
Todo nada

Report by: Anne McLean

This subtle, surprising and assured first novel by Mexican writer, Brenda Lozano, is a sort of modern lament. It is often sad, frequently touching, sometimes angry, but at the same time very funny. Lozano's prose is precise and playful and over the space of a very few pages (every second chapter being one or two lines long), manages to bring readers to a genuine acquaintance with her two eccentric and intriguing main characters. It is a fragmentary narrative of contrasting extremes, a story of an old man and a young woman, told in alternating chapters of evocative portraits or revealing anecdotes followed by chapters consisting of a few words, sometimes only one, or an aphoristic line. She has a nice line in pithy phrases, which will provide many entertaining challenges for her future translators.

Her first person narrator, Emilia Nassar, is feisty and charming, as lively and stubborn as her recently deceased grandfather, Emilio. As the book opens she is days away from the first anniversary of his death, which also happens to be the two-month anniversary of her break-up with boyfriend José. Over the course of the novel Emi goes back and forth in time telling anecdotes in the present tense about her grandfather and José, treating her grief over both losses with wit, style and disdain, turning it over and over, examining it and accepting it, though never with any sense of resignation. This is a story of present absences.

Emilio Nassar, the narrator's grandfather, was a renowned gastroenterologist. When his wife of more than forty years decides to leave him for 'a mediocre paediatrician', so she'll have someone to keep her company in her final years, Dr Nassar decides to slowly starve himself to death, subsisting entirely on café con leche for the last months of his life. We don't find out very much more about Emi's grandmother, except that she used too much salt in her cooking. Even less is revealed about the narrator's mother, who is barely mentioned. But these are obviously intentional omissions, and interesting ones. The narrator is young and fixated on the particular losses of her grandfather and boyfriend and so that's what her narrative reveals.

The title provides a perfect example of Lozano's affection for opposites as well as for wordplay. Todo Nada: All Nothing, two simple words, which the reader might assume refer to life and death for most of the novel. And then we turn the page and find: Todo flota, el pasado flota. Nada todo. (Everything floats, the past floats. Everything swims.) Most of her sentences are short and she favours fairly basic vocabulary but takes delight on turning that seeming simplicity on its head and wringing every last meaning out of everyday words.

Todo nada is a moving, witty, profound and enormously enjoyable first novel. Brenda Lozano takes both stylistic and emotional risks and carries them off with aplomb. Like most good novels it has its own distinctive voice. Despite, or even because of, the obvious challenges her wordplay-riddled 2 prose presents, I think Todo Nada would work well in English translation at a time when young, female, literary Latin American authors are not terribly abundant on many publishers' lists.

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