
La vida antes de marzo

Author: Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón

Translation rights: Anagrama

Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón is one of Spain's best-known filmmakers and there is much that is cinematic in *La vida antes de Marzo* (Life Before March), his first novel, which charts the genesis of a terrorist attack which rocked Spain.

The year is 2024, Martín is a passenger on the newly inaugurated circular train whose two thousand carriages form a serpentine link around the continent, from Baghdad to Lisbon, never arriving, always coming from. As the train continues on its unending journey, two passengers, Martín and Ángel, start up a conversation in the dining car, accompanied by bottles of wines from the regions through which they pass. By coincidence, they come from the same region of Spain and as their stories unfold further parallels become clear: both have, in different ways, been involved with the Islamic community in Spain – Martín through his love for the Manga-eyed Asal and Ángel through his friendship for Serhane; both have played a part in transporting illegal explosives to Madrid in the days before 11th March 2004 and they also share the same father: one of the victims of the bombings they inadvertently helped to produce.

As the clues to the relationship between the travellers are gradually introduced, the narrative offers a vivid picture of contemporary Spanish society and the bonds and tensions which exist within it. Martín's affair with Asal comes to a sudden end when she is forced into an arranged marriage with a man she does not know; Ángel's mother takes him to Madrid when they are deserted by his father and the young boy begins mugging to obtain money for drink and drugs. His closest friend, Serhane, is both his protector and betrayer. Meanwhile, the gradual release of detail draws the reader into the plot before it becomes obvious exactly where it is leading. Throughout all this, the author skilfully mixes heartache with humour as the protagonists become progressively drunker, sampling the wines of the countries through which they pass. And when they are questioned by a pair of European police officers, communication is hindered by a faulty instant -translator.

This novel presents a view of life in Spain which British readers will find both interesting and insightful: it is no mean feat to successfully fictionalise an event which has shocked a whole country so soon after it has occurred. *La vida antes de marzo* was the winner of the Premio Heralde de Novela, 2009.

This is a summary of the reader's report by Christina MacSweeney

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