La memoria del alambre
Author:
Bárbara Blasco
Reader's name:
Katie King

What happens to a piece of wire when you twist or bend it sharply? That twist disfigures the shape of the wire, and can never be removed, never returned to normal. This is the metaphor author Bárbara Blasco deploys to set the stage for her story about a middle-aged woman whose adolescent adventures and traumas shape the rest of her life, a permanent warp in her psyche.

This is a difficult but important and moving novel about the traumas suffered by teenage girls. This is the kind of story that the #metoo movement made possible for women to tell and they need to be heard.

It is also a beautifully rendered piece of literary fiction with a compelling and suspenseful plot, true to life dialog, and a seamless flow of short brisk chapters that little by little introduce us to the characters and reveal their stories. All is not what it seems, and the surprise ending produces in the reader a gasp of surprise and grief. And hints at the potential for empowerment.

Set both in the present day and in 1980s Valencia, the protagonist tells her story in the first person. She describes her current life as an itinerant singer performing with a folk band that tours small Spanish towns singing “bad” songs, but then takes us with her on a journey through her memory, a journey that is triggered by an email she receives from the mother of her best friend who died when the two were in school, at just 14 years of age. Was her friend’s death an accident, or suicide? The email provokes the protagonist’s memories of those years, what happened to her and her friend, and as she recounts events, she becomes conscious of things she has repressed. Her realization of what really happened leads her to a confront a figure from her past, her own recollection of events and her own role in the tragedy.

The historical setting portrays a post-Franco Spain relishing its new cultural and artistic openness. The two girls, despite their young age, throw themselves into Valencia’s music, drugs and sex scenes at a series of discotheques known then as the Codfish Route, in part to escape difficult situations at home. “We are 13, 14 years old. We are ageless,” Blasco writes. “Adolescence is the moment when the wire gets twisted.”

The electronic dance music of the 80s shaped a generation of young people in Spain and plays a central role in the story. For the protagonist, the music dies when her friend Carla dies. It’s the death of innocence.

This novel will be a joy for someone to translate. The protagonist’s voice is consistent, believable, engaging, and conversational. The narrative moves briskly forward.

While English language readers may not be familiar with some of the influential Spanish songs and musical groups that appear in this story (there are also many references to British and American music of the period), those who are interested can easily link to online videos.

This novel is *not* steeped in reflection on Spain's Civil War or long Franco dictatorship. It is a contemporary work of fiction exploring very contemporary themes. It recalls other successful novels from Spain depicting the real lives of women, such as *The Wonders*, by Elena Medel.

Author Bárbara Blasco, who won the Tusquet's Prize for her 2020 novel, *Dicen los sintomas* (The Symptoms Say), appears to be a writer on the rise.