



La bajamar

Author:

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Reader:

Ruth Clarke

La bajamar (Low Tide) is a beautifully written story of three female characters searching for meaning: interrogating themselves and others to find answers within and from their past. It is narrated in alternating chapters by three generations of women from a family in a small village in the north of the Basque Country. This book is an exploration of shared memory and what goes unspoken in families – particularly in the case of women who put the needs of others before their own, and how they deal with their choices. It addresses issues from all stages of motherhood: miscarriage, feeling overwhelmed, absence and loss, and watching one's daughter and granddaughter become mothers in turn. We see daughters resenting their mothers' decisions, mothers suffering with regret over choices they made with their child's best interest at heart, and painfully real struggles to share feelings and broach difficult conversations. This is a considered, reflective, and often sad family saga. The three characters offer a realistic reflection of family relationships: the ambiguity of love and resentment, sharing and secrecy.

Each in their own way, the women are attempting to tie up loose threads of family history, but the key premise of the book is that Adirane wants to record her grandmother's life story before it's too late. Despite its spare dialogue, the novel's characterisation and voices come through clearly, and the voice of the grandmother recollecting while on the verge of losing her memory, is particularly poignant.

These characters are representative of three very different historical and political periods in Spain: the second world war, the years of separatist ETA violence, and an era marked by migration of the younger generations to big cities. They embody the challenges of maintaining a family and family relationships through or in spite of these societal changes and the ongoing decline of industries that kept the village alive.

The women's stories revolve not only around the theme of family, but also of home. All three return home at some point – from the war, from university, from the capital – to find the place, the people, and themselves changed.

Adirane

The youngest of the three female protagonists, Adirane makes a long-overdue trip back to the village where she grew up, on the premise of recording her grandmother's life story. In reality, she isn't coming home so much as escaping Madrid, and the complicated issues in her own new family. She struggles with her role as a mother and finding her place in the world. Later in life she discovered that her father had been a terrorist and had to go into hiding before she was born. Adirane struggles to forgive her mother for withholding this information, and Adriana struggles with lifelong regret for

her decision to do so. By leaving Madrid, Adirane fears she may be letting her own daughter down in a not dissimilar way. Back in the village, Adirane meets an old lover – another unresolved relationship with much left unsaid and hints of sacrifice and longing for a life that could have been.

Adriana

Adirane's mother. After raising her daughter alone, she still lives with her own mother, Ruth, who is reaching the end of her life. By deciding to keep her baby, and to spend her life caring for others, she has effectively missed out on a romantic relationship of her own, always putting her family before any possible new partners. Privately, she suffers the pain of not seeing her daughter for five years, and never having met her granddaughter, a rift for which she blames herself. When Adirane returns to the family home, Adriana makes anxious and tentative attempts to rekindle the relationship.

Ruth

Adirane's grandmother. Adirane records Ruth telling stories about the unsettled and hungry period before the war; her childhood as an evacuee in France and the relationship she slowly built with her foster mother; her difficult return to Spain and her mother's refusal to let her ever go back to France. The book opens with a story that has long haunted the town, of a child who drowned in the river. That child was Ruth's brother, Matias, who died while she was in France. In the final pages Adirane reveals that just before her death, Ruth had explained that this story was a myth, and that her brother had been suffocated as her mother tried to keep him quiet to avoid being caught by soldiers breaking into their house – a truth that she had only learned at the end of her own mother's life, another generational secret.

Ruth's life story and the heartfelt account of her death could almost make a novel in itself, but the generational layers and multiple perspectives add a more complex literary structure and really bring out the relationship themes.

La bajamar would certainly translate well for the UK market. It resonates particularly with the Northern Irish troubles, but also the struggles of a family in any declining small town, and its theme of mothers and daughters is universal. While the approach of telling generational stories through female characters is not unique, it is always refreshing and lends itself to the gentle and sympathetic storytelling which this author uses so evocatively. As much as the reader may long for these women to have a Hollywood style conversation that brings closure and clarity, their exchanges are frustratingly real and punctuated by things unsaid, meaning that they (and we) never get to a point of resolution. While slimmer and more refined than a Ferrante novel, *La bajamar* would nonetheless appeal to fans of Elena Ferrante and fans of Maggie O'Farrell (who shares a UK publisher with Moreno Duran).

Aroa Moreno Duran is a multitalented writer, working in journalism, biography, poetry and fiction. Her critically acclaimed debut novel, *La hija del comunista* (The Communist's Daughter), won Spain's Premio Ojo Critico for Best Fiction of the Year and accolades are sure to follow for *La bajamar*, her second novel published in June 2022. The Communist's Daughter was published in the UK, in Katie Whitemore's translation, by Tinder Press, the literary imprint of Headline Publishing Group.