



The letter opener

Author:

Vicente Molina Foix

Reader's name:

Katie Whittemore

READER'S NAME: Katie Whittemore

El abrecartas (Anagrama, 2006) earned author Vicente Molina Foix Spain's National Prize for Narrative (2007), among other distinctions. Composed of letters, reports from police informants, and other written ephemera, the 448-page book is an epistolary novel that recreates the correspondence of a diverse group of characters (both real and fictional) maintained through the tumultuous period comprising the Spanish Civil War, Franco's dictatorship, the student movements of the 60s and 70s, and the democratic Transition. *El abrecartas* reconstructs History as it was borne out in the lives of both public intellectuals and artists (Federica García Lorca, Vicente Aleixandre, Ramón Serrano Suñer, among others) and private individuals, regular men and women—students, political activists, workers—whose lives and loves were shaped by the time and place in which they lived. With no separate narrator to shape and mold the story, nor dialogue to frame character or show relationships, the plot is woven through written documents that, as we later discover, were stolen by police informant Ramiro Fonseca, a man who ingratiated himself in intellectual circles, spying and writing reports for Francoist officials. The sheer volume of characters, stories, and material acts as a sort of accumulation of fragments of private experiences, passions, and pain, individual and disparate voices that together create a panoramic sense of Spain in the twentieth century.

The novel can be broken down into two main parts: the first half, which covers the period from 1920-1964 and imagines the correspondence of celebrated leftist cultural and intellectual figures, serving as a window into their private lives during a time of violence and repression (political, yes, but also just as crucially, moral and sexual); and the second, which focuses on letters exchanged between a set of average people, letters that quite masterfully reveal the changes in the societal and political fabric in the 60s and 70s in Spain. The latter half of the book also includes the denouement, the discovery of what these letters are, how they are related, and how we have come to read them.

Molina Foix ambitiously recreates the personal writing of at least two dozen characters, a feat in style and tone that is mostly successful. There are a few voices that feel weaker, or characters who are less fleshed out, but in general, the changes in how the characters write and reflect over time read as mostly consistent and smooth. The letter writers express themselves from the perspective of the political left, and create something like an interwoven discourse of the public and private people affected by the repression, cruelty, and reprisals of Franco's Spain. There is just one voice from the other side, Ramiro Fonseca's, the police informant we have to thank for the letters, and thus, the book. Fonseca's reports on his targets and his superior's comments and edits on his reports represent a counter discourse, one of official prose made ridiculous by the overblown and malicious

nature of Fonseca's writing.

When *El abrecartas* was published in 2006, it was mostly warmly received by critics and celebrated by a very important prize jury, despite the fact that the market was considered "saturated" by books about Spanish Civil war and Franco dictatorship by that point; certainly, Molina Foix's novel is ambitious and well-written, and innovative in its approach to well-worn themes in contemporary Spanish literature. The main question is how interested and engaged a US readership would be with these themes over 400+ pages. This particular reader's opinion is that, while the book is clearly meritorious from a literary standpoint, without a background in some of the particulars of Spain's history and, crucially, key cultural players, a US reader might feel lost among the great variety of storylines and characters. Whether or not this is actually an impediment to promoting the book, I leave to the jury!