

★ **Reuniting with Strangers****Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio**

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In the short stories that make up Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio's novel *Reuniting with Strangers*, women from the Philippines try to make places for themselves halfway across the world.

For many Filipinas in the collection, the only way to improve their lot in life is by finding work abroad, even if that means leaving behind loved ones to care for strangers on another continent. After years of hard work, if they are lucky, they can bring their relatives over for a reunion that is never as smooth as they imagined. Only their good memories and pride in themselves give them the resilience needed to thrive in new circumstances.

Using different formats, including epistles and guidebook entries, these interlocking stories follow characters of all ages as they navigate worlds they no longer recognize. The culture shock of leaving the Philippines and the difficulties of maintaining beloved traditions in cold, unfamiliar Canada bring them low but never break them.

Each narrator longs to be heard and understood: "The Caregiver's Instruction Manual" is a heartrending warning from one nanny to another, while "Little Manila Mumshie" follows a nonbinary teenager as they try to discover themselves and to understand their father's abandonment. Every character is unique and memorable while also sharing an important quality: determination to succeed against the odds.

The thread holding the stories together is Monolith, a young neurodivergent boy who struggles to find the support he needs in his new home. For his own reasons, he, too, is left voiceless and adrift. The emotional final story, "Monolith Speaks," is a triumph for the title character—and for all of the people who ever loved someone enough to make painful sacrifices to secure their future.

Reuniting with Strangers is a radiant novel-in-stories about the pain and loneliness of trying to fit in as a new immigrant.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (May / June 2024)

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