Pa negre
Author:
Emili Teixidor
Reader:
Peter Bush

*Black Bread*is a novel set in rural Catalonia in the worst period after the end of the civil war – the hungry 40s. Andreu, the narrator and protagonist, is a boy from La Plana de Vic, the countryside around the town of Vic, who is forced to live in a small village with his grandparents, when his father is in prison in Vic and awaiting his sentence as a "red". His mother can't look after him, as she works long hours every day in a textile factory. Andreu's family belongs to the losers' side, although the only member of the family of any political significance during the war was his father. This idealistic dreamer aspired to more from life than the poverty-stricken existence his father, an agricultural worker, suffered, and thus espoused the revolutionary cause.

Andreu's grandparents are tenant farmers on the estate of the Manubens family who live in the city of Igualada but own a country house in the village. Andreu's family occupy the ground-floor rooms in the house that have been set aside for the servants. The Manubens are wealthy and belong to the victorious, Francoist side, and in this sense, Andreu's family enjoys a fortunate position in comparison to the other families in the village, though always relative to the state of penury ravaging the whole country. Andreu's family doesn't go hungry and doesn't have to eat the rationed "black bread" that is the symbol for those times. Andreu's aunt and uncle, cousins and a younger single sister live with them. The cousins are a boy they call Quirze Junior and a girl they nickname Llorica and the sister, Aunt Enriqueta, is a romantic dreamer who is nevertheless reputed in the village to be a lady who likes the company of men. Aunt Enriqueta works as a seamstress. In the end she abandons her long-standing fiancé to make her escape with a young novitiate who lives in the monastery that cares for patients afflicted with tuberculosis that is on the outskirts of the village. Another important character in the novel is Roviretes a young girl who is a playmate of Andreu and his cousins. Roviretes is more cynical and "grown-up" and is aware of a lot of the rumours and gossip milling around the village. She and Núria are sexually abused by the schoolmaster; the children in the school, but none of the adults, are aware of this abuse.

While the adults work hard for long hours and little reward, the children try to enjoy their childhood: they go to school, play in the woods, and strive to see what lies behind the evasive comments made by adults in order to understand the world of contradictions that surrounds them. When Andreu's father is finally sentenced to death and executed, the Manubrens, who are a childless couple, suggest to Andreu's mother that they could take charge of the boy, give him a good education and make him their heir. Andreu's mother, now a poverty-stricken widow, tries to persuade her son to accept the offer. He resists at first because he doesn't want to leave his family. However, he gradually changes his mind, as he becomes dazzled by the level of luxury the Manubrens enjoy and is bewildered by the constant lying of the adults and, in particular, of his mother, who reneges on her ideas and consorts with the fascists in the village. He goes to live in the Manubrens' household and, eventually, loses contact with his own family, whom he disowns. He

becomes a Manubrens, one of them, “a monster”, in his own words.

*Black Bread*is an exceptional novel. Written in striking literary language, it describes post-war life in Catalonia through the eyes of a young boy who doesn’t understand the compromises the adults have to reach in order to survive. The novel covers some three years, in which the protagonist and his friends discover their sexuality, the deceit permeating the world of adults, the contradictions, the lack of justice and the huge sense of disillusion in the country. Spared grandiose declarations or political statements, the reader is introduced to the horrors of life for the defeated through the detail of their everyday lives: fear, hunger, repression and the spirit of revenge driving the fascists… This contrasts sharply with the opulent lives led by the victorious rich and the power of the Church and its priests. As the narrator is a young boy who simply describes what he sees and experiences, the novel lacks any moralizing baggage – that is not always the case in such novels! - and readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

*Black Bread*is undoubtedly one of the best novels ever written about the post-war period, and Emili Teixidor’s lyrical prose draws the reader in from the very first page. Although the immediate focus is a very specific period in Spanish history, the story he tells is universal, given that every war has its losers, and modest families are always forced to find ways of coexisting with their enemies in order to survive, particularly in rural areas. The perspective of a narrator still at the stage of discovering the world, who is forging his ideas and character through his reactions to what he discovers and the way he then interprets the decisions and behaviour of adults, gives the novel an original literary twist. It makes *Black Bread* one of the great novels of contemporary Catalan literature.

Note: there is a Catalan film, *Black Bread*, directed by Agustí Vilallonga that has been a box-office success in Spain. This film is not simply based on the novel of that name but also on other shorter fictions by Emili Teixidor that are set in the same era, namely *Portrait of a Bird Killer* and *Sic Transit Glorias Swanson*. The film incorporates stories that aren’t in the novel, and although the main characters are the same, the plot changes somewhat. Nonetheless, *Black Bread* can be enjoyed in its own right without reference to other stories.