Rayos (Rays)
Author:
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Reader:
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Miqui Otero's third novel, Rayos, is part coming-of-age novel, part rom-com, part portrait of 21st-century Barcelona, and all heart. Otero's alter-ego narrator, Fidel Centella, is literally directionally-challenged, as well as somewhat spiritually lost as he navigates early adulthood, leaving home at 24 to move in with his three best buddies as he completes an internship writing for the newspaper La Verdad.

Humble and searching, Fidel uses Google's autocomplete feature as some sort of an IChing.

He describes himself as the typical guy who holes up with books and records, yet his job and his friends—and the city itself—pull him out of his shell. Like a film, this novel's cast of characters is small and those Fidel meets when helping out his buddies with their jobs (house painter, bicycle tour guide) become fodder for articles, particularly Tinet Rocamora, also a neighbor in the eclectic, rapidly gentrifying Raval. Tinet, Barcelona's last itinerant blade sharpener (of the sort that play a special whistle to let potential customers know he is on their block) and a man who lives in a repulsive and enviable state of squalor and freedom, is being subjected to real estate mobbing.

Fidel's narration alternates between his Catholic-school childhood in Barcelona, his parents' journey to the city from Galicia, his summers spent there where he soaked up his grandparents' rural wisdom, and the present (2000-2014). Otero manages to strike a fine balance between nostalgia and rabid anti-nostalgia, characteristic of someone who feels they've been born into a city past its true gritty heyday, and a charnego who has to compartmentalize all he knows about pig slaughtering when confronted with the urban packages of thinly sliced plastic-wrapped meat.

The other intern at the newspaper is another childhood friend, Bárbara, the girl Fidel has always loved and the compass that keeps him true. Fidel's interviews with Tinet about the mobbing lead to a paternal friendship, and he learns a new tongue, Barallete, the language used among sharpeners. Meanwhile, Fidel struggles with the revelation that his father has cancer. A little too coincidentally, the father of the girl Fidel is dating turns out to be a corrupt architect implicated in Tinet's being bullied into signing away his apartment. Childhood friends grow apart, Fidel's father goes into remission, there is romance and romantic confusion, eventually Fidel writes a novel, and Tinet dies.

However it is not the plot that keeps readers charmed and turning pages in Rayos. It is the immense empathy and subtle astuteness that shines through the narrative voice, as Fidel reminds us of the value of those things in life that money can't buy. Otero's pacing is deft and the details in his writing winsome and heartening. Recommended.