Ventajas de viajar en tren

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Ventajas de viajar en tren is the second of the four novels Antonio Orejudo has published to date, and it won the Premio Andalucía de Novela when it first came out in 2000. Described by publisher, press and the author himself as ‘cervantina’ in style, much is made in reviews of the uneasy relationship between reality and fiction which characterizes this short novel and results in a rather unsettling reading experience. From the opening sentence, ‘Let us imagine a woman who returns home to discover her husband inspecting his own shit with a little stick’, the reader is plunged headlong into the bizarre world of the book, populated by a shifting cast of characters whose true identities are often called into question.

Two train journeys, both taken by Helga Pato, frame the narrative. At the start of the first chapter, she sits next to a man who introduces himself as Ángel Sanagustín and tells her he is a psychiatrist at the clinic where she has just admitted her coprophiliac husband. Sanagustín begins by describing his unorthodox treatment methods (getting patients to write down episodes from their lives), and goes on to offer three conflicting stories, told from a variety of authorial standpoints, concerning his patient Martín Urales de Úbeda. Helga barely speaks, other than to insist on paying for the sandwiches Sanagustín gets out to buy at a station on the way. Entrusting her with the red folder containing patient testimonies which he says he is preparing for publication, Sanagustín disappears into the station café. To her horror, the train pulls out almost immediately and Helga is left alone with the folder, ‘confused and hungry’. At the end of the novel, Helga is once more on a train returning from the psychiatric hospital. She meets the same man as before and feigns normality, a somewhat superhuman feat given that she now knows he is actually Martín Urales himself, a mentally ill fantasist who had posed as a doctor during their first encounter. In fact, Helga had gone to obsessive lengths to return the folder to him and, in the process, narrowly escaped from the fire in which it was assumed Urales had died some months before. The two converse once more as the train speeds on towards its final destination/destiny.

Divided into seven parts in all, with Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 presenting four of the short and seemingly unrelated patient testimonies contained in the red folder, the novel could arguably be read as a series of linked (and not-so-linked) tales. Storytelling is a central motif of the book, with numerous narrative voices and viewpoints represented in the tales which spin out of the initial encounter between the two passengers. Some of these tales simply peter out and function as real red herrings for any reader determined to try and follow the main thread of the book. Narrative ‘truth’ is constantly undermined, as people and events turn out either to be not quite as expected or deliberately deceiving. Much of the time, the reader is uncertain who is who and it is only in retrospect we realize that ‘the woman’ in Chapter 1 is Helga, the central character in Chapters 2 and 7.

The reader’s confusion runs parallel to Helga’s own; ‘The problem Helga Pato had with people was that she confused narrators with authors and sometimes authors with characters.’ This is particularly problematic for Helga, given that she works with literary fiction. Initially attracted to the famous, left-leaning writer ‘W’ because he is her favourite author, she abandons her PhD on the collective authorship of the medieval epic on marrying him and, a year later, becoming his agent. When the marriage sours and life - and especially, sex - with W become a series of deliberate humiliations, Helga decides to murder him. But the internet friend, Fat, who offers to procure the necessary drug never materializes (they are supposed to meet in the Central Library of New York State University) and on returning to Spain, Helga finds her husband poring over his own excrement, offering her an easier way out of the relationship.

While the structure of the book is complex, the language used is relatively simple. Often recounting bewildering or even horrific events in a rather deadpan, plain style, Orejudo engenders a growing sense of near-panic in the reader, who is whisked along as if on a high-speed train herself. Despite provoking varying degrees of unease and incredulity, the book is nonetheless enjoyable and highly readable, due in part to the humour which is a strong feature throughout. Sometimes grim, often vicious (particularly when directed at the literary establishment) and occasionally laugh-out-loud, it provides a counterweight to the peculiar, if not perverted or queasy subject matter of some of the storylines. To describe just a few of these, there is the sexually and mentally degrading treatment of a woman who eventually becomes her husband’s ‘dog’, the government conspiracy in which refuse collectors are involved in monitoring citizens through the scientific examination of their weekly rubbish, and NGO involvement in the trafficking, prostitution and organ harvesting of war orphans. Not ostensibly easy reading at times, then, the lack of real emotional investment in the characters (are any of their accounts ‘real’?) makes this a book that is

more interested in exploring fact versus fiction than offering grueling social commentary or ‘normal’ psychological insight.

Potentially frustrating for the reader who prefers a neatly unfolding narrative, there would definitely be a market for the surreal inventiveness of this book among those who enjoy the work of writers such as Paul Auster, Julio Cortázar, Borges or Vonnegut. The novel is a strong candidate for translation into English and, while perhaps not a best-seller, might be of interest to publishers looking to promote innovative writing from this generation of young(ish) Spanish authors.

Ventajas … would not present the translator with too many difficulties, barring perhaps handling the technical terminology of psychiatric diagnoses, Chapter 6 (which is written in non-standard Spanish, but only 12 or so pages long), and the literary wordplay by which ‘TO’, ‘LE’ and ‘DO’ (from ‘TOLEDO’) are discovered in the First Eclogue by sixteenth century poet Garcilaso de la Vega. The poet and the poem exist, so whether there is an accepted English translation of the fragment, or whether in fact Orejudo has invented an extra section for his own ends, would require research. The subject matter of the novel would transfer perfectly well into English-speaking cultures as, although set in Spain, it is rather in a world of its own in any case.