Basque: Izurdeen aurreko bizitza; Spanish: La vida anterior de los delfines; English: The Past Life of Dolphins
Author:
Kirmen Uribe
Reader's name:
Lisa M. Rodríguez

Kirmen Uribe, born in Ondarroa, Spain in 1970, published his most recent novel in March 2022. Written first in Basque, it has already been translated into Castilian Spanish by the author and José María Isasi Urdangarín. A translation into Catalan is also already on the market. The title of this new novel by Uribe translates into English as *The Past Life of Dolphins*, and publication of the book in the United States is more than justified.

Over the past two decades, Uribe has written over a dozen works in various genres, including adult fiction, children's fiction, poetry, and journalism. He has received over half a dozen literary awards for two of his prior adult novels, his poetry, and a published essay on the right to individuality. A past Culmen Center Fellow of the New York Public Library, he is currently Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University. His writing has already been translated into over twenty languages.

The Past Life of Dolphins is a multi-thread narrative, 432 pages in the Spanish version. Like prior works by Uribe, this novel blurs genre and brings forward individual experience using comparison and the shared experiences of people who touch each other's lives profoundly. The themes, also seen in prior writing by Uribe, include the lived experiences of migrants and the changes that occur within an individual's psyche when life moves into a completely different context.

Three main storylines are woven together in *The Past Life of Dolphins*. The first is the story of Rosika Schwimmer (1877-1948), a Hungarian pacifist and feminist, who immigrated to the U.S. after World War I but was denied citizenship because of her pacifism. Schwimmer's secretary, Edith Wynner began work on a biography but was unable to complete it. Uribe takes up this story by personally reviewing the contents of the dozens of boxes held in the New York Public Library, boxes that reveal Schwimmer's life story.

A second storyline within *The Past Life of Dolphins* is the experience of a Basque family that moves to New York in the here and now. This family is a reflection of Uribe himself, his wife, and his children.

The third storyline involves the friendship of two young women in a small coastal town in Basque Country, a fishing village where strong women had strong ideas. Here again, Uribe makes use of his own life, his upbringing surrounded by formidable women in the 1970s and '80s.

The thematic thread connecting all three narratives is a traditional Basque legend about dolphins. According to this legend, dolphins are men transformed into sea creatures after daring to fall in love

with the mythical lamia. In the Basque tradition, lamia are water-dwelling creatures who appear to be women with long hair and who possess some attributes of animals. They are strong. Uribe draws comparisons between these men transformed into dolphins with the experiences of migrants, whose life experience changes when they enter their new environment.

The overall narrative structure of *The Past Life of Dolphins* is a pleasure to read, both richly complex, yet accessible, thematically and structurally, to a broad audience. Sections of resonant dialogue alternate with descriptive sections that both draw the reader in and move the novel forward. The Past Life of Dolphins is not a simple collection of life stories. Instead, the themes entwine the stories to each other and to the reader with a subtlety that is unusual.

The piecing together of the experiences of individuals from different locations and backgrounds is something Uribe explored in his 2008 novel, *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, which has been published in English. The experiences of migrants and exiles is also central to his 2016 work, *Time to Wake Up Together*, which has not yet been translated into English.

With so many excellent books on migrants and cultural intersection available, the public has perhaps never had such an abundance of choice for exploration of topics related to cultural transition. What *The Past Life of Dolphins* offers is a special, gentle threading of themes that move from individual, intimate thoughts and experiences out toward common human and universal experiences.