Picasso in the Civil War
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France, 1953: the young, well-known comic strip artist Paco Torres is summoned to a meeting on the Costa Azul to discuss a project with a mysterious "Señor Ruiz"—an admirer of his work—who turns out to be none other than one of the 20th century's most famous artists, Pablo Ruiz Picasso. Tormented by the Franco dictatorship in his native Spain and embittered by the fact that he wasn't able to fight for his beloved republic during the Spanish Civil War, Picasso proposes a joint project to Torres: use the medium of the comic to go back in time and rewrite the "real" wartime feats of young Pablo Ruiz, as Picasso would have wished to experience them. Picasso tells Torres: "I want to be part of the history I was left out of. I want to feel the chill of an existence that hasn't existed…And how can I do that if not within a drawing?" (pg. 31).

Thus begins an adventure in which readers are treated meditations on art, death, the nature of fame, the march of history, and the possibility of reimagining our lives through what we create. Through Torres's thoughts, letters home to his wife, and conversations between the two artists, better known aspects of an aging Picasso's larger than life personality are confirmed and his anxieties about his death and legacy are also revealed.

The result of their collaboration is a comic book in which Picasso—as Pablo Ruiz— a young man from the south of Spain and dedicated Communist, is living in Barcelona at the height of the conflict and Franco's march toward power, working for the Sindicat de Dibuixants, a union of cartoonists and artists, and signing his drawings as "Pegasso."

Torres's evocative drawings in this section of the book show a bombed out Barcelona and the surrounding countryside, children playing war in the streets, mob attacks on Falangists saluting each other on the sidewalk, young soldiers sent to the front, and even the "ladies" of the Calle Aviñon. When Pablo is sent to the front at last (his deepest desire is to shoot both Franco and the artist who signs his work "Fusil" and steals his drawings and repurposes them for the Nationalist cause) it is not with a gun but with his pencils and a mobile printing press. There Pablo discovers the power of his work in the trenches and on the battlefield, and conceives of a new piece of propaganda: a comic strip lambasting Franco and his Fascist allies in Germany, Italy, and Japan that will delivered to enemy troops via a series of rockets.

But the picture for the Republic is grim: scenes show Pablo's regiment preparing for the disastrous Battle of the Ebro and receiving news of France and Britain's capitulation to Hitler over Czechoslovakia, and the withdrawal of the International Brigade (Georges Braque-as-soldier makes an appearance, encouraging Pablo to go to France). When Pablo returns to a devastated Barcelona

to find that his friends have fled with Braque to Paris, Pablo decides to leave as well, and the man and artist begins his life in exile.

The book is structured in two principal frames. Firstly, the opening and closing sections that include the primary narration, that is, the characters Paco Torres and Picasso and their collaboration on the comic book rectifying Picasso's frustrations about never having fought in the war, and secondly, the inclusion of said comic/graphic novel "The Real Life of Pablo Ruiz," which Torres finally completes and gives to the artist. s Torres uses a style of illustration and color scheme unique to each section.

In terms of possible reception in the US market, the fact that this book is about Pablo Picasso, one of the most well-known artists of the 20th century, will generate interest in those who already consider themselves fans of Picasso, as well as the general public. Also, the Spanish Civil War is an evocative literary subject that many US readers will be familiar with from Hemingway and others, and Spain as the site of the "dress rehearsal" for the ideological and military conflicts of World War II is also familiar and potentially of greater interest in the current global political climate.

This novel is entertaining and enjoyable to read, the set up is unique, and the illustrations are appealing and rather retro, in keeping with the time period and subject. Written with humor and pathos, it contains healthy doses of meditations on art, politics, and history, illustrations of both charming 1950s French villages and wartime 1930s Barcelona, and an interesting gloss on the Spanish Civil War and its role as a precursor to the aggressions of Fascism and the conflict that would grip the entire continent. Anyone with a general interest in Picasso, 20th century modern art, 20th century European history, or the Spanish Civil War will find a lot to enjoy in this book.