
Bilbao-New York-Bilbao

Author: Kirmen Uribe

Publisher: Seix Barral, 2008, 204 pages

Genre: Literary Fiction

Reader: **Margaret Jull Costa**

Kirmen Uribe is an award-winning Basque poet and this, his first novel, won the 2009 Premio Nacional de Narrativa and the 2008 Premio Nacional de la Crítica (for a novel written in Basque). The English translation of his first collection of poetry, *Meanwhile Take My Hand*, was chosen as a finalist for the 2008 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation.

At one point, the author/narrator recalls telling his American publisher that he wants to write a book about three generations of his family, but isn't interested in writing some kind of nineteenth-century saga. The book he finally writes – this book – is a patchwork of stories about his grandparents, parents and himself, but also about other people he has met or read about or been told about. The piecing together takes place during the seven-hour flight from Frankfurt to New York, about the same time that it takes to read the book. This is not, then, a novel, but a kind of biography-cum-autobiography, full of fragments and digressions that build to a portrait of those three generations. It goes beyond that, too, to embrace all kinds of other topics – tolerance versus intolerance; the contradictory nature of human beings; the role of chance in our lives; how easily the old ways are lost; the importance of making stories out of what happens to us, often shapeshifting fact into fiction. There is no plot, but people and stories and ideas occur and reoccur, forming a rich tapestry of lives and thoughts.

A few examples: the Basque artist, Arteta, who chose family life over art by turning down the commission to make a painting commemorating Guernica; the grandfather, on finding out that he is terminally ill, taking his daughter to a museum to see a particular painting; the brother bringing his blind sibling all the way home from Argentina, only to leave him two miles from their village and immediately setting off back to Argentina; the house-high waves off Rockall; the wedding ring lost at sea and turning up in the guts of the fish brought home for supper; the boy who throws away the chance of a finding a dance partner only to meet her twenty years later; the bank customer who 'deposits' old Basque words along with his money; the explosion that blows in his stepson's bedroom window.

The stories rise up throughout the book, wave upon wave, and although both author and book are rooted in the Basque country and in Basque culture, the stories come both from there and from all over the world and from all kinds of people, and the universal concerns expressed in the book – the importance of tolerance, love and generosity over and above ideology - are relevant to us all. As one of people he meets says: Ideas are one thing, but the heart is another.

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