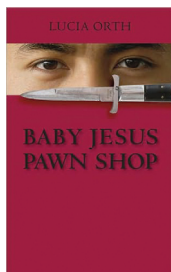


Adult Fiction

HISTORICAL



Baby Jesus Pawn Shop

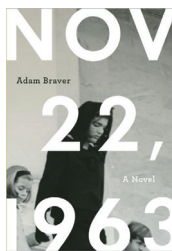
Lucia Orth

The Permanent Press
Hardcover \$29.00 (288pp)
978-1-57962-170-4

Like Isabel Allende, who has written about Chileans trying to survive the Pinochet dictatorship, Lucia Orth writes about ordinary Filipinos trying to survive under Ferdinand Marcos's martial law. Orth, who lived in Philippines for five years and, like her heroine, worked for a non-profit organization, opens her story with a night of torture and murder. Doming is not at home that night; he later escapes to Manila, where he buys a new name that has no history and eleven years later finds work as the driver for Trace Caldwell, an American counter-insurgency specialist, and his wife, Rue. In the 1980s, with the cold war still hot, the Reagan administration supported dictators like Marcos; they were villains, it was explained, but at least they were "our villains." Doming becomes part of the insurgency and slips cables he copies from Trace's briefcase to the New People's Army. He is reluctant, however, to take part in assassination: "Doming wasn't sure if in his hesitation he was a coward, afraid of doing what they asked, or a good man, tempted, or simply made of anger, clay baked and hardened to stone. And God? God must be blind, what had He noticed on this dead star..."

Set against this background is the love story of Doming, the reluctant Filipino insurgent, and Rue, the American wife. The plot is enormously complicated, as Orth describes in heartbreaking detail the terror and poverty that fill Manila, and the love that cannot be extracted from the politics. One of Doming's best friends is wounded and dies, another other is arrested and tortured, an American journalist is killed, and these events lead Doming to become more active in the resistance. He drives Trace and another American operative to a fortune-teller favored by Imelda Marcos. The fortune-teller persuades Doming to write an oracle for Imelda that will lead to the death of Benigno Aquino upon his return to his homeland. This is one death that will lead to the downfall of the Marcos regime.

Love, poverty, mercy, terror, revenge, the corruption of a dictator's regime, the complicity of a U.S. government, revenge, terror, mercy, poverty, love...in today's world, has anything in this circle changed? *Barbara Ardinger*



November 22, 1963

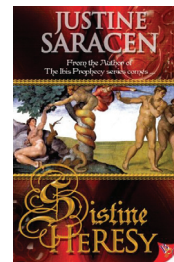
Adam Braver

Tin House Books
Softcover \$14.95 (208pp)
978-0-9802436-2-8

History can fill the memory. If asked, "Where you were on September 11, 2001?" readers will no doubt remember exactly where they were and what they were doing. "Where were you on November 22, 1963?" This reviewer was teaching a speech class in a high school in Missouri. The principal's voice came over the loudspeaker: "Boys and girls, the president has been shot." It's an indelible memory. Some readers are also familiar with Stephen Sondheim's musical play, *Assassins*, in which John Wilkes Booth tells Lee Harvey Oswald how to be remembered.

Although the assassin does not appear in Adam Braver's spellbinding novel, the reader meets real people coping with history. Braver's technique is to get inside them as he tells the stories of, among others, a traumatized Jackie Kennedy determined to model the president's funeral on that of Abraham Lincoln; Bobby Hargis, the Dallas motorcycle cop assigned to the motorcade; Abe Zapruder, whose home movie documented the moment of death; the Kennedy children's nanny, to whom is given the awful assignment of telling Caroline and John that their father is dead; Lady Bird Johnson trying to get Jackie to change out of her blood-stained pink suit; the medical photographers documenting the autopsy; and the mechanic in charge of the limousine, who uses his pocketknife the scrape blood off the leather seats.

Though there are flashbacks and flash-forwards, the book takes readers from early morning in the Hotel Texas to about four o'clock the next morning, when Jackie Kennedy returns to the White House with her husband's body. It's not a conventional novel with rising action, climax, falling action, but a mesmerizing tidal wave of facts, portraits, episodes, and stories. Braver, who is the author of previous biographical novels loosely based on history and a writer in residence at the New York State Summer Writers Institute, has done his research well (his sources are given at the end of the book) and also interviewed some participants. But he doesn't just give the facts; he gets inside the people. The narration of the story is elastic—sometimes omniscient author, sometimes first-person (the White House staff wondering about their jobs), sometimes second person (a phone interview with Hargis), and, most often, intimate third-person accounts of people trying to do their jobs on that awful day. It's a memorable novel about a day the nation would like to forget and needs to remember. *Barbara Ardinger*



Sistine Heresy

Justine Saracen

Bold Strokes Books
Softcover \$15.95 (264pp)
978-1-60282-051-7

Absolute power and absolute corruption make for a deadly combination, and nowhere was this confluence more bloodthirsty than in early sixteenth-century Rome where, under the reign of Pope Alexander VI, such overt political villainy reached new heights (or, more appropriately, sunk to new lows.) Born Rodrigo Borgia, the Pope was well-acquainted with the intricacies of depravity, sin, and perversion. His death created a void that would be filled by one of the eager zealots whose piety was equally absolute.

Caught up in this maelstrom of fervent righteousness and blatant political intrigue is Adriana Borgia, wife and mistress of two of the late Pope's sons. Having fled the Spanish Inquisition, she finds that she is no safer in Rome now that her protector is dead. But Adriana is not without influential friends, chief among them Michelangelo, recently commissioned by the new Pope, Julius II, to paint the Sistine Chapel. Like Adriana, Michelangelo is critical of the Church's strict scriptural interpretations, especially in the area of human sexuality. Yet unlike Adriana, Michelangelo has a means of voicing his displeasure.

And herein lies Saracen's theory of heresy. Having meticulously studied Michelangelo's panels, Saracen contends that the artist filled the frescoes with homoerotic imagery, not only as a repudiation of the Church's hypocritical rectitude, but also as a reflection of his own (and Adriana's) predilections. Although in her postscript, the author freely admits there is no historical evidence supporting her assertion that Michelangelo was, in fact, gay, there is also nothing, she says, to suggest that he wasn't.

Such is the bane and beauty of historical fiction, a genre that must artfully blend historical accuracy with fanciful conjecture in order to succeed. And succeed Saracen does. A professor of German language and literature at such prestigious institutions as Stanford University and Rochester Institute of Technology, and the author of two previous theocentric novels, Saracen is a self-proclaimed amateur historian who nevertheless renders accepted period details with a robust physicality. And while the rapid-fire pacing of the tale spins on the dangers inherent in succumbing to homosexual temptation, its gay/lesbian characterizations are handled with a discerning degree of restraint.

Casting such an iconic artistic and historic figure as Michelangelo in a controversial new light is risky business—some would say a heresy unto itself. But Saracen portrays Michelangelo and his cohorts as anything but corrupt, endow-