

EVERYTHING

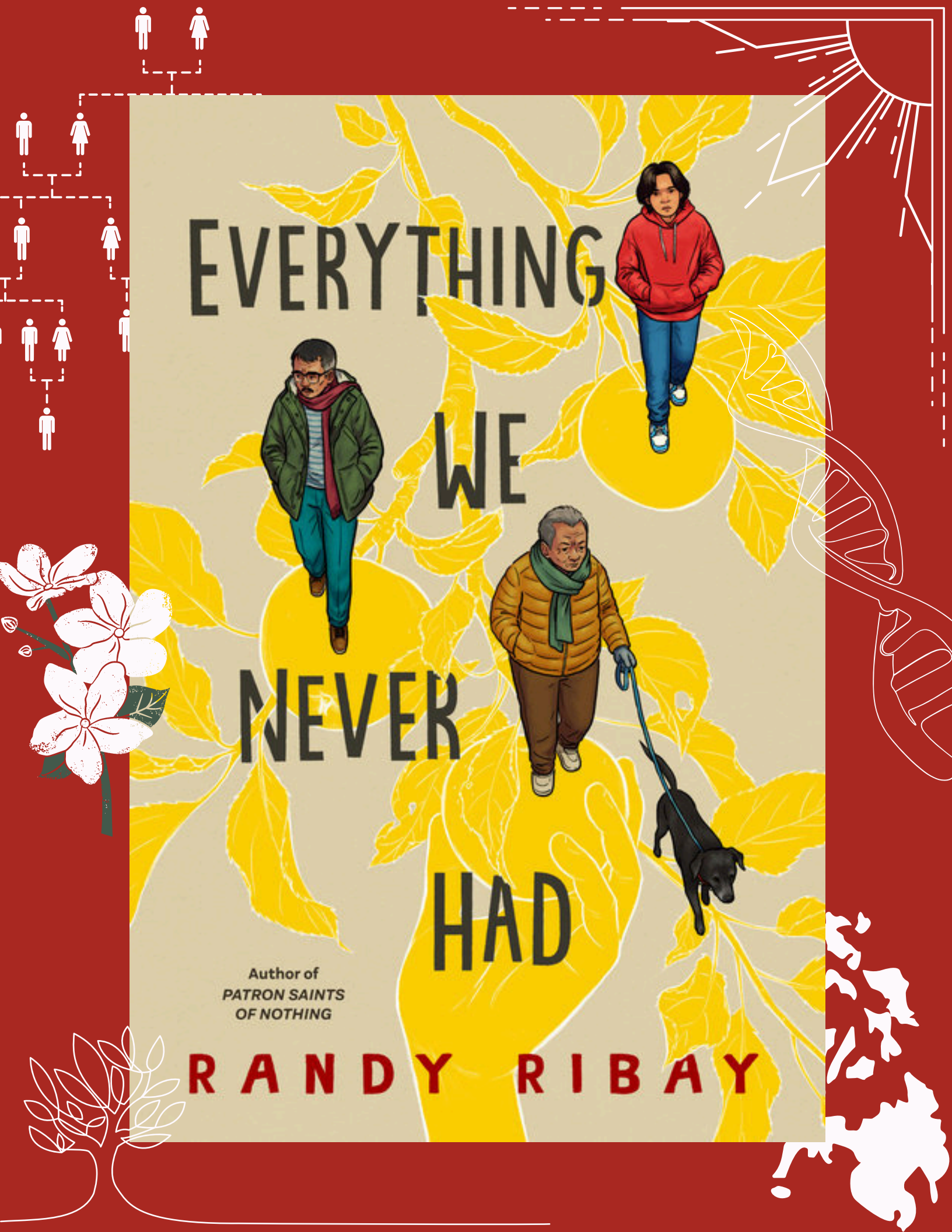
WE

NEVER

HAD

Author of  
*PATRON SAINTS  
OF NOTHING*

RANDY RIBAY



# REVIEW:

In honor of Filipino American History Month, this month's book review highlights a title perfect for the cusp of October. The month commemorates when Filipinos first immigrated to North America, on October 18, 1587. Filipino American History Month aims to recognize the history, culture, and contributions of Filipino Americans and encourages individuals to educate themselves on the current state of the Philippines. Through layered characters and flowing prose, the following novel prompts readers to experience the intricacies of Filipino American life.

In Randy Ribay's stunning new novel, *Everything We Never Had*, four generations of Filipino-American men blend the past and present into one poignant, heartfelt story of family, culture, and identity. The book examines the complexities of generational trauma with a refinement scarcely found in literature today, resulting in a tale as refreshing as it is hard to swallow. By alternating chapters between four members of the Maghabol family, readers trace the impact of one character's actions from its roots to its result, creating a journey that transcends time.

