

Juanit

Reviewed by PAULETTE M. COULTER

Juanit, by Chris Perez Howard. University of Guam Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-935198-75-8, 295 pages (paperback).

In the Preface to *Juanit*, his last book, Chris Perez Howard (1940-2023) indicates that in 1999 he set out to write a novel about “someone of mixed ancestry like [him]self” (p. 2), with a CHamoru mother and an American military father, that is, a mestizo, a person who was “always made aware that they were different” (ibid.).

The parents of Juanit, Juana Ulloa Lambert, met in 1951. They were Concepcion, “Connie,” Santos Ulloa and Harold Lambert, a U. S. Navy enlistee. Lambert followed local traditional customs in asking Connie’s parents’ permission to court her and, eventually, to marry her. When Juanit was born, after an interruption of electrical power at the hospital, an older woman, a *suruhana* (CHamoru traditional healer), commented that the child was “going to have a hard life” (p. 6). In many ways, Juanit does have a hard life. In many ways, though, she also has a very full life, cataloged in the novel’s 300 pages.

In her earliest life, Juanit was steeped in the love of her parents and her extended CHamoru family. Perez Howard notes that Connie has multiple brothers and sisters (p. 17) and also that Howard sometimes feels uncomfortable in his whiteness (p. 7, for example). By the early sixties, disruptions and discomforts begin in Juanit’s young life. Her mother becomes seriously ill, is sometimes confined to the hospital, and passes. Although Lambert remains on Guam after his tour of duty ends, with the passing of his wife, he plans a return to the United States. While Juanit had been staying with her grandparents since her mother’s death, her father intends to take her with him to California. While in California, Juanit learns of her grandparents’ passing.

In California, Juanit initially stays with her mother’s sister, Daling, and her family and seems well adjusted. She continues speaking CHamoru at home and English at school. She is a good student. Then for a while she lives only with her father until he decides to remarry and bring Juanit to

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live with him and his new wife and her son. Her isolation from those she knows and loves increases, as does her loneliness.

Lambert is portrayed stereotypically as the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant that he is. Father and daughter share very few confidences. Her stepmother is even colder. Juanit finds “friendship” with someone who shares marijuana with her in the early years of high school, genuine friendship with a gay young man at her school, and an unfortunate introduction to sex when her step-brother visits her bedroom. When she goes to his room merely to talk to him, her stepmother sees her leaving and erupts. Juanit is sent back to live with her Aunt Daling and then returns to Guam.

A major portion of the novel covers a mere two years of Juana’s life, her junior and senior years of high school (pp. 105-270). This is a turbulent time for Juanit: she continues her marijuana use, hangs out with a gang (but not a vicious village gang, as some in Guam were in the 1970s according to the author). She lives with her mother’s brother and his wife, but disobeys their traditional rules for young women, runs away, takes risks she knows she should not.

Juanit’s interactions with Tony develop in the gang. Initially Tony is the boyfriend of Tina, who also befriends Juanit. When Tina realizes Tony is more interested in Juanit, she attacks Juanit at school for taking away her boyfriend. Juanit’s English teacher, Miss Neal, defends Juanit after witnessing the attack and attempts to prevent her expulsion from school, but rules are rules! After the fight, Tony and Juanit establish a relationship. As a result of the fight, Juanit runs away from her uncle’s house, is rescued from a dangerous situation by a friend and the police, and chooses to move to the island’s youth detention center. There the only official visitor she allows is Miss Neal, who helps her complete requirements for graduation. An unofficial visitor is Tony.

In the end, Juanit marries her sweetheart. Harold Lambert comes to Guam for his daughter’s wedding, and Juanit finally tells him what actually transpired between her stepbrother and herself. Juanit eventually gives birth to a son who is born safely and is healthy. When Tony is drafted into the U.S. military and faces the threat of service in Vietnam, Juanit initially becomes depressed, but with help from her mother-in-law taking care of the baby, she begins attending the University of Guam. There she meets a

female professor who exposes her to more of the island's history and to decolonizing ideas, and she becomes interested in political activism.

The heart of the novel is Juanit's personal quest for identity. This may be an issue for all children of mixed parentage. For many young people on Guam, identity seems to be an issue, whether because of race, ethnicity, language, or merely being from somewhere else. Difference is treated on Guam as difference is treated in many places, with a powerful hint of "You don't belong" or "You are not one of us." Fortunately, the book contains an addendum with "Questions for Reflection and Discussion" (pp. 294-295). These questions cover the topics of displacement and disruption, relationships, culture and identity, sexual abuse and harassment, and bullying. They apply not only to people of mixed parentage. The last page of the book also identifies resources for local and national assistance in times of crisis.

The discussion questions are apt for anyone. Further, consider that some of Guam's schoolchildren literally get off a plane from somewhere in Korea, China, Japan, any of the Compact of Free Association states, or even from the U.S. through military assignment, and begin attending school on Guam because their parents want to keep a family together, to provide a better life for them, or to have them learn English in order to attend an American college or university. Some young people return from the U.S. mainland and enter or re-enter relationships with their extended family, learning daily that CHamoru families on the island may differ from those in the mainland.

Besides the compression and expansion of time devoted to portions of Juanit's life, a number of things seem disruptive in the novel. One is the spelling. The current orthography is used (probably because of the law); this was not the spelling system of the 1950s to the 1970s. The 2020's spelling system seems anachronistic.

At times, the book contains too much explanation, slowing the reader down. The vintage Golden Rule, "Show, don't Tell," remains pertinent. The book does best when the characters move the story forward, not the all-too-omniscient narrator. How can the narrator know so much about everyone?

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Some readers may feel that the political activism and anti-colonialism occasionally become a bit heavy-handed. Again, this is handled better by the characters than by the narrator.

In *Juanit*, both character and book, Chris Perez Howard addresses the issue of cultural and personal identity, an issue of concern among young adults.

RIP, Mr. Perez Howard! (1940-2023)