
La nit de les papallones

Author: Jordi Coca

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La nit de les papallones is a powerful, engaging novel of obsession and desire, which moves between the present day and the grey and staid reality of 1970s Barcelona. In his prize-winning novel, Coca vividly evokes the nocturnal world of Barcelona in the dying years of the dictatorship, and pays tender homage to the striptease artist and actress Christa Leem, who rose to fame during those last months before the advent of democracy.

In a sense, the story begins at the end: the nameless narrator, an obscure journalist aged sixty-seven, is looking back over his life, and the reader is warned that the story that follows will not have a happy ending. He looks at a photograph in a newspaper, not just any photograph, but one of Carla, the character around whom the story revolves. She is naked, with her back turned, swinging her blonde hair over her swaying body. The photograph is accompanied by the news that Carla has died, and it is this which propels the narrator back into the past, when he knew and loved her.

The novel follows the narrator's attempts to trace his way back through his memories of Carla, beginning with the first time he saw her perform, up to the last time he saw her, seventeen years before she died, all the while returning to this photograph of her at the peak of her success as a point of reference: her initial performances, her rise to fame, her addictions and eventual withdrawal from the public eye. Although the narrator's focus is entirely on her, Carla is as unknowable to the reader as she evidently is to the journalist himself - despite her candour and the seeming transparency of her performances, the real Carla remains an enigma. He vividly describes the seedy world of Barcelona by night, an underworld that can bring fame and success, but also a dark labyrinth which pulls Carla in and never releases her, with inevitable tragic results.

This novel is exactly the kind of novel that should be published in English: evocative and poignant, it is a well-written eulogy to a Barcelona long since disappeared. Coca successfully paints a portrait of a very specific historical moment but his explorations of love and loss, desire and obsession are universal and show that the struggle to find freedom is an essential part of being human.

This is a summary of the reader's report by Laura McGloughlin

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