
La sopa de Dios

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Casamayor's slim first novel (185 pages) *La Sopa de Dios* [God's soup], which won the 2010 Memorial Silverio Cañada prize, is ostensibly a slow-burning work of crime fiction that lacks any actual scenes of violence or murder, but is also a moving account of the indignities of old age and a tightly held-together debut that involves the reader fully in the mindset of its elderly and fascinatingly fallible protagonist, as well as in the life of a very real Barcelona neighbourhood.

Fede Cortés (previously known as Federico Suárez Llopis), principal suspect in several murder cases and ex-alcoholic in his seventies, is biding his time in a prison hospital and refusing to speak to anyone, in a move he describes as his 'winning strategy'. He does keep a diary, however, which is what we are reading, and in it records his life in a series of skilfully depicted flashbacks that jump back and forth between his childhood, his youth and middle age working as a salesman in Barcelona, and his more recent life as an elderly man in Ciudad Meridiana, a working-class district on the edge of the Catalan capital known for its large population of immigrants from Ecuador and Romania.

Fede grew up with his mother, who soon kicked out of the house the man he calls his 'first father', Herminio Suárez. Fede has few memories of Herminio, but does credit the man with giving him a second life once he inherits his father's flat and a mysterious sum of money. His mother's second husband and the man Fede calls his real father, Micky Cortés, was an honest hard-working man who loved Fede's mother and according to Fede saved his life by taking the scrawny little boy to the gym and teaching him to stand up to bullies. It is to Mickey that Fede owes his new surname as well as his love of words; the man was an avid reader of Western novels and assiduously bought his stepson books he saw as life-improving - *War and Peace*, *Don Quixote*, *Moby Dick*.

Tensions arise when Micky wants the teenage Fede to study to be a quantity surveyor, while Fede simply wants to work and have money in his pocket. He leaves home at the age of eighteen and heads for central Barcelona, where he finds lodgings in a *pensión* and his first lover in Mabel, the older woman who runs it. She senses he has a gift for selling and advises him to start working in a tailor's shop, choosing his clothes and persuading him to grow a moustache so as to look older. After a successful period in this profession he is called up to do his military service and starts drinking seriously. He leaves the pension and Mabel after being discharged and moves to Sabadell, where he meets the only woman he ever wanted to marry, Maria Fernanda Onelly. They spend time in Paris together and his eyes are opened by this cultured woman who makes references to classical mythology and rails openly against Franco, but ultimately she turns down his numerous marriage proposals and breaks his heart.

Fede slips into difficulties, carrying out one scam after another to cover his mounting debts and failing to see how his greed for money will be his downfall in the end. After a three-year stretch in prison, he is seen as too old to be a good salesman and his life begins a downward spiral. He lives on the streets for a while where he meets a man called Gabriel in the queue for 'la sopa de Dios' [God's soup], the name his new friend gives to the free food they receive in the city's soup kitchens. This phrase is where the book's title comes from, but it is also echoed in the phrase 'el soplo de Dios' [God's whisper or murmur], used later on by Fede to describe how sometimes the words in his diary flow out of him 'as if someone were dictating them to me', and which refers to the supposed divine inspiration received by writers of the Bible.

After being traced by a private investigator who informs him his biological father has left him his flat and some money, Fede moves to Ciudad Meridiana and builds up a new life there, taking pains to say hello every morning to all his neighbours and make his face known so as to avoid the loneliness of old age he fears so much. He becomes a regular in the neighbourhood bar called Cristián's, along with several other elderly people from the area who gather there to drink coffee and gossip. They include a retired sergeant major from Fede's block of flats, a coarse, unreconstructed man who bathes once a week and is held in contempt and reluctant admiration by Fede, and all but worshipped by his fellow coffee drinkers for having shot in cold blood a young drug addict who attempted to hold up the bar with a machete.

He marries his cleaning lady Matilda for unsentimental reasons, wishing as he does to escape the curse of being forever surrounded by lonely old men and women. Her children turn out to be two extremely violent unpredictable characters, a drug addict poet who brings tricks home to Fede's own bed, and an aggressive thief who regularly

marches Fede to the cash point to withdraw his savings. The narrator builds up sympathy for the awful situation with his step-children, and then at one point reveals that it 'occurred to him he could ask his neighbour the sergeant major [who we already know owns at least two guns] for help.' Fede reveals that Matilda's children have been found dead at some point, and hints as to his possible involvement are dropped along the way, along with his repeated claims of innocence.

