Un país con tu nombre
Author:
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Reader:
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Un país con tu nombre (A Country with your Name), by Alejandro Palomas, is a moving and intimate portrayal of two lives that intertwine by chance. It immerses us in the narrators' emotions on every page and reminds us of the importance of friendship and following our dreams. The warmth I felt towards the characters and my emotional engagement with the story made this a very enjoyable read.

In the rather otherworldly setting of an (almost) abandoned village somewhere in Spain, Edith is a recently-widowed septuagenarian who lives with her eleven cats. Her solitude is disturbed by the arrival of Jon, a fifty-something vet turned zoo keeper who becomes the only other resident in Edith's village. These two characters narrate the whole book in the first person, in alternating chapters. Despite their initial wariness of one another, they begin to form a friendship, albeit reluctantly at first, and trundle along happily enough in their quiet lives,

"lives in which nothing happens, until one day everything happens at once."

On that day, Jon learns he is to be laid off from the zoo, meaning he will no longer be able to work with his beloved elephants, while Edith discovers that the local council is planning to restore a hotel in the village and turn the whole place into a tourism venture, thus destroying her peaceful idyll. Edith and Jon are both aghast at the turn of events and unsure of how to proceed, but eventually come together to hatch a plan to find an area of woodland to turn into a wildlife sanctuary, Edith's lifelong dream.

Working his notice at the zoo and trying to avoid dealing with other issues, Jon focuses his energies on the newly-arrived elephant Susi, who is refusing to eat. A young girl, Suzume, starts appearing in the elephant enclosure every day after school and bombarding Jon with questions about Susi. We eventually learn that Suzume has problems of her own – a sister who has recently died of anorexia, which explains her concern at the elephant's wellbeing. Suzume's naive but direct way of expressing herself seems to help Jon put his own thoughts in order. The author is known to be strongly against zoos and although this is not a main theme of the book, animal welfare is an undercurrent that runs throughout, with Edith calling the zoo 'the independent republic of sadness'.

There are moments of humour: one day when Edith is waiting for Jon to return from work with the promise of news, she accidentally gets drunk on some Polish vodka she finds in the cupboard, and when Jon arrives and struggles to get his words out, she mistakenly jumps to the conclusion that he is trying to tell her he is gay and insists on giving him a sedative to help loosen his tongue, resulting in neither party being able to continue with the conversation. This scene is immediately followed by Jon's childhood memory of his father's death from leukaemia, which came as such a shock that he

developed a stutter. I found that this contrast of humour and tragedy really heightened my emotional engagement with the text, and indeed the whole novel is paced and structured so as to maintain that effect.

Although it is not a work of magical realism, the book does have a slightly enchanted feel to it. The romantic setting of an abandoned village in itself seems steeped in mystery and mysticism, and there are occasional touches, such as the rusty old weather vane that hasn't moved for years suddenly turning to point at Edith's house on the day when everything starts to change, that suggest a hint of magic.

Stylistically, Palomas' prose is simple and accessible, but far from superficial. It is lyrical and descriptive but never heavy, and he comes across as a seasoned storyteller. The way the novel is structured, with present-day events interspersed with recollections and flashbacks, means that some details are not revealed until near the end of the book (for example the death of Jon's sister, Mer, which he feels unable to admit to Edith for some time), which, although clearly a device to hold the reader's attention, is very successful in doing just that. The jumping back and forth in time is occasionally slightly confusing (particularly with events in the recent past vs. the present) but this is only a minor niggle.

Palomas approaches themes such as grief and regret with great sensitivity, but more significantly conveys a sense of optimism in new beginnings and the importance of following your dreams no matter what your age. There is a philosophical note to the prose, but far from feeling intellectual or pretentious, it comes across in the kind of spontaneous, unpolished observations anyone might make:

"we all have [a dream] even if we don't know it, because we couldn't live without one… well, we could, but it wouldn't be living, it would be something else, although I don't know what you'd call it."

I particularly liked the fact that there is a female protagonist in her mid-seventies who, despite her eleven cats, is not consigned to the 'mad old cat lady' mould, but instead is full of life, humour and ideas. I really warmed to her eccentric, slightly scatter-brained nature, and the description of her difficult relationship with her daughter Violet is rendered movingly and convincingly. Jon is very different to Edith, being much less open, clearly traumatised by events in his past and sometimes struggling to cope with reality. He find it easier to talk to animals and children than he does to share his feelings with the adults in his life. As a result, it takes slightly longer to work out his motivations, but he is still both plausible and persuasive as a character.

Although we never learn whether the sanctuary is a success (the novel ends just as Edith and Jon are about to embark on this new life project), it would take a cynical reader not to be rooting for this pair of likeable characters.

In terms of translation, I believe this book would lend itself well to English, as there is no use of dialect or slang, and the themes addressed are universal. I would place it at the mainstream rather than literary end of the spectrum and it is a captivating and fairly quick read (despite its 400 pages) which I think would appeal to a wide audience. The character-driven nature of the novel, where the protagonists are not portrayed as saints or heroes but just endearingly human, has echoes of writers such as Anne Tyler, while the slightly magical, otherworldly feel made me think of Joanne Harris's Chocolat series. Another comparison to make is with Leonard and Hungry Paul, by Rónán Hession, which treats its characters with a similar tenderness and warmth.

Alejandro Palomas (b. 1967) has a large and loyal fan-base in Spain, and many of the amateur reviews of this book on the Goodreads website highlight its emotional appeal and the affection with

which its characters are portrayed. He is well-established as an author, having written around twenty books for adults and children, and he won the prestigious Premio Nadal in 2018 for Un Amor (A Love). Following the publication of the first edition of Un país con tu nombre in September 2021, by Ediciones Destino, the book is now on its second edition.

I thought this was a touching and thoroughly enjoyable book, with an optimistic feel that is much-needed at the moment, and I would wholeheartedly recommend it for translation into English.