

Postal properties

Vicente Molina Foix is a film director and translator of Shakespeare, a social commentator and a novelist. *El abrecartas* (The Letter-opener) gives proof of a large talent. Without recourse to a narrator or overarching guide of any kind, Molina Foix plunges the reader into a series of testimonies, mainly in the form of exchanges of letters. The correspondence begins in 1921 and ends in 1999, thus serving as a commentary on Spain's history during this period.

The novel begins with Rafael, a fictional schoolmate of Federico García Lorca, writing to the poet without expecting a reply. Lorca's plays have inspired him not only to write letters but to leave the life he might have expected to lead in Andalusia, and to become a soldier and an author. Several of the letter-writers reappear as the century proceeds and their lives evolve and interlink in ways they do not always appreciate. Perhaps the most important of these, the one who lends some coherence to the whole, is Setefilla, Rafael's cousin. She corresponds with the poet Vicente Aleixandre (who was a friend of Molina Foix), then elopes to Latin America with the wife of Alfonso, an art

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teacher imprisoned by Franco's forces after the Civil War. Later, Setefilla becomes Alfonso's penfriend after she returns alone to Spain and becomes a successful children's author. Although the elegant correspondence between Setefilla and Alfonso dries up, leaving several mysteries unresolved, her continued existence into her nineties, inspires the final letter of the novel in which she is advised of the sale via the internet of relics – clothing, letters, photographs, pamphlets and typescripts – the property of the literary figures of the century.

The relics, chance fragments with a historical resonance, are like the invented documents which make up the novel itself; they are being sold by the miserable Ramiro Fonseca, a would-be artist, who bitterly denounces the Spanish intellectual set which once rejected him, in a series of reports to the

police. Fonseca's reports, complete with crossings out and marginal annotations, are used by Molina Foix to mock the style of the *informes* of the Franco regime, and to belittle the finger-pointers.

The novelist brings together historical figures and fictional characters, but he avoids the risks of inventing letters from the well-known writers he features – with the brief exception of Vicente Aleixandre. Many of his correspondents are part of Lorca's circle: Rafael Alberti, Miguel Hernández, Eugenio D'Ors and the avant-garde film directors of the late 1960s. The portrayal of this "faction" is a clever and often witty way of revealing the day-to-day historical realities of Spain with and beyond Franco, without the formal demands of a plot-driven historical novel.

El abrecartas evokes a yearning for what might have been. Many of the letters are sent from beyond Spanish borders – England, France, Switzerland, Mexico, Morocco – or to and from prison; some are censored, others never delivered. The novel is a collage which attempts to reflect nearly a century of turmoil. It is a notable achievement, especially impressive given the challenges presented by the epistolary form. The richness of the voices which the author creates, and the sensitivity with which they are revealed, are testament to the maturing of a highly talented creative writer.

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