



Voices
from the
Gaps

The Youngest Doll by Rosario Ferré

Publisher: University of Nebraska Press

The Youngest Doll--in a word--“delicious.” I am thankful to Rosario Ferré for translating her group of Spanish-language works into English. The short stories in this collection succeed as entertaining social commentary, exposing a garish group of characters in vivid and colorful form. Decadent imagery brings time and place to life, puts the reader immediately in the tropics, in the villages, in the houses and in the minds of the “dolls” of these fascinating stories.

The book begins with a feature story that introduces the reader to her deviant style – with a bit of a wink. It sets the tone for satisfying further reading. “The Youngest Doll” is a scrumptious tale with a full mix of fantastic imagery and social relevance. It says something, needing to be said, by grabbing your imagination and taking you to the fascinating, heated tropical coast where the necessary meets the surreal – a fairy tale that really gives you the creeps and gives you reason to applaud at the same time.

The story takes you to a time and place where a woman’s life is easily reduced to the confines of a rocking chair by one man, a medical doctor. The premise is absolutely animal, in which a crustacean creature embeds itself into our lovely innocent protagonist’s calf and is left to grow and fester by her trusted physician. This leaves her to cope as many women do when wronged and confined by a patriarchal power. The woman creates with what she has available to her. She makes life sized dolls for her many nieces. Like dolls themselves, the nieces are married off, given a very special doll on their departure. Ferré’s twist will make you shudder. If you have any sense of divine justice, it will also make you smile.

In “Marina and the Lion” we go over the top to a place where the main character is trapped in a doll’s house where we cross back and forth between the rigid trappings of social status and the dreamlike place where animals can come inside and captivate us. In this story, Marina aptly stages a costume party starring herself as a lavishly dressed doll, complete with silk lined box, wrapped in cellophane. Looking out she comments, “My whole life is just as I see it now, glimmering and distant, exactly as in a dream”. The story is set in a real Puerto Rican town where men have built streets covered in the sickening powder of the cement plant with “dusty street lights and phlegm white sky, wrapped forever in flouring gauze vapors which swirled constantly above the townspeople’s heads, around their shoulders and arms, a town with beaches of white gunpowder which thundered at dusk when the tide began to rush in, with clouds which burst open like cannon shots and left the streets sown with calcium.”



The Youngest Doll by Rosario Ferré

Marina lives here. Her husband tries to work in the grey and white dust town, but it chokes him. He is committed to an asylum. She is forced to share her husband's business colleague with his own wife. Marina is the mistress doll. In the neighboring home, we meet Madeline, her lover's wife. As casual as animals who mingle with humans in children's fairy tales, "Madeline was sitting at the head of the table eating an artichoke with a full grown lion lying on the floor next to her."

The story continues to balance between a wicked reality and beautifully sensual dream. But for Marina, "Asleep or awake, nothing seemed to matter much, smothered as she felt by her cellophane skin". She dreams of a parrot, a parrot appears. "It's feathers were vermilion and he carried it curled up in a too small cage of wooden rushes, which stifled it's brightness". Both lion and parrot escape and Marina witnesses their demise in the garden. Her lover bursts onto the dangerous scene and he carries a .45 caliber gun, but as he valiantly kisses her, he realizes that the animals are already dead. She laments, "my life has always been what it is now...shining and distant as if covered by a coat of varnish, just as if I were dreaming it."

Marina believes that she is helpless, with no clue of how to get to a place beyond, where she might become a real person, ie: not a doll. Just as Marina is encased in the cement powder city, many American women feel trapped in a place called suburbia. We are guarded by the ever expansive free way system, snarling and roaring around our homes, like a giant cement dragon, keeping us from living in the real world beyond.

Each of the stories is dramatically different. They expose very real social circumstances through characters who have too much or too little. These characters force you to look at them in scenes of desperation, loneliness and injustice. While Marina takes us over the top like a romance novel, Ferré effectively uses a plain, matter of fact tone in "Mercedes Benz 220SL" to lay bare the results of human selfishness, ignorance and greed. "Mercedes Benz 220SL" begins as a conversation between an upper middle class man and wife who feel they have finally made it as they proudly share a ride in their new Mercedes Benz. Meanwhile they actually kill someone with the vehicle, but are far too protected now from the real world they drive through to even connect to the horror and pain that they have left in their wake. Big, pretentious cars are also a very American value. They stand for the shallow sense of power that people try to purchase when they feel little meaning in their life and work. People who have a true sense of disappointment with life try to cover it with steel and drive away with speed and force, so they do not have to feel any of the real life situations they find distasteful or complicated.



Voices
from the
Gaps

The Youngest Doll by Rosario Ferré

American women should enjoy Ferré's vicious sense of vengeance, exposing patriarchy, greed, stupidity and sexual oppression in many forms, in a kind of devilish and dishy way. These anecdotes cross cultures, while respecting their own fascinating and unique place. Thank you, Rosario Ferré, for bringing your witty and well told Puerto Rican tales to this Midwestern reader. Perhaps, as women have been likened to dolls all over the world, we love to pay visit to the "marvelously real" to meet the dolls of these pages.

Reviewed by Dyan Anunson