



Memoirs of a Basque Cow

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Editorial Choice:

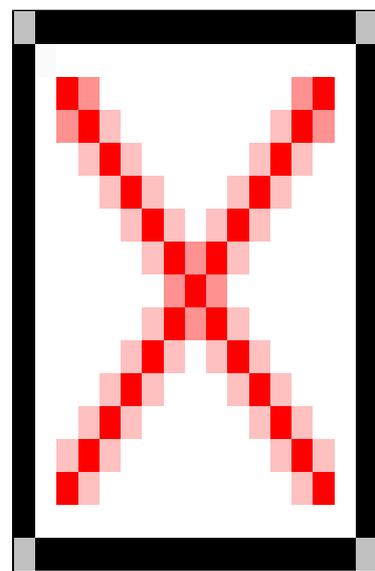
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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

3



Memoirs of a Basque Cow must surely be in the running for Title of the Year, though it's difficult to speculate what expectations it might evoke in young readers' minds. What they would find is a gentle bovine tale, set among the mountains and valleys of the Spanish Basque country, beginning in the late 1930s and then meandering towards the end of the century without much concern for chronology. Not too much happens, though something almost does once or twice. There's a good deal of chat between a couple of cows, a cow and a diminutive nun, and a cow and her Inner Voice, often with a hint of whimsical humour.

Mo, the author of the *Memoirs*, is born 'shortly after the end of the 1936 war', already equipped with an extensive vocabulary; that's the Spanish Civil War, of course, and a group of Republican guerrillas is holding out in the hills above the valley where much of Mo's story plays out. At one point, she is caught up in what is almost, but not quite, a bloody trap set for those resistance fighters by Franco's brutal Nationalists, led by one Green Glasses. Mo can't understand a word he says (though her friend La Vache qui Rit can and duly translates); all of Green Glasses' dialogue is represented by the single word, 'Karral', repeated (and repeated) throughout the text. We never learn what the

original means which might be confusing, even irritating, to a reader of any age. As is the name La Vache qui Rit. An adult reader may well know that's the name of the oldest branded French cheese. But the laughing Vache is always red in the ads, while this Vache is proudly black, with not a good word to say for any other cows, especially reds. Many, many times, she repeats, 'There's nothing in this world more stupid than a stupid cow!' As for Mo's friend laughing ? rien. She is fiercely intent on denying her essential cowness, preferring to pursue her inner wild boar, ablaze with violence and adventure. Such subject matter may not make too much sense to a young reader.

Mo herself is fond of cow-related quotations culled from Basque lore; she also loves the stories told by her friend, the tiny nun, Pauline Bernadette, such as the classic tale of 'The Trojan Cow'. Their first meeting was memorable. One night Pauline Bernadette jumped out of the upper window of her home to escape a serenading suitor, landing by chance on the passing Mo's back. Together, cow and girl run away to a convent where they live happily for almost ever after.

Among the byways of the story (engagingly translated with, I would guess, a sensitivity to the comic spirit of the original), some critics have found philosophical depth. I couldn't find much more than advice which could be summarised as 'Be Yourself' or 'Accept what Nature has given you and Make the Most of It'. Even so, as a second reading confirmed, an adult reader might find a kind of refreshment in the random musings of this likeable narrator in her remote hills; but the lack of action and the absence of a more linear plot could offer a confusing challenge to the 9-13 age group suggested by Dedalus in their Press Release.

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