

Jessica Hagedorn (b. 1949) is a writer, playwright, poet, and artist born in Manila, Philippines, and is currently based in New York City. She's the author of *Dogeaters*, *Gangster of Love*, *Toxicology*, *Dream Jungle*, *Mango Tango*, among others. *Dogeaters* and *Gangster of Love* have been adapted for the stage and are currently being developed for audio book format. Hagedorn is also the recipient of an American Book Award, The Rome Prize for Literature, the Idea Award from the Adams and Reisch Foundation, a Guggenheim Fiction Fellowship, and a Philippine National Book Award.

Molly Guillermo for Konch: I have a question about your novel *Dogeaters*. This quote is from Senator Avila's pamphlet. He writes that the "suffering of the Pilipino is a cultural inferiority complex. Filipinos are doomed by our need for assimilation into the West and our own curious fatalism." He describes us as a "complex nation of cynics, descendants of warring tribes which were baptized and colonized to death by Spaniards and Americans as a nature betrayed and then United only by your hunger for glamour and our Hollywood dreams." Throughout the book, movies and Hollywood are such a big deal. And then you have the international film festival come into town and the newly constructed theater collapses and kills the workers. It's built on top of the bodies of Filipinos. What was running through your mind when you were writing this, and when you hear it now does it feel relevant?

Hagedorn: I think it's incredibly relevant. It's a piece of history. It was happening when I was writing it. There was a film center built on top of all the workers bodies, so history isn't stagnant or to be erased. Of course, things are different. It's 2023. But look who's in power now. And the movies, they were part of my childhood, a very big part of it. I was born after World War II. So even though there was a president who was Filipino, the American presence and the Americans said, well now you have your independence, but anytime somebody tells you, "Here I'm giving you your independence," you have to question that. And I do remember their presence being very strong, particularly after the war. I mean, Manila was being rebuilt. The war had destroyed the city where I was born, so I was growing up as a little kid in all of this, you know? Seeing all this around me and yet the house I grew up in had survived the war. You know, it was one of the houses that for some reason, didn't get bombed or shelled or you know, destroyed in a fire, so it

was kind of an amazing place to grow. I always dreamed of being a writer. I love stories as a kid. And what was important to me as a child was that we didn't have television when I was very young. It was all about going to the movies. The first time I saw a movie, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe what it was. And I think a lot of things that people take for granted now and don't give a second thought to the technology and how it's all around you and rules our lives. All these gadgets and streaming. And one doesn't really connect, especially as a young person. I have daughters and a granddaughter who are very young and a grandson who's still a baby. They can consume all this technology without thinking twice about it, whereas I always have this memory. I don't take anything for granted. So, do I believe it's still relevant? Everything is relevant to me because everything connects. The past comes back to bite you in the ass.

Guillermo: Do you ever worry, though, that technology, the media, and pop culture can be used as tools for subjugation? As in, ways of westernizing countries like the Philippines, and that they might be tools with which we subjugate ourselves?

Hagedorn: I don't think it's so simple anymore. I don't think it's about some other empire subjugating us. I think we do it to ourselves now and we need to take responsibility for it. But I also think these tools can be very creative and useful. So, it's not about the tool being a bad thing. It's about how it takes over and how we let it. Certain people use it for maybe nefarious things, to distract us or to spread misinformation, but it can also be used to spread information. I think you always need to weigh it. It's never one or the other. That's something I've learned.

Guillermo: So, it's not about inferiority necessarily, it's just something that's part of our lives now.

Hagedorn: Yeah. Manila has some of the best graphic designers, bloggers, and journalists who work with whatever's available, and all these sites provide good information to rally people. They know what they're doing, and they know how to use it. It's up to us how we use this thing, and the idea of inferiority. Don't get stuck on that quote. That's the language of a character in a novel, and you need to understand how literature works—I am not every character. I'm creating them. I'm inventing them. I'm taking from what I know. Everybody isn't me.

Guillermo: But do you agree with any of the Senator Avila's ideas?

Hagedorn: I feel like I'm giving him his own language. It's not about agreeing. I'm thinking, "What is his character trying to convey to his people?" He's trying to say we've got a lot of issues because we've bought into the lie that we have this benevolent savior. And when I was growing up, people would say, "Oh, I wish they make us the 50th state. Why did they make Hawaii a state? It would be better because things would run better." So, I mean, that's how it works. You get a sense of a world and then you create it. And the Senator is a character in a novel who is inspired by several real life people and historical figures who had certain beliefs. Whether I agree with them or not, I still write about it. Because it's important that they exist.

