
El Funeral Celeste

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El Funeral Celeste is a story of first love across a cultural divide, as a Spanish teenager falls for a Chinese waitress. However, as well as confronting racial and social prejudices, this modern day Romeo and Juliet must also overcome the threat of organised crime. The collision between their two unconnected worlds will change the protagonists' lives forever.

The story is set in Barcelona in the heat of August. Nineteen year old Isaac has stayed on in the city to study, while the majority of the city's inhabitants, including his parents and younger sister, have escaped to the beach and the countryside. One lunchtime, he is served by the angelic faced Yam-Mey in a Chinese restaurant, and it is love at first sight. During the couples' regular night time trysts, Yam-Mey reveals that she must work for five years to keep her family in China fed and housed. Isaac is outraged at her lack of freedom, and intrigued by mysterious activities he observes at the restaurant. When Yam-Mey fails to appear one night, Isaac recruits his cool cousin Martina to aid his investigations. The pair discovers that the restaurant is at the centre of a counterfeiting and people trafficking operation. However, their interference in a world they do not understand leads them into great danger, with possible tragic consequences for Yam-Mey.

The significance of the title becomes apparent when Martina's lawyer uncle highlights the low figures for recorded deaths amongst the Chinese community in Spain. He attributes this to the recycling of passports to further people trafficking, but also suggests that bodies may be disposed of through the ancient ritual of Sky Burial, where flesh is stripped from the skeleton by vultures. While this is pure conjecture, the shadow of the vultures hovers menacingly over the novel, providing a fitting metaphor for the nature of organised crime. Martina's uncle also observes that the insular Chinese community remains largely a mystery to many Spanish people. Isaac's initial experience of Chinese culture is limited to stereotypical images of restaurants, sweatshops and triads. However, his love for the girl, and his shock at discovering the human cost of the cheap CDs and DVDs he buys, prompts him to reconsider his own values.

Jordi Sierra i Fabra is an accomplished and prolific writer, adept at weaving complex elements into an absorbing tale, while exploring issues relevant to the society we live in. The romance is nicely observed, and will appeal to readers experiencing the first pangs of love, as well as those wishing to revisit the experience. The mystery behind the facade of the Chinese restaurant adds dramatic tension to the story, but also has a firm basis in reality: while the counterfeit CD industry may have run its course, there will always be new opportunities to exploit vulnerable people in the name of profit. El Funeral Celeste is a gripping and well paced novel which will encourage readers to consider the price of their freedoms and to look at their neighbours with new eyes.

This is a summary of the reader's report by Lise Jones

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