

Liebegott occasionally tosses in abstractions such as “soul” or “prayer.” Religious language, like the language of advertising, relies on signal reactions in the reader rather than creating a concrete moment we can enter. There are florid patches, too, that try to push emotion on you rather than earn it. Liebegott writes of the mother’s cancer, “her own body abducted one cell at a time.” There is no abduction. The mother has a disease in which cells replicate indiscriminately, and it might have offered her more range as a writer to observe what those cells actually do.

Mostly the book is sly and surprising, melding sadness and comedy. Driving with Rorschach, Ali comes upon a scene of road kill, and in the way that anything dead feels like all dead things and in the way the stab of death stirs the excitement of sex, the moment is touching and absurd:

this land of flattened pigeons in Pompeii poses / wings upraised and trying to flap away from their bodies / two puffed-out pigeons seduce each other by dancing / and pecking the ground dangerously close to their / flattened brother / ... if my therapist were here I'd say, / I desperately need the in-love pigeons not to eat the flattened one

Liebegott brilliantly evokes the way, in anticipation of a moment, we look forward to looking back at it. “My most treasured things,” Ali says, “aren’t mine yet.” Along the way we learn that Dalmatians have spots all over, including on their gums, that dogs love grief because they get to walk more, and that Dalmatians are the only dogs that smile. (This may not be true.) The writing burns hottest when reversing expectation, most especially the cliché of the male loner searching for space out West. In Liebegott’s hands this becomes a comic and anxious ode to escape for its own sake: “what if,” Ali writes near the end of the book,

you leave knowing there’s nothing where you’re going / the hand out the window, the red rocks, all that / the hot wind blowing in the window, the back of your T-shirt / stuck to the seat, wet with sweat”

When asked in interviews why women don’t write more about the road, Liebegott says they do, only people don’t want to publish those books or publish women who write “authentic queer characters.” In a 2013 interview in the blog HTMLGIANT, she told Janice Lee she thinks about queer kids in libraries—like the queer kid she was—“looking for a book that reflects your experience and you can’t find one.... As a writer, I always try to put a little lifeline in my book for that reader. That, and category fuck as often as possible.”

Asked by Lee who she would rather sleep with, Dostoevsky or Van Gogh, Liebegott answered: “I think Van Gogh, but that might be ageist, because I think I’ve only ever seen portraits of Dostoyevsky as a balding man. Van Gogh had really bad teeth, right? I think Van Gogh, although they both seem like terrible problematic relationships, so either would do. It’s tough. But probably Van Gogh.”

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To Serve a Genius

Puro Amor

By Sandra Cisneros

Louisville, KY; Sarabande Books, 2018, 32 pp.,

\$10.00, paperback

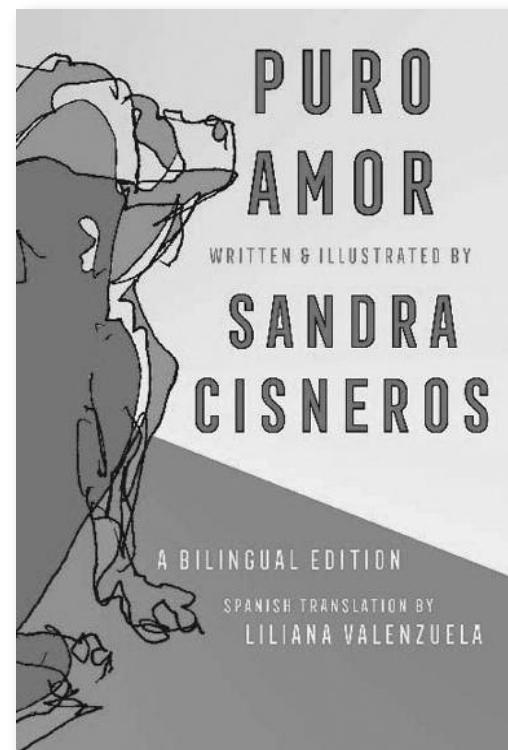
Reviewed by Noelle McManus

Everyone has something to say about Frida Kahlo. Some see her as an icon ages before her time; others insist she is overrated. Her image has been coopted by movements and businesses alike. She represents feminism, communism, experimentalism, Mexican nationality, anything the public wants her to represent. These days her face lives on Forever 21 t-shirts and her words on Instagram and Facebook. Her humanity, in many cases, seems to have been washed away, every indication that she was a living, breathing, flawed human being overshadowed by the wants of the authors wielding her name. Yet, from the start, I trusted Sandra Cisneros to treat Frida well.

Puro Amor, a chapbook that just so happens to be Cisneros’s first published fiction for adults since 2002, is about Frida, though she is never addressed by any name other than Mrs. de Rivera. The story is told twice, in English on left pages and Spanish on

the right—an arrangement that tripped me up more than once when I began reading. My initial attempt to read the pages from left to right was foiled when Cisneros’s own sketches of dogs began appearing intermittently throughout, throwing the alignment off-kilter. I tried to read all of the English, then all of the Spanish. I tried flipping back and forth between pages. No one way worked perfectly. Eventually, I settled into a flow, reading one passage in one language and then again in another, pausing to take in each tongue for some time before diving in again. *Puro Amor*’s words are soft and flowing, but the manner in which I found myself reading it was fragmented. Somehow, that made the whole of it feel like a dream.

