

BOOK CLUB KIT

Life is a lucrative  
business, as long as  
you play by the rules.

# THE FARM

A NOVEL

JOANNE RAMOS

## A NOTE FROM JOANNE RAMOS

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**THE FARM** is a work of fiction. But it is also, in many ways, true: inspired by people I have known and the stories they have shared with me.

I was born in the Philippines. When I was six, my parents, siblings, and I moved to southeastern Wisconsin. In many ways, America's heartland was wholly different from the world we'd left. And yet, because my father's family had preceded us in emigrating to Wisconsin, and because of the tight-knit Filipino community that had already taken root in the area, I grew up straddling two worlds: our old one, preserved in clamorous weekend gatherings filled with Filipino friends and family and too much food, and our new one, where my little sister and I were two of the four Asian kids in our elementary school.

After high school, I headed east to attend Princeton University. My world was blown open, and not just intellectually. Princeton was the first place I encountered truly great disparity—in wealth, in class, in experience and opportunity.

Years later—after stints in finance and then a career switch to journalism—I decided to take a break from the working world to spend more time with my young children. I realized one day that the only Filipinos I knew in Manhattan, where I lived with my family, were the ones who worked for my friends—baby nurses, nannies, housekeepers, cleaning ladies. My husband and I ended up hiring a wonderful Filipina nanny for a time, too.

Perhaps because I am from the Philippines and am chatty and curious about people by nature, I became friendly with many of the Filipina caregivers in my orbit, as well as others from South America and the Caribbean and elsewhere in Asia. I listened to their stories—about errant husbands and difficult bosses; about the dormitory in Queens where beds are rented by the half-day to save money and how the money saved was sent halfway around the world to support children or parents or nephews back home. I saw the daily sacrifices these women made in the hope of something better—for their children, if not for themselves—and the enormous obstacles standing in their way.

The gulf between their lives and possibilities, and mine, is vast. I often wonder if it is even bridgeable in our society today. And despite what I've been told countless times in my life—that I am the embodiment of the "American Dream"—I know this chasm has as much to do with luck and happenstance as it does with any kind of merit.

In many ways, *The Farm* is a culmination of a running dialogue I've had with myself for the past twenty-five years—about just deserts and luck, assimilation and otherness, class and family and sacrifice. I didn't write it to come up with answers, because I don't have them. Instead, the book is meant to explore—for myself, and hopefully for its readers, too—questions of who we are, what we cherish, and how we see those who are different from ourselves. I hope *The Farm* might serve as a window to the "other" side of these divides, from wherever readers approach it.

## Q&A WITH JOANNE RAMOS

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### **What inspired you to write *The Farm*?**

The ideas that sparked *The Farm*—about the immigrant experience, the tenuous line between luck and merit and the narrative of the American dream, class and inequality and motherhood—are ones that have occupied me for decades. They are rooted in my upbringing as a Filipina immigrant, in my experiences as a financial-aid kid at a wealthy, Ivy League university and the years I spent working in high finance, and in the world that opened to me once I began having children of my own. The challenge, once I finally dared to dedicate myself to writing fiction, was to find a way to bring these disparate ideas into a coherent, compelling story. After a year of experimenting with short stories on these themes, I happened upon an article in the newspaper about a surrogacy facility in India. It was a place where customers—mostly Westerners, as I recall—could hire and house Indian women to carry their babies. The what ifs began percolating in my head almost immediately (what if I made the facility a luxury one? What if the clients were uber-rich and the surrogates were often desperate for money? What if . . .), and *The Farm* began to take shape.

### **How do your own experiences relate to the story you tell?**

I was born in the Philippines and spent my childhood in Wisconsin, in a town not far from my father's extended family. Most weekends of my youth were spent with his family and the tight-knit Filipino community of which they were a part. Decades later, when I was living in Manhattan and raising young children, it occurred to me that the only Filipinas I knew in the city were nannies or housekeepers—those who at various times worked for me and the many who worked for people I knew. It was a jarring realization, and it forced me to question all sorts of things. This conversation with myself, which was really only a more heightened continuation of one I'd been having internally for decades, was one of the impetuses for writing *The Farm*.

## Q&A WITH JOANNE RAMOS

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**Community and friendship are so important in *The Farm*. Did you set out to write about these themes deliberately?**

I didn't set out to write about community or friendship per se. I suppose the centrality of community and friendships to *The Farm* sprung out of the world I created and, also, the world I know. Family and community are deeply important to me. And I consider myself lucky to have close female friends, particularly my girlfriends from college, who expanded my ideas about the world just as I was beginning to wade into it as an adult.

