

## The past, by Alan Pauls

WHEN this dazzling sexual odyssey was first published in Barcelona in 2004 it was rumoured to be a hoax. This was partly a reaction to the accolades of several influential Spanish critics, who ranked it alongside the best of contemporary Latin American fiction, and partly the sceptical belief that Alan Pauls was a pseudonym or perhaps a suspiciously Anglophonic acronym adopted by a group of collaborators.

At first glance the author of *The Past* did not appear to have one. Born in Buenos Aires in 1959 - that was the extent of his bio. He had no international profile. His work had never been translated from the original Spanish. Even in his native Argentina he had had nothing published in the previous decade. If there was undeniable brilliance in a story of memory, cocaine and addiction to love, it also read as a series of variations and elaborate digressions on new relationships, fresh peccadilloes, with solo, paired, group or fantasy practices surely outside the range of even the most fanatical sexual conquistador. This added to the theory of multiple authorship.

So did the syntax. Multiple clauses, qualifications, extended similes and inexhaustible conjunctions, produced sentences of sometimes above 300 words, compressed in an agoraphobic typography, with dialogue always submerged within a saturated text, page after page. It had all the signs of a committee job. The astonishing paradox was how a novel as compacted and anachronistic as a 19th century broadsheet newspaper should remain so compulsively and intelligently readable.

Flattering comparisons were made with Proust and Nabokov. This view was shared by the panel of the prestigious Herralde Prize when they made the 2003 award to *El Pasado*. Film director Hector Babenco bought the rights and made a film starring Gael Garcia Bernal, due for release this year. The Spanish doubters were soon confronted with interviews of the author under headlines like "Alan Pauls Exists!" Audiences at the Edinburgh Book Festival will have the chance to confirm this happy fact when Pauls appears on Tuesday to read from this new English translation by Nick Caistor.

Adding to what must have been a demanding task for Caistor is the irony that the central character of *The Past* is also a professional translator. Rimini attacks his work compulsively, abusing cocaine to produce his formidable 30 pages a day from the French. He becomes a polyglot star, called in as an interpreter and simultaneous translator, but he suffers a kind of linguistic Alzheimer's which leaves him unable to remember foreign languages, except in his sleep. This curious condition is symptomatic of Rimini's protective amnesia following a separation from his partner Sofia, an art therapist. Rimini wants to escape the past. Sofia seeks ways of spooking him with

notes, phonecalls and apparitions to keep shared memories alive.

Their battle focuses on custody of a collection of 1500 photographs featuring moments from their 12 years together. Rimini refuses to take possession of any of them, but he finds himself snorting up from the glass of a photo frame, and the image beneath it is of Sofia's face. She remains a continuing and ambiguous presence, guardian angel or ghost, as Rimini tries to throw himself into his serial relationships with other women.

His malaise finds another reflection in a wild pastiche biography of an English artist, Jeremy Riltse, who has evolved a Sick Art theory with some hilariously risible attempts to mix his media with anatomical parts. The separate narratives are united when Rimini steals one of the mad artist's lost works, and Sofia assumes a mission to get him out of the police frame.

The Past will reward readers undeterred by its dense linguistic foliage and winding narrative paths. Its handling of sexual obsession is strongly reminiscent of Milan Kundera, and leads to meditations, both comic and profound, on love as gift possession, and the possessiveness of love. The existence of Alan Pauls is surely destined to be more widely celebrated.

Alan Pauls appears at the EIBF, at 7.30pm on Tuesday, August 14

7:03pm Saturday 11th August 2007

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