
Mae West y Yo [Mae West and Me]

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Felipe Bonasera is an openly gay retired diplomat in his early 60s who has decided to spend the month of July alone at his family's summer home after being diagnosed with an unidentified life-threatening illness. As an amateur ventriloquist, Felipe is used to entertaining his friends with performances using puppets of golden age Hollywood filmstars: Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich and Mae West. Despite having left his puppets back in Madrid, the voice of Mae West travels with him; Felipe has named the initially unidentified cancerous part of his body – at the end of the novel we learn that it is his prostate – after the famously sharp-tongued actress, who keeps him company with her witty and often obscene comments on life during his self-imposed exile.

During his stay, Felipe becomes involved in the social life of the Villa Horacia Village & Resort, a privileged village near Sanlúcar in Andalucía where wealthy families come to spend their summer holidays. In particular he makes friends with Marita, the village's frivolous shopkeeper and chief gossip, and André and Leoncio, a gloriously camp elderly gay couple who invite him to their house to watch Spain's victory against Holland in the 2010 World Cup Final. Felipe is also reunited with his childhood friend Carmeli, the daughter of the villa's former housekeepers, who acts as Felipe's housekeeper during his stay in the resort. Carmeli's quick tongue, warm heart and lack of pretension help to keep him entertained.

However, Felipe is suffering from the side effects of his medication, which include sudden attacks of sweating, constant trips to the toilet, and a reduced sex drive. He is also deeply frightened about his illness; while he outwardly manages to play the role of the charming, urbane diplomat from Madrid, inside he is terrified of what lies ahead. Events in the resort, such as the death from cancer of a celebrated local writer, heighten his awareness of his own mortality. Furthermore, returning to his childhood holiday home brings back many memories and contributes to his nostalgic mood, reminding him of lost loves and friendships.

With all this on his mind, Felipe spends most of his time alone, reading the newspapers, talking to Mae West, and spying on Pilar and Borja, his mysterious neighbours in the house opposite his. Pilar is an attractive woman in her early 40s whose husband Javier, a successful banker, went missing two months before Felipe's arrival. Pilar's teenaged stepson, Borja, immediately catches Felipe's eye, and later surprises him with an offer of sex; it seems that Borja has been earning extra pocket money as a rent boy since his father's disappearance. While Felipe doesn't take Borja up on his offer, the event does increase Felipe's fascination with the family, especially after he is visited by a private detective looking for information on Javier's disappearance. The mystery is also a subject of interest to Paco Luna, the editor of the local newspaper, who writes regular flowery and insensitive articles speculating about whether the banker has been kidnapped or has run off with a younger woman.

Felipe becomes fascinated by Pilar, whose obvious anxiety awakens his compassion, and a close friendship develops between the two, particularly after Borja also goes missing. At the end of the novel, Paco Luna publishes a major scoop; Javier has been involved in a significant financial fraud. The police believe that he is somewhere in the Caribbean and that his son and wife have gone to join him. To Felipe's disappointment, Pilar has also disappeared; he receives a message from her to let him know that she is ok and apologising for not saying goodbye, but never finds out how much she really knew. Just before Felipe leaves for Madrid he receives a phone call from Thiago, his former lover, a hunky young Brazilian who had previously refused to return his calls. Buoyed up by Thiago's phone call, Felipe returns to Madrid feeling determined to carry on living and to live his life to the full.

The novel is divided between two first-person narrators: Felipe and 'Mae West' – Felipe's prostate personified as the Hollywood star. The chapters alternate between these two narratives, with a new chapter for each day spent at Villa Horacia. In the sections narrated by 'Mae West', the narrative voice mimics the quick-fire, gossipy wit of the real-life actress in a very conversational style. She scatters her observations with anecdotes about other stars of her time such as Grace Kelly, Rita Hayward, Audrey Hepburn, James Dean, and Cary Grant. 'Mae West' compares everything that Felipe experiences with plots of films or the experiences of golden age actresses, and constantly interrupts Felipe's part of the narrative with witty, wry and sometimes obscene comments. The sections narrated by Felipe tend to be more reflective, with his mind regularly returning to his anxiety about his illness, which he tries to forget by becoming involved in village life and spying on his neighbours.

The relationship between Felipe and 'Mae West' – his glamorous imaginary friend – is interesting. Instead of hating and fearing his cancerous prostate, Felipe gives it a name and an imaginary life of its own, and a strange friendship develops between them. By giving his prostate a name and a personality, Felipe is no longer suffering alone. Whenever he gets frightened or morbid, 'Mae West' snaps him out of it with a witty comment, transporting him to a glamorous fantasy world of film stars and intrigue. It is a strangely affectionate relationship, with 'Mae West' calling Felipe 'my man'.

Mae West y Yo tackles the theme of death and mortality from an unusual perspective, showing how humour and imagination can help when facing adversity, whilst also presenting a gentle critique of the privileged lives of Spain's upper-middle classes. The concept of the 'talking' prostate with the voice of Mae West may seem a little forced to some readers, and the highly complicated, long sentences, 'camp talk' and great number of cinematic references might make this difficult to translate and also – a little worryingly – difficult to read. However, it is a highly original book with some very funny and warm moments; the voice of Mae West and character of Carmeli provide genuine and memorable highlights.

This is a summary of the report by Catherine Mansfield.

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