Nadie en esta tierra
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Víctor del Árbol (Barcelona, 1968) began writing crime fiction whilst a serving officer with the Catalan police force. His first novel, El peso de los muertos (pub. Editorial Castalia in 2006), was awarded the Premio Tiflos in the same year, and he left the force to become a full-time novelist in 2012. Since then, he has gone on to win several prestigious prizes, most notably the Premio Nadal in 2016, for La víspera de casi todo (pub. Destino). Del Árbol's work has been translated widely and is particularly popular in France, where it has met with much critical acclaim including the Prix du Polar Européen (European Crime Fiction Prize, 2012) and the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Order of Arts and Letters, 2017). Nadie en esta tierra is Del Árbol's tenth novel, and one which he says he wrote 'to put an end to the debate around whether or not crime writing can be deemed literary '

This novel certainly is more than simply a crime story; it is a dark, complex and beautifully written exploration of the relationship between victims and perpetrators which considers the motives and impulses behind the most evil behaviour. Two interconnected plotlines of drug trafficking and child sexual abuse are woven through past and present, framed within the deeply corrupt system that facilitates them. Universal themes including loyalty and betrayal, guilt and remorse, revenge and justice are explored from an unexpected perspective and del Árbol analyses human behaviour through an original lens.

Nadie en esta tierra opens with an intriguing prologue written in the first person, a poetic and philosophical monologue about human nature and whether a person can really change who they are. This mysterious character reveals that he is a paid assassin; he first killed at the age of thirteen, and never questioned what he did for a living until everything changed when he met Julián Leal a year previously. Action proper begins in 2005, when we meet said Julián Leal; a police inspector based in Barcelona who has been suspended from duty for beating up a respected Catalan businessman, with no apparent motive. Julián, a commitment-phobic loner who has never sustained a meaningful relationship with anyone besides his brilliant police partner Virginia, who he is secretly in love with, has recently been diagnosed with cancer of the kidney. He decides to return to his hometown in rural Galicia to make peace with his traumatic past.

Julián has uncovered a child abuse ring involving a number of powerful high-ranking police officers, politicians and members of the judicial system – including the businessman he almost beat to death. With the recklessness of a dying man and believing he has nothing left to lose, Julián embarks on a dangerous investigation, off the record, into the child abuse ring, uncovering links with the Mexican drug trade that can be traced back to his own hometown.

During Julián's childhood in the 1970s, the local drug trade was largely ignored, condoned, and even supported by many members of the community, since it brought much-needed money into the village

at a time of economic instability. Julián has not set foot in the village for thirty years, having left after his father Martín was violently murdered in 1975 for blowing the whistle on a drug smuggling heist, resulting in a botched raid that left several villagers dead. Murdered for being a traitor, we gradually learn that Martín had exposed the heist in rage when he discovered his friend Toño, who worked with the smugglers, had been sexually abusing Julián.

Shortly after his visit, two of Julián's childhood friends are found dead, as well as Francisco, the father of a woman, Clara, who he has recently met through an internet dating site. Clara is a former journalist who was kidnapped, drugged and raped whilst in Mexico researching for a story about the exploitation of children by drug cartels. Although she escaped, Clara's ordeal left her addicted to heroin, and Francisco reluctantly started to work for the Galician drugs clan to fund her rehabilitation and save her life. Julián's connection to Francisco's daughter means he becomes the prime suspect in the spate of murders. Julián's ex-partner Virginia is tasked with leading the investigation against him, and whilst he initially resolves to protect her by concealing the scandal, Julián eventually confides in Virginia so that she can help prove his innocence.

Although the storylines are complicated, the narrative is extremely well-structured and well-written, and the prose clean and direct, meaning that the reader remains committed and engaged throughout. Del Árbol switches deftly between past and present and whilst the pace is never frenetic, it propels the plot steadily forward, gaining considerable momentum in the last third.

In terms of the characters who populate the book, del Árbol has crafted convincing, complicated and often flawed characters, avoiding the clichéd personalities that can often be found in crime writing. For me the most distinctive feature of the novel is the enigmatic first-person narrator – that mysterious character whose name we never learn – whose interjections have an introspective, meandering style that contrasts with the concise third-person narrative. It quickly becomes apparent that he is the assassin responsible for the murders Julián has been wrongly accused of, but Julián is not concerned with catching the murderer; this is no cat and mouse thriller. Instead, del Árbol uses this protagonist, known only as 'the man with the dark eyes' to explore the motivations and compulsions behind the very worst – and eventually best - parts of human nature. As the book reaches its climax, the assassin and Julián's roles and priorities subtly shift, as they both realise choices are available to them that they had previously ruled out, and the two make a pact so that they can both go free.

One of the pleasures of this book is the highly atmospheric depiction of setting, especially the bleak and brooding Galician coastal town that acts as a backdrop to the dark secrets of those who live there. It is no surprise that del Árbol counts Domingo Villar among his favourite writers, and in this novel, like Villar's famous 2006 novel La playa de los ahogados (published in English as Death on a Galician Shore), the setting practically becomes a character in its own right. Del Árbol was married to a Galician woman for fifteen years, and he conjures vivid images of the landscape with subtlety and ease, so that much of the book has a very visual, filmic quality. 'Galician noir' is enjoying something of a moment recently, with an explosion of bestselling Netflix crime series like O sabor das margaridas (Bitter Daisies) and El desorden que dejas (The Mess You Leave Behind, based on a novel by Carlos Montero), and this novel taps into that same dark, brooding and violent energy to great effect.

Crime fiction is a genre that has proven to travel well and there is already a loyal UK readership eager for novels such as this. The universal themes explored in Nadie en esta tierra will appeal to many readers, and this kind of high-quality, literary noir is often a safe bet for potential publishers in terms of commercial success. A crime series is even more attractive, and this book may well be the

first of many, though this question is another example of how del Árbol does things a little differently. More often than not a crime series revolves around the police detective, and indeed in this case the novel closes with Julián being wheeled into theatre for a kidney transplant, implying that his end is not near after all. However, more intriguing to me is the assassin's suggestion, in the epilogue, that he may return to a life of crime and therefore come to feature in subsequent stories. It was at this point that I realised del Árbol had pulled off something rather special; creating a character who the reader never really gets to know, dropping a final crumb that leaves them wanting more.