

Nuria Amat by Carlos Fuentes from *El País*

The pre-eminent Catalan writer Nuria Amat writes in Spanish and displays an immense devotion to literature and words. Essays – *I am Kafka* – literary criticism – *Juan Rulfo* the best ever study of the Mexican writer – combative, questioning, acerbic journalism. And above all, novels. The very subjective *Country of the Soul*. The very objective *Queen Cocaine*, a striking tale of a cut-throat, guerrilla-ridden Colombia. And now a complex, subtle book that is unsure what it is, that is disguised as an autobiography, which it isn't, as a collection of maxims, that is most minimalist, as if the author were challenging us to search out the novel by the name of *Let Life Rain over Me*.

Amat's aphorisms are brief, eye-catching signs on a path that refuses to reveal where it is heading. Her style reveals and conceals the 'themes' that then emerge. Father. Mother. Friends. Lovers. Husbands. Until it anchors significantly on two characters who are so 'invented', you could say, so 'literary' that they throw light retrospectively on the intimate union between aphorisms and characters.

For Amat, writing is an act that is solitary, deracinated, out of place everywhere, and unrelenting in the way it reminds us of an author's loneliness. A novelist resides with the dispossessed, where the madness of others strikes, where lovers quest after disaster, where boudoirs are like cemeteries, where a dream is to be marooned in the body's secret, where God is in the room next door, where we are only sincere when we scream, where fear of dying is 'the secret reason why so many couples break up who've lived together for years and see old age as their punishment for lived'. Where death is the coin paid for the luxury of life.

The writer realizes that love, however, is only seen as true when it is lost. Then indifference becomes a thing of the past, a 'leaden knot' that sinks couples when 'nobody wants to wake up next to someone who makes them unhappy'; what is gained in turn is the immense potential of 'loving so intensely something that doesn't exist'. Fortune demands – thus making love palpable – the smallest, forgotten detail surviving from a couple's relationship. A laugh. An elegant farewell. Dismay getting out of bed. Marooned in the body's secret, unable to strip off because the body is our greatest disguise.

I will mention two characters whose fictional density alone sustains this fragile, haphazard quest after the truth and deceit in our lives. Dominica is an old, illiterate woman, alone, in mourning and one who doesn't pray because she is poor. She is expert

at finding the best hiding places, the best of all being the grave. It is there Dominica seems to inhabit her country of birth. She lived without complaining: she knew the worst had already happened. 'All the same', says the author, 'she makes me a present of her voice and her word.'

The other character is a young man who gives up drugs and grows old in an out-of-the-way wooded heath where he looks after plants and cultivates solitude. He exercises his memory hoping to be born anew. When he reads, he faints. He is seduced by exaggeration. He thinks narcissism is a defence against death.

Both the old woman and the man in the wood belong to a military, priest-ridden Spain, where the telephone had only just arrived and sewage systems were almost unheard of. The evocation of a recent agrarian Spain under authoritarian rule contrasts dramatically with modern, European cosmopolitan country, still tied to regional prides, jingoism and rancid disputes. Nuria Amat doesn't hide the paths of her liberation as a narrator. She loves the sea. She loves the fact that in Spain a marine horizon is never too far away: to dive in the sea is to sidestep death. She loves her friends. She loves those who have loved her. She loves her dead lovers and listens to 'the archaic voice of the fallen angel'. She loves music, storms and emotions.

But doesn't deceive herself. The good and the beautiful can exist, or, equally, cannot. In contrast, the flowers of discord always bloom. Tragedies shape their nests. Sometimes, one loves only by renouncing the beloved one. We are surrounded by people looking for enemies, who speak ill of others, who caricature themselves through their acts of envy...

Nuria Amat's book is a poem on the possibility or impossibility of being happy and a literary affirmation: in the end, a writer only recognizes life as embodied in letters, conscious that everything written is imperfect. Or as perfect as the blank spaces that, in a tacit homage to Mallarmé, bring this book to a conclusion. Because, finally, a cast of the dice will not abolish chance.

Translated by Peter Bush