Oceánica
Author:
Yolanda González
Reader:
Suky Taylor

Oceánica is a blend and contrast of two parallel stories, one set in 2019 when the G7 summit was held in Biarritz and another that takes place nearly half a century earlier, at the time of the Bayonne peace conference between the French and Spanish courts. González takes two great events between world powers of either era, which in the book bring contemporary issues into focus from a different and new perspective, by which she reminds us that the most obvious reaction is perhaps not always the most comprehensive.

In Hondarribia, on the Basque coast, the body of a whale is washed up on the beach, and all efforts to save it are futile. But the last helpless flap of its fin kills an incautious journalist there reporting on the environmental disaster, and the event becomes taken over by rumours of sabotage by the environmental activist groups gathered in protest against the G7 summit. The dead whale becomes a new player in the political friction that is developing.

The same setting in the sixteenth century was the centre of the booming whaling industry, which massacred whole families of men and caused the near extinction of species of whales. González tells the narrative of the men whose fate is to prove their worth on the seas, often with their deaths, the women who are responsible for providing the next generation of boys who will give their lives to the same, and the children who face an unavoidable dark future.

It must be said that this book is far from an easy read. In both content and form, the novel takes inspiration from Melville's Moby Dick, presenting the enormity of its intention in the ocean, the whales, the spanning of time, and the impact of climate change in an epic novel that is a serious undertaking. The text incorporates many narrative devices to represent the gravitas of the story in the language. González uses language that is deeply lyrical, rhythmic and restless, in an echo of the ocean waves. It upholds the narrative style of a literary epic which rebounds with force to symbolise and emphasise the sixteenth-century narrative, and contrasts with the modern setting in a way that curiously highlights the ambiguity and hypocrisy of twenty-first century politics and attitudes.

Before attempting a translation of this book, the first task would involve a great deal of research and study. There is so much underlying the current of the narrative, and the translator would have to

spend a lot of time in preparation, not least with a reading of Moby Dick, as well as other literary references, research into the whaling industry and its

history, the political turmoil behind the modern environmental crisis, and the relationship between the fictional events in the book and the real-life situations on which the story is founded.

González highlights the irony of the hypocrisies not only of the politicians with their messages of 'save the oceans' but also of the ecowarriors accused of ecoterrorism and profiting from the tragedy of the beached whale. She also questions the modern judgment of society on the industry, and the whalers, who had no idea of the damaging environmental impact they were instigating because the health of the planet was not a concept that entered into human awareness in those times. The question of responsibility is one posed by the author and the entire book takes the role of re-examining preconceived stances and the way our society approaches these issues, as well as our own individual contribution to contemporary disputes of climate change. The contrasts are presented at every level, from global to personal, from human to animal; between times and cultural values, with the purpose of offering a new approach to imbedded thinking.

The language and style of the Spanish text also strongly reflect the themes of the book. The sheer immensity is apparent in the author's descriptions and the way she evokes all the senses in the scenes she creates. The flow of the language is almost visible as the pounding and vast movement of the waves and the journey of the whales; in its rhythm and repetition, with depth and musicality, and a sadness that is essential to the story and which would obviously have to be as integral to the translated English as in the original Spanish. It would require skills from the translator in creating an equivalent sense, which uses precise images and notes yet is not lost in the description and the torment behind the words. These underflowing emotions are also contrasted in the text with a sharp vision that critiques have described as political satire, and that brings modern hypocrisies into the light. This is all compressed in the drama of two plots into a tense thriller that leaves the reader deeply immersed throughout the book, both emotionally and intellectually. The style of the book is a series of contrasts and flow, combined and chopped up by its structure, language and story to create an all-encompassing experience for the reader. The task of the translator would be to penetrate and decipher all this, and then to reweave it in order to reproduce the narrative in English.

So in summary, the translation of this book would be a truly challenging task, but one that would be a joy to the right translator, and could produce a beautiful rendition of an important message to an English-speaking readership.

The ecological message is of course absolutely global, and at the top of the cultural agenda in the international literature market. But Oceánica is set in the very local setting of the Basque Country, which gives it a specific point of reference in the Spanish market and would need to be translated into English. Again, the paradox of the global impact of a local event would be a question a translation would need to address, and may add extra angles to the adaptation of the text. However, none that would not be part of the adaptation of contrasting eras, cultures and contexts already existing in the text. For its literary tone and style, the book might be ideal for marketing towards a

slightly more targeted audience, but its artistic appeal is also available to a wide readership, and it fits into the genres of thriller and historic fiction, both of which are popular on the market in the UK. This book has all the potential of high appeal with English readers, fulfilling many of the common criteria for success in an English-speaking market.

NB. It is worth mentioning that Asymptote published in its Spring 2023 issue a translation by Robin Munby of excerpts from Oceánica, of the whales' song, entitled Song of the Whale-Road.