

Book review

Tales of Love and Distance

Reviewed by David Preston

When it comes to fiction, there are essentially two kinds of writers: the romantics and the liars. Or perhaps I should say there are writers who are openly romantic and those who are not. My point is that all writers are romantics at heart, whether they admit to it or not. As a reader, I tend to appreciate writers who are honest about their craft, and love stories that are all about . . . well . . . love.

With his premier collection of short stories, first issued in Spanish in 2001 and translated for an abridged English edition in 2008, Columbian-born novelist Javier Amaya demonstrates that he is as unabashedly romantic as they come. In other words: my kind of writer. Each tale in *Love and Distance* is a tantalizingly brief, but unmistakably human, vignette containing the essence of experiences that resonate in every one of us to some degree: from the fading memory of a youthful love affair to fantasies of affairs yet to be.

As the title suggests, these stories depend for their dramatic tension upon the separation of the characters – physically, emotionally, or culturally – one from another. Amaya’s specialty is creating characters who would seem to have every reason not to cross these divides. And yet, somehow, they do. With the exception of the two stories, which deal primarily with conflict, *Love and Distance* holds to a pattern: First the author creates his characters and kindles a powerful attraction between them. To make things more interesting he then frustrates the lovers by interposing various obstacles (time, geography, culture) between them. Like any compassionate creator, Amaya ultimately takes mercy upon his creatures, offering them a last chance to take destiny into their own hands, after arming them with a deeper insight into themselves and the universe around them.

In “Natasha,” Amaya employs the device of a private journal to let his protagonist, Eduardo, explore the furtive passion he nurtures for his new Russian friend, who happens to be a married and strongly religious young woman. (Think of Gogol’s stories, for example, or Dostoyevsky’s *Poor Folk* —with a somewhat happier twist.) Ultimately Eduardo makes a gambit for the heart of his beautiful Natasha, revealing himself to her by means of this chronicle of his deepening love.

It’s a different path that leads Julio Santamaria, the hero of “An Angel in the Cathedral,” to his bliss (and perhaps to something else as well.) Love seems to find Julio early on in the story, in the form of an unnamed woman who materializes from the mists of his turbulent childhood, a woman for whom he feels such a

strong attraction that he can describe her only in metaphysical terms. Just as suddenly as she appears, however, and for reasons equally unfathomable, Julio’s new lover seems to abandon him, so he packs his bags and returns home across the sea, only to take up the torch again. Though not a religious person himself, Julio, through a religious devotion to the memory of his lover, is able to summon her back across immense barriers of both time and space. Or is it she who summons him?

“Angel” clearly represents the author’s nod to the well-established tradition of magical realism in Latino writing – complete with a riddle for an ending. Although Amaya has a way to go in terms of developing and polishing his style, he is on the road to becoming a writer in the tradition of his countryman, Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Look for plenty of riddles, magical and otherwise, to be raised in *Love and Distance*. But don’t look for many answers to those riddles. It would seem that Amaya is content to open the door for his readers, allowing them to enter into the story with him, but taking them only as far as he thinks he needs to. As to how the story will end, well . . . that is another matter.

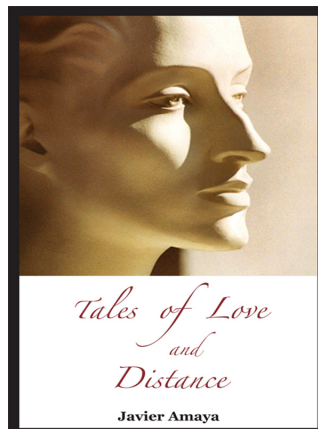
Before a reading at the Seattle Public Library recently, Amaya warned the audience that the stories he was about to read might seem unfinished. He didn’t apologize for this; instead he invited listeners to imagine their own endings.

When it comes to a good story, though – especially a love story – there will always be those who just can’t resist skipping ahead.

Whatever happened with Natasha and Eduardo? one listener wanted to know after the reading.

Why did you give the angel such an odd name? asked another, speaking for everyone.

“That’s for you to decide,” Amaya said, coyly. “What do you think it means?”



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