**Everyone in *The Farm* has mixed motives. Are there any you would like to tell us about?**

I prefer to let readers themselves analyze the characters in *The Farm*! Let's just say that I believe all people have varying motivations and loyalties, and that balancing these competing motivations and loyalties—while trying to stay true to oneself—isn't easy. Often, we compromise; sometimes we sell people out. Distinguishing a compromise from a betrayal is to a degree a matter of perspective or context. Life is messy, and people are, too.

**This is your debut novel. Have you always wanted to be a writer? What's your writing process?**

I've been writing stories since I was six or seven. Writing was my first true love. A few years ago my mother mailed an enormous, plastic storage bin to me. It was stuffed with the notebooks and journals and loose pages of stories that I'd written since I was in the first grade. I can't bear to throw the piles of paper away. Neither can I bear to read them after all these years!

When I started writing *The Farm*, I hadn't written fiction since college. So there was a lot of trial and error involved, especially because I don't make outlines. Once my children were all at school, I wrote for two or three hours in the morning before turning to the logistics of life and child-rearing. I continued even when unconvinced. And I had a lot of support: my children and my husband believed in the book from the very first chapter—which, incidentally, I worked on for months and then ended up binning. To a great degree, writing a book is a matter of persistence.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Would you recommend *The Farm* to another reader? If so, who?
2. After finishing the book, how would you describe how you felt in one word?
3. What other books, movies, or TV shows did *The Farm* remind you of?
4. Did you sympathize with any of the women? Did you have a favorite character?
5. Does it seem like a place like Golden Oaks could exist now or in the near future? Could you see yourself applying to be a Host or using Golden Oaks' services? Why or why not?
6. Reagan and Jane come from very different worlds, yet end up being close friends. How are their experiences and viewpoints similar, and how do they differ? Why do you think they formed such a close bond? What does each of them offer to the other?
7. Were you surprised by Jane's decision to run away from Golden Oaks? How does this represent a transformation in her character?
8. What did you think of Jane's choice to work for Mae after leaving Golden Oaks? How do you think this decision relates to the agency she gains throughout the novel? Considering all the factors at play in Jane's life, do you think she made the right decision? What would you have done in her place?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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9. Mae Yu and Ate are both characters who seem to exemplify the ambition and entrepreneurial spirit of the proverbial American Dream. What are their motivations, and how are they similar? What do the ways they choose to achieve their goals say about them as characters?
10. One of the major themes in *The Farm* is the relationship between luck and merit in individual lives. How does this play out among the four main characters in the novel? How do these two forces of luck and merit affect the agency that the characters in the novel have?
11. While this novel is about four women, ultimately it is still a white man, Leon, who holds the power. What do you think this says about the world of the novel, and about Golden Oaks in particular?
12. Towards the end of the book, Reagan is saddened when contemplating the lives of Jane and Ate, because she feels nothing will change—for them or for their children. However, Jane, at the very end of the novel, expresses hope that the future might be different. Have things changed for these characters? What, if anything, hasn't changed? Who believes in change, and why?

# A RECIPE FROM JOANNE RAMOS: MOM'S PANCIT SOTANGHON\*

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- 1.** Boil 3-4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts or 4-5 boneless skinless chicken thighs in water for 20-30 minutes (more or less, depending on how much meat you want with the noodles).
- 2.** While the chicken is boiling, soak 1 to 1.5 cups of dried shiitake mushrooms (more or less depending on how much you like shiitake mushrooms; I love them so like to go heavy on the mushrooms) in hot water for about 30 minutes. When the mushrooms are softened, cut into pieces, reserving the liquid.
- 3.** While the chicken boils and the mushrooms are soaking: Mince garlic (at least 3 cloves but if you like garlic, much more. My older sister doubles it to 6 cloves). Optional additions: hard-boiled eggs, boiled carrots (boil until soft and dice) and/or diced green onions.
- 4.** Once the chicken is cooked through, remove from water, reserving the water. Cool the chicken slightly before shredding. If you like a stronger chicken taste to the reserved water/broth, you can add a couple chicken bouillon cubes or add chicken stock/broth.
- 5.** Heat a large, wide pot/pan. Coat the bottom with vegetable oil. Add garlic and fry until fragrant and lightly browned (do not burn!). Add shredded chicken. Add more oil if the mixture looks too dry. Cook for about 5 minutes. Stir. Add re-hydrated mushrooms and the reserved mushroom liquid. Stir.
- 6.** Add 1 tsp garlic powder and 2 tsp onion powder. Taste. Add more if needed.
- 7.** Add mung bean/bean-thread noodles. These can be bought at an Asian grocery store or on Amazon. They usually come in packs of eight. If you use 3 packs, you'll have enough noodles for around 5 people.
- 8.** Pour some of the reserved chicken stock, starting with one cup, over the noodles. Continue adding more of the stock until the noodles are almost soft, then stir noodles until most of the liquid has evaporated, and the noodles are soft enough to eat, around 5-10 minutes. If you'd like, add some fish sauce (start with 1 tsp and add more to taste).
- 9.** Top the noodles with crushed chicharron (or crush your own), fried garlic (you can buy at many stores), and fried shallots/scallions (ditto).
- 10.** For extra color and different flavors, my mom likes to top the pancit with sliced boiled egg, a half a cup (or more, to taste) of diced green onion and/or julienned boiled carrot.

