Las niñas prodigio (Child Prodigies)
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The novel Las niñas prodigio is the result of a yearlong writing retreat in the wilds of the Alpujarras, on the slopes of the Andalusian Sierra Nevada. Less self-indulgent than that might make it seem, it blends reflections on time spent alone in the tumbledown farmhouse with anecdotes from the buzzy, druggy city existence she has left behind in Madrid. The harshest withdrawal symptoms arise from lack of internet access, and Urraca is one of the best writers I've come across on questions of identity and the internet: insightful but not brow-beating, and above all honest without straying into an exhibitionism that might detract from the narrative. Events in this far from idyllic idyll – from power cuts to problems with the water supply, encounters with wildlife and roving packs of dogs, having to hitchhike to the nearest town (an hour away) for supplies – frequently segue into remembrances of childhood episodes. Indeed, as the Spanish critic Nadal Suau puts it in a review for El Cultural, "this is a novel about growing up without life growing any more certain".

It is difficult to put a finger on the precise nature of the alchemy that makes the alternation between these elements quite so dynamic, and in turn makes Las niñas prodigio such a compulsive read. Urraca is very good at the suggestive skip between timeframes, in creating counterpoints and half-echoes between the narrator's recent past, her childhood and the present.

Each chapter has its own title, which seemed unusual to me in a contemporary novel, and added to the sense of these episodes as discrete and short story-like. Almost all have the self-enclosed thrust of short stories; opening with an intriguing clatter, closing with a pleasing click. Las niñas prodigio only really qualifies as a novel, then, in the recurrence of certain themes (female individuation, the place of women in modern society, the internet) and characters (particularly those remembered from the narrator's childhood), giving unity to what otherwise has the feeling of a suite of 26 short stories.

Las niñas prodigio has been well received in Spain, winning praise from critics such as the aforementioned Suau, and Alberto Olmos (always worth listening to) in El Confidencial, and in less literary outlets like Playground and VICE. It has also sold remarkably well for a work of literary fiction published by an indy, and that is yet to win any prizes: over 3,000 copies since it was published nine months ago. (Bearing in mind a recent report from the Spanish publishing guild which showed that, of the 90,000+ titles annually published in Spain, only 7,000 of these sell more than 1,000 copies). I found it compulsively readable, and feel confident that it could do similarly well

outside of Spain.