

REVIEWS

Bruce-Novoa

Only the Good Times

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Juan Bruce-Novoa
Arte Público Press
Houston, Texas
1995, 286 pp.

Bruce-Novoa, best known as a leading Chicano critic, has now published his first novel. Although publicized as a romance, the book is more a postmodern parody of romance and several other narrative subgenres. First, it is a novel of artistic apprenticeship, with the mature artist narrating the source of his inspiration: his first love, the woman who got away — Ann Marisse. Paul, an internationally successful screenwriter, has spent his life rewriting key scenes of his youth with Ann Marisse, both remembering and altering them to eliminate the unhappy ending that threatens to impose itself as the ultimate proof of his existence.

Only the Good Times also parodies the traditional “first novel,” the disguised autobiographical text we expect of writers in their first book. Bruce-Novoa plays with first-novel clichés, from the opening sentence, “The first time I saw Ann Marisse, she was running towards me...” to the last, “We are...the product of this life and, now, this book.” However, the author undercuts all platitudes through comments in the text. For instance, we learn that Paul’s “first time” was not really the first when Ann

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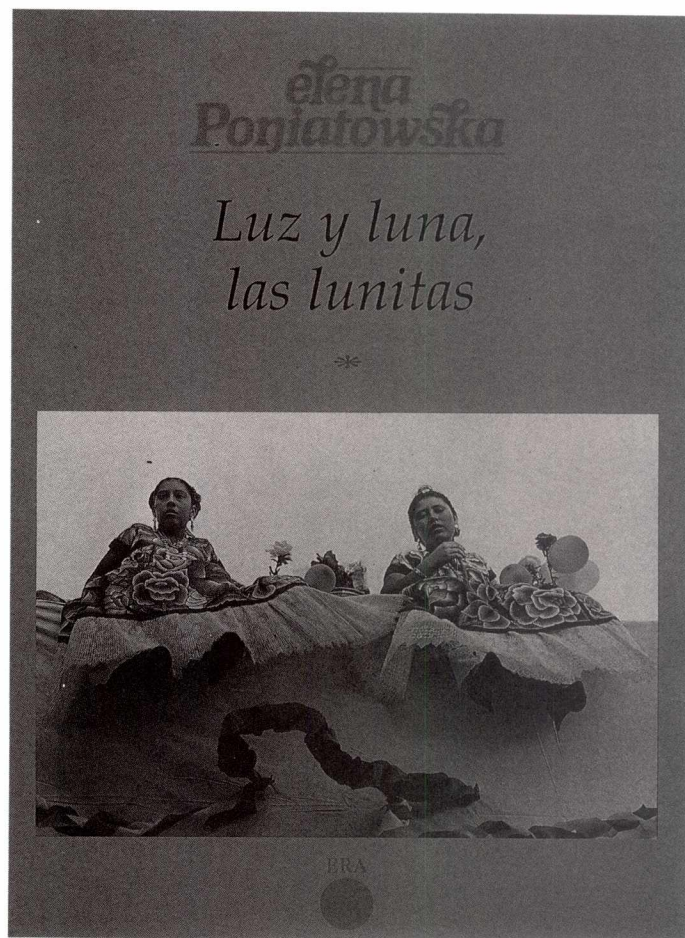
Marisse corrects his memory, offering an alternative beginning to their relationship, thus casting a veil of doubt over the narrator's accuracy. And the book's last sentence is printed in italics, a visual code Bruce-Novoa uses to convey that what is being read is actually from a film, and as such not a "real" experience, but an image contrived by the narrator.

Other postmodern techniques constantly interrupt the narrative flow, making it impossible to read this as a straightforward, traditional novel. Footnotes appear in which the narrator argues with his editor over writing style, factual details, or changes the publisher imposes. He includes a letter from the "real" Ann Marisse in which she gives her prosaic, angry version of a key scene written in highly romantic, poetic fashion by the narrator. Movie scenes replay what readers have already seen as factual material. While the essence of the scenes remains the same, details are altered to give the experience a feeling of intense observation possible only when reality is preserved in artistic representation. The characters involved in the narrative also discuss the text. Finally, film and the characters' lives are so intricately interwoven that it is difficult to distinguish them.

However, what attentive readers will retain above all from this complex novel is the power of the vision of love—the image of the loved one—to take hold of the

imagination and the heart of the artist. In the end, it is the image of Ann Marisse that endures here, despite the distractions of reality; her ability to center the world with a simple movement of her body. Bruce-Novoa's obsessive insistence on making the image of love our image of his book wins out. A highly recommended addition to the new U.S. Latino literature. **W**

Mike Estrella



Luz y luna, las lunitas

(Light and Moon,
the Little Moons)

Elena Poniatowska

Ediciones ERA

Mexico City, 1994, 206 pp.