

# On the Edge by Rafael Chirbes review – the financial crisis as seen from Spain

Chirbes was a giant of Spanish literature before he died last year. Now his award-winning novel of economic despair on the coast is finally available in English

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**T**he Spanish novelist Rafael Chirbes died of lung cancer in August. Born into a Republican family and raised in orphanages during the dark days of Franco's dictatorship, Chirbes educated himself in a leftist milieu in Madrid of the 1960s and 70s, spending some time in prison for his activities. Originally published in 2013, *On the Edge* was the capstone of his prolific career as a writer and public intellectual. It won the Spanish National Literature prize, and has now been translated into English by Margaret Jull Costa and will be published by New Directions.

In her foreword to the new translation, the scholar Valerie Miles called Chirbes's body of work "the most renegade and uncomfortable literary testaments of Spain," combining biting social realism with the experiments of idols like William Faulkner or John Dos Passos. *On the Edge* has been lauded as a stark portrait of Europe in the depths of its late economic malaise, called "the great novel of the crisis" by *El País*.

Chirbes indeed has something important to tell us about the present day. Some writers have found a despairing kind of humor in the sudden collapse of the world economy. Paul Murray's *The Mark and the Void*, for example, described a tragicomic ouroboros of national and international interests as they play out in the Irish banking sector.

But Chirbes isn't much for flinty satire. There is nothing facetious about his rich, naturalistic style, or his grim outlook on human nature and the dire conditions of his bewildering array of characters. *On the Edge* traffics in acute descriptions of the failed economy of the Spanish coast: housing developments sitting half-finished with exuberant banners flapping mournfully in the wind, unemployed men despairing on couches in dingy homes while their wives consider how they will feed and clothe their children. In his opening scene, a Moroccan immigrant named Ahmed fishes for his dinner, and takes the reader through the complex petrol calculations required by the daily commute to low-paid jobs in a seaside Spanish town. Later we see a gaggle of roadside prostitutes in plastic chairs, underdressed and shivering in the weak winter sun.

Although the novel opens from the perspective of Ahmed, our real guide on this long, bleak tour through coastal Spain is Esteban, an ageing, self-described "lugubrious bat" who has the sole care of his ancient father, a similarly thwarted and joyless man. Esteban and his father have shared a home, a modest woodworking business, and a chilly relationship for half a century. As the novel begins, we learn that Esteban has secretly put up the home and business as collateral for an investment in housing developments, gripped by the fever for cheap credit and easy money that spread over the globe. The results of his ill-advised

investment are predictable, and the book follows him as he formulates a dramatic plan to make restitution.

Chirbes wants to show us the sprawling, kaleidoscopic effect of the crisis, which means he gives us several narrators, all linked by the economics of the fictional Spanish villages in which they live. The Moroccan in the opening scene is a former employee of Esteban's workshop. Quickly, he discovers several corpses in the marsh that forms a major symbolic and narrative force in the novel. We also hear from Liliana, the Colombian woman who assists Esteban in the intimate eldercare of his father, and Francisco, Esteban's major foil, the successful friend with whose dead wife Esteban had his sole love affair.

Chirbes structures the book as a mosaic, which can be intensely disorienting. Characters sometimes speak in overlapping voices. In one typical moment, Esteban's narrative abruptly meets Liliana's: "I won't even be able to want to see you; I won't hear your voice, I won't inhabit any memories: I collect my little girl from the nursery and then pick up my youngest boy from school, because I can't be sure he'll make it home on his own." (The first half of the sentence is Esteban's voice; the second is Liliana's.)

Narrative experiments notwithstanding, *On the Edge* really has a single subject, Esteban's disappointment. He lingers on the saturninity of his father, the goodness of his uncle, the indignities of the Spanish civil war for his leftist family, the phoniness of his old friend and rival Francisco. And when he is speaking Esteban's voice, Chirbes has a knack for poignant and memorable phrases. "I was like the residue of what had once been a family," Esteban says of his role in the household once his siblings have flown the nest.

But Chirbes descends into flat parody when he has to speak in the voices of the super-rich, corrupt men who serve as contrast to Esteban's financial ruin. They speak with the clichés of leftist cartoons, living decadent lives without "a thought for my wife or the kids, who'll be off doing what they do best, namely spending money". Laborers, meanwhile, are given angelic, dreamy monologues while they sit on park benches, brooms in hand.

But while the cartoonish reveries of fat cats for yachts and prostitutes can seem cartoonish, they form an important part of Chirbes's fierce moral vision. English-language readers are accustomed to a news-hour view of Spain as one of the hapless and unfortunately named "PIGS" of the financial meltdown. We benefit greatly from this rangy, relentless and damning view from below.

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