

The Princess, the King, and the Anarchist

Robert Pagani

Helen Marx, Translator

Helen Marx Books (October 2010)

Softcover \$14.95 (99pp)

978-1-933527-20-8

"The day she became queen, there were lots of flowers, lots of noises, lots of blood, and lots of dead bodies, but she wasn't particularly surprised." So opens Pagani's svelte historical novel, and with this fleet-footed prose and playful tone the author spins an enthralling reimagining of his subject, the events surrounding the 1906 assassination attempt on the newlywed king and queen of Spain.

Shifting between the three perspectives suggested in his title, Pagani's narrative moves freely among the major characters to paint a full picture of the attack: British Princess Mary Eugenia Victoria of Battenberg, the young and naive virgin bride who is horribly nervous on her wedding night; Alfonso XIII, king by birth, a practiced aristocrat eagerly anticipating the wedding's consummation, his twenty-ninth conquest; and the anarchist, known only by the name "Fernando," waiting along the route of the royal procession to assassinate the newly wed king and queen.

At less than one hundred pages, *The Princess, the King, and the Anarchist* is a slim novel, almost a novella, and will draw a natural comparison to Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*. As in McEwan's novel, Pagani educates the reader about the period of which he writes while he explores the tension of the two newlyweds' diametrically opposed expectations. However, unlike *On Chesil Beach*, this tension is not the novel's only conflict but another set piece in a full, vibrant stage. All characters are tensed, and the assassin's bomb, which would seem the natural climax of the novel, acts not as an end to the narrative but a catalyst to drive the characters further, pushing the novel to a surreal ending.

The Princess, the King, and the Anarchist educates as it entertains, and readers will enjoy the book for Pagani's effortless prose as well his insight into the history of European aristocracy in the early twentieth-century. The liberties he takes, such creating an entirely new fate for the assassin after the failed attempt, suit the story while the imagined ending fits the narrative well. As a result, the novel is not hemmed in by a total allegiance to history. However, the details, atmosphere, characters, and aristocratic sniping one expects are all there. By creating this well-rendered tapestry for his characters, Pagani is able to take these risks with his fiction, and to reap such rich rewards for his efforts.

MICHAEL BEEMAN (November / December 2010)

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