Los astronautas
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Los astronautas (The Astronauts) begins with a casual revelation: a family photograph of the narrator as a one-year-old in Barcelona with her parents, who separated shortly thereafter. Since this is the first image she has ever seen of her biological family, the photo acts as a psychological detonator, exploding the stories she has told herself about her parents and her own identity. Now a writer in her thirties, she embarks on a profound and wrenching exploration of the mysteries and absences in her unhappy childhood, determined to find the truth about her parents' relationship—and to write a book about it. Why did her father leave? Why did he never show interest in her? What exactly happened to her when she was eleven and attacked by a stranger? Why does her mother deflect all questions about the assault, her ex-husband, and her own feelings? What does the mother's strange expression in the photo mean?

Her quest to find the truth about the past is interspersed with passages about the US and Russian space missions, which contain reflections on presence and absence, longing and returning, that complement and deepen the family story. This braided, episodic structure, full of ruptures and surprising connections, is fresh, smart, and compelling.

One particularly effective juxtaposition is her parents' separation occurring the day the Challenger Shuttle imploded in 1986. Mortified by constantly being asked, "Where is your father?" the seven-year-old narrator eventually invents a fictional answer for her schoolmates, that her father is an astronaut working for NASA in Houston. She is eventually caught by her teacher in this fabrication and admonished not to mix fact and fiction in the future, a wonderful metafictional moment among many others in the novel.

A kind of psychological detective story, *Los astronautas* explores the nature of memory, truth, love, and history. As the narrator doggedly questions her relatives, she meets all too often with reticence or blanks, hampered by her own reluctance to push too hard. As she pieces together information about her mother and father's lives, she realizes that each of them is shadowed by trauma and comes to an understanding of the role of the past in shaping the present.

A fascinating and original work that uses elements from the author's own life but explores them as fiction, *Los astronautas* is comparable to titles by other prize-winning authors of autofiction such as Annie Ernaux, Rachel Cusk, Douglas Stuart, Sigrid Nuñez, Ocean Vuong, Ben Lerner, and Karl Ove Knausgåard. I found it an engrossing and thought-provoking read. The tension increases the further the story progresses, up to the very end.

I think it would work extremely well in English translation. The main challenges would be the references to Spanish and Catalan foods and customs, as well as the code-switching between

Spanish and Catalan, with all the cultural and political context that practice entails. The references to the NASA and Russian space missions would be familiar to US readers. Literary memoir, especially by women authors, is widely read in the US and this novel often reads like memoir. Dialogue is one of Ferrero's many strengths. She perfectly captures the complex currents concealed in everyday family exchanges.

Laura Ferrero is an exciting new voice in Spanish fiction, the author of an acclaimed debut novel, *¿Qué vas a hacer con el resto de tu vida?* (2017) as well as two collections of short stories and a graphic nonfiction collaboration. She writes for *El País* and appears on the Spanish current-events program La Ventana, on Cadena SER.