

*The Farm* by Joanne Ramos

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Review by Melanie White

In her debut novel, *The Farm*, Joanne Ramos sets up the intriguing premise of monetising surrogacy by connecting needy immigrants with high-net-worth individuals who desire a child but are unable or unwilling to do the heavy lifting.

The “farm” of the title is Golden Oaks, brainchild of businesswoman Mae Yu, who sources suitable “hosts” with the help of women like Ate, an immigrant matriarch in New York City who regularly finds jobs for struggling women in her Filipino community. It doesn’t seem a great leap from baby-nursing for rich Manhattan yummy mummies to carrying their young, and far more lucrative than cleaning toilets. Although the novel intertwines the experiences of four characters (Mae, Ate, and two surrogates: well educated, white “Premium Host” Reagan and desperate Filipino Jane), the heart of the novel is Jane, lured by the promise of big money into leaving her infant daughter in her cousin Ate’s care while she performs nine months of surrogacy at Golden Oaks.

*The Farm* brims with the potential for an excoriation of capitalist exploitation, for dystopic darkness and sinister consequences, but it miscarries the opportunity. The novel’s central idea invites comparisons with *The Handmaid’s Tale* or *Never Let Me Go*, but it’s nowhere near that literary league. In its timely brush with gender politics and the framework of multi-character perspectives, it has more in common with Naomi Alderman’s 2016 novel *The Power*; unlike that feminist sci-fi thriller, the worst thing to happen in *The Farm* is that Jane’s daughter suffers an ear infection while Jane languishes upstate in the equivalent of a luxury hotel.

There are certainly resonant dilemmas in the novel (none more so than the universal problem of balancing childcare with the need to work), and the characters serve as mouthpieces for the morally complex surrogacy debate:

“You’ve got to understand what this place is. Okay? It’s a factory, and *you’re* the commodity.”

“Surrogacy – this kind of surrogacy! – is a commodification, a cheapening! Everything sacred – outsourced, packaged, sold to the highest bidder!”

On the other hand, altruistic/idealistic Reagan points out, “Live-in nannies, baby nurses, wet nurses ... Blood donors, kidney donors, bone-marrow donors, sperm donors. Surrogates. Egg donors.” All of these transactions already occur; why not in the more organised fashion of Golden Oaks’ business model?

Ramos’s response can be detected in the glimmers of Golden Oaks’ manipulations, but she fails to develop those threats, and that’s partly because of fundamental flaws in the plot’s plausibility. If Golden Oaks were conceived as a criminal operation, there would be a greater capacity for abuse, but Ramos presents it as an above-board business venture. As a result, the suggestion that these surrogates are akin to prisoners in a human factory farm falls flat as they have, in fact, chosen to

sign up for the job and would be, in reality, free to come and go as they please (or at least at liberty to eat a slice of banana bread). Golden Oaks' stab at coercion (an imposed regime of healthy organic food, nature walks, antenatal massages, and classical music) is unenforceable and, as a result, a good deal of the novel's power dwindles as fast as a chromosomally compromised fetus. The problem isn't anything to do with surrogacy; it's to do with patriarchal capitalism, and *The Farm* finds no routes around that.