

## **A minimal story of sad times**

Long and his new book: "The girl who watched the trains depart".

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Ruperto Long's previous book, *Piantao*, was the biography of Uruguayan poet Horacio Ferrer. In his new book he changes the tone of the prose and the subject to deliver a novel, albeit inspired by true events. *The girl who watched the trains depart* (published by Aguilar, distributed by Penguin Random House, 490 pesos) goes back to the days of Nazism, to tell a story that unfolds on both sides of the Atlantic. "The protagonist is an eight-year-old Belgian girl who flees from Nazi-occupied Liège and must remain hidden most of the time, in different towns and cities", explained Long to El País about the main significance of the book's title. "On the rare occasions that she is allowed to get out, she stays away from the town centre, where she might be recognised. Instead, she climbs a hill, near the station, to watch the trains. And she is mostly attracted to the trains that leave. She enjoys watching lose themselves into the countryside, so fast and free. It's obvious that she hopes to recover her freedom and escape this miserable captivity maybe - why not? - on of those trains. Until one day she discovers that the trains that are departing, especially the freight and livestock trains, are hiding a different reality."

From here the narrative follows four apparently unrelated stories that start to intermingle into the same plot, and revolve around the central figure of Charlotte de Grünberg, the girl who watched the trains depart. "I was interested in tackling this dramatic period of history through the eyes of anonymous protagonists", says Long. "Those who, one fateful day, saw dark times closing in on them, without being able to do anything to avoid it. Except resist. Sustained by the unwavering love for freedom and life. And Charlotte, with her innocence and tenderness, reflected so well in the photograph on the cover of the book, is a paradigmatic character of this conflict. She represents the freshness of childhood that confronts fierce hatred. As the story moves on, this girl becomes an adult, and reveals a

capacity for overcoming the adverse circumstances she must face, and an intelligence to interpret the events, that surprises us."

As he points out, the approach to that period of history is often provided by politicians such as Churchill and De Gaulle. "But what this book sought was to describe, for example, what it felt like to travel on a train controlled by the Nazis under a false identity. Or what it was like wander around occupied Paris at night, seeking shelter in some hideaway. Or the solitude of making decisions that could affect many people."

The book, says Long, seeks to communicate feelings and sensations and for the "reader to get under the skin of the protagonists, to live the unfolding events with them, to better understand an era. I'm not seeking to convey a way of thinking or even less an ideology. Who am I to tell the reader what to think?"