

In search of Argentina's lost times

Alan Pauls' *The Past* examines an Argentinian couple's attachment to both personal and collective memory, says Ben Bollig

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The Past

by Alan Pauls; translated by Nick Caistor
Harvill Secker £17.99, pp528

The past, Alan Pauls' first novel to be translated into English, has arrived with a certain amount of fanfare - including a film adaptation starring Gael Garcia Bernal, an appearance at the Edinburgh Festival and critical comparisons to Proust and Nabokov.

Like Proust's epic, *The Past* is about memory. A twentysomething Buenos Aires couple, Rimini and Sofia, split up after 12 years together, sharing out friends, possessions and living arrangements. But there is a sticking point: their photographs. Sofia wants desperately to divide up the thousand-plus photos they have; Rimini feels repulsed by the pictures. For Sofia, the images are a visual prompt to aid her perfect memory of their years together; for Rimini, they moor him in the past.

Rimini moves on: a new, younger girlfriend, cocaine abuse, work addiction (he is the most productive of multilingual translators) and compulsive masturbation. He marries and divorces, breaks down and recovers. He even becomes a tennis coach. Sofia, meanwhile, haunts him with recollections at pivotal moments in his life. By the final section of the novel she has become the founder member of a remarkable organisation: the Women Who Love Too Much.

A large proportion of the text digresses from this main narrative: the life and works of a fictional painter and pioneer of 'Sick Art', Jeremy Riltse (one of his pieces involves an attempt to have part of his rectum removed and attached to canvas); the tale of the adman who brings Riltse's 'Bogus Hole' to Buenos Aires; the story of the obsessive lover Adele Hugo; the tragic fate of Rimini's junior-school teacher. After about 400 pages, the novel is even good enough to recap an earlier sequence, presumably fearing that the portrayal of amnesia may have brought it on in the reader.

Alongside the novel's internal echoes and ricochets, there are a great number of literary and artistic references, including to Victor Hugo, Althusser, Marx and Freud. Indeed, *The Past* is peopled with spectres; characters are described as zombies, as ghosts, as ghosts haunting other ghosts or simply as dead. Rimini and Sofia both on occasion refer to each other as dead people, and there are lengthy sections discussing loss, mourning and the status of the survivor.

But surviving what? There is a strange absence in this novel, hinted at with references that may remain unnoticed or inexplicable to the general reader. A Ford Falcon, vehicle of choice of the military's hit squads, brings back 'past memories' for Rimini. After his wife gives birth, Rimini is assailed by the strange fear that their child will be kidnapped or killed. 1976 reoccurs as a gap, and the chaos and violence before and after the coup d'etat is inexplicably absent, despite the lovers' Riltse-chasing school holiday in Europe that luckily allows them to be absent while their country descends into chaos.

This gives the strong impression that Pauls says too much and too little at the same time: digressions into junior-school teaching suggest not a novel written on cocaine, like the translations Rimini produces, but something closer to the headless beast that Professor Grady Tripp engenders while high on weed in Curtis Hanson's film *Wonder Boys*

There is also a contradiction between the one or two references to Argentinian history and the very international feel of the novel: there is no maté, no coups, no Peronism. Throughout, dates are implied through world-historical events: the Cuban revolution, the moon landings, the fall of the Berlin Wall. The novel is thoroughly international and thoroughly Argentinian at once; it seems to demand familiarity with Argentinian places and dates yet does not clarify what these might imply for any meaning of the novel.

We are all, Pauls seems to say, dead men and women, dead because of an attachment to a past now gone. But the source of this tragedy is only hinted at: twentysomething break-ups and midlife crises, the stuff of Pauls' countrymen Andres Neuman and Gonzalo Garces, do not explain the melancholy or foreboding that characterise the mood of *The Past*. What might be the debate that drives the novel: how to remember, what to remember; how to experience or live the past in the present. In the end, Pauls' entertaining novel - at times, horribly so - tells every story imaginable except the events that haunt his tale, and that are perhaps the most important story in Argentina's recent history.