Golpes de luz
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After a short-lived career as a lawyer, Galician writer Ledicia Costas (Vigo, 1979), turned to full-time writing, publishing her first book in 2000. She has written more than twenty books, the majority of which are directed at a children's/young adult readership and for which she has been awarded several prestigious prizes including the Premio Nacional de Literatura Infantil y Juvenil and the Premio Lazarillo. Golpes de luz is her eagerly anticipated second adult novel, following the success of her thriller Infamia, published in 2019. Costas writes in Galician and has thus far translated her own novels into Castilian Spanish, though she has suggested that in the future she may use a translator.

Golpes de luz is a unique, moving book about the darker side of family life. It is somewhat difficult to classify in terms of genre; several Spanish sources call it a 'novela negra', but since the crime element is very much secondary to the human story, I feel it is better described as 'literary fiction'. The novel, at once tender and gritty, is a story of buried secrets and their impact on three generations of one family – grandmother Luz, her daughter Julia and Julia's son, Sebas.

Luz, an eccentric and feisty woman approaching eighty years old, has lived a difficult life, having lost her younger sister to a road accident that we eventually learn may well have been suicide, and then marrying a man connected to the local drug trade who disappears one day without a trace, leaving her to raise her young daughter Julia alone. Julia, now in her early forties and an investigative journalist, has just separated from her husband in Madrid, returning to rural Galicia to bring up their ten year old son Sebas whilst caring for her mother, whose advancing age is beginning to impact her physical and mental capacity.

The first half of the book is a tender depiction of the three characters reconnecting after a period of absence, learning to live together, and with their own fears and issues. Julia struggles to adjust to single-parenting after her divorce, managing her feelings of rejection upon discovering her ex-husband has a new partner and trying to cope with her mother's increasingly erratic behaviour. Luz strives to hold onto some independence despite her obvious failing health, frustrated that she is no longer able to tend her beloved garden. What begins as eccentric quirks – carrying a hammer in her housecoat pocket, hiding biscuits down her tights, smoking a sneaky cigarette in the garden and hiding the stubs in plant pots, squirting bleach on the neighbour's washing across the garden fence - soon starts to manifest in more dangerous behaviour. She becomes aggressive, at times manic; arguing aloud with her dead mother. Sebas, a sensitive and thoughtful boy is finding it hard to fit in at his new school and is targeted by the class bully. Fortunately, his deep bond with best friends Noa and Guerrero keeps him afloat. The inseparable trio love spending time with the irreverent and mischievous Luz, whom they decide must be Thor, on account of the almost-mythical hammer she carries with her at all times.

Julia's return to her hometown ignites a curiosity in finding out what happened to her father, who left home when she was a young child. Her mother had told her he had gone to find work in Argentina and simply never returned, starting a new life there and forgetting about his family. However, whilst researching a story on the local heroin trade in the eighties and nineties, Julia recognises a man in a photograph as someone her father associated with. She recalls the prevalence of heroin in the neighbourhood growing up – discarded syringes littering parks, shady men dealing in bars, youths overdosing in the toilets, and the 'Mothers Against Drugs' group that desperately campaigned for an end to the business that was killing their children.

As the novel progresses, Julia becomes more determined to discover the truth, digging into the history of the drugs trafficking trade in her hometown and interviewing those with a connection. She learns that the man in the photograph with her father is infamous local drug baron Lucio Rincón, a dangerous and brutal criminal who became known as 'Lucifer' for his methods of eliminating rival traffickers by burning down their homes, their families inside. Julia realises that at the time of his disappearance her father had been working for Rincón, and when she discovers her mother has a huge sum of money – ninety seven million pesetas, now worthless – hidden under her mattress, she assumes that her father must have double-crossed Rincón, and was therefore murdered by him. She approaches the police with the intention of interviewing Rincón, now aged seventy five, who has been in prison for twenty years, with seven years remaining on his sentence. Julia persuades them to request the interview, and within days her someone paints 'You'll burn, bitch' on her car in red paint. Luz is horrified when she learns what her daughter has done, and finally sees she has no choice but to tell the truth, finding two shovels and handing one to Julia with the words 'We have to dig'. In a genuinely unexpected plot twist, Luz leads her daughter to a spot in her precious garden where they dig until they start to unearth a bloodstained rug. Luz calmly confesses that she killed her husband, who had already begun beating her, the very first night he raised a hand to Julia. Her weapon had been the hammer, which from that moment on had never left her side. They throw it into the grave, burying everything once again.

Costas uses the three separate first-person narrators to great effect in this novel, alternating between them deftly. Each character's voice is distinct and convincing, providing a different perspective on the events that are unfolding, as well as lending colour and depth to the overall reading experience. Sebas shows us the world through the eyes of a child; he is innocent yet perceptive, imaginative and childlike, adding lightness and humour to the narrative. Julia's failed marriage has left her guarded, at times neurotic, but she grows through the course of the novel to become more open and assertive. Luz has perhaps the most unique voice – disjointed and a little chaotic, sprinkled with Galician phrases and eccentric expressions and including fragmented conversations with her long-dead mother. Costas paints her characters with incredible warmth and empathy, and one of the joys of this book is how quickly we engage and become invested in the protagonists.

Many of the key themes in Golpes de luz - family dynamics, growing up, bullying, ageing and dependency - are universal and will appeal to a wide audience. Costas also deals sensitively with issues of a more specifically feminist nature, like domestic violence, divorce and motherhood, which will resonate with a female readership. The female characters, notwithstanding their vulnerabilities, are strong, independent women who stand up to the men in their lives, and despite the dark moments they live through, there is a huge sense of growth and hope in the novel. Costas sets the human story against the backdrop of the Galician drug trafficking trade with great skill and insight, and the way the crime element festers and then gradually picks up pace in the latter part of the novel works very well, creating increasing tension and suspense for the reader. I was not surprised to learn that the author's own childhood was overshadowed by the local heroin problem; her godfather died of a heroin overdose when she was just eleven years old. Though she is not afraid to

describe the bleak and disturbing reality of the issue, Costas also shines a light on the resilience and tenacity of the women campaigners fighting to reclaim their community.

In terms of its suitability for translation, the universal themes the book explores, combined with the specific local colour and context, mean it would appeal greatly to readers of translated fiction. Maintaining the compelling voices would be a key focus for the translator, and Luz's voice in particular, with her smattering of Galician, would require careful attention. The fact that the novel is ultimately a story of female empowerment means it would travel well in today's literary climate and appeal to publishers of translated fiction as well as readers. Costas writes with a beautiful balance of darkness and light, pain and humour, and Golpes de luz is a thoroughly enjoyable read that stays with the reader long after finishing it.