

The Past, by Alan Pauls, trans Nick Caistor

Don't cry for them, Argentina

Reviewed by Jason Wilson

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Alan Pauls, born in Buenos Aires in 1959, won Spain's Anagrama novel prize in 2003 for this, his fourth novel. At its core, it attempts to rethink the laws of love in dense details through its two principal characters. Indeed, it could have been titled an Anatomy of Love.

After 12 years together, against the current selfish trends, Rimini and Sofia decide to split up, perhaps because they need to experience more life. Rimini, a translator and interpreter with a Dantean name, chooses dissipation: a journey into the hell of 1980s Buenos Aires through addictions to cocaine, masturbation, tennis, translation, a sudden marriage and paternity, until he loses everything. His self-destruction is matched by Sofia's crack-up as her never-failing love for him leads into her own degradation.

Towards the end, now a tennis coach and gigolo, Rimini steals a work of art by a painter named Riltse, whom both had adored, and is imprisoned. He is rescued by Sofia and joins her group of Women Who Love Too Much, named after Victor Hugo's daughter Adèle H: an elegy to female tenacity. Suffering brings them together.

This outline scratches the surface of a love story set in a Buenos Aires with barely a mention of the dirty war, disappearances or shanty towns. Pauls called his novel *The Past* because we slowly understand through Rimini's passive self-obsessions that the opposite of love is amnesia, that his characters' parallel lives suddenly overlap through a string of coincidences. Fortuitous encounters generate the plot of this pleasingly constructed novel. These encounters create memories of a past Rimini tries to reject, refusing to look at a recurring box of photos.

A key scene is Rimini's discovery of Riltse's painting *The Bogus Hole*, hanging on the wall in a loo in the flat of a spoilt woman with whom he is monotonously copulating. We then get the history of how that painting ended up there, how Rimini steals it and is rescued from prison by Sofia, with vivid descriptions of Riltse's "Sick Art" and an account of how the horror of love is at the source of this Bacon-like painter. In fact, it's

almost an essay within the novel. Rimini sought immersion in real life, but by the end life no longer belongs to him but to the past.

Pauls's allusive novel invokes Proust, Nabokov and, more locally, Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, with its descent into urban hell, rejection of love and abandoned baby. Long sentences and looping coincidences suggest that love itself is a rhythm of chance events. However, a picaresque strand lightens the dense flow, with much explicit sex and black humour. Rimini is a *Candide* witnessing late modern in its Buenos Aires versions. Scenes with a homoeopath, or a cocaine-sniffing rock-star, or interpreting for the visiting Jacques Derrida, or bumping into Sofia's father in a love-hotel with his mistress: all stand out.

But most pleasing in this ambitious novel - brilliantly caught in Nick Caistor's translation - is the distancing way Pauls slides in and out of characters who are ghosts of their pasts, without a centre or psychology. He is inside and outside them, so we grasp the logic of their passion of parallel lives that intertwine. It is almost 18th-century in its philosophical meandering, and, emotionally and rationally, deeply satisfying.

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