

Simon

Author:

Miqui Otero

Reader:

Peter Bush

*Simón* is a highly original bildungsroman set in crucial periods of history for Barcelona: the 1992 Olympic Games, the 2008 economic crisis, the 2017 terrorist attacks and 2018 independence referendum. The characters are from immigrant backgrounds and struggle to survive in the big city. It is not the Barcelona of intellectuals and artists, but the city of poorly paid, mainly Spanish speaking families where the new generations read pulp fiction and cheap books they buy in the Sant Antoni Sunday second-hand book market (the pre-social media culture of the early 90s). It is a world of banter, popular music, low dives and a search for tenderness and meaning. The spine of the plot is constructed around the journey of Simón from a young boy brought up in a cheap bar who becomes a chef in top restaurants only to go back to running a small bar. The reader is swept along by Miqui Otero's effervescent use of dialogue and description that creates a city that is post Carlos Ruiz Zafón or Eduardo Mendoza.

Simón is eight years old at the beginning of the novel. He experiences life from the perspective of the Baraja, a no-frills bar in the Sant Antoni district that is owned by his father and his uncle, two emigrants from Galicia married to twin sisters who look after the kitchen. The bar has a faithful clientele of old-time inhabitants of this district before it began to gentrify: taxi-drivers, gypsies who work as travelling salesmen, unemployed actors, old stars from the variety shows on the nearby Paral·lel, office workers and unskilled workers... Simón is an only child and enjoys a special relationship with his cousin Ricardo (nicknamed 'Rico', who is ten years older and whom he treats as a brother).

Rico is a typical rebellious adolescent and a great reader of books and he initiates Simón into the pleasure of reading. Rico hands on to him books he buys in the Sunday second-hand market and introduces him to fictional worlds inhabited by knight errants, swashbuckling swordsmen and musketeers. Simon's favourite book is *Scaramouche*, a character he thinks is very like his cousin Rico, whom he idealises.

On 24 June 1992, while the city is preparing to hold the Olympic Games, Simón and Rico stroll along the streets that are celebrating St John's Eve with parties, bonfires, and fireworks. That night, Simón meets Betty, a friend of Rico's, and Tailor, an older, eccentric man, who is a tailor by trade, and with whom Rico is in a strange business relationship that Simón can't fathom. Tailor gives Rico a flashy jacket he's made, and Simón a trumpet. Later on, Rico leaves Simón sleeping in his bed, and disappears mysteriously; from then on Simón's life is dominated by his obsessive attempts to discover what happened to his cousin.

In the Baraja, Simón gets to know Estela—nicknamed 'the Green-haired Girl'— a girl of his age who is the daughter of the 'Martian'; both owe their nicknames to the fact that Estela's father works as a

polisher using an abrasive product the sparks and splashes from which give his hair a greenish tone, (his daughter's too, who often keeps him company while he is working). After Rico's disappearance, Estela becomes Simón's best friend and helps to look for Rico in second-hand book markets and down city streets. Simón and Estela are loners and are the butt of bullies and pranksters at school. In Estela's case, it's the colour of her hair; in Simón's, it's because he talks like the characters in the chivalric and adventure novels he reads. At the same time, Simón discovers he has a talent for cooking and starts to help his mother and his aunt in the kitchen of the Baraja preparing dishes with outlandish ingredients.

One day, when he is thirteen, after masturbating for the first time, Simón catches a glimpse of the trumpet that Tailor gave him the night Rico disappeared and which he'd never bothered to examine more closely. He tries to give it a blow but a note written by Rico falls out in which he says he is fine and that 'Everything is in the books'. Rico is still missing, though his family is convinced he left of his own accord. A couple of years on, Simón finds out that Tailor has died, and soon after has a chance encounter with Betty, Rico's friend, who now works as an estate agent and has the keys to Tailor's flat. Betty asks Simón to accompany her to the flat, and there after an initiatory sex session, by chance Simón finds that ten-thousand peseta notes are hidden inside the thousands of books that comprise Tailor's library and he remembers the note Rico left: 'It's all inside the books'. He doesn't say anything to Betty, but does tell Estela, who is still his best girlfriend. As the money is still hidden among the pages of the books, they both think up a wheeze to get their hands on Tailor's library and its hidden treasure.

Six years later, in the summer of 2004, we meet Simón in his early twenties working as a trainee chef in a two Michelin star French-Basque restaurant. This long sequence in the novel takes us into the world of luxury restaurants and designer chefs through the relationships Simón develops with his bosses and work colleagues. It's a hilarious behind-the-scenes portrait of the universe of nouvelle cuisine. Simón is good at it, and invents such delicacies as a tasty mix of Nocilla chocolate spread and anchovies. He strikes up a friendship with Biel, who is also studying to become a chef, and his sister, Ona. Simón falls foul of Biel's father, who is an important Catalan businessman, and that leads him to lose his job and find himself on a blacklist, which means no other high-class restaurant will employ him.

In the spring of 2010, at the age of twenty-seven, Simón returns to Barcelona and gets work in a Basque 'pinchos' bar. One day, a very decrepit Rico walks into the bar. We now discover what happened to Rico. On the day he disappeared, Rico had planned to fly to New York in search of adventure, but when he got to the airport he discovered he'd forgotten his ticket and consequently missed his flight. As he had no money to pay for another ticket to New York and needed to flee the city because 'he owed money to half the district' and, what's more, was tired of fighting with his father, he decided to jump on a bus to Santander where he ended up working in the kitchens of backstreet bars and operating in the world of petty crime. Eventually he returned to Barcelona and found work in a dive in the Zona Franca. Betty was aware of his situation and got him a different job in Valencia, hoping to rescue him from the world of drugs and delinquency. He goes to that city but is soon in hospital recovering from a coma induced by pancreatitis that's caused by his abuse of alcohol and drugs.

In the summer of 2017, Rico is one of the victims of the terrorist attack on the Ramblas in Barcelona and is injured, though not seriously. Simón now has plans to reopen the Baraja, (a business his father and uncle have sold) in premises shared by La Caldera, the bookshop opened years ago by Estela in the basement where her father once polished metals. In the autumn of that same year, Simón finds out that Betty has given birth to a son she's named Simón and that Rico is the father. Rico discovers he is a father and opts to disappear once again 'in order to ensure his son has a good life', very conscious that he won't make a good father. The opening of the new Baraja concludes the

novel; Simón and Rico are peeling onions, and Simón is pondering his cousin's imminent departure.

Simón is an intelligent, witty, original novel with a host of characters, each with their own story to tell, with its own atmosphere, historical context and linguistic mix. On the one hand, there is the influence a rebellious adolescent wields over his eighty-year-old cousin and the trauma provoked by Rico's disappearance; on the other the relationship between the two cousins once Simón has come of age. The multiple stories are framed by the most important events Barcelona has experienced in recent years—the 1992 Olympic Games, the 2008 economic crisis, the 2017 terrorist attacks and the 2018 independence referendum. It is the focus on the marginal and the sparkling literary recreation of their cultural milieu that makes Miqui Otero's novel such a distinctively good read.