

Spanish high

*Their banned sexuality is the only life, the only vital and affirming force, in the decaying fascist society.*

B Y J E F F F R I T Z

Franco's Spain is an unlikely setting for a novel about two brothers in love, but then *The Carnivorous Lamb* by Agustin Gomez-Arcos (translated by William Rodarmor, New American Library, 1984) is an unlikely book. With sensuous evocative prose and dramatic, lively characters, Gomez-Arcos creates a world of fantasy and illusion in which only the love of brothers seems truly real.

Agustin Gomez-Arcos is a Spanish émigré who writes in French. One reviewer of this novel, written before Franco's death in 1975, wrote "the entire bizarre tale is a metaphor for the future of Spain." Well, maybe. But let's not lose sight of the fact that this is primarily a tale of two men, a sheltered young boy and his brother five years senior who is his protector and lover. While some might find this theme of incest disturbing, in Gomez-Arcos's sensitive hands it becomes almost magical.

Carlos and Mathilde, the boys' parents, were losers in the Spanish Civil War and have retreated into exile in their ornate villa. Their isolation from society is total; only their eldest son, Antonio, ventures out for school. Mathilde receives her confessor periodically and possesses a coterie of invisible friends on the end of the telephone line. Carlos, almost permanently

closed off in his study, receives clients sporadically and listens to the incessant bleatings of Franco about "victory and peace" on his radio. The pervading mood is death. Carlos and Mathilde are, in fact, already dead; they are just waiting to die. But their sons bring life in the form of sexual rebellion, a private rebellion which succeeds where their parents' public rebellion failed so many years before. Their banned sexuality is the only life, the only vital and affirming force in the decaying fascist society.

The novel begins as a memory of the younger son (whose name the author does not reveal until the end of the novel). The boy, now eighteen, recalls his life literally from birth until the time his brother Antonio leaves for South America. The narrator is addressing his absent brother with mixed tones of passion and despair, longing and betrayal. He recounts his birth and the fact that he did not open his eyes for fourteen days, provoking his mother to plan an extravagant trip to Lourdes. When he does open his eyes, in the midst of Mathilde's frantic consultations with her dressmaker about pilgrimage wardrobe, he becomes the great disappointment of his mother's life. Antonio whisks him away to the protection of his room.

Gomez-Arcos has a comic touch which is at once absurd and sarcastic. The narrator is torn between a brutally liberal teacher and an equally

repressive priest, both necessities if he is to attend high school. The episode of his baptism shows Gomez-Arcos at his best. While the zealous priest douses the boy with holy water, Antonio fondles his ass, provoking an expression of apparent religious ecstasy.

The final third of the novel focuses on the boys' reunion, albeit one less than planned by the narrator, for Antonio returns from South America with a very American wife, daughter of his boss at a chemical plant. Gomez-Arcos takes the opportunity to poke a satiric finger at American values, but never loses the focus on the two brothers, producing a finale both emotionally satisfying and totally in keeping with the fantasy of the novel.

Matriarchal intuition

*The four main female characters respond to society's demands as differently as four heads of hair respond to permanents.*

B Y D O R I S W I S H E R

Louise Erdrich's second novel, *The Beet Queen*, is a grabber. Like her first, *Love Medicine*, it is set in North Dakota near an Indian reservation where she grew up. A few characters from the first novel surface in *The Beet Queen*, which is now available in paperback for \$4.50. Few writers can, on page one, so authoritatively invite readers into a fictional world that's on the verge of expanding naturally in all directions.

*The Beet Queen* opens in 1932 with Mary Adare, whose father is dead and whose mother dumps her and her two brothers at the Catholic nuns' Orphans' Picnic by flying away with Great Omar, a stunt pilot. Mary and her brother Karl (baby brother went to a childless couple) hop a freight to aunt and uncle Kozka, who are butchers in Argus, North Dakota. They jump off the boxcar. Just before the train lurches to life, Karl jumps back on. Mary lives with the folks and her cousin Sita, and a friend of both, Celestine. Twenty years later, Karl blows into town like a tumbleweed and fathers Celestine's daughter, Dot, who is crowned sugar beet queen as the novel closes.

This novel fleshes out four main female characters who respond to society's demands as differently as four heads of hair respond to permanents. Mary's mother, Adelaide, wings away with her pilot and lets others raise her kids. Sita, obsessed with social climbing and a "practiced voice," marries well. As years go by, her connection to the world relies on remote control devices for television and radio. Just before her stiff demise, she sleeps on a pool table, watching her beloved beer lamps with "sky blue waters" shimmering. In contrast, Mary is a storm trooper at Dot's birthday party, reads tarot cards and spits on a brick to see calendar dates. She thinks she's operating on matriarchal intuition. Mary and Celestine, who has thick arms (who wouldn't, hacking up animal carcasses in a butcher shop) and a "common sort of fierceness," raise Dot. They don't


want Karl around. He agrees to stay away.

