

En Un Rincón Andaluz by María Vallejo-Nájera Zóbel; Pub.Varieditores. ISBN 84-931467-0-6

I love reading; I love buying books; but it is a different pleasure altogether when you receive a book unexpectedly that you knew nothing about and which turns out to be a little gem. *En Un Rincón Andaluz* was sent to me from Spain by one of our members who had enjoyed it and found it “not too daunting for foreigners”. It was selected by the panel of judges as one of the finalists for the Premio Planeta in 1999.

The story is told by Rocío, the youngest of seven girls in a middle class family living in Andalucía in the last century. Her poor father was finally forced to give up his quest for a son when his even poorer wife could no longer conceive, but she was blighted for life by her father’s disappointment. She was considered “rara” from the beginning, being a throwback to a Filipino ancestor, and on the first day of her life cried out in revulsion at the sight of Luisa, three years her elder, who was so ugly; Amelia, a year older, was both beautiful and delightful; Teresa, a further two years older, was a loner who spent hours communing with nature. And then there was the “*divertida*” Belén, her twin, Natalia “*impregnada de veneno mortal*” and Carmen, the eldest at twenty-three, “*que era poco inteligente*”.

The title might suggest some nineteenth century *costumbrista* novel, but gives away nothing of the emotional turmoil experienced by the narrator and her sisters. Right from the beginning, the writer hints at the drama to come; there are touches of the picaresque and of Isabel Allende in this ‘coming of age’ story which flows from the reality of the present to memories prompted by things she sees and hears, backwards and forwards in a stream of consciousness. Thus details are filled in that we were not aware we were missing, and we are tantalisingly given a foretaste of events and feelings that might never be revealed. And, as in any novel of adolescence, there is the awakening of sexuality which threatens to tear the sisters apart. Luisa frightens Rocío with stories of the ‘bogeyman’, El Rabao, who turns out to be a handsome youth who presents himself naked to help Amalia when she falls out of a tree! (And therefore brings the realisation that the horrors of childhood can become the pleasures of forbidden fruits of adolescence).

This is a book of small delights; it reminded me of a Pardo Bazán novel in an Andalusian setting. How Rocío finds out the truth about EL Rabao and has to face up to a lot of unpalatable truths about her parents, I will leave you to discover for yourselves.

Pyrenean High Route by John Harding; Tiercel Publishing. ISBN 0 9532002 1 3. Price £40.

Are you a skiing enthusiast? Do you enjoy climbing? Does the thought of a freezing night in an ice-hole or a windowless mountain hut without electricity or running water set your pulse racing and the adrenaline flowing? If the answer to these questions is in the affirmative, then you have a lot in common with John Harding, the author of this book, for he combines all of these passions in his ski mountaineering traverse of the Pyrenees in winter.

