

used her brain and beauty to become the Emperor's chief confidant, advisor, and concubine.

In this new and lively work, we are invited to meet a clever, manipulative, but also kindly person who, thanks to her inner strength, subtlety, perseverance, and beauty became China's longest-reigning female ruler.

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Margryt Poortstra. **Suster**. Ljouwert, The Netherlands. Utjowerij Frysk en Frij. 2004. 205 pages. €17.50. ISBN 90-73554-90-X

EACH PERSON WHO HAS LIVED a self-examined life has a story to tell. Each story may not aspire to or qualify as literature, of course. Aukje Hoekstra is telling the story of her life to her great-granddaughter, a journalist who intends to turn the story into a book. Great-grandma Aukje has some interesting turns and twists to relate to Marije. She loved, sometimes not wisely, but passionately. She also lost some she loved the most. But she tried to find her way through life, bravely and thoughtfully, aided by an older brother who was also her soul-brother, though he had emigrated to far-away America. When she tells of her years in training as a psychiatric nurse, the story becomes untracked. Or, one might say, the story spawns another one that in effect displaces Aukje's story as the center of interest. For one of Aukje's patients in the psychiatric ward was none other than Willemyn (Wil) van Gogh, the sister of the famous Vincent van Gogh. Marije's interest is as piqued by this revelation as is the reader's. She buries herself in some in-depth research on

the Van Gogh family and their tragedies; in view of the renown of this name, the reader feels drawn more urgently to these details than to the much more "ordinary" life of great-grandmother Aukje.

Perhaps the author quite intentionally tried to meld the stories of "susters," the Frisian word for "sisters," but which is also used for "nurse." There is a special relationship between brother and sister in both stories: Aukje and her fantasizing brother Metske, Wil and her artistic but troubled brother Vincent, and then, Aukje serving as Wil's "suster" or nurse. But in effect the focus of the novel is thereby bifurcated and diminished. The interior monologues added by Wil further confuse the novel's structural integrity. In this case the whole is less than the sum of its parts. Maybe Poortstra anticipated that when she had Aukje suggest to her chronicler that Marije should just go with the Van Gogh story and drop her own. But Poortstra's character Marije chose not to take that advice.

Margryt Poortstra has proven herself a very able writer in the past. Her strengths come through here, too. Her style is consistently engaging, her use of dialogue skillful and convincing, and her themes admirably dive below the surface to bring up meanings and perspectives that provoke reverie. And that's a good enough reason to read even one of her flawed novels.

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Santiago Roncagliolo. **Pudor**. Lima. Alfaguara. 2004. 187 pages. ISBN 9972-847-49-7

SANTIAGO RONCAGLIOLO (b. 1975) belongs to a younger generation of

Peruvian writers who have appeared on the literary scene in recent years. His previous two books, the novel *El príncipe de los caimanes* (2002) and the collection of short stories *Crecer es un oficio triste* (2003), have received good critical attention in Spain, where the author has resided since the late 1990s. His latest novel, *Pudor*, is the story of a young, middle-class Peruvian family and its domestic trials and tribulations. Alfredo Ramos is a man whose doctor has told him he has six months to live and unexpectedly finds himself in a troublesome affair with his secretary. His wife, Lucy, receives anonymous erotic messages from a secret admirer whom she tries to meet, only to be disappointed. They have two children, Mariana, their pubescent teenage daughter, who is secretly attracted to her classmate Katy, and Sergio, a young boy who talks to ghosts. Also included are a senile grandfather, who hasn't given up on one last attempt to charm his neighbor Doris despite his fragile body, and Rocky the cat, who roams around the neighborhood troubled by a curious odor and led by his most basic instincts.

The lives of these characters, all of whom share the same household at the Residencial San Felipe in Lima, are cleverly woven in the narrative to tell the story of individual existences that, at least on the surface, appear to be governed by a sense of discretion and stringent, middle-class codes of conduct. However, Roncagliolo displays an omniscient (and efficient) narrator who is able to equally depict the exterior façades of his characters as well as the troublesome interior motives that govern their behavior. Such a contrast is maintained in the book through good dialogue, brief chapters, play-