



2

Joanne Ramos
touches on the
Filipino-American
economic divide



Novelist Joanne Ramos has spent much of her life on the outside.

Born in the Philippines, she was six when she and her family emigrated to Wisconsin in the Midwest, where Asians were few and far between. When she attended Princeton University, it was on financial aid. Later, after working for a short period on Wall Street, she became the first woman on the investment team of a private equity firm in Boston.

Now a mother of three, Ramos has published *The Farm*, a poignant story drawn from her own experiences as well as conversations with mothers across the social spectrum.

The novel, which she didn't begin writing until she turned 40, offers social commentary on privilege, inequality and the lengths women will go to in order to give their children the best possible start in life.

What inspired you to write *The Farm*?

The ideas behind it came about from a life of straddling worlds and often feeling like an outsider. But the real kick in the butt was when I was raising my children in New York.

The only other Filipinas I knew in Manhattan were domestic workers, who were also mothers. They loved their children just as much as I loved mine, and yet they weren't able to give them the

opportunities that I could provide. I wanted to write about this uncomfortable divide. So the book is an exploration of motherhood that also questions American capitalism and the myth of meritocracy.

What research went into writing this novel?

I wasn't really sitting there thinking, "Let me do research for this book." The ideas were mostly already there. By chance, I read an article about a surrogacy facility in India and that sparked the idea for the facility in the novel. Other than that, I talked to people a lot, including both Filipino friends in New York and the women in my orbit with the means to hire them. Hopefully, this gave me the ability to write about both sides of the divide with empathy.

How has your experience as a Fil-Am shaped the characters you created?

We moved to the States in the late '70s. Many people who emigrated at that time were assimilationists, and I was raised to assimilate as well. I understand Tagalog, but wasn't raised to speak it. Instead, I was raised to fit in. However, I spent a lot of time with my wider Filipino family on the weekends and that's where I got a sense of what being from the Philippines meant.

Flash forward a few years to New York, where I met many domestic

workers from the Philippines. We bonded over Philippines food and yet our lives were so radically different. I was hiring nannies while many of my friends were nannies.

I think you can get a sense of all this in the characters in *The Farm*. Ate, for example, is based on a number of very strong and tough Filipinas I knew as a child and here in New York. Reagan, a white American, is based on my experiences on the other side of the socio-economic divide. Through her, I attempt to answer the question: What is the right way to live when you're a person of privilege in an unfair world?

What would you like readers to take away from your book?

I was never interested in writing about villains and saints – very few people are completely good or evil. People are complicated. So, the overarching message I'd like readers to take from the book is that we should try to truly see each other; to see that we each encompass multitudes; and that easy labels are just that: too easy. I hope the book helps remind people that if we can't see each other clearly, we have no hope of understanding each other. And without at least trying to understand each other, how do we get anywhere? **joanneramos.com – Joshua Zukas**

“
I was never interested in writing about villains and saints – very few people are completely good or evil
”