Lengua ajena
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Julia Rendón Abrahamson's debut novel is told from the perspective of Sara, a young Equatorian-Jewish woman and new mother living in contemporary New York, with smatterings of English and Catalan interspersed throughout the text. Recently separated from her partner, a Catalan banker, much of the novel also takes the form of second-person addresses from Sara to her young daughter, Lola, as Sara wades through feelings of estrangement in the city, ruminations on her family history, and worries that her ailing mother will die before she can return to Ecuador—a decision as fraught as any, because Sara worries that if she leaves, she'll never come back.

Sara came to New York via family connections—her grandmother, Hannah, fled the Holocaust and ended up there, so she has American-Jewish cousins—but also under the pressure (or obligation) of her mother and brother, who orchestrated the entire operation. While living in New York, Sara is haunted by Hannah's life: being forced to leave her country and migrate to the US, meeting a German Jew whose family went to Ecuador, who will take her back home with him, and ultimately using her children as a way to keep her from going back to New York, to keep her from leaving. Echoes of these issues resound throughout the novel, with Sara yearning to return to Ecuador with Lola but afraid of taking her away from her father and, above all, of leaving her daughter just as lost and rootless as Sara herself is.

The novel reads like an open wound: sensitive and gushing with lyricism, it's a portrait of that very rootlessness, of mothering in a foreign place and between languages—English, Spanish, and the father's Catalan—and the weight of the choices a mother makes, or doesn't, in trying to provide the best life for her child. Sara is surrounded by other parents and children as she attends to Lola's social life, leading into thoughtful reflections on the microaggressions of other parents (a seeming obsession with Lola being Spanish, as if they forget she's half-Equatorian), their expectations for their children (Sara gives Spanish lessons to a peculiar young boy whose mother wants him to keep up his Spanish, less because it will provide a connection to his family past than because it will set him up a for a successful future at Columbia, where a second language is required), and their ease and confidence in this place that Sara will never feel settled in.

One of the novel's other strengths is how much space it makes for Sara's sexual life and erotic desire, alongside her existential musings and her dutiful, diligent mothering. It's the sort of thing all

too often absent from narratives about mothers, adding layers of complexity to the author's portrait of Sara. She maintains a cordial relationship with Lola's father, Adrià, after the separation (although we never learn exactly why they separated), and there are many scenes where she finds herself yearning for his touch, his lips, and his body, not out of a sense of desperation but simply because she continues to be attracted to him. It's the same feeling that will lead her to have a fling with an Equatorian man she knew from home who happens to be in the city. But encounters like that only serve to heighten the disjoint she feels in New York.

Adding to her internal tension is her worry about who Lola will be if she *stays* in New York, around children whose parents think only of their future colleges and careers, a fear which is made manifest when she notices that Lola, who understands Spanish but never speaks it back to Sara, unconsciously uses her father's language, Catalan. It's a blow to Sara's ego, on the one hand, but also accentuates her visceral fear of losing her daughter, and her sense that she needs to hold her close to keep her as she wants her.

Late in the story, there's a scene in which Sara, in the car with her bombastic, overbearing American cousin Jeff, demands him drive her to the airport. There, she walks into the departures hall and stares at the screens for upcoming flights. This scene is one of the most poignant in the novel: there's an expectation she'll look for flights to Ecuador, even if just to look, but instead the author opts for something more subtle, and perhaps all the more tragic. Sara sees flights to places all over the country and world, including one to Vienna, where her grandmother was from. There's something terrible about this moment in which Sara is confronted with just how *easy* it has become to travel, to go one place to another, in contrast to her grandmother's life, but also in contrast to the inertia that prevents her from making a decision about whether to stay or go.

This effect would seem to be intentional, as there is a passage where Sara remembers a conversation in which her mother reveals that she named her Sara in reference to the Biblical figure's rootless wandering through Egypt. Sara feels the name weigh on her like a prophecy, and the novel closes on a feverish passage that moves between German, Spanish, and English, with Sara agonizing as she moves closer to her ultimate decision, the one that has been looming over the novel: that Lola should stay in New York, where she's from, with her father; but that Sara should go, she has to.

Rendón's novel would make a wonderful addition to a catalog of translated literature in the UK, between the great writing and the fascinating and unique perspective of a novel centering an Equatorian-Jewish woman. Whether it's an apt title for the UK market in particular may be up for debate, given that the novel is set entirely in New York, and though this certainly isn't disqualifying, it may be best if it comes first through an American publisher. The novel also presents a tricky problem for the translator, given the prevalence of English and Catalan throughout the text. It is not an insurmountable problem, but it is one that would require a certain finesse and creativity in recreating the multilingual play for an audience that is not as familiar with Spanish as Rendón's likely is with English (and Catalan, for that matter).

All that said, *Lengua ajena* is a strong book. It carves out a place of its own among recent literature which seeks to complicate facile notions of womanhood and motherhood and shows Rendón to be a great storyteller and a writer to look out for.