Fog In Tangier
Author:
Cristina Lopez Barrio
Reader's name:
Brendan Riley

READER'S NAME: Brendan Riley

This highly readable novel is a pleasant, compelling romantic thriller filled with smart literary allusions and fascinating games of time, history, and aesthetic philosophy. No surprise that Cristina López Barrio's elegant adventure, her sixth novel, reminiscent of the smart, enjoyable, well-crafted thrillers of Carlos Ruiz Zafón or Arturo Pérez Reverte, was a finalist for the 2017 Premio Planeta.

The heroine, Flora Gascón, is a lonely woman from Madrid, with a boring husband, an unfulfilling job translating manuals for electric appliances, unfulfilled literary aspirations, and the frustration of being unable to conceive a child. A chance tryst with Paul Dingle, a handsome Frenchman, leads her to read, and become obsessed with, the eponymous novel she spots on his nightstand, *Niebla en Tánger* (Fog/Mist in Tangier). When Paul fails to appear for their next date, Flora, finding that one of the main characters in the novel bears Paul's very name, begins to be drawn into a web of intrigue that takes her to Tangier to try to meet the author, an old Berber woman named Bella Nur, and to try to discover the real identity of Paul Dingle; has Flora been seduced by a ghost, an imposter, or someone else?

The story (or stories) that follows—this is the classic novel within a novel—offers an artfully crafted detective story that employs a wide variety of fascinating elements and familiar motifs: Tangier as exotic literary destination; Morocco's historical connection to Spain; Morocco's post-war independence movement; smuggling gold to help revolutionaries; Jewish refugees from the Russian Revolution; the clash between modern Morocco and its traditional culture; elegant salons of the 20's and 30's Jazz Age; fine restaurants, cocktails, and after-dinner rooftop cigarettes; art deco fashion, style, and architecture; love affairs pubic and private, transgressive and profane; ghostly figures in the nighttime streets; unsolved murders and disappearances; a cold, intimidating police inspector; unsettling robberies and surprise attacks; a risky clandestine exhumation; danger both real and imaginary . . . Beyond that deftly handled and entertaining catalogue, beautifully constructed paragraphs, and smooth dialogue (artful, not overly contrived), lies the novel's aesthetic, philosophical, and psychological concerns: Oscar Wilde's affirmation that life should imitate art, and how authors should not be slaves to facts but must imbue their art with their imaginative selves; whether and how much people should be bound to and by their families' expectations of them; how we create legacy; how we can be, and how much right do we have to be, our own best friend instead of our own worst enemy (follow our own inspiration or emulate other people)—all of that undergirding the author's strong, sensitive exploration of an interesting cast of women powerfully wrestling with life's demands and finding how or how not to take charge of their own destinies.

Cristina López Barrio's novel comfortably straddles the worlds of best-selling genre fiction and

literary art. *Niebla en Tánger* is a dyadic house of mirrors wherein reflections multiply and beget one another with dizzying ease. The novel confers the curious sensation of feeling very familiar with the fascinating, frustrating, and complicated characters while still wanting to know more about their inner lives. It demonstrates a timeless love for literature and an ability to reflect the vicissitudes of its time of composition. *Niebla* can mean both fog and mist in English, and this novel exudes the qualities of both words—it fills the reader with the foggy feeling of mystery: the heroine's confusion generated by lies, ambition, betrayal, and murder; and it settles slowly and satisfyingly on the brain like a fine cooling mist. The novel proceeds with disarming gentility—the author is always tasteful and restrained, wisely avoiding any crass, garish, or gruesome attractions—leaving a lingering curiosity even after experiencing the endgame; readers are likely to feel drawn to revisit the many fascinating corners and details of this artful and fictive Tangier.

A positive, touching, well-crafted novel. Formulaic but never completely predictable. Strongly recommended. Hopefully a skillful translator will soon bring its lucid Spanish and complex literary plot to life in an equally satisfying English-language version.