

PRAISE FOR RODRIGO REY ROSA

“Rey Rosa creates narratives of mythic proportions.”

San Francisco Chronicle

“Rodrigo Rey Rosa is one of the most interesting Latin American writers of his generation.”

ERNESTO CALABUIG, *El Cultural*

“A colossal writer in the Spanish language who, with the prodigious exactitude of his prose and the mathematic equilibrium of his narratives, draws from an abundance of techniques amplified by true talent.”

JAVIER APARICIO MAYDEU, *El Periódico*

“His work is extraordinarily precise, mythic, and intriguing; it’s literature without useless gestures, where beauty seems to be born of its author’s curious inclination toward silence.”

RAPHAËLLE RÉROLLE, *Le Monde*

“Rodrigo Rey Rosa has developed a signature prose style with which he is cultivating one of the most impressive careers in Latin American literature. Known best for his winning short stories, his writing sometimes draws from the influence of magical realism and at other moments reaches almost Baroque sensibilities, achieving a poetic elegance that is both lucid and precise.”

RICARDO BAIXERAS, *El Periódico*

“Rodrigo Rey Rosa’s prose, dense and precise, shows his literary relationship to legendary writer Paul Bowles.”

Der Spiegel

“Each new book by Rodrigo Rey Rosa . . . [has] the special quality of a meticulous prose, elaborate to the point of being hand-crafted though not in search of style, but rather, on the contrary, of writing that is refined, light, silent, that is evocative and imaginative rather than informative. In *Severina*, the books serve as some of the protagonists, but the novel isn’t bookish because the books ‘vibrate and breathe’ . . . we’re able to succumb to the romantic delirium and the quixotic passion for books as both objects and interpretations.”

J. A. MASOLIVER RÓDENAS, *La Vanguardia*

Severina

Severina

RODRIGO REY ROSA

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS ANDREWS

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For Beatriz Zamora

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INTRODUCTION

CHRIS ANDREWS

Readers who look to Central American literature for baroque exuberance, perhaps with the prestigious precedent of Miguel Angel Asturias in mind, are likely to be surprised by the Guatemalan Rodrigo Rey Rosa. His fiction is the opposite of lush: generally spare in style, restrained in its exploration of the characters' inner worlds, and elliptical in structure. Moreover it tends to be somber in tone. These descriptive formulas might, in North America, suggest that Rey Rosa belongs to the numerous offspring of Hemingway, but that would be a somewhat misleading impression, for he is not a writer who begins from a secure (if bleak) sense of how things really are. In the fiction of Rey Rosa the lineaments of the real cannot be taken for granted. It is true that his settings have gradually become more particular and identifiable, and that the fantastic and speculative elements that marked his first three books—*The Beggar's Knife*, *Dust on Her Tongue*, and *The Pelcari Project*, all translated into English by Paul Bowles—have since receded. Nevertheless, dream, fantasy, and hallucination still threaten the stability of the worlds in which his characters live. In this regard, Rey Rosa remains fruit-

fully in debt to the writer whose work revealed his vocation: Jorge Luis Borges.

The difficulty of distinguishing dreams from experience of the world we share is written large in *Lo que sueño Sebastián* (“What Sebastian Dreamed,” 1994). The title poses a question to which the novel replies in a deferred and partial manner: Did the protagonist dream that he was forced to fire a shotgun or was he effectively framed for the murder of his neighbor? Is he the victim of a nightmare induced by fish eggs gone bad or of a home invasion? Quandaries of this nature are pivotal in a number of Rey Rosa’s stories and novels. Rather than blurring the action, they make it tremble like a clear reflection on rippled water.

Rey Rosa’s fiction departs from a narrowly conceived realism in another way as well: it sometimes gives onto a mythical or allegorical hinterland, delicately intimated, never insisted upon. Sometimes the characters’ names suggest that they stand for something beyond their particularities, as in “Gracia,” a story from the collection *Otro zoo* (“Another Zoo,” 2007), whose eponymous heroine prays to God that she may be taken as a sacrificial victim instead of the lamb she has been raising, which her entrepreneurial brother has sold to a Muslim neighbor for the feast of Eid ul-Kbir. “Gracia” (the noun *gracia* means *grace* but also *mercy* or *pardon*) patently alludes to Abraham’s sacrifice, but is not a simple inversion of the scriptural episode, which, rather than serving as a key, gives Rey Rosa’s vividly realistic fiction, set in contemporary Guatemala, an enigmatic reso-

nance. In *The African Shore* (Yale University Press, 2013), set in Tangier, the revelation of the protagonist's name is strategically delayed until the moment he is about to lose it, along with his passport and his life, to a mysterious assailant. The name revealed—Angel Tejedor—is common enough yet, in context, irresistibly significant, for *tejedor* means weaver, and this is precisely when the drifting protagonist overcomes his passivity and, in vanquishing his Doppelgänger, recovers a minimal capacity to weave the threads of his fate.

Having lamented the range and quality of books for sale in Guatemala City, the narrator of *Severina* adds: “There are far more serious problems here, but I don’t want to talk about all that now.” Taking a break from those serious problems, *Severina* is an exception among the recent novels of Rodrigo Rey Rosa in that it only glances momentarily at Guatemala’s pervasive politico-criminal violence, which is confronted in a particularly direct and courageous way in *El material humano* (“The Human Material,” 2009). Nevertheless, the novel shares the characteristics just outlined: the instability or inscrutability of the real and a mythical or allegorical hinterland. The narrator is an eclectic reader, an aspiring but stalled writer, and part-owner of a bookstore. Into his stagnant life comes a beautiful thief: Ana Severina Bruguera Blanco. She steals from his store and manages to foil the alarm system. Although eventually receptive to his advances, she remains fundamentally elusive and inscrutable. Where, for example, does she come from? Sometimes the narrator can hear an Argentine or Uruguayan accent when she