The Violet Guy
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The graphic novel El violeta begins in 1955 in the Mediterranean port of Valencia. Spanish society has endured 16 years of the Francisco Franco dictatorship. A year earlier the regime had strengthened an existing statute, the Vagrancy Law, (Ley de vagos y maleantes) and criminalized any form of sexual dissidence. This is the historical moment the reader is introduced to eighteen-year old Bruno working at his aunt's store

The young protagonist is eager to go to the movies where an undercover policeman arrests him for lewd conduct. On the way to prison the police stops by a park where several young men have gathered and asks Bruno to identify others like him, other violetas. The term was used in media reports of the time to identify gay men. During this violent encounter, one of many throughout the narrative, Julian, (who is soon revealed to be Bruno's boyfriend), is also taken prisoner.

Bruno signs a confession that he is a homosexual but is lucky that his absent father enters the scene to get him out of jail; while Julian is less fortunate, ending up at a forced labor camp, euphemistically called Colonia Penitenciaria Agricola. Throughout the story the Catholic Church appears as a complicit agent in the repression against gay men: for example, a priest leads the jailed men into praying an Our Father and later another clergyman takes part in processing incoming prisoners at the Tefia camp located in Fuenteventura Island, just off the coast of North Africa. This was the best known of the forced labor camps for gay men, operating from 1954 to 1965.

Bruno's father, a secret police agent, gets his son into the police academy and the closeted violeta young man settles into "normal" family life with a wife and a child, at the same time becoming part of the state apparatus that persecutes other gay men. After leaving the Tefia labor camp Julian follows a different path and joins an underground group opposing Francoist repressive policies. Both men meet again towards the end of the story as the rebel Julian tries to convince his former boyfriend to join him in leaving for Mexico where they can lead a freer life.

As a fictionalized account, the novel skillfully weaves a text highlighting a little known part of Spanish history, from interrogation rooms, to sexual violence in jails and harsh conditions at forced labor camps. "We are imprisoned for being who we are," says one of the men. In an interview for Spanish television one of the authors commented on how police reports from the period provided the horrifying details that he integrated into the novel.

Gay men are not the only victims in this story. Bruno's wife, Maricruz, embodies the women marrying closeted men, who often led double lives and frequented places where they met other

violetas. Her name is symbolic of the “cross” she is called to bear. Divorce was not an option in Francoist society and would not become legal in Spain until 1981, almost six years after the dictator’s death.

Translating El violeta would bring a rich text to teach not only Spanish post-war history but also global LGBTQ history. Dynamic instructors looking for tools that can bring history to life have an engaging narrative in El violeta. Hopefully this graphic novel will be available in English translation very soon.