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# Obra muerta

**TITLE:** Obra muerta [Dead Work; Freeboard]

**AUTHOR:** José Luis de Juan

**PUBLISHER:** Editorial Minúscula

**GENRE:** Novella

**READER'S NAME:** María Julia Rossi

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**ON A SCALE FROM 1 - 10 (WITH 10 BEING THE HIGHEST SCORE) HOW WOULD YOU RATE THIS BOOK? 9**

A crucial ambiguity is at the center of this engaging, at times lyrical, at times philosophical, novella: “obra muerta” means at the same time, literally, “dead work” and, technically in the maritime lexicon, “freeboard”: the part of a ship that can be seen above the waterline. The Spanish writer José Luis de Juan (born in Majorca in 1956) develops this metaphor into a reflection on death and art through a succession of deaths around the protagonist and narrator. This novella blends brevity (around 100 pages) and complexity with a light writing that hooks the reader and does not let go.

The narrator of *Obra muerta* is obsessed with death; it recurs in his imagination incessantly since his childhood, disturbs his sleep to the point of causing him insomnia, and becomes the leitmotiv of this narration. His own death is the first, followed by others' in this book. The narrator successively describes the death of five of his friends: Paul Romeo, Chris Tango, Mike Bravo, Joan Delta, Oskar Isumi, in completely different times and circumstances. His recollections recreate an always-changing assembly of material descriptions, shared anecdotes and fresh feelings in a confessional tone that is never too melancholic or repetitive. Upon his death, his first dead friend was writing some piece of fiction called “*Obra muerta*”; the last dead friend incites a reflection on fiction and life, questioning the difference between reality and fiction. These hints open a multilevel interpretation of the novella, while bringing it closer to a metafictional tale. It pushes readers to transcend the matter of his obsession with death and move to question what is real and what is fiction (underscored by the fact that the narrator works in a newspaper and also writes short stories—a fact that we find out

when he is talking about the last dead friend and, at the same time, a character he wrote about).

With a tone that at the beginning resembles that of the noir genre, the accounts of deaths allows the narrator to describe parts of his dead friends' lives. Each death is a sort of episode in this cyclically organized reflection. But, as reflections often do, these episodes do not fully develop their part in the whole picture. Each tale presents simple anecdotes, full of meaningful details, creating micro stories whose importance has less to do with a structural narration than with the impression they cause in the narrator. Readers gradually become involved with each episode, as if each atmosphere were an inescapable environment redolent with of suggestive leads.

Intellectual and aesthetic reflections are the main protagonists, embodied on each page through very well crafted descriptions whose rhythm and quality are constantly appealing. José Luis de Juan wrote a book that is hard to put down once started. Intelligent and suggestive, *Obra muerta* does not give premade answers or perfectly closed plots; on the contrary, this novel has the configuration and the sound of a dream—or of an insomniac night. I readily recommend it for translation.

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