

# When the Elephants Dance

By Tess Uriza Holthe

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*“Papa explains the war like this: ‘When the elephants dance, the chickens must be careful.’ The great beasts, as they circle one another, shaking the trees and trumpeting loudly, are the Amerikanos and the Japanese as they fight. And our Philippine Islands? We are the small chickens.”*


Once in a great while comes a storyteller who can illuminate worlds large and small, magical and true to life. **When the Elephants Dance** introduces us to the incandescent voice of Tess Uriza Holthe, who sets her remarkable first novel in the waning days of World War II, as the Japanese and the Americans engage in a fierce battle for possession of the Philippine Islands. The Karangalan family and their neighbors huddle for survival in the cellar of a house a few miles from Manila. Outside the safety of their little refuge the war rages on—fiery bombs torch the beautiful Filipino countryside, Japanese soldiers round up and interrogate innocent people, and from the hills guerillas wage a desperate campaign against the enemy. Inside the cellar, these men, women, and children put their hopes and dreams on hold as they wait out the war, only emerging to look for food, water, and medicine.

Through the eyes of three narrators, thirteen-year-old Alejandro Karangalan, his spirited older sister Isabelle, and Domingo, a passionate guerilla commander, we see how ordinary people must learn to live in the midst of extraordinary uncertainty, how they must find hope for survival where none seems to exist. They find this hope in the dramatic history of the Philippine Islands and the passion and bravery of its people. Crowded together in the cellar, the Karangalans and their friends and neighbors tell magical stories to one another based on Filipino myth and legend to fuel their courage, pass the time, and teach important lessons. The group is held spellbound by these stories, which feature a dazzling array of ghosts, witches, supernatural creatures, and courageous Filipinos who changed the course of history with their actions. These profoundly moving stories transport the listeners from the chaos of the war around them and give them new resolve to fight on.

With **When the Elephants Dance** Holthe has not only written a gripping narrative of how Alejandro, Isabelle, Domingo and their community fight for survival, but a loving tribute to the magical realism that infuses Filipino culture. The stories shared by her characters are based on the same tales handed down to

Holthe from her Filipino father and lola, her grandmother. This stunning debut novel is the first to celebrate in such richness and depth the spirit of the Filipino people and their fascinating story and marks the introduction of a talented new author who will join the ranks of writers such as Arundhati Roy, Manil Suri, and Amy Tan.

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## When the Elephants Dance By Tess Uriza Holthe Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

Tess Uriza Holthe writes with a mixture of metaphor and fact, a combination of the supernatural and the all-too-real. *When the Elephants Dance* opens, in fact, with an apposite metaphor for a horrible reality: "Papa explains the war like this: 'When the elephants dance, the chickens must be careful.'" The elephants in question are the Americans and the Japanese, fighting for possession of the Philippines. The chickens are, of course, the ordinary Filipinos. Three of these "chickens" by turns tell us the story of the Japanese occupation as a small neighborhood near Manila literally goes underground, hiding in the cellar and swapping stories. Holthe takes her onus as a seminal Filipino voice seriously; she sometimes seems determined to cram every bit of tradition, history, and myth into her novel, to the detriment of the plot's propulsion. But readers who stay with her will be rewarded with an extraordinary display of historical color, and will certainly root for her three narrators. --*Claire Dederer*

### From Publishers Weekly

"Papa explains the war like this," narrates 13-year-old Alejandro as he heads through a series of Japanese barricades and check points. " 'When the elephants dance, the chickens must be careful.' The great beasts, as they circle one another, shaking the trees and trumpeting loudly, are the Amerikanos and the Japanese as they fight. And our Philippine Islands? We are the small chickens." Inspired by her father, who grew up in the Philippines under the Japanese occupation during WWII, first-time novelist Holthe writes about the experience from a variety of civilian perspectives. Set in Manila during the final week of the Japanese-American battle for control of the islands, the novel centers on a small, mismatched group of families and neighbors who huddle in a cellar while Japanese occupiers terrorize and pillage above. Because food and water are scarce, some of the refugees must leave the shelter to forage for sustenance. In simple, strong language, Holthe conveys the terrifying experience of darting bullets and machetes above ground and the equally horrendous experience of waiting for loved ones to return. Grounded in Philippine myth and culture, the novel is filled with beautiful, allegorical stories told by the story's elders, who try to share wisdom and inspire their captive audience in the midst of gruesome violence. Primarily narrated by Alejandro; his older, headstrong sister, Isabelle; and Domingo, a guerrilla commander living a double life one with his family in the cellar, the other with his true love and adopted son in his rebel army this beautiful, harsh war story is no epic. Rather, Holthe presents personal, pointed fragments that clearly demonstrate history's cultural and personal fallout. (Jan.) Forecast: A promotional blitz an eight-city author tour, targeted marketing to Asian organizations, and radio and print advertising campaigns should alert readers who appreciate simple, moving storytelling to this powerful debut.

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### From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-This gripping tale of love, war, indomitable courage, and the struggle for independence will captivate teens and enchant them with Filipino folktales, while providing them a glimpse of another culture. In 1945, as the U.S. fights to regain control of the Philippines from Japan, the Karangalan family huddles with neighbors in the basement of their house outside Manila, hiding from Japanese patrols. Papa says, "When the elephants dance, the chickens must be careful." The beasts are the Amerikanos and the Japanese; the Filipinos are the chickens. Isabelle, 17, leaves the cellar to visit a cousin. She is captured by Japanese soldiers and raped, but escapes with the help of a friend. Her brother Alejandro, 13, is stopped and tortured by Japanese soldiers while trying to barter for food, but is released, making his way home empty-

handed. Domingo, a guerilla fighter wounded by the Japanese, also makes his way to the cellar, where his wife and son are hiding. The group seeks respite from the horrors of war by telling stories, weaving magical tales of ghosts, family curses, and the spirit world with moral lessons about greed, love, and the importance of family. Finally, the Japanese find their hiding place, and they are imprisoned in a warehouse in Manila. The building catches fire, and in a dramatic climax the Filipinos fight their way out and are rescued by victorious American soldiers.

*Molly Connally, Kings Park Library, Fairfax County, VA*

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## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Bert Gomes:**

Book is to be different for every grade. Book for children until eventually adult are different content. We all know that that book is very important for us. The book When the Elephants Dance has been making you to know about other knowledge and of course you can take more information. It doesn't matter what advantages for you. The book When the Elephants Dance is not only giving you much more new information but also to be your friend when you truly feel bored. You can spend your personal spend time to read your publication. Try to make relationship together with the book When the Elephants Dance. You never feel lose out for everything should you read some books.

#### **Jim May:**

The book When the Elephants Dance will bring you to the new experience of reading some sort of book. The author style to spell out the idea is very unique. In the event you try to find new book to read, this book very appropriate to you. The book When the Elephants Dance is much recommended to you to see. You can also get the e-book from your official web site, so you can more readily to read the book.

#### **Thelma Atkins:**

People live in this new time of lifestyle always try and and must have the time or they will get lot of stress from both everyday life and work. So , once we ask do people have spare time, we will say absolutely yes. People is human not only a robot. Then we question again, what kind of activity have you got when the spare time coming to anyone of course your answer can unlimited right. Then do you ever try this one, reading textbooks. It can be your alternative with spending your spare time, often the book you have read is actually When the Elephants Dance.

#### **John Moreno:**

In this era which is the greater individual or who has ability to do something more are more special than other. Do you want to become considered one of it? It is just simple method to have that. What you must do is just spending your time not very much but quite enough to experience a look at some books. On the list of books in the top collection in your reading list is usually When the Elephants Dance. This book which is

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