

Los Astronautas

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The unnamed narrator of 'The Astronauts' (an auto-fictionalised version of the author) is a woman in her 30s whose parents divorced when she was just a baby. At a Christmas gathering with her father's side of the family, she discovers a photo of the three of them - mother, father and daughter - together. Having never before seen a photo of her "family" from that time, she decides to write a book exploring her history, by interviewing various family members and trying to piece together their narratives. The novel moves back and forth in time from the present day to the narrator's retellings of her childhood. Vignettes about the history of space exploration are interspersed throughout: she recounts stories about engineer James Nasmyth, the moon landing, cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev, Laika the dog, the Challenger disaster and more, which are used to illustrate and reflect on her own life.

Her parents Clara and Jaume met in Barcelona in 1976 and married 5 years later. They travelled the world until Clara became pregnant with the narrator, who was born in 1984. Eighteen months after her birth, Jaume leaves his wife and child - notably, this happens at the exact same date and time as the Challenger disaster. He then marries another woman named Clara, and they have a daughter, Inés. Her mother marries a man named Miquel, and they have a son, Marc. The narrator lives with them, only seeing her father occasionally. These two new families never meet and never speak of each other. The narrator spends her childhood caught between the two, never feeling a sense of true belonging.

We learn about a number of unusual incidents from her childhood, such as eating hair, stealing her father's shoe, and changing her name. At 7, instead of drawing a normal Father's Day picture in class, she draws a man floating in space in a NASA spacesuit. She includes a moon to represent her mother, and a floating blob stuck between them to represent herself - it is from this drawing that the novel takes its name. When everyone naturally assumes that her father is an astronaut at Houston she goes along with the lie, pretending that this is the reason why he's not around - a lie she manages to keep up for two years.

It is revealed that when she was 11 years old, she was cornered by a strange man in a stairwell who threatened her with a lighter. She has no memory of what happened next, only that her mother and brother eventually found her, alone and distraught, with the tips of her hair burnt off. Throughout the novel the narrator tries to prod her mother about what really happened: her mother claims also not to remember.

The narrator spends her teenage years battling anorexia, OCD and depression. At the age of 18 she is severely injured in a motorbike accident. Once she recovers, she leaves to study abroad, and doesn't return to live in Spain until her thirties. By then, her father's family has moved to Madrid,

while her mother's remains in Barcelona. The narrator has an impressive education and is a successful writer, but resists showing affection or opening herself up to relationships.

In the present day, she begins by interviewing her stepmother Clara. The narrator was under the impression that Clara first met her father in a pub in London, when her mother was seven months pregnant. Clara immediately contradicts this story, claiming that the two were introduced by a mutual friend long after the separation. It is later revealed that the narrator herself once fell in love with a married man with children and had an abortion without telling him. It dawns on her that this casts her in the role of Clara.

She is able to learn a few more details about her childhood from her uncle, aunt and brother, but the narrator struggles to get either of her parents to sit down and talk to her. She asks her father to find his old photo albums to help her with the book, but he demurs. And even though they see each other regularly, her mother refuses to talk about anything that could end up in the book. They still keep each other updated on their day-to-day: her mother talks about an upcoming doctor's appointment to check her lymph nodes, and in turn she tells her mother that she's thinking of freezing her eggs. The narrator eventually persuades her mother to look at the mystery photo of them that she found, and her mother reveals that it was taken by a "friend" of her father's whom they ran into at a restaurant.

When she attends her father's birthday party and discovers a world of people who only know her as Jaume's "other" daughter, and who all describe her father in ways that she doesn't recognise at all. She realises how little she knows about him as a person. She asks her father about their photo, and he confirms that it was taken by a

woman he was sleeping with. He continues to avoid the subject of his other photo albums.

The narrator clashes with her mother when she finally begins to push on her memories of traumatic events, particularly the stairwell incident, but is brushed off once again. Frustrated with the conflicting stories and lack of co-operation, she angrily decides to abandon her book. However, the next day she receives two devastating pieces of news – her initial IVF treatments have been unsuccessful, and her mother is diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The narrator dedicates herself to her care. She informs her father, who calls to speak with her mother for the first time in years – it has been so long she doesn't even recognise his voice on the phone.

After months of treatment and having faced the idea of her mortality, the mother finally reveals what she remembers about that day on the stairwell, and seems to confirm the narrator's suspicions that some form of sexual assault occurred. After finding her daughter, she'd run in panic to the police station, but was so disoriented and distraught that she could not find it. On returning home, still in shock, she decided that the only way to deal with the situation was for them to forget everything that happened. She expresses remorse, saying she only did what she thought best at the time. The two reconcile and put the incident behind them.

Meanwhile, her father confesses that, in a fit of anger, he threw away all their family photos after the divorce. He apologises profusely, unable to explain or justify his past behaviour. To make up for it, he draws a recreation of his favourite photo of him holding her as a newborn – though a rather idealised version, mirroring her childhood astronaut drawing.

The narrator finally realises how she and her parents have lived their lives with an image of each other, and themselves, that never matched up to reality. Their struggle to reconcile these images has always been the underlying issue – yet it always came from a place of love, with the best intentions.

It is impossible to reconstruct the narrative of her family, because there never is just one narrative. At the end of the novel, we learn her mother's treatment has been successful and the cancer is in remission. Moreover, the narrator's IVF was successful – she will be having a child of her own.

Laura Ferrero has previously published two short story collections and one novel, but her work has not yet appeared in English. *"The Astronauts"* is a beautifully written book – thoughtful and cerebral, but also full of heart. It sensitively approaches difficult

subjects such as divorce, trauma and illness, and contains some truly incisive reflections on the nature of family histories. It is also a meditation on the act of writing itself, as befits an auto-fictional novel. The theme of space exploration appears tenuously linked at first, but the author skilfully connects these various stories with her own life. For example, James Nasmyth's fake photos of the moon's craters are used to demonstrate how fiction can be indistinguishable from truth; Laika the dog is an example of how unwavering trust in those who cared for you can lead to tragedy; and most notably the way in which the catastrophe of the Challenger mirrors with the catastrophe of her parents' divorce. Ferrero recounts these stories with a poignancy that drives home the emotional connection to her own narrative.

There are some Spain-specific elements to the novel. It is set in a very specific period of post-Franco Spain, in which divorce was still new and taboo. One of the sources of tension between the families comes from the conflict of Catalan and Spanish identity and language. However, this is the only potential cultural barrier, and a small one to overcome. The writing style is clear and straightforward, so should pose no notable translation issues.

While this is ostensibly fiction, it brings to mind a number of recent memoirs exploring family histories, such as *"Crying in H Mart"*, *"Somebody's Daughter"* and *"All You Can Ever Know"*. Ferrero is a talented writer and this novel's themes of identity, family and belonging will resonate with any audience.

Not really clear on what 'these stories' are – jumps from a theme to stories