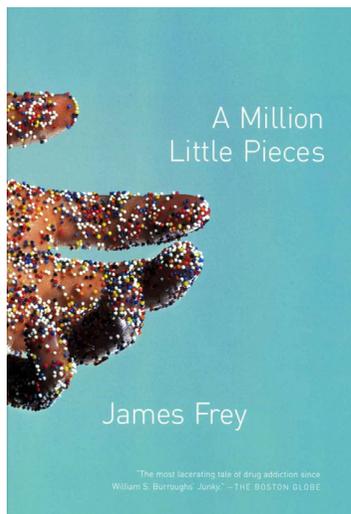
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HOWARD HUGHES BY CLIFFORD IRVING (1971)

Investigative reporter Clifford Irving never banked on the reclusive movie mogul Howard Hughes emerging from seclusion to denounce his apparently ghost-written autobiography – after which Irving was jailed for fraud.



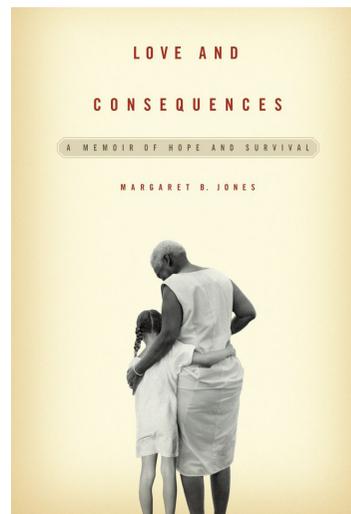
ROOTS: THE SAGA OF AN AMERICAN FAMILY BY ALEX HALEY (1976)

Pulitzer Prize-winning *Roots* traced Alex Haley's family history as slaves in the US. A popular TV series followed, after which, in court, it became apparent that Haley had copied extensive chunks of Harold Courlander's *The African* (1967).



A MILLION LITTLE PIECES BY JAMES FREY (2003)

Oprah Winfrey championed James Frey's harrowing recovering-addict memoir – up to the point where she invited him to return to her TV show and excoriated him for making it up. Website *The Smoking Gun* had done all the legwork in exposing Frey as a charlatan.



LOVE AND CONSEQUENCES BY MARGARET B. JONES (2008)

Writing as Jones, Margaret Seltzer published her brutal story of life as a foster child in gangland south-central Los Angeles – but she was actually raised in the posh Sherman Oaks neighbourhood and attended private school. About 20,000 copies of the book were recalled.