

Synopsis

No Concessions might be fairly described as being – to some extent, and in a civilized and mature sort of way – a feminist novel. In any case it is certainly a historical novel and also a novel of ideas which are entirely contemporary.

The narrative begins and ends in 1975, with the ageing Elvira determined to record a final victory by outliving the detested *Caudillo*: the tyrant Franco. The chapters between paint a wide-screen picture of life and love, civil war and death, adversity and survival – almost all in Catalonia, and particularly Barcelona, between the years 1902 and 1975. In a little more detail:

In the early years of the century, Elvira, brought up in bourgeois comfort in a small Catalan town, dreams of righting the wrongs in her society. With the appearance of the young and wealthy landowner Xavier Nonell, who shares her views, Elvira is convinced that together they can set about the great enterprise. But the scheme goes drastically wrong. Xavier runs away, and Elvira marries the aspiring journalist Ignasi Pineda, in the hope that he will be able to help her advance the views that no woman in Spain at that time could hope to promote alone.

Ignasi, however, lacks the drive to achieve anything, and the couple lead an unhappy existence in working-class Barcelona. With the arrival of her son, Fortunat, Elvira's hopes are rekindled. All her crusading zeal is transformed into motherhood, as she decides that in time the boy will take up the challenge that has proved beyond her.

The situation is aggravated by the outbreak of the Civil War, and, with Franco's victory, Elvira concentrates all her hatred on

the victor, whom she now considers as solely responsible for all Spain's evils. It emerges that, instead of producing a hero, Elvira has, by her possessiveness and her conviction that there is a special, almost supernatural bond between them, virtually paralysed her son. Eventually, with the encouragement of Xavier, who has met up with Elvira again, Fortunat breaks away to marry the girl of his own choice.

Elvira is so outraged by Fortunat's betrayal, as she sees it, that she ends up living alone in her slum-like flat, insisting that she has 'no son', and talking only to the cockroaches and to her long-dead husband – with whom she has spirited, recriminatory and revealing 'conversations'. Her final years are sustained also by her fierce and stubborn determination to outlive the hated Franco in what she realizes is a race against time. It is a race, however, which she is destined to win, and there is a grim satisfaction and humour in her victory.

In its narrative strategy, *No Concessions* is less of a plot-driven linear development than a jigsaw/tapestry-like, cumulative completion of a picture. It reminds me in some ways of the Jocelyn Moorhouse film *How to Make an American Quilt*. Literary reference points, re the exploration of ideas in fiction, might include middle-period Aldous Huxley (e.g. *Those Barren Leaves*). With respect to content and vision, there are perhaps resonances with Maupassant, especially *A Woman's Life*. Mercedes Clarasó is, if anything, appreciably more hard-hitting.

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