

Las voces de Adriana

Author:

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Reader:

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*The Voices of Adriana* is a beautifully crafted novel that spans the generations from the pre-Civil-War years in the south of Spain to the present day in Madrid and Valencia without ever falling into the category of family saga. It is divided into three sections: "The Father", "The House" and "The Voices".

The third-person narrative of "The Father" is centred on Adriana, a thirty-something woman, dissatisfied with her life in and job as a university lecturer in Madrid, who faces an existential dilemma. She is an only child, her mother died of cancer some years before, and her father, who lives in Valencia, has recently suffered a stroke. For some months, Adriana's life is divided between her work and trips to the south at weekends to visit her father in a rehabilitation home. When he finally returns to the family apartment, she is left in the uncomfortable position of being the weekend carer of a man who refuses to follow medical advice, continues to smoke and avoids exercise. She finds it difficult to deal with the reversal of the parent-child roles and hates to hear herself telling him what he "has to do". Would it not be better, she asks herself, to allow him to live what is left of his life the way he wants. She also has to deal with pressure from family and the financial burden of finding carers for her father during the week, which inevitably leads to them employing immigrant workers without legal documentation.

All this leads Adriana to reflect on her father's life following his wife's death. After a period of mourning, he started internet dating in a search for companionship rather than romance. The relationships were mostly short-term, although one lasted until his stroke and the woman, Martina, also became Adriana's friend.

Adriana herself is facing a future without a partner or children, she feels isolated and often passes days without speaking to another human being. Her last relationship, which had lasted three years, was with "the bearded man", who had turned up in her apartment after his marriage had broken down, saying he just needed somewhere to stay until he could find another place. After being advised by her psychiatrist to keep a "talking notebook", Adriana begins to reflect on her parents' relationship and her early childhood, largely spent in a small town in southern Spain, living with her grandmother, who always carried with her a photograph of her two brothers, who had been executed at the outbreak of the Civil War.

This section is interspersed with sections of Adriana's own writing in italics: short stories that seem to reflect her own concerns; for example, an internet dating scam where the man requests money after becoming embroiled in smuggling in Mali.

The second part of the novel, "The House", is also a third-person narrative which, in this case, a vivid evocation of Adriana's maternal grandmother's home in rural Spain. Adriana had been left there for long periods of her childhood as her parents moved from place to place for her mother's job as a paediatrician. There, she lives a simple life in a home lacking many basic necessities, where her grandmother's only luxuries were her flowers and flowerpots. Her grandfather had been a physician's assistant who acted as the doctor in the small town and it becomes apparent that the Catholic family had lost most of its land and wealth during the Civil War. Despite being a religious household where the rosary was said every evening, there are intimations that Adriana's grandfather had been constantly unfaithful.

Adriana's mother is buried in the graveyard where she herself had played as a child and this leads Adriana to reflect on her mother and on death; she sees the figure of "Lady Death" dogging her footsteps and believes that her mother left her in that rural home in an attempt to vicariously relive her own largely happy childhood there.

On her final visit before her grandmother is admitted to a home for dementia sufferers, she feels the house is empty and has lost many of the secrets that inhabited its rooms. Adriana wonders why she had not been able to write about this rather than her more fictional stories.

The novel takes a dramatic turn in "The Voices", where "The Grandmother", "The Mother" and "The Daughter" alternate first-person narratives, although when they intervene to say such things as, "those aren't my words" or "I would never have said that", it becomes apparent that it is in fact Adriana who speaks their voices.

The grandmother's intervention mainly relates to her early life in the house, in the town where, in pre-war days, the family was seen as part of the local aristocracy. The Civil War broke out when she was fourteen and although the family didn't initially take it seriously, they soon realized that their lives would be permanently changed. Not only did they lose their property and most of their possessions, but her two brothers, who were stranded on the family farm at the outset, were later discovered to have suffered summary execution. Although her married life had been monotonous and not always happy, she feels that, as an ultra-conservative Catholic, she always had what she wanted; the list she gives of what she has is pitifully meagre. She also relates her seven miscarriages and fear of seeing a foetal hand or eye in the toilet bowl. Her final pregnancy resulted in a son with Down's syndrome.

The mother's interventions expand on the figure who had been somewhat shadowy in the earlier part of the novel. She had been the first woman in the town to study at university and after her marriage had continued her career, with her husband changing jobs to follow her professional needs. Despite her success, she seems to long to return to her childhood home, to the life she had shared with her brothers and sisters and wants her daughter to know her native soil.

Adriana's interventions in "The Voices" reflect on her writing, on the nature of literature and language. She feels that what she terms her "vomit poems" (added in *italics*), and which mainly relate to her failed affair with the "bearded man", are the basis of what she is now writing about her mother and grandmother because they made her and live inside her. She reflects on her mother's long illness and ultimate death and understands that she was in fact the love of her life.

Elvira Navarro's novel is an exceptional evocation of three generations of women that addresses the central issues of all their lives, the lives of the women of their respective generations in a way that is remarkably natural given the complexity of the narrative. Contemporary readers would easily

identify with the main themes of the work. The first section speaks candidly of the concerns of women in an ageing society that still expects them to be primary carers of their parents, of the effects of social media, in particular internet dating, on their relationships, and the isolation often felt by those who don't follow the conventional path of marriage and motherhood. The grandmother's story deals with the conventions of Catholicism and the resignation of women who must accept or ignore their husband's infidelities and the narrowness of their existences. Adriana's mother is a mid-point in the social changes that occur over those years as she attempts to find a path through the difficulties of juggling her professional and family lives. Through Adriana's voices we invest as readers in these characters as their stories unfold in the palimpsest structure of the work. The quality of Elvira Navarro's writing shines through in her ability to create metaphor from the most ordinary of situations and the inclusion of her poetry in this work is a surprising but highly successful divergence from the author's usual prose narrative.

While the references to the Civil War period in Spain may be less familiar to readers in the United Kingdom, the novel does not enter into the politics of the situation, rather focusing on its effects on the lives of the characters. Moreover, the evocation of rural Spain in the years preceding and after the Civil War is vivid enough to make further context unnecessary.

In terms of translation issues, I feel the main problem would be achieving something equivalent to Navarro's wonderful prose and poetry.