Azucre
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Before *Azucre*, her first novel, appeared, Bibiana Candia had published two poetry books, *La rueda del hamster* (The Hamster Wheel) and *Las trapecistas no tenemos novio* (We Trapeze Artists Have No Boyfriend), the short-storycollection *El pie de Kafka* (Kafka's Foot) and the "literary artifact" *Fe de erratas* (Errata).

Azucre (the Galician word for "sugar") is based on a little-known episode in the history of Galicia: the story of around 1,740 young men (most of them under eighteen years of age) who in 1854 were brought to Cuba with false promises of work and fortune by Urbano Feijóo de Sotomayor, a Galician nobleman and entrepreneur, and then sold as slaves to sugar plantation owners.

Candia's research was extensive, but she chose a minimalist approach: to focus on the humble, untold stories of those young boys, plucked from Galician villages at a time when the region was beset by famine and pestilence, shipped across the Atlantic like cattle, and then locked in barracks and forced to work the sugar cane fields side by side with the black slaves.

The first half of the book is devoted to getting to know these youths and where they come from: Orestes, who has the face of a cherub but can be as tough as necessary; Juan the Frog, a born dancer and apparently a callous bully, though we come to understand the reasons behind his violent behavior; José the Eaten, so called because a pig bit off an ear and part of a cheek when he was barely a toddler, and whose first child had died shortly before the trip; Amador the Consumptive, who at barely 16 is already suffering from tuberculosis. None of those boys had ever seen the ocean before boarding the *Villa de Neda*, bound for the port of Havana.

We also get to know some of the women (mothers, grandmothers, wives) they leave behind, as well as some of the slave women they encounter in Cuba –all of them women suffocated or hardened by hardship, who work as hard as the men. One of them is Agustina, a *criolla* (born in Cuba), who having been born to slavery needs to deliver sixteen children to her owner to gain her freedom.

But the book is about the Galician boys, and their gradual descent into the hell of slavery. Some of them die of exhaustion. One of them escapes and is granted sanctuary in a hidden village of fugitive slaves, under the divine protection of the orisha Eleggua. Others end up in jail, from which they are eventually released after the scandal of the enslaved Spanish boys breaks. (Candia chooses to ignore the much better-known fate of Feijóo de Sotomayor, who returned to Spain a rich man and, despite this scandal and others, became a politician years later.)

The novel is told through poetic vignettes, where even the most brutal, heartbreaking moments are conveyed by means of a beautiful, serene, yet poignant prose. We become privy not only to the boys'

thoughts, but those of their jailers, and even the mules, horses, and oxen they encounter. In this sense, *Azucre* is closer to a prose poem than to the novel form, and reminds me of another unusual, exquisite book: Marcel Schwob's *The Children Crusade*.

I most emphatically recommend *Azucre* to be translated and published in the United States.