
La contadora de películas

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María Margarita lives in a remote township run by a nitrate company in Chile. Her father, badly injured in a mining accident, is now wheelchair-bound. His much younger wife and mother to his five children runs off, some say to become a dancer. Although the family is allowed to stay in the house, money is always short. Then María Margarita, who has always loved the cinema, discovers that she has a talent as a teller or re-teller of films for those who cannot afford the price of a cinema ticket. She feels she has found her true vocation as actress and singer. Her father even starts to make money out of her. However, she soon becomes sought-after not just for her dramatic talents, but for her physical attractions. At thirteen, she is raped by a moneylender, who invites her to his house to reenact a film. Her eldest brother takes revenge and beats him to death, a crime for which he will later be punished with prison. When her father dies, and it looks likely that they will lose their house, she becomes the mistress of the company administrator, a 51-year-old gringo. One by one, for various reasons, her brothers leave – one is run over, another elopes with an eighteen-year-old widow, another is snapped up by a football club, and the last ends up in jail. And with the advent of television, her talents are no longer wanted or valued. When the Allende government is overthrown, her gringo lover flees, and the company collapses. Everyone leaves, except her. She stays behind in what is now a ghost town, telling the occasional incredulous tourist about how life used to be – how no one starved, how they helped each other, how you could safely leave your door unlocked at night, and about how she was once a teller of films.

The plot may sound melodramatic, worthy perhaps of one of the films Margarita reenacts, but this is a wonderfully involving book, evoking the harsh, precarious lives of those living in the nitrate mine townships in Chile, but also celebrating the redeeming power of art and, in particular, of story-telling.

This is a summary of the reader's report by Margaret Jull Costa

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