



Seeing Red

Lina Meruane

Megan McDowell, Translator

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A young woman may go blind, in this novel with a bristling, staccato torrent of vivid imagery from an acclaimed Chilean author.

Seeing Red, by Lina Meruane, dramatically introduces English-language readers to the acclaimed Chilean author.

The novel is based on Meruane's experiences with diabetes-induced blindness. The main character shares her name and is also a graduate student recently arrived in New York City. The story plunges right to the action: Lina is at a party, and ruptured blood vessels flood one eye. Soon, another stroke dims her remaining eye, and she reckons with the possibility of permanent blindness and increased dependence on others. While Lina's eyes heal, she awaits an operation to hopefully reclaim her vision, and she describes the upheaval in her relationships with her boyfriend and parents.

The writing is jagged, sharp, and direct, serving as a counterpoint to the careful movements and stillness prescribed for our heroine. Short chapters of dense blocks of text shape the novel into a bristling, staccato torrent of vivid imagery and psychological roilings. Meruane shares the most intimate, intense details of her harrowing story through her narrative, building tension towards the climax of her surgery.

Much of this slim novel can be read in metaphorical terms. Heightened awareness of Lina's other senses and reevaluation of her life come when her visual faculties are ebbing. There are also numerous optical analogies. Her surgeon's irritatingly pompous secretary, Doris, "spokeswoman of terror that she was," opines that patients bear some blame for their ocular complaints, since "the retina [is] our life record, the mirror of our unfortunate acts, a perfectly polished surface that we spend our existence ruining."

Lina's chronicle is simultaneously disturbing and lyrical. When she travels home and hears a fellow passenger speak with a Chilean accent, it evokes a sensual encapsulation of her native land: "the glacial poems of the mountain peaks and their snows in eternal mid-thaw, the dark whisper of the south dotted with giant rhubarbs, the wail of roadside shrines, the herb-garden smell, the rough salts of the desert, the sulphurous copper shell open to the sky."

Translator Megan McDowell has an excellent ear for Meruane's prose and skillfully exposes its darkly humorous veins. *Seeing Red* is a captivating, multilayered debut from a strong young writer. Hopefully, more translations of her work will soon follow.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (Spring 2016)

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