

Shattered bits, whole novel: Daniel Olivas paints ambitious saga Picasso-style

By Virginia Alanis / SPECIAL TO THE EL PASO TIMES
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"The Book of Want" (University of Arizona Press, \$16.95 paper) is the debut novel from Daniel Olivas, who has been mining the California and Mexico territory for more than a decade in his widely anthologized short stories.

In "The Book of Want," Belén, a 15-year-old Mexican village girl, is raped on her way home, which sets off a chain of events with far-reaching consequences. She becomes mentally unstable and falsely accuses her paternal uncle, who is forced to flee to El Paso, but Belén's father sends a hit man after him, whom Belén later meets and marries. The innocent uncle comes back as a ghost.

This is just one of the story threads Olivas has woven into "The Book of Want." I found myself caught up in a narrative of great scope, with four generations of characters across two countries. Olivas has written an intriguing and compelling novel.

To say that perspectives shift in "The Book of Want" is an understatement. Olivas presents Belén's life, and the lives of those around her, by showing them through their own fragmented perspectives. He writes the way Picasso painted. In cubist artwork, objects are broken up, analyzed and reassembled in abstract form; instead of depicting objects from one viewpoint, Picasso depicted the subject from multiple viewpoints to represent the subject in greater context. Olivas has mastered this technique.

He has broken the surface of "The Book of Want" into small, multifaceted areas of narrative to emphasize the plural viewpoints. They are little cubes of narrative that, when taken together, produce a single cohesive body.

Not only are the technical accomplishments in "The Book of Want" of high literary quality, but also Olivas gives the reader what he most wants - to be entertained by a good story: " she laughed and laughed. A laugh that sounded so ridiculously young and joyful with the discovery of funny words, sentences, ideas. A laugh that doesn't yet know the disappointment of choosing the wrong man to marry. Of feeling foolish for letting a little charm blind you to what was really there all along and plain to any of your friends. So clear that your own mother who believes almost any man can make a good husband could sense it within a minute of meeting Rigoberto. And you said yes to him even though your mother carried through with her threat to boycott the wedding."

Daniel Olivas has published six books in his 10-year writing career, including three collections of short stories: "Anywhere but LA" (2009), "Assumption" (2003) and "Devil Talk" (2004). He has also published a children's book, "Benjamin and the Word" (2005),

and a novella, "The Courtship of María Rivera Peña" (2000). He is a regular contributor to the El Paso Times books page.

"The Book of Want" is an important book of great ambition as the genesis of Olivas' foray into the novel. Discover this book's stark power for yourself. Fans of Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights" and of Gabriel Garcia Marquez will savor this book.

Virginia Alanis, a former English professor in Dallas, is working on her first novel, "Love Field."