



Voices
from the
Gaps

The House on the Lagoon

by Rosario Ferré

Publisher: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Rosario Ferré's novel *The House on the Lagoon* centers on the life of Isabel Monfort, a Puerto Rican living in Ponce and a writer undertaking the task of recording the histories of her family and the family of her husband, Quintín Mendizabal. Before the story even begins, Ferré provides us with a family tree, suggesting we may be in for a 407 page genealogy. However, the book moves so quickly that you hardly notice the litany of names and dates necessary for Ferré to present what amounts to a history of 20th Century Puerto Rico. The book begins on July 4th, 1917, the day President Wilson signed the act granting Puerto Ricans American citizenship, but the events also extend into the past and future.



Ultimately the book is concerned with the nature of truth and the social conflicts that are mirrored in domestic life, such as Puerto Rico's debate over whether to be independent or to become a U.S. state. Through a series of interconnected short stories focusing on the various branches of Isabel and Quintín's family tree, Ferré illustrates the tensions between different races and social classes.

Quintín is of Spanish descent. He is part of a long line of Mendizabals who combine the racial pickiness of Spanish culture with the every man for himself attitude of American capitalists. He is also the inheritor of a violent patriarchal tradition. Ferré is not shy about bringing this to the forefront immediately. The story begins with a pledge being made between Isabel and her husband. It may better be called a reconciliation as Quintín must apologize for a violent outburst. As Isabel sits on her porch, a young boy with an innocent crush serenades her with his guitar. Quintín, at this point Isabel's fiancé, enters a jealous rage and beats the boy with his belt. However, the image is made all the worse since the boy "went on sitting on the ground singing: 'Love me always / sweet love of my life'...until he fell unconscious on the sidewalk" (4). It is this kind of imagery that gives us a clear picture of who the characters are.



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The structure of Ferré's novel also contributes the characterization. In addition, it provides insight into the relationships between characters. The reader is not aware of the structure until a few chapters into the book where italicized print breaks the retelling of history and describes Quintín discovering a novel being written by his wife. It turns out that this novel is entitled *The House on the Lagoon*, the very text we have been reading. In addition to the narrative voice Isabel uses when writing her novel, the book also switches narrations between Quintín and Isabel, highlighting their respective views on their current marital dispute (Quintín is determined to prevent Isabel from publishing the novel, which he feels disgraces his family).

The effect of this narrative form is astonishing. It allows us to follow the story-in-progress, discovering it alongside Quintín and allowing us to hear his condescending comments and Isabel's reaction. But it is not long before we are thrown back into the stories that begin to fill in the details of Isabel and Quintín's conflict. It is here that two versions of reality begin to emerge, animating the conflict and giving it depth with the back and forth "he said/she said" arguments that frame the story. Without this narrative form the central conflict of the novel would be shallow and not as interesting.

The branches on the family tree and the stories that accompany each person are the ultimate source of Ferré's characterizations. Yet, since Ferré understands we are a product of the environment and our history, both are important to the novel. Rather than merely following Isabel as she writes her story and watching the marital conflict unfold, we are able to see where she came from by following the causal chain of events that originate with her grandparents. For example, in a lucid scene describing an event that dramatically shapes Isabel's life, we learn that her mother, Carmita Monfort, was forced by her grandmother to have an abortion when Isabel was very young. With stunning imagery, Ferré explains that Isabel hears a scream, drops her dolls, and sees her mother, "lying on the floor unconscious; a pool of blood lay on the white tiles like lacquer" (82). The imagery is equally as vivid as the imagery in the opening scene. A scene like this disturbs us, provoking empathy for a woman whose life has not gotten any easier. Similar imagery continues throughout the book. Each time we encounter it, we not only feel present at the scene because of its vividness, but we also gain a deeper understanding of the events that fashion the characters' personalities; Ferré is truly proficient at creating psychological depth for nearly all her characters.



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The structure of the novel also illustrates the nature of truth. Quintín has a history degree from Columbia and consequently, “there was a true and a false, a right and a wrong in his mind” (106). He is angry when he first reads Isabel’s manuscript, embarrassed by the way she portrays his family and irked by her historical sloppiness and misrepresentation of the facts. However, we learn that, to Isabel, this is not the point of the book. One of her favorite sayings is, “Nothing is true, nothing is false, everything is the color of the glass you’re looking through” (106). She is writing a novel, embellishing aspects of the stories to make a literary rather than an historical point. Ferré is in agreement with Isabel. Her book, with its back and forth narratives, constantly casts doubt on the possibility of objective truth. As we read Isabel’s novel and then reread it with Quintín, we see the existence of as many truths as there are perspectives.

Likewise, we see this in the political climate of Puerto Rico. The violence between Independistas and those for statehood reflects the lack of concrete reasons for favoring one over the other -- different people see different advantages and disadvantages, and therefore different shades of truth. It’s the predicament that everyone in the novel is trying to escape. On one hand, Puerto Rico deserves its own identity. Unlike the nuns who teach Quintín’s grandfather, Aristίδes, that the island has no history, the goal of the Independistas is to maintain their unique sense of identity. Yet there is no doubt that the conveniences of American citizenship are very appealing. Isabel’s grandmother, a unwavering Independista, would sit with the family and look at the Sears catalogue, showing that whether you are for statehood or not, having a General Electric refrigerator is a good thing. In her book Ferré takes a complex issue, gives the reader historical information, well-developed characters, and then filters the information through anecdotes that contain at least some grain of truth.

Ferré also takes every opportunity to establish a scene with Isabel’s emotional and captivating reveries, lulling us until an often violent or disturbing event occurs. Isabel writes about a Russian Immigrant and his wife who open a ballet school in Ponce. Isabel joins and soon after her life revolves around dancing. She even considers taking a year off after high school so she can practice full time. We are enamored with the story of her passion, so when she gets a part in the big performance, Ferré is pushing us toward a sense of fulfillment as we expect a happy conclusion. But Ferré doesn’t let this feeling last long. Isabel’s friend and fellow dancer has been staying late to practice with the instructor and after their duet and numerous curtain calls, the curtain mistakenly opens a final time to reveal the two kissing passionately -- a public display of pedophilia. Ferré raises the curtain unexpectedly throughout the whole story, revealing unexpected twists and the unending shades of truth.



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Like Isabel, Ferré grew up in the small city of Ponce in Puerto Rico. Her native language is Spanish and *The House on the Lagoon* is the first book she initially wrote and published in English. Her other works include *Sweet Diamond Dust*, *The Battle of the Virgins*, *The Youngest Doll*, *Eccentric Neighborhoods*, and *Flight of the Swan*.

Ferré's book is a mammoth and ambitious project, but she succeeds admirably. Her use of multiple narrative voices draws out the book's important themes without being overly didactic. More importantly her brilliant characterizations through the use of imagery and history engage us entirely until we not only sympathize with the individuals but also understand the ultimate causes of social problems.