



***Stories*, Jose V Ayala, University  
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162 pages**

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A few families have made a significant impact on modern Philippine society in such a way that the name is immediately recognized with multiple achievements. The surname Ayala is one of them. The Ayalas have made numerous contributions to the country's economics, infrastructure, and culture. The latter especially rings true for Jose V Ayala, who made his mark in the literary world in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by penning numerous stories that engage and question the world around us. This is epitomized in his first collection, aptly named *Stories*. The seventeen short stories found in the compilation reflect a writer who finds his craft in the realms of the “what if”, drawing the reader into the minds of each peculiar character.

At the very beginning of *Stories*, we are introduced to a world full of symbolism in something of an allegory with “And the Dancer, Dancing”. It is a strong opening for a book that constantly makes the reader question the tales of which they are being allowed into. “And the Dancer, Dancing” describes the plight of thirteen men, all chained together and dependent on the others for each movement. They must find a way to work together to accomplish even the most minimal task. Pervading through the story is the presence of the outside power that put them there, watching at all times. This story sets the tone for many of the others in the collection, using a stream of consciousness narrative that seems to be a favorite of the author.

The stories that follow this big bang of a headliner are more within the realm of common life, with a hint of fantasy. The reader is introduced to relatable characters put into predicaments that might be faced by themselves or anyone they might know. We have

the strugglers such as the poor father Anselmo, coping with hunger and pride in “Salt and Rice,” the well-meaning government man Gil Flores, whose wish for progress is met with rejection by the locals of Tanabag in the lengthy piece “Hard Earth”, and the frustrated retiree named Constancio trying to make it alone on a new island after retirement in “The Alien.” These stories invite the reader so graciously to feel for the main characters in their misadventures. Other stories describe anomalies in life, such as the clerk, also named Constancio, a man almost maddeningly entranced with the full moon in “The Astronomer,” and the unnamed protagonist trying to make it through day after day in a seemingly meaningless existence as in “Night is a City.”

The second half of *Stories* ventures into the special realm of the mind. We encounter characters dealing with lust and sin, forever contemplating the fine balance. Jilted lovers still hopeful for an embrace whether literal or imaginary are found in “The Sound of Reflections” and “So Still, So Bright.” Ayala then flirts with madness by penning stories such as “Bestiary” and “The Walled City”. As a reader, one may wonder at his inspiration for such peculiar plots that brush the forbidden edges of the mind with careful fingertips.

The last few tales in *Stories* come full circle with Ayala’s “The Other Half of the World,” a story published several times locally and internationally. The story, revolving around a man known only as ‘the beggar’, comments on the predicament of many Filipinos who are living in squalor and scrounging up a living to support a large family. With this being the penultimate piece in the collection, one may observe Ayala’s fascination with poverty, this being the main theme of many in this engaging ensemble of selections.

Ultimately, Jose V Ayala’s style and flair for highlighting the peculiar in everyday life has been encapsulated in beautiful descriptive writing. With each layer of this well-crafted collection, the reader cannot help but be pulled in. The author hands out invitations to think deeper about history, class, and relationships as well as bringing the reader along to dissect the human psyche as it reacts to multiple situations. It is through these complexities that Ayala succeeds in making his mark that has lasted for so long. 📖