



BOOKS

SF author's 'Son of Good Fortune' explores 'myth of the American dream'

Brandon Yu | August 24, 2020 Updated: August 25, 2020, 8:01 am



Lysley Tenorio's novel "Son of Good Fortune" explores being an undocumented immigrant. He'll be holding a virtual book event with Green Apple Books on Thursday, Aug. 27.
Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle



passing the day.

“We would see her around town,” the author, now based in San Francisco, recalls. “We would see her wandering in and out of stores, but always alone.”

Eventually, someone who knew the woman revealed to Tenorio that she was “TNT.” It was Tenorio’s first time learning about the phrase “*tago ng tago*,” the Filipino designation for someone who was undocumented – his first knowing encounter with someone who was “hiding and hiding.”

“It stayed with me,” Tenorio says. “I can still see her vividly, young as I was.”

In Tenorio’s exceptional novel, “**The Son of Good Fortune**,” the protagonist is a Filipino teen named Excel who lives in Colma with his mother, Maxima – and both are TNT. A resilient woman clinging to her short-lived stardom as an actress in camp action movies back in the Philippines, Maxima left for America eight months pregnant, desperate for a better life for her son, only to literally give birth to Excel on the flight over.

Ever since his mother revealed his TNT status to Excel as a child, his life has been a muted sequence of keeping himself unnoticeable, of being there but not. While he has lived an ostensibly standard existence – he finishes high school, toils away in his job at the local pizza arcade – his future is clouded by his hidden political reality. Presented with the opportunity to escape with his girlfriend, Excel leaves for a small desert city named Hello City, desperately hoping to free himself.

“It certainly was not uncommon in my experience to know and sometimes be close to people who were undocumented,” says Tenorio, who grew up in Mira Mesa, a suburb of San Diego with a large Filipino community. “The national conversation of undocumented



Still, despite the inherent politics of their situation, Tenorio was careful not to make his characters poster children for the undocumented experience, offering instead a nuanced portrait of Maxima and Excel. There is a tenderness with which he allows them to be messy, to have agency, and in turn their own humanity. The two are emotionally withdrawn from one another; Excel never refers to Maxima as “Mom,” and Maxima often struggles to offer any form of traditional maternal guidance.

It was the resonant push and pull of their relationship that guided Tenorio’s writing. The very first draft of this novel was wildly different, centering on “these dogs that were trained to sniff out pirated DVDs in southeast Asia, and there was a bounty put on their heads,” Tenorio says with a chuckle. But in that story there was a mother and son that he kept returning to, and that became the basis of “The Son of Good Fortune.”

In particular, Maxima, consistently down on her luck but dogged, guided the way.

“I wanted to veer away from this idea of the quiet, martyr-like immigrant mother, and present a mother and a woman who was emotionally and physically formidable – in many ways, kind of selfish,” Tenorio says. “She’s someone who still pines for her faux stardom back in the Philippines, and someone who doesn’t always do the right thing for her son.”

Maxima spends most of her days as an online grifter, scamming American men who cruise the internet looking for Catholic Filipino housewives. Limited by her TNT status, her con is Maxima’s way of creating her own rules to survive.

“It’s also her way of talking back to America,” Tenorio says. “America obviously makes so many promises. The myth of the immigrant dream in the land of opportunity for some is quite real and has historical accuracy. For others it doesn’t.”

Review: ‘Son of Good Fortune’ finds comedy in Filipino Americans’ life on the margins



San Francisco author Lysley Tenorio poses with his novel, "The Son of Good Fortune."
Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

The title of the book is an ironic gesture toward the promise of that dream that Maxima had intended for her son, one that, even after Excel's journey of self-discovery, may never be cleanly fulfilled. "America good, America bad. ... The life is like that," Z, an older Serbian immigrant also trapped in a dead end in Colma, tells Excel at one point toward the end of the novel.

"(Excel's) real good fortune is that he is Maxima's son," Tenorio says, "because Maxima, for all the good and bad that she's done, she's taught him how to survive."

The portrayal of her love and sacrifice, but also her failures, reflects a complexity that accounts of the undocumented experience rarely make room for. Tenorio hopes the book upends those flattening narratives.



“I lost my mom during the writing of this book, which was tremendously difficult, and remains so,” Tenorio says. “After her passing, my commitment to Maxima’s character became even more steadfast. In many ways, for myself, this book is a tribute to my mother, and I hope it has that kind of impact on a reader and maybe how readers might view their own mothers.”

“The Son of Good Fortune”

By Lysley Tenorio

Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins

(304 pages, \$27.99)

“The Son of Good Fortune” author Lysley Tenorio in conversation with Bruce Snider:

Virtual event hosted by Green Apple Books on the Park. 6 p.m. Friday, Aug. 28. Free.

bit.ly/LysleyTenorio



Brandon Yu

Brandon Yu is a Bay Area freelance writer.

More In Books

<p style="text-align: center;">SPONSORED CONTENT</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">BOOKS</p>	
--	--	--



Sign In

Say Chan thinks

BY HILLBARN THEATRE

BY KEVIN CANFIELD

min hard

BY .

Related Events

DATEBOOK PICK

FEB

02

SUNDAY, 11:00AM

Mo Willems at SF

Books

📍 Marines' Memorial The... \$42.77 -...

You must be signed in to comment

[Sign In](#)



Sign In

Commenting on this article has ended

Powered by  OpenWeb

[OpenWeb's Terms](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Feedback](#)

FOLLOW US



WEBSITES

[SFChronicle](#)

[SFGATE](#)

[Datebook](#)

[GreenState](#)

ABOUT

[Our Company](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Privacy Notice](#)

[CA Notice at Collection](#)

[Your CA Privacy Rights \(Shine the Light\)](#)

[DAA Industry Opt Out](#)

[Careers](#)

[Advertising](#)

CONTACT

[Customer Service](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Contact Newsroom](#)

SERVICES

[Subscriber Services](#)

[e-Edition](#)

[App](#)

[Archives](#)

[Store](#)

[Subscription Offers](#)

[Your Privacy Choices \(Opt Out of Sale/Targeted Ads\)](#)