The text itself, in either language, only spans about ten pages. It involves not an event but an entire marriage, simultaneously weaving through years and the breadth of a single spring morning.



Cisneros’s Frida is neither a celebrity nor a symbol. She is only the wife of a renowned muralist, and while she enjoys painting as a hobby, it does not bring her any success. She creates art not for recognition but to bring joy to those around her, namely her husband and the countless pets she rescues from around her home. Every piece, whether it be a pillow embroidered with the phrase “Amor Eterno” or a dessert wrapped in banana leaves, is a gift. She lives to give, to pour out love

until someone pours it back to her. Her husband—again, never referred to as anything but Mr. Rivera—is too busy with himself to worry about her. “Ah, how troublesome it is to be famous!” he laments, draping himself across her lap like an infant. He’s more of her son than her husband, constantly yearning for her attention. Cisneros writes,

He was used to being adored, to have her look at him in the same way the animals looked at her, with devotion and gratitude, as if they were all sunflowers radiating light. She had to do this. Her husband was famous.

Is this love? Cisneros’s Frida seems to think so, as does her husband. Such an arrangement is one countless women find themselves in. They live as their lovers’ mothers, gently shepherding them through life at the expense of their own autonomy. Indeed, this Frida wraps herself in motherhood, dotes on both her husband and her animals, treats every last one of them like her own children. Though she herself sometimes reverts back to that childlike state, she and her husband being “orphans in the universe,” it is she who holds the household together, who watches out for every living creature within it. Her domestic centrality and authority allows her to feel some semblance of control over the volatile life her husband has given both of them. It allows her to be strong in spite of the illness wearing her down, graying her hair and rotting her teeth and binding her beneath the sheets of her bed. It allows her to become someone, anyone, something more than the Wife of the Artist.

Cisneros’s decision to address Frida in terms of her husband’s accomplishments rather than her own may seem curious for a story about an iconic figure such as Kahlo, but it is certainly nothing new. Women are measured by the work of their husbands, remain relegated to the last names they take. History washes these women away, leaving them nothing but footnotes in their husbands’ lives. One such woman, Sophia Tolstaya, wife of Leo Tolstoy, kept detailed diaries of her experiences as a prodigy’s accessory. “Everyone asks,” she once wrote, “But why should a worthless woman like you need an intellectual or artistic life?” To this question I can only reply: “I don’t know, but eternally suppressing it to serve a genius is a great misfortune.”

Frida Kahlo, of course, made it out of the shadows, carved a name for herself that would one day shine even brighter than her husband’s. Very little of this, however, happened during her lifetime. While alive, she had a single solo exhibition, and the majority of the paintings she sold were commissions. The Frida we love—vibrant and clever, a talented experimentalist—was only known after her death, at age 47. Cisneros’s focus, then, is to humanize the Frida that lived and suffered, the Frida that knew nothing of fame, the Frida that existed in the same transitory realm as Sophia Tolstaya, an artist aching without knowing quite why she ached. This Frida—this iteration, this incarnation of her—is far cry from the unstoppable force we see in modern pop culture. She is flawed. She serves others. She is real.

The prospect of even reviewing a story about Frida Kahlo frightened me. Could I do justice to her, I wondered? In the godlike light I viewed her in, any misstep felt like blasphemy. Yet Cisneros

dives into Frida’s identity without hesitation, taking bold steps in imagining the inner workings of her mind. She does this wonderfully, breathes life into a woman so often deified.

The Frida of *Puro Amor* finds peace in her own weakness. Towards the end of the story, she calls out to her animals, “¿Quién quiere amor?”—Who wants love?—and, when they stand before her, she demands to know, “¿Quién los quiere?”—Who loves you? She cares little for the love others have for her, only wanting them to understand what she has for them. Sophia Tolstaya once wrote that she had “a love which nobody wants and which nearly drives me insane.” Both she and Frida hurt with a pain that might be uniquely female; one that, I believe, pangs deep within all of us. Sandra Cisneros knows this well. 🐾

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Ray Santisteban

Sandra Cisneros.

POETRY

The Group

I remember none of the names of the men
circled in chairs in a room at the end of the hallway.
They were hurt, and they had hurt,
their women back at the shelter the still-living proof.

In circled chairs in a room down the courthouse’s serpentine hallways,
we sat while one by one they confessed.
Their women were all back at the shelter, living proof
of what was written on forms read by judges

who sat up above us while, one by one, they confessed
or protested or no-showed, middle-fingered
what’d been described on forms for the judges
who didn’t need them, given the bruises.

The protestors, the no-shows, middle-finger throwers
all, were delivered to the group,
which didn’t need to read the forms either, given the bruises
they’d refused seeing on their women’s bodies.

They all were delivered to the group,
to us leaders trained to be uncharmable,
having apprehended so many women’s bodies before.
We felt there was nothing we hadn’t already seen.

To us leaders trained to be uncharmable,
the one guy’s balls escaping his shorts
were nothing we hadn’t seen before, we felt,
and mostly succeeded at looking away.

The one guy’s balls escaped his shorts
and sat on his seat, absurd and tender all at once.
We, succeeded, mostly, at looking away
as one by one the men and their unbruised bodies reported out.

Sitting on those seats. Absurdly tender.
Hurting, and having hurt.
One by one the men and their unbruised bodies reported out.
I remember none of their names.

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