

Locos: A Comedy of Gestures

Felipe Alfau

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The interconnected stones that form Felipe Alfau's novel LOCOS take place in a Madrid as exotic as the Baghdad of the 1001 ARABIAN NIGHTS and feature unforgettable characters in revolt against their young 'author' "For them," he complains, "reality is what fiction is to real people; they simply love it and make for it against ray almost heroic opposition" Alfau's "comedy of gestures" -- a mercurial dreamscape of the eccentric, sometimes criminal, habitues of Toledo's Cafe of the Crazy -- was written in English and first published in 1936, favorably reviewed for The Nation by Mary McCarthy, as she recounts here in her Afterword, then long neglected.

Locos: A Comedy of Gestures Details

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From Reader Review Locos: A Comedy of Gestures for online ebook

Tom Lichtenberg says

A wonderful collection of interlocking stories, told by and about a cast of shape-shifting characters who wander in and about each other's lives like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which could be put together in endlessly different patterns. All of them are introduced at once in the very beginning when they are pointed out by the narrator as he sits in a cafe in Madrid, but then they each take the stage in their turns and weave odd tales that lead you on as patiently and deliberately as any Scheherezade. Those who are not in the foreground of a particular story are nevertheless lurking in the background, illuminating themselves like occasional fireflies. Some, such as Lunarito, threaten to develop into protagonists but never do. Others, like the great Olozago, seem to be a different character on every other page, as their histories self-modify and stretch out through the years. Some are victims of themselves, like the son of the man who invented fingerprints, or the man who is alive but does not exist. Others are mainly hinted at, like the long-suffering Padre Innocencio. This is a book that, as soon as I finished it, I thought of three of my good friends whom I wanted to foist it upon immediately, telling them that they had to read it now and all at once and that I wouldn't take 'no' for an answer.

AC says

This book is very clever, an example of what wiki calls metafiction. I had never read anything like this, and was charmed and captivated..., at first. But charm is a thin substitute for emotional depth, and reading this simultaneously with Mrs. Dalloway cost this one a star. That said, a worthy little book.

Alta says

Poor Felipe Alfau! If he had stayed in Spain rather than immigrate to the States he would very likely be considered today one of the most interesting writers among the "avant-garde" artists of the 20th century. Locos, a book he apparently wrote in the late 1920s but only published in 1936, and no one paid any attention to it until more than 50 years later, anticipates trends that can be found in other major 20th century writers. In fact, there is no doubt that the structure of Cortazar's Hopscotch, with its chapters that can be read in any order is literally taken from Locos. The interruption of the fictive time of the narrative by the "real time" dimension in which the author writes—I need to stop writing because the doorbell rang, he says at some point—can be found later (also literally) in Clarice Lispector, another modernist writer known all over the world as the most important South American female writer, who is only now discovered in this country. True, the characters that act independently of their author (another feature of Locos) can already be found in Luigi Pirandello, who lived before Alfau. But think of the fate of all these other writers: Cortazar, Lispector, Pirandello—all of them celebrated worldwide as some of the greatest writers of the 20th century. And Felipe Alfau—who has heard of him?

It is a general misconception that if you write in English, and especially if you are from the States, you have more chances to public and universal recognition. That may be the case if you write the kind of literature Stephen King writes; but if you write anything that attempts to rethink the process of creation, anything truly innovative, forget it! The most you can hope for is that some specialist in "theory" will discover you and

write a paper about you, and then one of his students will devote you a thesis no one will ever read. From then on everyone will refer to you as an "experimental" writer, that is, some bizarre specimen stored in a museum from where they will retrieve you from time to time to temporarily dust you off and apply a lotion of "theory" to your mummified body.

Tony says

Once I was at the Café de los Locos in Toledo. Bad writers were in the habit of coming to that café in quest of characters, and I came now and then among them.

And so he did, this Spanish expatriate, writing in English, in New York, because he felt Spaniards wouldn't get it. Finished in 1928, it was eight years finding a publisher. And when it did, Felipe Alfau gave up writing and worked in a bank.

The book . . . Well, there's certainly an audience among my cherished goodreads friends. Appearing to be a collection of stories, the characters within nevertheless appear and reappear, in somewhat different forms and identities. The author speaks to the reader. He explains himself, apologizes (faintly). A character is playing the Rondeau Capriccioso of Mendelssohn, but we are told in a footnote that the character could not conceivably have played such a piece, performing an 'inadequate popular dance' instead. But the author had his way. Stuff like that.

Alfau demands comparisons, at least every reviewer seems to feel the need: 'he's like' Borges, Barthelme and Barth; Nabokov, Calvino, Eco. Falling into the category of 'every reviewer', and thus feeling the urge, I'd vote for derivative of Sterne and presaging O'Brien.

As I said, characters appear and reappear. Lunarito can be a child, a prostitute, a nun. Pepe and Gaston, Carmen and Mignon: what a family. There is the suggestion of incest, and sex with a 12 year-old maid. But the author said he could not control his characters, or not completely.

A very old-looking woman in an apron comes into a kitchen. She keeps repeating, "...if poor Gil should lift his head." Like a parrot saying nothing else. Thereafter, she is called 'the old insane woman', but I'm not so sure. Gil shows up. And again.

So people are named, and re-configured. Yet I noticed - as if only I was supposed to notice - that there was an *un*-named character who appeared only once or twice. The fourth man at a table, if you will, where the other three are named. Even described once, an older man with rounded glasses. He never participates. He would seem unnecessary.

But please don't call me that.

