

The Planets

Sergio Chejfec

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A grisly explosion on the outskirts of a city, resulting in human appendages sprayed for hundreds of meters, causes the narrator to remember his childhood friend, M, who disappeared years before. In interconnected vignettes, the book describes the friend, the vivid stories he told, and the walks the two took along the streets of the city.

The book appears to be a meditation on grief, memory, and friendship. But the setting is Buenos Aires in the early 1970s, and M had been abducted. As the narrator writes, "I have always had the feeling, when walking anywhere in Argentina, but particularly in Buenos Aires, that I was doing so among people who, surprised by the intimacy of their relationship with death, choose cynicism as their form of atonement."

M had not been political, and his disappearance was likely the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. His parents are paralyzed into inactivity in the hopes of saving the rest of the family. M's name is never recorded in the newspapers or listed in school records. The complicity of others in helping M disappear gnaws at the narrator: it is as if his friend never existed. For a while he even attempts to take M's name.

Images reappear throughout the book: photographs the boys exchanged; the trajectory of the planets. An eye M finds besides the train tracks near his apartment could represent foresight or just the belief that things are always found. But M never is. The narrator declares, "Though his existence is slowly slipping away from me, becoming abstract, it continues to be the most vibrant, certain, and immediate thing I know."

Sergio Chejfec, originally from Argentina, teaches in the Creative Writing in Spanish Program at New York University. He has received fellowships from the Civitella Ranieri Foundation and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. An earlier novel, *My Two Worlds*, is also available in English. *The Planets* was originally published in Spanish in 1999; it was translated by Heather Cleary.

The Planets is a reflective book about friendship and loss that should be read slowly. For even if M's city is not ours, grief is a landscape we all come to know.

KAREN ACKLAND (Fall 2012)

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