

Conquering the Air

La conquista del aire

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The novel *La conquista del aire* [Conquering the Air] was published in 1998 by Belén Gopegui, a writer who stood out on the Spanish literary scene of the 1990s and early 2000s for the political engagement of her works. *La conquista del aire* depicts the everyday struggles of a group of friends who met at university and bonded over leftist political views and their nonconformity with socioeconomic structures. Set in 1990s Madrid, the novel not only unfolds against the sociopolitical backdrop of late 20th-century Spain but also takes this context as a central theme. As the characters drift further and further apart from their ideals, the plot highlights the destructive power of money.

At the beginning of the novel, Carlos, who owns a small company, asks his friends for a large loan due to financial problems. Marta and Santiago agree to lend him the money, and from that moment, their friendship starts to feel more transactional. The novel is divided into three parts, along with an opening and a conclusion, which explore how the loan progressively corrupts their relationships. Although the characters are not affected by poverty and both Marta and Santiago can afford the loan, it introduces tension in their lives. Even though in the last part of the novel Carlos manages to give the money back to his friends, this cannot undo the damage: the romantic relationships of the friends are broken, and their friendship is destroyed. Even the act of giving the money back is far from cathartic. Carlos realizes that his friends do not care about the money anymore. Returning the money is an act of getting rid of the responsibility, whereas assuming responsibility would imply paying his former employees for the extra hours they worked, as Carlos acknowledges later.

One of the key issues addressed by *La conquista del aire* is the disappointment with democracy. Carlos, Marta, and Santiago have grown up alongside Spanish democracy: they were kids during the transition period after the Francoist regime and teenagers during the effervescent *movida madrileña*, while the new political system was still forming. The novel portrays the protagonists in their 30s and depicts how they struggle to act fairly within an unfair system. They have chosen different paths in life: Marta works as an official in a ministry and the European Union, Santiago became a sociology professor, and Carlos decided to run a business. They represent three possible paths of working in line with their ideals, but none of them succeeds.

Marta admits that she opted to work for the government not to destroy the system from within, but to earn her living; Santiago feels forced to produce knowledge at an imposed rate, while Carlos' company has turned into a disaster. The company was meant to be a social experiment: its goal was to produce high-quality devices and view income as just one of many outcomes. The experiment failed; Carlos did not manage to rescue the business even with the money borrowed from Santiago and Marta, and he ultimately agreed to incorporate the company into an international corporation. This decision thoroughly discredited the original idea behind the company and serves

as a symbol of the failure to put ideals into practice.

This broader failure is reflected in the title of the novel: “conquering the air” seems futile and is technically impossible. The phrase symbolizes the characters’ inability to align their aspirations with reality, highlighting the novel’s central theme of disillusionment with ideals and the systems meant to support them.

A notable narrative strategy in *La conquista del aire* is the use of multiperspectivity. The author juxtaposes fragments narrated from the perspectives of various characters: Santiago, Carlos, Marta, and their partners. This approach allows the novel to take into consideration various points of view and provides a deeper understanding of the protagonists' motivations. Moreover, Gopegui employs interior monologues in which the characters reflect on the socioeconomic system and their political responsibilities. These monologues are complemented by elaborate dialogues that highlight contrasting perspectives, enriching the narrative’s complexity.

It is also worth noting that the metaphor of sleep appears throughout the text and becomes especially prominent in the conclusion. By depicting Carlos, Marta and Santiago during sleep, Gopegui draws attention to their inactivity and passivity. They seem anesthetized to reality and unwilling to fight for their ideals. As Carlos states in one of his interior monologues, “deciding” is limited to a range of options prepared by others, while “choosing” requires imagination and the ability to envision new and different worlds. The characters of the novel gradually abandon choosing in favour of deciding. “On their tired skin the world is seemingly ordered”, we read as the novel ends.

LANGUAGE: Spanish / Español

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