# GREEN JUICE

## Ingredients:

- 1 bunch curly kale, chopped
- 1 large lemon, peeled
- 1 inch ginger, peeled
- 1 large cucumber
- 2 large granny smith apples, cored and sliced
- 4 whole celery stalks

## Instructions:

1. Wash and prep veggies.
2. Insert into juicer in the order listed.
3. For a pulp-free juice, strain through a sieve after juicing.



Source: <https://showmetheyummy.com/green-juice-recipe>

# KALE SALAD WITH FRESH LEMON DRESSING

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## Ingredients:

- 5 cups chopped kale
- 1-2 tsp olive oil
- 1/8 tsp salt
- 2 cups chopped broccoli
- 1/2 cup sliced almonds
- 1/2 cup cheese (optional)
- 1/4-1/2 cup shredded carrots
- 1/4 cup diced red onion
- 1/4 cup sunflower seeds
- 1/4 cup cranberries

## Lemon Dressing

- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 2 tbsp fresh lemon juice
- 2 tbsp red wine vinegar
- 1 tbsp dijon mustard
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1/2 tsp dried oregano
- 1/4 tsp salt
- 1/8 tsp ground black pepper
- 1 tsp honey or sugar

## Instructions:

1. Make dressing by combining ingredients in a lidded jar. Shake well to emulsify. Dip a kale leaf in the dressing to taste, then adjust sweetener, salt, and pepper as needed.
2. Using your hands, massage chopped kale with olive oil and a pinch of salt. Rub the oil into the leaves with your fingers until the leaves begin to darken and tenderize.
3. In a large bowl, combine massaged kale, broccoli, almonds, cheese, carrots, onion, sunflower seeds, and cranberries.
4. Shake dressing once more and pour 1/3 of it over the salad. Toss to coat.



Source: <https://www.spendwithpennies.com/easy-kale-salad-with-fresh-lemon-dressing>

## PLAYLIST

*Listen to these Golden Oaks-approved songs while you discuss The Farm. If you're pregnant, be sure to strap some high-tech, luxury headphones around your belly to ensure baby can hear the music.*

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1. “Run the World (Girls)” performed by Rockabye Baby!  
(Originally performed by Beyoncé)
2. “Colors of the Wind” performed by Rita May (From *Pocahontas*)
3. “Swan Lake, Op. 20: Act II: Pas de Deux” by Tchaikovsky
4. “Back Home” by Moux
5. “Hallelujah” performed by Emma Wiederstahl  
(Originally performed by Leonard Cohen)
6. “Symphony No. 9 in D minor: Ode to Joy” by Beethoven
7. “All of Me” performed by Ellen Courtois (Originally performed by John Legend)
8. “Flute Sonata in B Minor, BWV 1030. I. Andante” by J.S. Bach
9. “Look What You Made Me Do” performed by Rockabye Baby!  
(Originally performed by Taylor Swift)
10. “Perfection” by Clint Mansell (*Black Swan* Original Soundtrack)

## FURTHER READING

### **Mother Jones**

**“Inside India’s Rent-a-Womb Business”**

[www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/04/surrogacy-tourism-india-nayna-patel](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/04/surrogacy-tourism-india-nayna-patel)

### **Vogue.com**

**“Kim Kardashian West Explains Why a Gestational Surrogate is Not the ‘Easy Way Out’”**

[www.vogue.com/article/kim-kardashian-gestational-surrogate-third-child-preeclampsia-kanye-west](http://www.vogue.com/article/kim-kardashian-gestational-surrogate-third-child-preeclampsia-kanye-west)