

Life Love Lust: Straightforward Answers to Provocative Questions (25th Anniversary Edition)

by Margarita Go Singco-Holmes (2015). Pasig, Anvil. 272 pp. PhP 695. ISBN 9789712731068

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To publish a 25th anniversary edition of a book is no easy feat. While it presupposes that the book's topic has remained relevant in the past two-and-a-half decades, it also poses the challenge for the author to consistently highlight such relevance throughout the updated edition of the book. The other challenge is dealing with three kinds of consumers: (a) those who have read the old edition, but need to see why they should *still* read the new edition; (b) those who have read the anniversary edition, but need to see why they should *also* read the original edition; and (c) those who have never read both the original and updated edition, who need to see what great part of their lives they are missing for being in this category.

Margarita Go Singco-Holmes, or simply Dr Holmes, has successfully hurdled these challenges in the 25th anniversary edition of Life Love Lust (LLL). This book is a compilation of advice columns to letter senders culled from her past Bodymind columns in the Manila Times and her more recent Two Pronged columns in Rappler, which she co-writes with her husband Jeremy Baer. LLL deals with various questions of letter senders, ranging from parent-child to man-woman relationships, female to male sexual concerns, and psychological to millennial issues, among others. Although advice columns are popular in Philippine media, LLL is markedly different from the "agony aunt" type of writing that many of us are familiar with mainly because of the former's systematic and evidence-based approach to dealing with issues compared to the latter's reliance on personal and commonsense knowledge in solving problems.

True to its subtitle, Dr Holmes offers straightforward answers

to provocative questions based on her extensive experience as an educator, researcher, and practicing clinical psychologist. Her well thought-out replies seek to either console distraught letter senders, correct people's misconceptions, provide accurate and scientific knowledge in laymen's terms, or present alternative courses of action for the readers' consideration—but mostly all of the above.

There are many things to love about LLL, but three things particularly stand out. First, it is undoubtedly a trailblazer in its fearless discussion of an oft-shunned topic in Philippine society. True, sex is no longer as taboo as it once was 25 years ago (largely due to the work of Dr Holmes herself), but the current dearth of books that deal with sex and sexuality in the country speaks volumes about how much work still needs to be done before our society finally embraces the idea that sex is a legitimate topic for discussion at home, in school, and in the mass media, among other venues.

Second, LLL treats us to Dr Holmes' excellent brand of writing. She writes in impeccable English but never sounds haughty in the process as her statements are peppered with what seems to be her favorite Filipino expressions (e.g., "*bola*," "*hinay hinay lang*," "*hindi ka nag-iisa*," and my personal favorite "*nakakainis-ly*,"). This is the kind of book that makes you smile and giggle, even as you pout in consternation at some of the letter writers' seemingly stupid ideas or stare into space upon reflecting on a line that struck you existentially, because the author is able to put into words those that are difficult—and those we choose not—to say.

Finally, Dr Holmes' sense of humanity shines throughout her book. Although she is, first and foremost, a clinical psychologist responding to the struggles of her letter senders, Dr Holmes never fails to make the readers feel that she is writing as much from her heart as from her head. The author reminds her readers that "an advice column can never be therapy" (p. 162) yet her replies offer some degree of comfort to the letter senders that may well be described as therapeutic. More importantly, other readers benefit from "eavesdropping" on the conversation between the letter senders and Dr Holmes by gaining insights they can apply to their personal lives. In fact, readers have been known to join the conversation either by sharing their own thoughts to the letter sender or writing to Dr Holmes about a related experience,

thereby extending and enriching the discussion of the topic (see for example, “How do I stop masturbating?” pp. 176-183, which generated a record number of comments from readers).

