

El Libro de Amor Esquivo (The Book of Elusive Love)

Report by: Kit Maude

In *The Book of Elusive Love* Rubén Abella investigates the state of romance in the 21st Century. Using a Short Cuts style format, he introduces us to a series of young Madrid couples and tells their inter-weaving stories of love, heartbreak, hope and renewal.

Félix is heartbroken when he catches his first love, Helena, whom he seemed fated to be with forever after they were born on the same day in the same hospital, having sex with a colleague at work. After months of suffering in bed, Félix finally goes back outside to discover that he is the spitting image of a newly-minted pop star. The likeness is convincing enough to gain free drinks, entry into the top clubs and even sexual favours from the stars' fans. Taking full advantage, Félix rebuilds his life: he is a hard-working law student during the week and hard-partying pop star on Saturday nights. Until he meets Luz. Luz has had bad luck with the men in her life. One day her father, a lazy nobody, disappears and the detective assigned to find him is more interested in taking his place in the family home, where, it transpires that he is attracted not to the mother but the thirteen-year old Luz. Surviving a purgatorial adolescence, Luz leaves home as soon as she can but her traumas come along with her – her chronic insecurities ruin relationships before they can begin. In spite of an inauspicious beginning marked by mutual distrust and a blow with a frying pan, an epiphany at a train station helps Luz and Félix to fall in love. Everything goes swimmingly, until they meet Gabriel. Gabriel was born in a small coastal town run by a powerful and corrupt mayor. At fifteen, Gabriel earns the caudillo's enmity when he discovers that Gabriel is sleeping with his favourite prostitute for free. Run out of the brothel, Gabriel starts an affair with a classmate, Flor. Although Flor is head-over-heels in love, Gabriel does not reciprocate the passion and when she catches him kissing another girl, Flor leaves the village in a jealous rage. Gabriel also leaves to travel the world, sleeping with hundreds of different women, and only returns on his parents' death. Traumatized by the loss, Gabriel wanders to Madrid where he drifts from job to job until he comes across the Cafe Salammbó, and, after a drunken conversation with the owner, is given the job of 'Public Relations' manager. Seeing it as the perfect opportunity to continue his womanizing, Gabriel sets himself up a fortune-teller/confidante, telling bogus fortunes in order to seduce the women who catch his eye. He sets his sights on Luz, a café regular, and his machinations are well advanced when Flor walks in, looking for a job. Gabriel and Flor recommence their affair even though Gabriel, who occasionally has bouts of genuine foresight, knows that it will spell disaster. Then there is Eva, who works in a photography store, which is where she falls in love with one of her clients; Alfredo. Eva successfully arranges the break up of Alfredo and his girlfriend by placing faked compromising photos in his album. The pair begin to go out even though Alfredo is aware of the scheme – an ambitious person himself, he appreciates Eva's ingenuity. A talented photographer, Eva begins a career as a paparazzo in partnership with Jesús (Luz's first boyfriend). The pair of journalists have many different celebrity-chasing adventures, which are often successful (Félix unwittingly provides a number of Eva's 'scoops'). The journalistic partnership is dissolved, however, after a traumatic incident in Paris, when a once-too-often-caught-out businesswoman forces Eva and Jesús to have sex on camera. Eva, working alone, then catches Alfredo having sex with a famous male artist and leaves him. Eva and Jesús reconcile and set out for one more big job...

The Book of Elusive Love is a dreamy, thoughtful and fun contemplation of the way in which age-old conceptions of love, sex and romance are played out in the modern world. With a colourful cast of characters, a clear, direct writing style, well-executed plotting, and some surprising twists, the novel is a hugely enjoyable read and would be sure to find a willing audience in the UK.

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