

Cabañuelas

Norma Elia Cantú

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Set at the dawn of the 1980s, Norma Elia Cantú's lovely novel *Cabañuelas* occupies a culturally liminal space.

Nena is from a family in Laredo, Texas, that keeps its Mexican culture alive, even while sending its sons to fight for the US in Vietnam. Right before leaving for Spain, where she's Fulbright-funded to investigate the connections between Spanish celebrations and Texan ones, Nena immerses herself in her family's traditional Christmas celebration, making tamales and going to Mass. This first scene—warm, intimate, and glowing—sets the stage for the inter- and intracultural navigation to come.

An ode to traditions, transitions, and family, the text switches between English and Spanish with musicality and ease, its linguistic choices a testament to the fact that one culture, one language, can't capture it all. It is a feast for the senses, sighing of monarch butterflies flocking south, croquetas de salmon and plato fuerte, Tejano music blaring against the stars, “*el azahar* on the orange and lemon trees,” and Spanish fiestas in tiny villages. Black and white Pentax photographs illustrate points of Nena's journey, which, though fictionalized, is Cantú's, too.

“Our past lives in the archive” and each page of Nena's exploration is colored by memories and yearning. Nena works to reconcile her Spanish blood with her indigenous blood, to “unearth all truths.” She wonders internally if she—already unusual in her family for her academic bent and resistance to marriage—will ever have a child to pass her amalgamated traditions on to. She also meets Paco, an irresistible Spaniard whose entrance pushes home farther away.

As Nena interacts with the traditions of her family's distant past, celebrates its unique Texas being, and looks to understand how the threads of disparate cultures weave together, her singular story reaches out with empathy to every reader's complicated sense of self. *Cabañuelas* is an arresting story of individual complexities.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March/April 2019)

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