Beyond its form (i.e., clear writing style, systematic organization of topics, humane voice, etc.) LLL must also be judged according to its content. It is, after all, a psychology book about the life, love, and lust of Filipino people. Thankfully, Dr Holmes never disappoints in the substance department. Replies to old letters have been updated with more information based on cutting-edge research, especially those coming from the field of neuroscience. Thus, a father who might share Paul’s predicament 25 years ago (“Frustrated—and frustrating—adolescent,” pp. 2-7) would hopefully cut his son—and himself—some slack upon knowing that an adolescent’s brain is still developing and that young people therefore need all the understanding they can get from their parents for all their seemingly “crazy” behaviors.

Apart from citing recent research to support her claims, Dr Holmes also draws on the statements of established organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, World Health Organization, and our very own Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP). This not only lends more credence to the author’s points, but also shows her respect for and acknowledgment of the work done by other individuals and organizations who share her vision of helping people in distress.

But perhaps the most laudable quality of LLL is its author’s unremitting honesty both to her readers and herself. Like any good scientist, Dr Holmes draws the line between research-based information and opinion, between fact and speculation. She is quick to point her readers to the source of her information (sometimes even adding the complete URL of the article she cited) and cautions them when she has not come across any research on the topic and has to rely on her clinical experience in answering the reader’s question. She asks for more information when she is not clear about what the letter sender is trying to say because “advice columns aren’t really for speculating” (p. 201) and even encourages her readers to write again should they feel that her reply was not sufficient.

That the 25th anniversary edition of LLL contains significantly more LGBT topics is a yet another testament to the book’s enduring

relevance. It is refreshing to note that this book covers a broad range of LGBT issues such as: dealing with a potentially gay son, the relationship between one's genitals and gender identity or sexual orientation, friendship across sexual orientation, getting turned on by yaoi (also known as Boys' Love or BL, a Japanese genre of fictional media focusing on romantic or sexual relationships between male characters, typically aimed at a female audience and usually created by female authors; "Yaoi," n.d.), and trans identity and sexual roles. More than two decades since the first publication of LLL, societal attitudes toward LGBT concerns remain largely the same: tolerant yet unsupportive. Then and now, Dr Holmes remains a staunch ally to the LGBT community by including their experiences in life, love, and lust in her columns.

This book contributes to the advancement of the rights and well-being of LGBT Filipinos by highlighting the depathologization of homosexuality and citing the PAP's (2011) landmark policy statement on non-discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. In reply to a father seeking advice on how to "cure" his son's homosexuality, Dr Holmes (2015) emphatically says: "The best antidote for homosexuality is to view it as a phenomenon that needs no antidote ... because it is not a sickness and thus needs no curing" (p. 13).

More importantly, this book leaves its LGBT readers empowered with the thought that they have control over their own lives, despite parents who express disappointment over their gender nonconformity, friends who suddenly turn cold after they open up to them about their sexual orientation, or partners who seem to view them as mere sex objects.

My only regret after reading LLL is that I felt *bitin* (hanging) and wished it had more than just six articles dealing with non-heterosexual issues. However, I had to remind myself that those six articles are probably enough for a seven-chapter book, and that Dr Holmes already has an excellent book (*A Different Love*, 1993) exclusively on gay men's love and relationships which, incidentally, will also celebrate its 25th anniversary two years from now. Perhaps it is also high time for Dr Holmes to compile her columns highlighting lesbian, bisexual, and trans concerns, which are often underrepresented in the Philippine

LGBT psychology literature.

Along with her other books, Dr Holmes' LLL is an excellent example of "giving psychology away" (Manalastas & Torre, 2016). When researchers, educators, advocates, and practitioners respond to the average citizen's most pressing issues, psychology is brought closer to Filipinos, and in return, our field benefits from the Filipinos' deeper appreciation of psychology. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has had to grapple with a difficult question about life, love, or lust, but may be too shy or afraid to ask. My hope is that in the next 25 years, we will make enough strides for us to finally ask straightforward questions and receive provocative answers that will make us realize how love and lust were meant to make life richer and far more meaningful than moral pundits would have us believe.

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