Guillermo: My other question about *Dogeaters* is about Andres. I don't know why he's the character who points this out during the film festival, because he doesn't seem like a political character. He's sort of sleazy, you know, he's the bar owner. But he criticizes the German man who's bragging about how he has his all-expenses paid vacation [to the Philippines]. Then Andres says that when the festival ends next week, he and the others will fly back to their countries and "remember our hospitality with such fondness" but he [Andres] will still be there. And of course, nothing will change. "Your brilliant movies won't make any difference," he says. It reminds me of—have you read *A Small Place* by Jamaica Kincaid? She talks about tourists using Antigua as a backdrop for their own fantasies. But then, you know, they're not the people on the ground, the ones who live in poverty every single day.

Hagedorn: You need to appreciate people's complexities and the fact that they're not one thing only. And just because he needs his bar to survive and he enjoys being the host, and running these young men around, he has lived long enough to understand the irony of the situation. He's a very ironic character. And I think part of that is about living in his world of underground activities. With the way we use language we can try to be open to these characters and expect them to surprise us. And I did that very purposefully. I have a fondness for him. The Andres character became quite a major character in my play. That's the fun part of adapting your own work, you can sort of add more things to it pull out, you can't have everybody on stage. Nobody

will ever produce a play with 5000 people in it. So, you kind of go, who's important, who would be an interesting character to take on some of the characteristics of all the other characters you cannot have on stage? And Andres proved to be one of the most interesting characters, you know, because I finally had the freedom to sort of give him that.

Guillermo: What was writing the stage adaptation like?

Hagedorn: It was hard. You want to keep the meat, but you are given certain boundaries because of the reality of theatrical economics, so it's kind of great. I enjoy having certain boundaries. Sometimes necessity is the mother of invention in the best way. It pushes you to think more richly and to be very, very innovative with how you used to be economical with storytelling. It was a whole other way of looking at storytelling. And I think those limitations are good for an artist because you learn how to not be too indulgent. What's important is telling a story. It's very different from the book in the sense that it only takes place in 1981 with some flashbacks. We did it first at La Jolla Playhouse with some of the same cast that ended up in New York but some of the local actors in the San Diego area. It was very interesting, but it was too long, sort of hard to follow, you know, you have the stuff in the 1950s then you had the 1980s, then you had this, then you had that. We had a big cast, but they had to play more than one role, except for two characters who always were the same. Joey and Rio, they were never playing anybody else but themselves. It was the first time I was attempting something so big of my own. And I learned a lot. And by the time we opened in New York, it had become so tight. By the time I got to adapting *Gangster of Love*, I had learned a lot from the first experience.

They just did the audio books of these novels. You know, it's auditory, purely auditory. And it's probably closer to reading than watching it on the stage because you're just listening and thinking and imagining for yourself all these characters, you know, especially *Gangster of Love*. Oh, my goodness, that one is 11 hours long. Listening has given me a new appreciation for how my writing is thick with description, meaning, and layers.

Guillermo: So, about the title *Dogeaters*. I saw that you caught some flak for it, and you said you meant it allegorically and not derogatorily. Can you explain that more?

Hagedorn: Well, and ironically. I mentioned that it was a disparaging term that came out of the American occupation. And I think it's been used in other cultures that have been subjugated for a time. I know that in Asia especially, a lot of people have been called that term in different cultures. When I found out about it, I was doing research for my novel. The novel didn't have a title. I was in the very early stages, and I was reading a lot of history books. History of the Filipino American War, the Filipino Spanish War, and what it all meant to be alive in a particular time and the Philippines. I learned all the stuff about like the word "gook," which they used in Vietnam, the American soldiers would call the Vietnamese "gooks." It actually started in the Philippines. And so, making those connections and learning where the slurs came from, I thought, but *why* are we ashamed? Why does it hit us so hard? What is it that we're hearing or feeling when we are called certain disparaging words? So, I took a big chance, I knew it was going to get me in a lot of trouble. I had other titles on my list that were less controversial. And less painful. And I thought if it's that disturbing, and you're that terrified to go for it, you should do it. So, I stand by it. And, you know, people feel like they don't want to read it because of it. That's okay.