Through gossiping with the local bank manager Sepúlveda, the sergeant major finds out about Fede's creative accounting involving his various properties and insinuates how he feels about this to Fede, who decides either to make the sergeant major 'his accomplice' or else 'eliminate him', so that he can't blackmail him. Fede pays a detective to investigate what the sergeant major does every Sunday, and learns the man takes a 500 euro note from a shoe box once a week and blows it on meals in expensive restaurants, cigars, taxis, hotel rooms and two alternating regular call girls, to whom he has confided his suspicions about Fede and who are the police's main source of information when they start investigating the various murders in the neighbourhood. We learn that the sergeant major is also killed at some point and once again, doubt settles over our slippery narrator.

Fede recounts in equal measure scenes from his life of touching human warmth (there is a particularly moving scene when his neighbour the Ecuadorian woman Nelly, who has hired him to put together cheap necklaces for her to sell, responds to his silent plea for physical company by undressing and climbing into bed with him to simply hold each other), yet also episodes that betray a seemingly chilling belief system – he states more than once that one can be only the 'victim or the executioner, there is nothing in between' – inherited from Gabriel, whom Fede calls the Archangel, and who claimed there was 'a limited and scarce amount of happiness in the world'. Fede adheres strongly to this belief as he himself has suffered so much and justifies his often questionable behaviour saying 'I didn't invent the rules of this game', allowing him to wash his hands of responsibility.

One episode he returns to again and again concerns a mysterious sad character known to all as the 'old smoking woman' who comes to Cristian's bar and always sits at the same table, drinking wine, smoking cigarette after cigarette and mumbling to herself. All the old regulars at the bar wonder about the life of this broken woman who wears what looks like expensive jewellery, but the sergeant major is the only one to ask any questions and doesn't believe her life story. He tells Fede that he believes a younger man has taken advantage of her loneliness to sleep with her and then wheedle money out of her. A few months later she is found dead, drowned in her bath, and a cryptic comment made by Fede right at the start, about the hiding place she found for her money being one of the best he'd ever seen, starts to make worrying sense.

The book's style is set by Fede's voice, an acerbic, unflinching tone with a precision of language laid down in the book's first sentence – 'I find it hard to write without accents' – and with a great deal of humour too. Fede is a spelling and grammar fanatic (he constantly corrects the sergeant major's bad Spanish) and has one especially unusual linguistic tic, a tendency to use three or four adjectives in place of one ('a blank atomized elusive silence') with no commas. He claims to be an expert in the use of the oxymoron and laments not having his trusty thesaurus by his side in prison. The tic is another mark of his fastidious character, along with his fondness for his Mont Blanc fountain pen, his repeatedly stated skill at finding good hiding places, his physical cleanliness (in contrast to the rank-smelling sergeant major) and his general belief in order and neatness. Significantly, spelling is also one of the few things he can control now that his aged body is betraying him and he is unable to choose his hours for eating and sleeping due to being in prison. He is highly believable as a character due partly to the superb depiction of his personal tics and oddities, but also to his fallibility and very human inconsistency – a great capacity to love and also to do wrong believing it to be right.

The book manages to be a gripping yet unhurried mystery that leaves a tantalising sense of doubt in the reader's mind, yet is equally a beautifully written depiction of the life of a Catalonian barrio, the importance of the neighbourhood bar, of Spanish customs and habits, and a moving, simple portrayal of the indignities and tragedy of old age. I think it could work in English, despite and maybe even because of its depiction of a very Spanish community. Spanish, Italian and more notably Scandinavian crime novels have done quite well over here in recent years, and I don't believe readers are put off by a foreign setting; if the writing is good enough (and this is very good) then it should do well.

Its depiction of old age and of a complicated man who is given several second chances are universal themes, while the ambiguous nature of the protagonist make him a very interesting character. The author has previously written a book of short stories (untranslated) called *Borrón y cuenta nueva* [clean slate] and in 2011 a second novel was published called *La vida y muertes de Ethel Jurado* [the life and deaths of Ethel Jurado].

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