

BEN BOLLIG

The human zoo was a popular fin-de-siècle attraction. London had its own in the 1870s, as did Edinburgh in the 1900s. In 1925 there was still a “Cannibal” exhibit, consisting of sub-Saharan Africans, at Belle Vue Zoo in Manchester. In his most ambitious novel to date, the Argentinian writer Carlos Gamerro tells the story of one of the Selk'nam, an indigenous people from the southern tip of the Americas, displayed as anthropophagi to shocked crowds at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle.

These fake man-eaters did not feature in Argentina’s official pavilion. Rather, this was the private endeavour of a Belgian entrepreneur, Maurice Maître, who had kidnapped a group of Selk'nam (or Ona) for his curiosity show back in Europe. Of the eleven people forcibly transported across the Atlantic, six soon died, while four were then claimed by missionaries and repatriated after a diplomatic stand-off. One, Kalapatke, made his own way home, though there is no record of how. This is the previously untold odyssey that Gamerro recounts, mixing historical research and literary invention, in *La jaula de los onas*.

In Gamerro’s telling, Kalapatke climbs the recently constructed Eiffel Tower, hoping to catch sight of his homeland. Here, he is befriended by Karl, an idealistic German socialist, who offers to help him return home. The two do not share a language, and, with limited knowledge of indigenous peoples, Karl calls on a phrenologist, who concludes that Kalapatke is an Inuit. They embark from Paris for the far north, on what turns out to be a wild goose– or rather puffin – chase. Months later, finally realising their error, they head south, through the USA. In Pullman Town, working to fund the next leg of their trip, they meet Vera, a fiery Russian anarchist, just one of a vividly drawn cast of supporting characters. Here Gamerro delves into a defining labour conflict of the 1890s, the Pullman Strike, in which railroad workers took on first bosses and then the US government. Soon the trio’s revolutionary ideals run up against the steely forces of capitalism.

Karl and Kalapatke then make their way to the effervescent Buenos Aires of the 1910s, with its anarchist plots and multilingual tenements. Gamerro operates somewhere between Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Forrest Gump*, as we see behind the scenes of the political struggles in the Americas. But the research never dominates; at heart, *La jaula* is a tender tale of an odd couple’s friendship, each with a mixture of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in them.

The narrative is told from different points of view and in changing literary modes. It opens as a bawdy epistolary exchange between two Argentinian dandies, one a dissolute adjunct to the Paris pavilion project. The chapters set in the US are written in a social-realist register. Perhaps the saddest sequence is a brief first-person account by an English nurse of the elderly Ona woman, traumatized by her kidnap, who starves herself to death. For the Buenos Aires sections, Gamerro offers a raucous *sainete*, or one-act farce – the genre perfected by writers such as Armando Discépolo and closely linked to the emergence of the tango. Elsewhere, we read pure dialogue, after the model of Gamerro’s compatriot Manuel Puig.

Karl and Kalapatke finally make it to Tierra del Fuego. There the Selk'nam invite the German to take part in their traditional ceremony, or Hain, an elaborate performance of folk stories and legends. Gamarro draws on the work of the ethnographers Martín Gusinde and Anne Chapman, who studied the ceremony, and of the Anglo–Argentinian rancher Lucas Bridges, who learnt and compiled vocabularies of the Yaghan and Ona languages. In previous works – such as *El sueño del señor juez* (2000) and especially his Shakespearean novel *Cardenio* (2016) – Gamarro has explored the way theatre overflows into and alters everyday life. *La jaula* delights in the drama of the Hain, as well as the precision and nuance of the Ona language, here rendered into Spanish very differently from more traditional and often condescending Latin American literary portrayals of indigenous languages.

The novel ends with Karl and Kalapatke at another crossroads in Argentinian history, the strikes and military repression of the 1920s known as *la Patagonia trágica* (Tragic Patagonia). Battles over labour and indigenous rights come together in the fates of Gamarro's heroes. The Selk'nam people, language and culture were all but destroyed in the early twentieth century, and their descendants continue to suffer discrimination. Carlos Gamarro offers a moving tribute to victims of a near-forgotten genocide with reverberations that continue today.

ENDS