Personas en la sala
Author:
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Norah Lange was an important Argentinian poet and novelist who lived from 1905 to 1972. She was married to the avant-garde poet Olivierio Girondo, was herself a great friend and inspiration to the young Jorge Luis Borges, and was one of the members of the Florida group of writers. Borges and other young writers met regularly in her house in Belgrano, an elegant suburb of Buenos Aires, in the 1920s and 1930s. She was best known as a poet, with several collections to her credit, but also wrote four novels and two books of memoirs, and was at the centre of modernist experiments in writing in the Argentinian capital.

Personas en la sala was first published in 1950, and re-issued by a small publisher Ediciones Barataria of Barcelona in 2011, in a collection called Humo al sur which claims to offer readers 'the forerunners of the Latin American literature boom of the 1960s.'

PLOT: The novel consists of 24 short chapters, less than 170 pages in total. It is a first-person narrative written as we learn at some point by a seventeen-year old girl. She lives in the smart neighbourhood of Belgrano, and is looking back on events which happened over a period of perhaps two months early in the 20th century, when people still travelled in horse-drawn carriages.

The drama starts on a stormy night when the electricity is cut due to a storm and the young narrator sits at her bedroom window. Looking out into the darkness, she sees three figures in a room in the house opposite, lit up by flashes of lightning.

She becomes obsessed by them, and soon gets into the habit of escaping as soon as she can to her bedroom after supper to observe them. She notes that one of them looks older, and sits apart from the other two. They hardly ever seem to speak, but sit smoking, always in the same position.

This leads the young girl to imagine all kinds of stories about them: have they committed a crime? Are they involved in some sort of complicated love tangle? Her mind runs riot with all the possibilities, especially when one evening a strange man arrives, goes up to the room, and appears to be handing the oldest woman a packet of letters. Eventually, these are passed to the youngest one- but the spying narrator cannot guess what it is all about, and so rushes down to catch the strange man as he is leaving. He tells her it was 'a very painful interview' and recommends that she does not try to visit them that night.

She is determined however to learn more about them, and engineers a meeting by intercepting a telegram meant for them. She rings their bell and hands it to the oldest one, and from then on often joins them in the same room, although she still manages to learn little of their past or present.

After several weeks, the narrator becomes so overwrought that she becomes ill. In order to help her recover, her family decides to send her out of Buenos Aires to Adrogue, to get some fresh air and quiet. Although she is only gone four days, by the time she returns the room is empty: the three mysterious women have moved on without leaving a trace, and she is left delirious, imagining that 'House for Rent' meant forever for me the three faces I loved and I was crying, trying to come to their aid, trying to make sure my gaze did not mean I knew them from memory'.

VERDICT: This seemed to me a jewel of a book. As the plot summary shows, nothing much happens, but the writing brilliantly conveys the wild imaginings of a mind just on the verge of adulthood, when that world is still a mystery but is endlessly fascinating, even if there is no explanation. The atmosphere created is like that of a recurring dream, with everything brought vividly to life, but not taken to extremes, so that the reader remains as unsure as the narrator herself what the three figures represent: the Fates, the stages of adult life, or simply figments of her imagination.

The book would need a very precise and sympathetic translation, but offers no special problems. I suppose the biggest problem would be to find an English-language publisher willing to publish a book that first saw the light of day more than 60 years ago, and find a way to market it as an unknown classic; I think it would be well worth the effort.

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