



BOOK CLUB KIT



DEAR READERS,

The setting for *Homicide and Halo-Halo* is based on a question I've been pondering much of my life: Why do Filipinos love beauty pageants so much? Yes, in many ways this is a huge generalization and stereotype. Yet take a minute to search the phrase "Filipinos and beauty pageants," and you'll find a host of articles and videos dedicated to the Philippines's beauty-pageant obsession.

I knew pretty early on that Lila's deceased mother was a former beauty queen, which led to the realization that if her mother was a beauty queen, then it was very likely that Lila had at least a pageant or two under her belt as well. So what was Lila's relationship with beauty pageants? How was she going to navigate the patriarchal, societal, and colonial standards of beauty that were constantly being pushed on her? How would it affect the relationship she had with her mother? How would it affect the way she remembers her mother, considering she passed away when Lila was still a child? What would it be like to set a murder mystery in this potentially painful (for Lila) environment?


These are the questions I started with when developing the story, but it grew and expanded into so much more.

I mention this in my author's note, but *Homicide and Halo-Halo* is heavier in tone than its predecessor, *Arsenic and Adobo*. Part of this is on purpose. (The other part is that it is shockingly difficult to make with the funny banter while, you know, *waves hand vaguely at the world.*)

After all, Lila had gone through multiple life-changing—not to mention life-threatening—events just months before *Homicide and Halo-Halo* opens. I love cozy mysteries and realize that they require a certain amount of suspension of disbelief (take my twenty-five-year-old cookie baker who solves murders, for example), but I was always frustrated that the majority of the ones I read acted as if the events of the previous book(s) were no big deal and had zero impact on the protagonist's day-to-day life. And yes, I understand that (1) they're meant to be written in a way that allows them to function as standalones, so if a reader decides to start the series at book fifteen, they can immediately follow the story, and (2) cozy mysteries are supposed to be light and fun escapist reads, so a protagonist dealing with the harsh aftermath of a murder investigation isn't what cozy readers are looking for.

However.





No matter how hard I tried, there was no way for me to write Lila's story without touching on the ways her previous investigation changed her. Especially because I knew this was the book where we'd learn more about Lila's mother and how, from a very young age, she was taught to ignore the emotional weight of her problems and just put her head down and work through them. I couldn't portray Lila as the very human (and therefore, very flawed) person that she is without including these aspects. She's growing and learning and changing, and occasionally stumbling, but she has the tenacity of youth and the support and love of those around her.

And thank goodness for her support network, because our girl Lila needs a LOT of help. Her best friends, Adeena Awan and Elena Torres, and her cousin/rival/frenemy, Bernadette (the main suspect this time around), do much of the heavy lifting for her—nudging her, sometimes downright shoving her, down the path she needs to go, and making her face things she's been running from all her life.

Tita Rosie, Lola Flor, and the Calendar Crew are out in full force, providing all the love and judgment that Lila is accustomed to.

As for her would-be suitors, Amir Awan, Esq., and Dr. Jae Park? Well, you'll just have to read and see, won't you? *wink*

Thank you so much for choosing *Homicide and Halo-Halo* for your book club! I hope you'll laugh a lot, possibly cry a bit, and, most importantly, come away from my story absolutely craving Filipino food. Enjoy!



A conversation with
MIA P.
MANANSALA

Mia P. Manansala is a writer from Chicago who loves books, baking, and badass women. She uses humor (and murder) to explore aspects of the Filipino diaspora, queerness, and her millennial love for pop culture.



She is the winner of the 2018 Hugh Holton Award, the 2018 Eleanor Taylor Bland Crime Fiction Writers of Color Award, the 2017 William F. Deeck-Malice Domestic Grant for Unpublished Writers, and the 2016 Helen McCloy/Mystery Writers of America Scholarship. She's also a 2017 Pitch Wars alum and 2018–2020 mentor.

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Tell us about *Homicide and Halo-Halo!* What inspired you to write this story?

If there is one thing that small-town America and the Philippines have in common, it's their love of beauty pageants. My mom is nowhere near as into them as many Filipino families I know, but even she makes a point to watch all the competitions and is so proud and quick to point out when a fellow Filipino is competing. So I got to thinking: What's the big deal? Why does every Filipino seem to be obsessed with these contests? (I was a clumsy, geeky, bookworm/athlete—yes, we do exist—so nobody considered me beauty pageant material, me least of all.) I eventually started doing research on this phenomenon, not just because I was curious, but because I knew that it would make an amazing setting for a story.

What do you feel are the main themes/issues that are addressed in the book?

The theme I had in mind when drafting the story was, "There's nothing wrong with accepting help," and when I started revising, it eventually morphed into, "A mother's love is complicated." I don't know if readers will agree with either of those as the theme of the book, but they're what I had in mind while working on the story.

Can you tell us a bit more about the research you did for this book?

I read several articles and watched videos about the Philippines and the country's history with beauty pageants. I read the book *The Crown: Your Essential Guide to Becoming a Beauty Queen* by Jonas Gaffud to get an idea of what kind of training goes into becoming a contender. I had conversations (too casual to call them interviews) with acquaintances who'd participated in pageants when they were younger. And I also rewatched *Miss Congeniality* and *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, because those are awesome movies, and I wanted to see how they incorporated the pageant setting with crime elements and a large cast of characters.

If anyone's interested, this was the most in-depth, well-researched article I read:

<https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/filipinos-beauty-pageants-series-part-1>

What do you hope readers will take away from this story?

Quite a few things, actually! That ignoring trauma not only doesn't make it go away, but it also makes it start to bleed into other areas of your life. That it's OK to need and accept help. That we all need to heal at our own pace, but we don't have to do it alone. And, as Lila put it, that sometimes we need to let people love us in the way that they can.

Sana's

SANGRIA SLUSHIES

A riff on the ever-popular (and delicious) frosé, Sana's Sangria Slushies are practically a health tonic, with all the vitamins and antioxidants you get from the mixed berries, orange juice, and red wine. This recipe makes two servings, but can easily scale up to fill a pitcher, and would make an excellent addition to any book club meeting (or, you know, on a Tuesday afternoon, just 'cause.)



Ingredients

- 1 cup frozen mixed berries
- 8 oz red wine (sweet or dry, depending on your taste)
- 1 peeled clementine OR 4 oz fresh orange juice
- A splash of brandy, rum, Grand Marnier, or Triple Sec (optional)

**BLEND
IT ALL
TOGETHER
AND
ENJOY!**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever been involved in a beauty pageant? Has this book given you a different perception of beauty pageants?
2. Lila and Bernadette's relationship is quite combative, yet they have a mutual understanding and love for each other. Is there someone you have a similar relationship with?
3. Why do you think Lila is so hesitant to open the cafe?
4. How do you feel about Detective Park being all buddy-buddy with Lila after his actions in *Arsenic and Adobo*?
5. My theme for this book is, "A mother's love is complicated." Do you agree with this sentiment? Do you see the possibility of another theme for this book? (Note: I originally thought the book was about something else, and then revised it to better match my realization of the actual theme.)
6. If you had to perform a talent for a beauty pageant (or any other contest), what would it be?
7. Lila changing her hairstyle is a small thing, yet extremely symbolic: It speaks to her relationship with her mother, but also colonial beauty standards. What are your thoughts on this?
8. Winnie tells her daughter not to rely on a man but to still take advantage of her looks. What do you think about the concept of "pretty privilege"?
9. Why do you think it took Lila so long to accept help, especially regarding her mental health issues? Did you find this frustrating? Realistic? Both?
10. Are you Team Amir or Team Jae? How do you feel now that she's essentially made a decision?