

The Absent Sea

Carlos Franz

Leland H. Chambers, Translator

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Can a victim be complicit in her own oppression? In this dense and historical novel, Carlos Franz attempts to answer that question through the story of Laura Larco, a philosophy professor residing in Berlin who is called back to her native Chile to confront her past. Set in the fictitious town of Pampa Hundida during the religious festival La Diablada, forty-four-year-old Laura is forced to resolve her own guilt for escaping the Pinochet regime that came to power in 1973. Split between alternating points of view (the third person and a first person letter to her daughter), Franz's debut novel in English dissects an individual's responsibility to right the political wrongs that they were not only subject to, but a witness of.

Laura's nineteen-year-old daughter, Claudia, who has left Berlin for Chile to attend University as a law student, questions her mother's participation and silence in Pampa Hundida's history during Pinochet's dictatorship. In an effort to explain what happened, Laura writes a letter to Claudia chronicling her traumatic involvement in that eventful time. In it, she explains that she was heralded as an exceptional law student and appointed as the youngest judge in Pampa Hundida's history, a twenty-five-year-old woman with power, just as Major Mariano Cácares LaTorre arrived as Pinochet's henchman in order to build a prison for political prisoners. When idealistic Laura challenges Cácares, they develop an abusive relationship in which "the torture had created between us, who were strangers, an intimacy that parodied love." Prompted by Claudia's quest for the truth, Laura decides to return as the magistrate of Pampa Hundida's vacated judgeship and seek justice for herself and for the city.

As with many Chilean novelists, religious symbolism plays a major role in the novel. Laura's return for redemption and recompense coincides with La Diablada, the three-day festival of penance. Cácares is a disfigured outcast waiting for Laura, the only person he believes can administer his own penance, the justice of death. Franz draws on religious metaphors in both narratives; toward the end of the novel, the technique becomes a bit cloying and heavy-handed.

At its best, *The Absent Sea* is a complex and rich story from a historical perspective not often written about, especially in such a concise and engaging manner. Franz is a welcome member of the new cadre of writers portraying Chile with a more realistic eye than that of his magical realist forefathers. This is a well-told story that illuminates concepts of justice, oppression, and guilt, with a harsh light that leaves no one untouched.

MONICA CARTER (July / August 2011)

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