The story begins with Enzo, a 16-year-old boy growing up in Philadelphia and the youngest of the family name. Enzo is a sensitive, loving soul on a mission to understand and soothe his anxiety, or the “murder hornets”, as he personifies it. By establishing a sense of safety that depends on routine, stability, and connection, Enzo learns to maintain the murder hornets - that is until the entire city is forced into lockdown, as COVID-19 sweeps the nation and changes his life irrevocably (sound familiar?).

While Enzo grapples with the overwhelming impact of a global pandemic, he is informed that his grandfather, Emil, will leave his assisted living home and stay with Enzo’s family to protect his health. Cue - the murder hornets. Yet the only person more anxious than Enzo about this decision is his father, Chris, the second Maghabol member of the tale. Having been raised beneath the ironclad rule of Emil, Chris is reluctant to spend time with his critical father. However, propelled by a sense of familial obligation, Chris abides by the Filipino concept of utang na loob, meaning, a debt of the heart. As Enzo describes, utang na loob is, “...an acknowledgment that none of us are alone...It is beautiful. It is burdensome. It is the glue of community, the weight of obligation.” It is this glue that, for the

first time, places three generations of Maghabol men under one roof for an indeterminate period.

Meanwhile, the story shifts from Enzo, Chris, and Emil, to the oldest Maghabol member, Francisco. After immigrating from the Philippines to America to make enough money to support his family and return home, Francisco works in the orchards picking apples. The parallels between 16-year-old Francisco and his great-grandson, Enzo, begin to lift off the page and bring the story to life, creating a realistic lineage for audiences to slowly unwind.

There are a myriad of reasons why this book quickly captured my heart. Its willingness to tackle uncomfortable topics while maintaining a sharp wit is equal parts blissful and heavy. This balance is demonstrated in three primary components of the story - its depiction of COVID-19, Filipino American culture, and toxic masculinity.

Enzo's timeline begins during the liminal period when the public was unsure whether closures were necessary during the onslaught of COVID-19. It shows that strange moment when it became apparent that



lockdown wasn't a matter of if, but a matter of when. As the plot progresses, it focuses on that critical period of when and leans into the surrealist nature endured by millions. Ribay's depiction of COVID manages to capture the bizarre components of pandemic life - hoarded toilet paper, perpetually drained phone batteries from doom-scrolling, and daily walks upon which our mental health depended. Furthermore, the story captures the mundane as eloquently as the everyday horrors - watching the death toll tick into the millions, seeing how the virus disproportionately affected BIPOC, homeless, and disabled communities, and the rapid rise in racism toward Asian communities. The book calls on readers to relive a collective experience that continues to shape our daily lives. It is both strange and comforting to witness Enzo contend with the pandemic-dominated reality we all know so intimately.

The plot also revolves around Filipino American culture, as told from four greatly differing perspectives. For Enzo, his heritage is integrated into every aspect of his life. It is lovingly taught by his parents through food, family traditions, and art. When that lens is changed, however, and replaced by Emil's filter, Filipino culture falls flat and is disregarded as a component of the past.

For Chris, a proud history teacher who stumbles upon the brutal reality of Filipino history after completing a school assignment, the perpetual contention between him and his father is only amplified by their positions on what it means to be an American. Because of this, Chris and Emil struggle to bridge their generational gap.

Finally, the novel also offers a unique perspective on how toxic masculinity dismantles the foundation of healthy relationships. As the protagonists examine their familial dynamics, either through self-reflection or forced proximity, readers witness the emotional gap wax and wane. While Emil has been shown that love is a weakness, Enzo works to communicate his love to his platonic best friend. Where Chris tries to express the hurt his father perpetrated, Emil works to understand how his own father failed him so deeply. It is this tangled kinship that strikes at the heart of the story; the different generations of Maghabol men must process their pain to understand how intimacy offers connection.

In conclusion, this book is for anybody who has struggled to relate to their family, despite the desperate desire to be known and seen. It's a story for

those who have fought to find their identity and made mistakes along the way. Through lyrical writing, honest conversations, and emotional discoveries, each page feels like an opportunity to learn. Ribay does a superb job of transforming parents and grandparents into vibrant, whole characters. Have you ever struggled to picture your parents or caregivers as the main characters of their stories? Do you find it hard to think of them as being the same age you are now? This book beautifully puts these ideas into perspective and begs the descendants - and readers - to view each character as a dynamic being. In the end, aren't we all just stories waiting to be told?



~ Anaya K. Campbell

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