Animal Museum
Author:
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Reader's name:
Andrea Shah

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ON A SCALE FROM 1 - 10 (10 being the highest score) how would you rate this book? 9

Museo animal, the second novel by the Costa Rican-Puerto Rican author Carlos Fonseca Suárez, is a tale of obsession, art, curation, repetition, architecture, and journeys both physical and spiritual.

The novel begins when our narrator receives a mysterious delivery of papers pertaining to a recently deceased fashion designer named Giovanna Luxembourg. This leads the narrator to recall a series of encounters with the designer, years prior, which began after she summoned him to her Manhattan studio in the middle of the night to discuss his work on insects and their patterns of camouflage. They meet intermittently until Luxembourg disappears from New York, ostensibly to pursue her fascination with Subcomandante Marcos and the utopian society he is creating in Chiapas, Mexico.

When the narrator receives Luxembourg's papers, years later, the assortment of photographs and writings – along with the fact that she has chosen to send them to him despite the fact that they have not spoken in years – it leads him to explore more deeply who Giovanna was. In particular, he finds himself haunted by the image of Giovanna as a young girl, lying in a hospital bed in a foreign country, her parents nowhere to be found.

This leads him to learn more about her parents: glamorous figures in the New York *demimonde* of the 1960s and 1970s, both of whom were captivated by fringe spiritual and political movements of the time.

The second part of the novel traces Giovanna's father's journey from his birthplace in Israel to his present-day life as a hermit, intertwining his personal story with musings on both history and photography.

The third part is the longest and most complex; it leaps from her father's story to that of her mother, an ex-model whose story is challenging to summarize. It is her obsession with a cultlike group in the jungle – led by a child prophet – that ultimately destroys her family. Many years later, living in an abandoned apartment building in Puerto Rico, she ends up accused of financial crimes which she attempts to spin as a work of performance art. This part nests the stories of multiple individuals who are trying to deconstruct the web she has spun, among them a police officer, her public defender, and a reporter from the U.S. (who happens to be the narrator's close friend).

The fourth and fifth sections return to the story of Giovanna; the fourth depicts the family's journey, when she was 10, through the jungle to the prophet's camp. The fifth, in turn, artfully ties together the prior four sections while reflecting on the nature of art and curation.

Summarizing the plot, however, does little to accentuate the complexity and sophistication of this book. From the first few pages, it is laden with literary and scientific references. Later sections, particularly the one regarding Giovanna's mother's trial, are meditations on the nature of art in society. The book is remarkable in addressing big-picture critical topics while still managing to tell a series of engaging stories. Often the reader will be convinced that they know where the story is going, only for it to take an unexpected digression that turns out to be just as intriguing as the main plot.

While reading, any number of comparisons came to mind: Borges, Calvino, Bolaño, or to take a more contemporary example, the British novelist Hari Kunzru, whose work often focuses on issues of art, identity, and reproduction. This is a serious literary novel that is also a pleasure to read, both in terms of the fluid, elegant prose and the author's knack for telling a compelling story.

The subject matter should be appealing to a U.S. reader of literary fiction, and the book is highly suitable for translation. There will be a few minor challenges for the translator: the book does use some regionalisms and characters speak in a variety of Spanish dialects. Additionally, there are a variety of citations from different sources which will require the translator to seek out either English-language originals or existing translations in order to stay consistent.

Overall, this is a compelling book from a major literary talent, and it absolutely merits translation and publication into English.

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