Pequeñas mujeres rojas
Author:
Marta Sanz
Reader's name:
CRISTINA DE LA TORRE

READER'S NAME: Cristina de la Torre

The author is well known in Spain and the recipient of many important awards for her considerable literary oeuvre. This novel is the third in a trilogy featuring a gay detective named Arturo Zarco. He is the former husband of this story's main character (Paula) and current partner of (Luz) the main narrator's son. Zarco appears only obliquely--mostly as interlocutor--in the actual events narrated in *pequeñas mujeres rojas*.

Theme: William Faulkner observed that the past is not gone, in fact, it is not even past. This statement could be applied to this novel. *pequeñas* (just like that, no capital letter used in the title--that is the first detais that alerts us to the subversive tone of the text) deals with the attempt to fill in the gaps of some episodes of the Civil War and the Franco years, and thus recover a more accurate historical memory of the times. The ongoing process involves opening war time unmarked mass graves, and cataloguing their contents with the help of survivors in a small town of rural Spain.

Perspective: The narration uses multiple voices, all with very troubled psyches and thoroughly untrustworthy. Past and present cross and uncross in these voices that do not distinguish between the living and the dead, with clear echoes of *Pedro Páramo*. It is all very confusing and contradictory, stories laced with lies, betrayals, family dysfunction and secrets being revealed. Despite being set in a pastoral rural setting the atmosphere feels purposefully claustrophobic and latently violent. Many of the town's inhabitants, intermarried or the product of incest, could have escaped from a Gothic novel. The effect is heightened by the occasional sightings of eco tourists who move about checking their cell phones utterly oblivious to the literally earth-shaking work being carried out.

Style: Well written, eloquent sentences and arresting observations both of nature and of personal interactions. Dialogue is sparse but very well captured. The text is sprinkled with English and wide ranging literary references. Sanz's use of diminutives for grotesque effects is notable. For example, in the following description.

Esta mujer, en su recogida gordura -- boquita circular y roja, redondos y negros ojitos, naricilla amarilla de guisante, perlas que tapan los lóbulos de las orejas, uñitas redondas en manitas como ramilletes o bouquets nupciales -- contradice el aire familiar.

As they dig around the graves the characters also dig into their own and others' psyches. It fights a strenuous battle against systemic silence while closely exploring the ever changing nature of memories, the varied and conflicting versions of even the simplest of events. This is a somewhat

predictable plot imaginatively treated, that builds to a brutal and most disturbing crescendo.

Suitability for translation: The language is ample, playful, occasionally obscene. Still it poses no particular problems for translation. However, I think that, at least on the surface, the book deals with a very specific Spanish issue that might be of very limited interest to the contemporary American market. I found its nightmarish tone feeding our own fears and phobias during this crazy pandemia times. This circumstance, as well as the antiseptic PDF format, has inevitably colored my reaction to the book.

On the other hand, perhaps the act of revisiting a painful past in order to re-examine and remedy abuses perpetrated fits in with the mindset of post George Floyd USA. In a classroom setting, the novel might elicit much needed exploratory discussions of historical topics. I doubt there is any danger of it ever becoming a bestseller.

Transfer to US market: Hard to predict. It is very slow moving at first and demanding to read, particularly the first 100 pages or so.

I am not familiar with the rest of Marta Sanz´s works but, from what I can gather online, she is an important new voice in contemporary Spanish literature. As such, it might be worthwhile to consider translating another one of her various novels.

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