Guillermo: I think that's so interesting because when I started reading this book, I didn't even make the connection that it was a slur. I don't know what I was thinking. That maybe was it was a metaphor or something. And then I was at Coney Island last weekend, and I made this comment to my husband, "If I were here 100 years ago, I'd be eating dog." And then I was like, oh my God. *Dogeaters*. I didn't connect it to Igorots until that moment. [In 1904, the American government spent \$1.5 million taking 1,300 Filipinos from a dozen different tribes to the St. Louis Exposition as part of a scheme to drum up support for America's policies in the Philippines and their political goal of maintaining control over the country. The "human zoo," which reached Coney Island, NY, on its tour in 1905, forced members of the Igorot tribe to eat dog meat as proof Filipinos were savage and incapable of self-government.]

Hagedorn: Yeah, the World Expo. Yeah, the title has such dark poetic undertones. And it is offensive. But why? Why are we afraid to confront it? I kind of was hoping I could stand it on its head. I wasn't going to explain anything. I don't think a writer should have to give you a trigger warning. That's not the way I work. I mean, I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt—that you are

going to have the intelligence to handle this or, if it's really upsetting to you, to turn around and put the burden on the book if you want.

And it was hard on the road. I met this very old woman in Hawaii during my book tour. I did a reading at the University of Hawaii. There were a lot of local people who were older who showed up. They were Filipino. They've had to deal with the slur when they worked the plantations. There was this old woman who had worked on the plantations, she was just as old as my lola, waiting for me outside. She came up to me, took my hand, and she begged me [to change the name of the book]. She was so upset she started crying. And there was a huge audience. And I thought, okay, here it is. I held her hand, and she said, "Thank you for writing the book. Could you please change the title? Why did you have to choose that title?" So, as you know, I just said, "I'm so sorry it hurt you this way. I'm not going to change it. I'm so happy you came and told me this. It's not meant to hurt you personally. It's meant for us to look at it, whatever that is." In Hawaii, they have a thing about the "Black Dog" apparently, it was like a common insult. This friend of mine who's from there explained it to me. White Hawaiians, whenever their dogs went missing, they would say, "Oh, those Filipinos. They took the dog so they can eat it." It was a big deal there that apparently and it was still going on. This was 1990. That kind of prejudice was very alive.

It was very intense [on the tour]. But you know, my book is intense. And it's meant to be. What I'm writing about is not pretty. A lot of people were dying and being tortured and as I was writing it, I was very aware of what was going on. And I was going back and forth to the Philippines, to do more research to see my family and make sure they were okay. While I was there, I was interviewing some people who were activists on the run because I wanted to know, well, how do you do it? How do you do what you do and stay alive? I thought that was important work. I could free myself and write about in my own way. It's a lot of grappling with yourself. Is this really what I want to do? Do I really want to use this title? Because once you do, once you open that can of worms, you better be clear about what you're doing. Because people are going to ask you questions. And look, this is 2023. You're a fresh new face in my life. And you're asking me this question. So, it's a love hate thing. Or it's just the plain old hate thing, you know, and that's fine. too. They don't have to talk to me.

Guillermo: Do you consider yourself a political activist or more of a literary activist? Or are they the same to you?

Hagedorn: They're the same to me. I think I do a lot of the labor in my novels, but I don't think I'm just writing polemics. My novels are not easily labeled. But certainly, I grapple with all those issues, what it means to have power, what it means to subjugate and what it means to be subjugated, what it means to get around it, to resist it, to adapt, and to become, like the Joey's of the world. He's going to survive. He's a survivor, the Andres's of the world. They're the survivors. Marginalization sometimes can be beneficial.

Guillermo: People on the margins tend to be more creative too. You know, if you think of where our fashion comes from, it's always sex workers.

Hagedorn: Yeah, absolutely. The street. When people have to make it up as they go along. You know, like, take rags and make them look good. It's fabulous. I'd rather look at that and write about that as opposed to, she went to Gucci and bought the \$5,000 version. I mean, that can be interesting too, but not really, it's already prefabricated. Invention takes a lot of brains and bravado.

