Consum preferent
Author:
Andrea Genovart
Reader:
Judith Willis

This short, prize-winning novel, narrated in first person by 30-year-old Alba, covers in its eight chapters eight scenes from her life over roughly six months. It mainly takes place in present-day Barcelona with a brief period spent in a village in Castile. There is a kind of development as she is forced to question her identity and confront her future, although a circularity is suggested by the phrase “així, en general” (in general), which occurs both in the first sentence (“I don’t know what I am in general…”) and as the heading of the final chapter and the closing words of the book. Other than this, there is no dynamic narrative thrust or plot as such. The interest lies in the main character, her vision of contemporary life, her humour and her means of expression.

The first chapter, entitled “Iniciar sessió” (Log on) is a lengthy, shocking – and colourful in every sense - account of Alba in the bathroom of her shared flat in the alternative, bohemian Barcelona district of Gràcia in the middle of the night throwing up the contents of a pack of smoked salmon she has eaten past its sell-by date. This is our introduction to the character and her predicament: while feeling sorry for herself, she describes the anguish of being young today in a privileged society, with no wars to fight, having to find a job in the gig economy while being considered useless and undervalued. And the title of the book leads the reader to speculate whether she, like the unfortunate salmon, is running out of time.

We see her daily life at work – having studied Philosophy at university, she now works as a graphic designer, creating promotional material for well-known brands – and going for a medical check-up by her perfect cousin Clara, one of a clutch of females Alba compares herself with unfavourably, while sniping at their apparent virtues. She half-heartedly attends a party at the home of one of her work colleagues, which descends into nightmarish fantasy and visits the World Press photographic exhibition with occasional boyfriend Uri, leading to reflection on how we react to the horrors of today’s world.

As the novel progresses, so does her sense of isolation and insecurity as she first realises that the boyfriend has no real interest in her and then discovers that Berta, who she thinks of as her best friend, has betrayed her by setting up a publishing house without telling her. Finally, she loses her job when her boss, Jordi, tells her that he won’t be renewing her fixed-term contract: in an example of contemporary business doublespeak, Jordi does everything he can to present an effective dismissal as a career opportunity, saying it’s as painful for him as for her. This all leads to her spending time alone in a house owned by her father’s family in the province of Valladolid in central Spain, from where she returns in the final chapter to an uncertain future.

Best Before is a first novel and, although not autobiographical, the main character shares the author’s age and initials, AG. In interviews Andrea Genovart has said that to be seen as the new

Sally Rooney would be a condemnation but she does use the expression Normal People (capitalised and in English) four times throughout the book. The parallels are there – a young woman writing about a young, self-obsessed, university-educated, middle-class woman seeking to find her way in today's world, dependent on her friends, mainly work colleagues, for her social and emotional wellbeing and with family support in the background. However, Genovart's writing style is probably more Bridget Jones than Sally Rooney with a touch of Molly Bloom (stream of consciousness), intensified by her use of linguistic and cultural references. I suppose that the work fits into the category of "millennial novel" and would appeal to readers of this genre. The main character's voice feels very authentic in the way she expresses her indignation and confusion over her identity, her role in society and her future, feelings which clearly apply elsewhere, not just Barcelona. However, although the generational unease portrayed here is widespread, the setting is important: the city of Barcelona plays a key role as we see Alba travelling around the city, commenting on and reacting to differences between areas as, for example, in Chapter 4 where she walks up from the Museum of Contemporary Art in the central Raval area towards Plaça Lesseps in Gràcia, where she lives. There is also an interesting passage in the first chapter where she bemoans the fact that many people coming from outside to live in the city do so just because of the job prospects and not because, as she says, using the catchphrase, "I love BCN". But awareness of Barcelona's, and her own, privileged status, makes her feel bad about expressing this regret.

The novel is written in a very personal and original style. As mentioned, it is told in first person throughout, with a certain amount of dialogue but mainly focused on its narrator, using a stream of consciousness full of repetition (the colour orange is mentioned 24 times throughout the book, on one page there is a mantra of "fuckkk youuu" [sic] repeated 31 times); references to both popular and high culture; and a mix of Catalan (the main language obviously), Spanish – chiefly when reporting the speech of Spanish-speaking characters or in citing proverbs and idioms, which Catalan speakers use frequently -, and odd words and phrases in English, sometimes from pop songs (the Beatles, Ace of Bass) or well-known expressions such as "I'm sorry" and "who knows". A translator would need to decide if, and how, to deal with this interplay between languages.

There is a great deal of humour in the book as the author employs irony and satire to challenge many aspects of contemporary life. The references to familiar aspects such as the digital world, ways of working, commercial brands, etc. work well although some sections are very culture-specific, for example in the chapter entitled Exposure, Saturation, Contrast there is an extended reworking by Alba of a short story *Faith* by the Catalan author Quim Monzó which is a reflection on the main character's dysfunctional relationship with occasional boyfriend Uri - with nods to philosophers Foucault and Žižek -, which would be fairly meaningless for a readership unfamiliar with Monzó (most Catalans would know his name even if they haven't read him).

In short, the main elements that appeal from this book are:

- irony and humour applied to contemporary city life

- an authentic picture of what it is like to be (relatively) young nowadays

- a non-tourist insider's vision of Barcelona, particularly appealing to readers who know the city

I see that a translation into Spanish is due to come out in the autumn but I feel this would be a challenging work to translate into English principally for the reasons already mentioned: idiosyncratic style, switching between languages, specific local references.

As a footnote, here is an annotated short section from Chapter 4, which illustrates some of these features. I have added the footnotes by way of an explanation; they wouldn't appear in an actual

translation.

I walk up the Ramblas. I turn round, the way they do in the films, to see if he does too: Make yourself pretty, Barcelona* and give me a reward. Make yourself pretty, Barcelona. Uri doesn't turn round and I'm relieved: I don't want silkworms inside me turning into butterflies in my stomach, making me shit myself. It's not the first time that things have come to an end. That they've ended for me. Maybe I've got it all wrong, no one has said anything about endings but I can hear a small voice whispering "It's over, over*". Maybe my mother's – I'm a feeble Jane Austen character in her eyes, "nothing lasts forever*" she'd say, because "there's nothing like a new love to mend a broken heart*", wagging her finger threateningly when I came home in the early morning with my mascara running everywhere. But it's no good planning in advance. The number of families who prepare for the death of a loved one from a terminal illness and after suffering for years, saying their farewells and doing everything they can, declaring their love and getting the paperwork in order, and when it comes, it's still a huge drama. I don't care anymore about being dumped over and over again; I just wish it could last for more than seven months. Because who knows* what wafts out through my pores and pollutes the atmosphere, why I can't hear that small voice telling me "hey, don't rush, slow down".

* Barcelona posa't guapa (Make yourself pretty, Barcelona) was a slogan used to encourage urban renewal between 1985 and 2010, that has become a catchphrase.

*It's over, over – in English in the original

*nothing lasts forever – sense of proverb "no hay mal que cien años dure" (there is no bad thing that lasts a hundred years) in Spanish in the original

* there's nothing like a new love to mend a broken heart – sense of proverb "la mancha de la mora con otra verde se quita"(the stain of the mulberry is removed by another green / new one) in Spanish in the original

* who knows – in English in the original