

ON THE EDGE

by [Rafael Chirbes](#), translated by [Margaret Jull Costa](#)

KIRKUS REVIEW

One of Spain's leading novelists, who died in August 2015, tackles the malaise that has swept his country in the wake of the Great Recession.

Avenida de La Marina is on the edge of the sea in a town on the edge of Spain, a nation on the edge of Europe. Its people are on the edge, too, of desperation and poverty. Ahmed and Rachid, the first characters we meet, have been on that edge since Esteban closed his carpentry shop for lack of business. Ahmed, who makes a little money as a busboy, has been listening to fundamentalists who are convinced that the Spanish are out for Muslim blood: "Abdeljaq had celebrated the bombings at Atocha station. He said he could see the face of Allah more clearly in the sky." Ahmed is just as resentful of rich Muslims as he is of the Europeans all around him—indeed, everyone in this book is resentful of anyone who has it better than they do. Meanwhile, the little town also swarms with Latin Americans, searching as well for better lives and certainly not finding them. There's some small common cause, but it's tentative and tenuous: "Because it's on my way," says one, "I usually buy coriander in that Arab greengrocer's next to the halal butcher. I would never buy meat from that butcher, of course." Esteban seethes with resentment of the newcomers, as do other *españoles* who tolerated them when things were good. Says one, queuing up for the dole, "just take a look at them—it's frightening. Gypsies, Romanians, Colombians, Italian mafia, Russians. Riffraff the lot of them." Prostitution, drug addiction, alcoholism: not much happens in Chirbes' pages, which are long instead on atmospherics, vitriol, and an attention to journalistic detail worthy of Orwell. There's a Spoon-River-with-flamenco quality to the proceedings as characters well up to talk, mostly indignantly and unhappily, mostly in monologue; from time to time their stories intersect, but more often they simply talk past one another.

A moving, densely detailed portrait of people without hope.