Doctor García's Patients
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ON A SCALE FROM 1 - 10 (WITH 10 BEING THE HIGHEST SCORE) HOW WOULD YOU RATE THIS BOOK?8

In 1936 Madrid is under siege as Republican defenders and Nationalist rebels square off against each other in the mortal combat that would be known as the Spanish Civil War. Enemy bombs kill and maim civilians, and hospitals can barely keep up with the avalanche of dead and wounded. Far from the carnage in the streets, a deadly game of espionage is being planned by the Republican leadership in exile and played out at embassy cocktail parties all over Europe. This is the backdrop to *Los pacientes del doctor García* [Dr. García's Patients], the riveting novel by Almudena Grandes.

General Franco's Nationalists beat the Republicans with help from Adolf Hitler, who saw an opportunity to test-drive his cutting-edge war machine in Spain. When the Second World War ended badly for Hitler in 1945, many of his henchmen appealed to Franco to return the favor. The fascist Spanish regime opened its doors to these Nazis, despite the fact that they were all wanted by the Allies for crimes against humanity. A well-connected committee of Nationalists in Madrid provided them with new identities and helped them emigrate to Argentina, where General Perón's fascist dictatorship welcomed them with open arms.

The author gradually peels open the pages of history, weaving fact and fiction into a seamless story of intrigue, impersonation, and revenge. And love, in many of its guises. Dr. García is a young, idealistic doctor in Madrid during the Civil War. He cares for the wounded, healing or dispatching them with the pitiful resources at his disposal as he becomes increasingly cynical about life, politics, and his shattered homeland. He has known Amparo Priego since they were kids, and they still live across the hall from each other in the same apartment building in a bourgeois part of the city. Now adults, caught up in the chaos of the Civil War, they find themselves on opposite sides of the conflict but are nonetheless physically drawn to each other and begin a sizzling affair.

Almudena Grandes is a terrific storyteller. Her characters come alive after just a few sentences, and her dialogue is crisp and credible. She has a rare talent for creating moods—the numbness of people under the constant threat of enemy bombardment, the thrill of being in bed with a lover, the excitement of going undercover to serve one's country. That's what Dr. García does, recruited to the Republican cause by a man whose life he once saved. The story then moves to Germany during WWII, to the eastern front in Russia, and to a grim scene in Estonia where crimes against humanity are committed in broad daylight. The fascist network in Spain pulls the right strings and the story moves to Buenos Aires, where a community of ex-pat Germans settles in and tries to keep out of

sight.

The Republican leaders in exile are outraged by what Franco is doing to their country, and feel sure the Allies will depose him as soon as they have proof of his nefarious doings. Their agent recruits Dr. García, and they both spend years in deep cover, assuming several identities and aliases as they infiltrate ever deeper into the Nazi-smuggling network they want to expose. Theoretically, the Republicans are right; the United States and the democratic nations of the world do want to punish Franco for aiding war criminals. But the dictator holds the trump card in this game of Anything-but-Communism that the West is playing as Russia rises ominously in the east, and Washington's righteous rhetoric is far worse than its bite. The Spanish Republicans, who were democratically elected and illegally overthrown, are astonished at this betrayal of principles, and realize they are on their own. No one is coming to rescue them. Toward the end of the book, Dr. García's wife asks: "What did we do that left us worse off than the Nazis?"

This is one of those invaluable books that sheds light on historical events like the wars mentioned above, sharing insights and nuances with which the general reading public may not be familiar. Well worth the read.

Almudena Grandes has written many books and won many prizes. This is the fourth volume in her series *Episodios de unaguerra interminable* [Episodes of an Endless War].