La Educación física
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La educación física (“Physical Education”) received the 2023 Biblioteca Breve prize by unanimous vote, and with good reason: Rosario Villajos has crafted a suspenseful, accessible, vivid, grisly bildungsroman about adolescent girlhood in the early 1990s.

In addition to evoking gym class and all its terrifying trappings—sexual segregation, fear of athletic inadequacy, changing and showering in the same locker room as your classmates—the novel’s title is also a wry riff on *L'Éducation sentimentale*, and Villajos is just as adept as Flaubert at lampooning the culture in which she was raised. The title perfectly describes the book’s core theme: the ways patriarchal society educates teenage girls on the dos and don’ts of inhabiting a female body.

The novel opens with sixteen-year-old Catalina fleeing her best friend Silvia’s house after Silvia’s father “does something” that makes her deeply uncomfortable. All her life, Catalina’s overprotective parents have reminded her of the threats (i.e. men) lurking behind every corner, and she is desperate to make it home in time for dinner so she won’t have to tell them about the abuse, for which they will undoubtedly blame her. In the first of the novel’s many tragic ironies, Catalina finds the prospect of acknowledging the abuse to her parents more distressing than the attempted abuse itself. She has missed the last bus, so she attempts to hitchhike to her house

The third-person-omniscient narrator closely follows Catalina’s inner monologue over the course of four hours, from her escape to her arrival back home. Instead of fleurons or chapter breaks, sections are divided by analog clocks that the time, as Catalina’s 10 p.m. dinnertime draws near.

Flashbacks illustrate how Catalina has internalized the core messaging of [what we would now call] rape culture. Villajos highlights episodes in the protagonist’s life that have taught her to view her body is a liability and a threat: infantilization by her parents after she recovered from a severe childhood illness; objectification by male friends; harassment by a male schoolmate whom she rebuffs romantically; her father slut-shaming women who sunbathe topless; being tricked into watching pornography and shamed for not feeling sexual desire; relentless news stories about girls and women who have been kidnapped and worse after “behaving recklessly;” an embargo on mentioning her period around men, including her father and brother. Particularly painful are the many scenes in which Catalina’s mother, herself the product of Franco-era Spanish values, endeavors to suppress any show of autonomy from the protagonist.

Catalina shows signs of resilience in many ways, such as circumventing her parents’ restrictions, learning to lie strategically, listening to grunge, and most importantly, discovering her passion for writing. But the novel takes place a full 25 years before #MeToo and, while the author is certainly rooting for Catalina, she resists presenting her as an anachronistic, fully-formed, 21st-century

feminist. The novel suggests that it is unrealistic to expect so much from a teenager immersed in a profoundly misogynist culture, and that it is the latter that must change.

The novel presents no major problems for translation. There are a handful of Spain-specific cultural elements that would need addressing (e.g., Catalina needs to be home by dinner at 10 p.m., and readers may wonder why they are eating so late), but there is nothing that a competent translator-editor team couldn't handle. The book will be very relatable among English-language readers, especially those who were raised in the 1980s and 90s.

Potential publishers should note that this novel is dated by design: this is a depiction of Catalina's "physical education" in a world of misogyny and sexualized violence as it existed in the early 1990s. Villajos's themes are universal, and patriarchy is as old as time, but the specifics have changed. The feminist responses to many of Catalina's encounters with machismo will be immediately obvious to most readers in the 2020s, and that is intentional. This book does not make an argument for feminism; it assumes its readers are feminists from the get-go. Instead, it represents what is, from hindsight, the stunningly toxic behavior that was tolerated, elevated, and internalized as Gen X and older Millennials were coming of age. Personally, as someone who is usually grossed out by corporations and public figures trying to cash in on nostalgia (SunnyD Vodka Seltzer! Steve from *Blue's Clues* is on TikTok! Make America Great Again!), I found it refreshing to read a novel that realistically remembers that era's noxious dudebro culture. As a pleasant side effect, the novel is a reminder to appreciate the progress that has been made in many of our lifetimes.