August, October by Andrés Barba: brilliantly dissects the business of being alive

August, October is beyond impressive, it is the real thing, a study of how the mind and memory attempts to make sense of emotion and guilt; need and regret

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Tomás is 14 and beginning to feel a bit disgruntled inside his skin. He has finally noticed that his parents are far more stupid than he had previously suspected. They even look a bit funny when they are asleep. Their faces become puffy; they resemble "a couple of puppets worse for wear". He knows; he has been spying on them.

He is on vacation with them and his little sister Anita in the usual seaside place, far from Madrid and in one of the many holiday homes they have rented over the years.

"They spent the first few days enjoying the house with almost angst-ridden delight. Deep down they were a childish family. Just as some families were melancholy, or happy, or destructive, theirs was a childish family. They got over excited at the drop of a hat, then grew sad for no reason."

Andrés Barba is one of several impressive writers from Spain at work on fiction that brilliantly dissects the business of being alive. He brings an unusually metaphysical intelligence which is exact and whimsical, undercut by a refined, humane tenderness. It is a quality he shares with his countrymen Álvaro Colomer, Adolfo Garcí Ortega and JA González Sainz – who are all, incidentally, published by Hispa in Madrid. The humour in *August, October* is far more painful, unlike the exasperated comedy of Colomer. Barba is capable of articulating intense states of mind with the surreal clarity more usually experienced in dreams.

This profound short novel – first published in Spain in 2010 – before his outstanding quartet of novellas, *Rain Over Madrid*, all of which were also sensitively translated by the US-based Lisa Dillman, belongs to the great coming-of-age stories. It seems simple and communal, almost matter-of-fact and devastatingly convincing.

Read it once at a gulp and then return to it. It possesses disarming genius and complex layers of truth, heightened by glimpses of understanding accompanied by near panic. Tomás has begun to drift between boyhood and the adult world. He taunts his mortality by a strange act of wilfulness while swimming which almost ends in disaster. The sensations throughout the narrative, both psychological and physical, are real and this is a story which delivers a palpable physical punch similar to that of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993).

The one element of Tomás's life, until this summer of shocking revelations, is his solemn sister. Anita is the one presence which binds Tomás to his real self, the kinder one tested by the need to assert his new personality in a world turned harsh. His emerging maturity is making him more critical, not only of his parents but of the city children he used to play with. "They were boys and girls from good families . . . and they behave like mini-emperors, a plague of 14-year-old serpents, green and shiny, taking over the small beach town every summer."

His former playmates now repel him: "He's begun to experience a strange feeling of contempt for them." With Anita it is very different. Barba conveys the sibling bond with understated beauty: "He and Anita were close, the two of them formed their own private community. He would turn to her and suddenly become aware of her admiration – a gaze so steady he got the feeling that his face was being engulfed by hers . . and when they walked from the house to the beach, he'd slip her his hand, pretending to have done it unawares."

The characterisation of the sister is extraordinarily astute: "Anita was an unusual little girl. Sometimes

she seemed cold, as though she'd learned from the time she was a baby to absorb things without touching them at all, to go unnoticed, moving from place to place on her tiny little legs."

Few writers have come closer to depicting the vividly secret inner world of a child. Anita's empathy is unsettling. "She seemed very different, moved to an almost insufferable degree by other people's pain, and that was when she walked the way she was walking now, as though dragging something behind her, something heavy and dense."

The shocking burden is the illness of Aunt Eli, their father's widowed sister, who appears to have entered a fatalistic mental state. Quite by random Eli mentions the Eiffel Tower and that she doesn't want to die without seeing it. When her melodramatic statement is countered, she remains unperturbed: "You don't know that, maybe I *will* die tomorrow . . . I've never travelled anywhere in my whole life."

Tomás is moving at a rapid pace. The restlessness which has begun to control him drives him out to the estuary "because the estuary was where you weren't supposed to go". He wanders on, recalling his aunt referring to a man who had "turned up dead there". It is a wonderful phrase; Barba – and his translator – are alert to the unconscious ways in which ordinary speech frequently includes the incorrect. Tomás "didn't know what he was hoping to find, he was trying to translate it into words, but he'd always been better at feeling than thinking".

When he happens upon a group of four local boys, his first impulse is to threaten them with a rock. A brief display of bravado follows. The only way these relate to the world and to each other is by sexualised goading. "They couldn't have been more than 14, and yet they were older than him, as old as fossil fish, as survival, as torture or neglect. They'd become realists. Their sexuality was clearly developed and that seemed to have created mysterious bonds among them . . . like wolves . . . hunting in a pack."

Forming a wary alliance of sorts with them, Tomás joins the gang. The illness and sudden death of his aunt sustains some level of distance for Tomás from the boys. His final initiation into their society of violence and abuse involves an outrageous act of violation which, although he does not fully participate, preys on his mind. Back in Madrid he becomes ill. Again Anita steals the show as she keeps vigil by his bed, "sitting on the floor with a handkerchief tied over her mouth like a miniature bank robber".

The closing quest sequence in which he runs away from his home in Madrid to return to the resort town completes an act of atonement. He imagines arriving at a doorway, "his hair ridiculously combed, smiling, holding out a bouquet of flowers . . . offering them to a girl who, in all likelihood, would run away if she saw him".

At the close of the book he is standing at a bus station with a girl whose face is "so huge, so full of life, round as a pie" and simple goodness imbues the story with a grandeur rarely achieved. Think of the hyped formulaic fiction being churned out on conveyer belts by busy famous writers with international reputations and shrug. *August, October* is beyond impressive, it is the real thing, a study of how the mind and memory attempts to make sense of emotion and guilt; need and regret.

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