



Leña Menuda

Author:

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Reader's name:

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Story-line, style of writing: the story follows a young Spanish woman who experiences an unplanned but not unexpected pregnancy. What is unexpected is her learning, quite late, that the baby she is now expecting will be born with a traumatic, fatal birth defect. Without hesitating, she decides to abort the child, requiring a trip to Brussels where, conveniently, her beloved cousin lives. The cost of the trip and medical procedure exhaust the narrator's savings, adding to her doubts, fears, and worries.

The novel's realistic style boasts a skillful balance of narrative and theme; the language is clear, straightforward, intelligent, engaging, modern, urban, and markedly Spanish in its depiction of family life, education, social, and religious issues. The plot is well-paced with an excellent balance of narration and reflection.

Alternating chapters highlight the narrator's now-strained relationship with her husband "A.", which, as she travels to Belgium properly cede space to a subplot about her lifelong friendship—as close as sisters—with her cousin, "B." B. hosts her at her flat in Brussels, and provides physical and emotional support during the grueling abortion, scenes that are described with realistic detail and intensity.

A third set of alternating chapters features reflections on language, history, literature, anecdotes, and trivia related to her situation; these are surprising, wellcrafted, well-placed, and interesting, and, along with the narrator's youthful memories, offer a thoughtful, somewhat lighter counterpart to the main pregnancy/abortion storyline.

Language and style: realistic style; first person POV omniscient, brisk, reflective voice —self aware and self-deprecating—wry humor, a bit unconventional but not selfabsorbed, the narrator is aware of the dynamics of her relationships with others and the mutual emotional feedback. The short chapter lengths propel the story forward. The language is intelligent and worldly and erudite but also lively, hot blooded, honest and emotional—vivid. The clear, detailed descriptions of physiognomy, pregnancy, and the abortion process are enlivened by the narrator's wry but woeful commentary. The book is dramatic, moving, even mordantly funny but not excessively sentimental.

Suitability for translation: highly suitable thanks to an engrossing plot as readers follow the narrator closely through her ordeal; it is emotional, daunting, interesting, and provocative as it navigates the ordeal of a young woman facing an enormous physical and emotional challenge. The subject matter is contemporary, compelling, and controversial, including some pop culture references, some passing, some more significant, that seem generational tags.

Whether the subject matter will travel well in the US: This book is an engaging and heartfelt but heavy duty, emotional, abortion narrative that clearly, contemporarily, and unapologetically asserts a woman's right to choose to end her pregnancy, in this case in response to a diagnosis that her male child, "X", will be born a "monster," with a rare, traumatic, fatal birth defect: *Achondrogenesis*. The subject matter would be naturally divisive in the U.S.

Whether the overall idea seems different and unusual: I am not an expert in the literature of abortion. Certainly the subject, including the need to make a perilous trip to procure an abortion, is, sadly, not new, but this is also very modern story that has played a part in many novels, stories, and films.

Whether it deals with a common theme but treats it in an original way: Enough literature includes frank, detailed medical descriptions, sometimes for shock or emotional effect—however, for me, at least, this story's inclusion of such language feels informative. It also helps to develop the narrator's ethos as a knowledgeable, thoughtful mother who comprehends the enormous gravity of her situation. What's also effective is the narrator's background story, her deep sometimes rivalrous friendship with her cousin, the alternating commentary chapters which explore related themes and allusions—these chapters enhance the novel's intellectual pleasure.

Predictability and variety of plotlines and how they blend together: the story is very well plotted and paced, and the alternating chapters are smoothly braided together and alleviate many concerns about the plot feeling predictable—we know that the narrator is going to get an abortion and we are led through enough preliminary details to feel reasonably sure of what's coming, that the narrator is reliable, but the manner of presenting this ordeal feels fresh thanks to how closely we follow the narrator and her frank commentary.

Plausibility of dialogue: First person POV narrates and reports conversations. No standard conversational dialogue.

Author & their previous works: Following, my translation of Tusquets' author bio:

Marta Barrio García-Agulló (New Haven, 1986) is an editor. With degrees in Spanish Literature and East Asian Studies, she also holds a Master's Degree in Publishing from the University of Salamanca-Santillana. Her first novel, *Los gatos salvajes de Kerguelen* (The Wild Cats of Kerguelen, 2020) was a finalist for the Premio Memorial Silverio Cañada during the Semana Negra literary festival in Gijón, Spain.

Similarities to other popular books: One name that comes to mind, in terms of intrepidity of subject matter, is Lucy Corin's *100 Apocalypses and Other Apocalypses*, though Barrio's style is realistic not figurative and fantastical like Corin's. I think of the frankness of Joyce Carol Oates' famous story "How I Contemplated The World From The Detroit House Of Correction And Began My Life Over Again." The medical procedures make me think of Thomas Pynchon's famously over the top nose job scene in *V*. I also feel an emotional intensity that calls to mind Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's collection of love stories: *There Once Lived a Girl Who Seduced Her Sister's Husband, and He Hanged Himself*.