The male characters are not as clear and matter-of-fact about life as, say, Mary and Celestine. Russell Kashpaw, a shot-up war vet, is hauled in from the reservation to be propped up in his wheelchair for parades. Early on, Wallace Pfef has a relationship with Karl and later on delivers Celestine and Karl's baby during a snowstorm. Wallace becomes Dot's subliminal uncle and a city father whose business savvy insures profits from sugar beets in the area. Karl is terrified of genuine contact — that's why he's a traveling salesman. When he grows tired of them, he leaves lovers behind in hotel rooms like played-out phonograph records. On the surface, he's icy, casual and rolls out of Wallace's bed — "He ironed everything I wore, washed my shirts fresh, brought coffee, squeezed oranges because I said I liked real juice, and cooked up big dinners every night" — and moves in down the road at Celestine's.

Karl's saving grace is his bisexuality. A lout wouldn't appreciate ironed underwear as he does. Just before he returns to Argus to see Dot crowned, Karl considers himself. "I had outlived something careless in myself. Most men get to my age and suddenly they're dissatisfied with all they've accumulated around them. Not me. I wanted everything I'd left behind."

"I wanted the cars repossessed after fifteen payments, customer's houses into which I never got past the doormat, the ones I did get past, their rooms and rich smells of wax and burned food. I wanted the food itself, burned or not, and the women who had left it in the oven too long. I wanted their husbands. I wanted the men in blind alleys, truck beds, the men who had someone else or like Wallace Pfef, never anyone before. I wanted the whole world of people who belonged to each other and owned things and cooked food and remembered old songs."

*The Beet Queen* affords an aerial postcard shot of the characters' lives, including bizarre comedy, which only intelligent writing can present.



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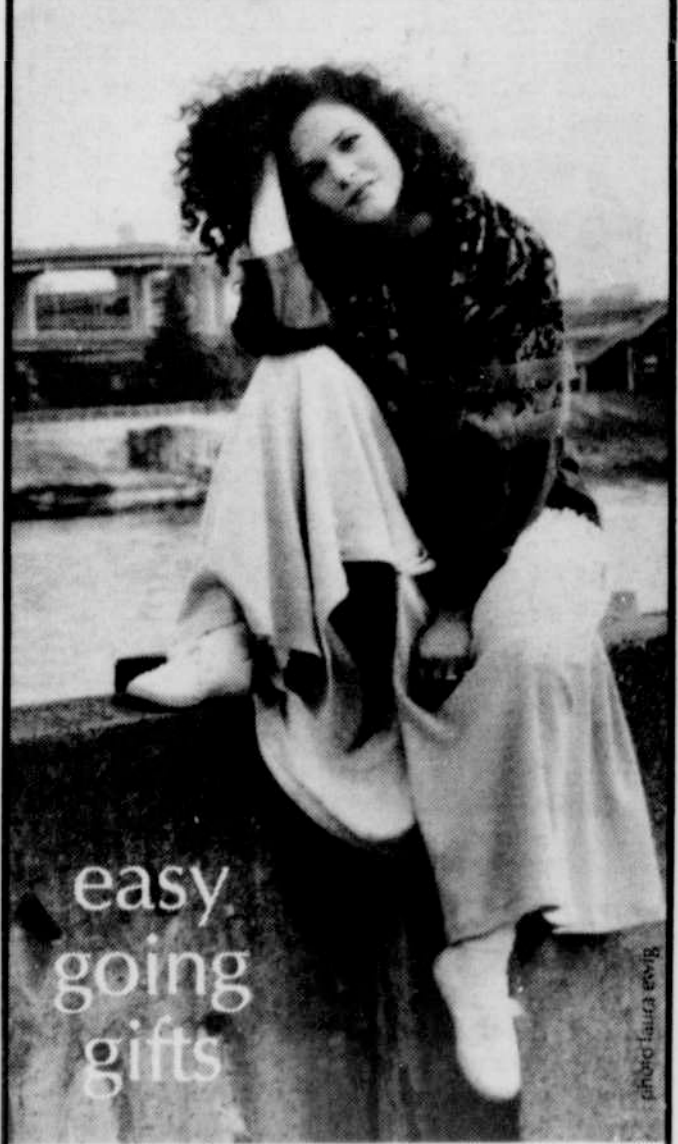


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