Guillermo: I love that. Well, fitting in is like a common theme in *Gangster of Love*. I was reading the LA Times review of it, and it read, "The characters who define themselves the most strictly are the ones who grow the least," or have the least amount of room to grow as people. And I thought that was interesting because normally I think, especially with mixed race Filipinos, there's this sort of like racial dysmorphia, like can people even tell that I'm Filipino? How Filipino am I? I like that there's this book where you don't have to necessarily define your identity. So, is that where you were thinking about when you were writing?

Hagedorn: You probably need to tell me what dysmorphia means? I've never heard that term and I love it.

Guillermo: I think some people who are look more “[racially] ambiguous,” you know, they'll be insecure about claiming their identities because they aren't really sure if they look like who they are.

Hagedorn: I'm always mistaken for being Latina. I mean, I have Latin blood, but when I was in Italy recently, I was Italian, because a lot of Sicilians look like me, and then around Filipinos who don't know who I am, you know, who haven't read my book, they don't know. And then suddenly, I speak Tagalog and they're like, “Where did that come from?” And then I have to tell my whole story and everything, but it's all good. So, tell me what dysmorphia really is defined as? Like, “I don't know who I am?” Or “they don't know who I am?” Or is it the question, “Do they know?”

Guillermo: I would say it's more personal. Like someone might not be able to tell how Filipino you are, so you look for that outside validation to tell you if you're Filipino or not. I think it makes you feel like you never fit in instead of the opposite. Which is why the book is so interesting because the protagonist, Rocky, could be a good role model. Is she biracial?

Hagedorn: I just left it alone and let the book do the talking. The world I came up with in the Bay Area was always mixed. I was like, nobody writes about this shit. It's always one thing or another or is purely a black and white conflict. Or a brown and white, or just a brown novel? That's not the world we live in, especially the Bay Area in the 1970s. You know, when I was first really, really taking myself seriously as a writer, and as a performer, I was like, “Why isn't anybody dealing with all the connections, collaborations, conflicts, and arguments that we're all having with ourselves, and how we work together?” In these communities it's not always smooth because the other thing a lot of writers in America avoid is class. They do race, they don't go into class. As I was writing, you know, wondering about these things. Because, you know, my parents weren't rich, but they knew how to live. So, in Manila we had a certain status even though we were not rich...And that's part of why I wrote the kinds of books I wrote.

Guillermo: Do you think there's more of that kind of class consciousness in the Philippines [today]?

Hagedorn: Definitely. There's a lot of exciting artists and writers there. More of them, I think, are local writers who are not trying to just be published in the U.S., but they have their own readership. It's different there though, because not everybody can afford a book. Only the middle class. So, part of my thing is really getting to know who some of those poets and novelists are, and how they get their work out locally, so that they can reach people. A lot of people have been really writing in their own languages. So, I did this really interesting project called Words Beyond Borders. They did a whole issue on translation and the Philippines. I wrote sort an introduction for this special issue. They featured a lot of poets and fiction writers from different regions in the Philippines. So, there were people writing in Bisayan, in Tagalog, in English. I think they're celebrating themselves. And I didn't grow up with that.

Guillermo: It's interesting that you identify with the margins because you also have a very strong sense of belonging in two different countries, which is more than most people have. It's like you said about your characters. People are complex.

Hagedorn: I've come to realize that home is inside you. It's not a literal space. All your memories about where you grew up? That's your home. Like the shell on your back.

Guillermo: So, what are you writing today? What is your focus?

Hagedorn: I'm working on a new book. It's a memoir, a hybrid memoir. So, it's going to have a lot of imagery and maybe one or two interviews in there. I'm working on a new play. But really, my priority is the book. I started it, and it's going to take me a while to finish. It's an ambitious undertaking so it's number one on the list.

Guillermo: Do you have a title in mind?

Hagedorn: That always comes last because I don't know what is going to shape up into yet. I'm sort of drawing up a little list of possibilities, but I think it's too early. It's always good for me to have these conversations and have to pull from my memories because you know, it helps me to

remember. Like, when suddenly it hit me, I'm looking at your face and your eyes and I said, "Oh, my God, is she related to the journalist [Emil Guillermo]?" [The writer is his daughter.] So, he's fixed in my mind as from a certain time in my life in the Bay Area, and then as soon as I moved to New York, you know, he was on the radio.

Guillermo: That's funny. I like how all of Ishmael's friends are connected in some way. And you all have stories about each other.

Hagedorn: Yeah, well, there were so few of us. It was important to remember everybody. ♦

Edited for length and clarity.