



How to Order the Universe

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Elizabeth Bryer, Translator

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In this intimate, intense novel about a child's perception of a vanishing way of life, seven-year-old M, thirsty for a way of learning about the world that her classroom cannot offer, convinces her traveling salesman father to take her along as he travels Pinochet-era rural Chile in his old Renault.

M is curious, clever, and a consummate actress who, with her father's help, manages to hide her school absences from her otherwise absorbed mother. She spends time practicing "gazes" and psychological tricks to beguile shop owners into buying the hardware supplies her father sells. Her scheme works, and M becomes a welcome part of the fellowship of traveling salesmen, learning the ropes of their life on the road, imbibing their stories, legends, and commercial jargon, and, from her father, learning how to blow smoke rings—all part of her "alternative education."

But it is not to last. Their encounter with E, an enigmatic photographer, places both M and her father in danger. An urgent trip under the cover of night explodes into gunshots. The next morning, M is found under a tree, alone and unconscious. Traumatized, she confesses all to her mother, who assures her that her father is "wily enough" to escape his interrogators. A new life and a new father claim her, but she is haunted by the ghosts and secrets revealed by that dark night, and is gripped by a visceral realization of the fragility of life.

Luminous and tender, *How to Order the Universe* is a novel about the love, filled with words unsaid, between a father and daughter who are caught up in the tides of change that engulf their ordinary, ordered way of life.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January / February 2021)

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