Rod says

Puma, you sure can pick 'em. I thoroughly enjoyed this one. The "characters in revolt against their young 'author'" line in the description had me somewhat concerned; I could see it getting a little too whimsically

"meta," like one of those Daffy Duck cartoons where he complains about how the animator is drawing him, and the animator retaliates by drawing Daffy more and more ridiculously. Thankfully, there's a lot more to it than just metafictive funny business. Certainly, there is the element of characters having their own consciousness apart from the author's, appearing and re-appearing throughout the interconnected stories, but it stops short of becoming cloying or overwhelming. Admittedly, there was a point almost halfway through where I became somewhat frustrated because I just couldn't see where anything was heading. Is that character "real" or imaginary? Is this happening in the "real" world or is it a figment of the "author"'s imagination? Are these two characters supposed to be the same person? I had been enjoying it up until about halfway, but then it just all seemed so pointless. I almost gave up, but I soldiered on, and was immensely rewarded almost immediately. Once I made it over that midpoint hump the book opened itself up to me and I started to feel how everything was connected and grok onto Alfau's wavelength. From then on, there was no stopping; *Locos* had me under its spell. I still feel the need to read it again, because I know on a second reading I'll discover things that I never noticed the first time through. I'm looking forward to that second reading; for right now, though, it's on to *Chromos*.

Simon Hollway says

I fell in love with this by the end of the first paragraph and it didn't let go until the last page. Odd then, as I loathe short stories and abhor the term 'metafiction' and all that goes with it (coffee not in an instant granular form, sour dough bread, open-toed sandals, the city, people etc).

There is something charming yet conflicted about Alfau's narrative which makes it kinda edgy, cutesy and provocatively sketchy. A hot mess drawn with a light hand. A thumbs and fingers up experience.

David Katzman says

A tale of two cities. One is Madrid the other imaginary. A tale of two novels written by itinerant, international authors both of whom had Spanish as their first language. A tale of two experimental novels. One I loved; one I did not. Can you guess which is which?

Cortazar published *62: A Model Kit* in Spanish in 1968; the edition I read was translated in 1972. Alfau published *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures* in 1936 in English. Cortazar had Argentinean parents but was born in Europe then moved back to Buenos Aires when he was very young and later, back to Europe. Alfau was born in Barcelona but moved to the United States when he was 14. *Locos* was published when he was 34.

Call me *crazy*, but I loved *Locos*. Pun intended. It is charming and cruel, tragic and hilarious, ambiguous yet direct, and written with clear, poetic prose. The experimental style on display never overwhelmed the narrative. Despite the fact that Alfau directly declares the fictive nature of his characters, he made me care about them. Unfortunately, I found *62: a Model Kit* to be nearly the opposite despite significant similarities. Cortazar seems to be peopling an imaginary city with characters and scenarios imagined by the very characters in the story, but unfortunately they never seemed real. The characters seemed undeveloped, Cortazar would reveal a quirky trait here or there, but they came across as highly abstract intellectual exercises. Where as Alfau acknowledges the characters are abstract, but he made them seem real! I found the prose in *62* to be opaque and unwelcoming. The sentences zigzagged in ways that didn't complement my brain. I felt like I was constantly trying to trace the thoughts of an intellectual squirrel on crystal meth. (Have you ever done crystal meth? It's like being on a mega-dose of caffeine but it sucks out all your wit. You are

basically an idiot who thinks he's not.) At any rate, every phrase that Cortazar wrote took the sentence in a different direction, and I became tired of trying to figure out what he was trying to say. I found the writing tedious. I couldn't get the meaning out of it. I don't know if I should put some blame on the translation or not, but after 60 pages I threw in the towel. I skimmed forward just to pick out sentences here and there and could see that it was essentially the same book throughout. This experience was severely disappointing after I quite enjoyed reading *Autonauts of the Cosmoroute*

With *Locos*, Alfau seems to be following in the footsteps of fellow Spaniard Luigi Pirandello who wrote a play in 1921 entitled *Six Characters In Search of an Author*. I actually performed in this show in college! But Alfau goes to a place that blends great humor with the tragedy. The story begins (roughly) with Alfau, playing himself, at a cafe with a "friend" who becomes a character in the book. This cafe is where bad authors go to discover characters for their stories. In that cafe, we meet many of the characters who will populate the book. Note the irony. What follows is a series of interconnected short stories about many of them. Most characters reappear throughout and even when they are not featured, a brief mention may act as a dramatic revelation that changes significantly what you read before. And further, some of the characters seem to metamorphosize and despite having the same names, serve different roles or have different relationships in subsequent stories. The entirety manages to hold together as more of a novel than a collection partly thanks to the overlapping characters, partly through the consistent tone and style, and partly because Alfau is always in the background or making appearances as "the author." He has several charming asides regarding how his characters have "gotten away from him," and he can't quite control them. Trust me, it just works.

Some of the stories are quite hilarious. Some are devastating and yet often absurd. In one case, a man is obsessed with fingerprints because he believes his father invented the...science of fingerprints? And didn't receive the recognition he deserves. In another scenario, the police are having a convention in Madrid at the same time as a blackout citywide occurs, which leads to a crimewave of everyone mugging just about everyone. And the police are so busy with their convention that they are too tired to even arrest anyone. It's so ridiculous, Lucy. The theme of the absurdity of life is never far from the surface.

I devoured *Locos*; I dropped 62 like a hot potato. If you want to dip your toe into some literature that is experimental without being alienating, then I highly recommend *Locos*. It's just flat out brilliant, feels modern (post) in content and style, and it's a book that can be read multiple times. Love, love, loved it.

J.M. Hushour says

I've now read every novel of this amazing fellow, all two of them. Alfau, a bitter curmudgeon in his old age, is unclassifiable. I recommend this and "Chromos" to lovers of Pynchon, Borges, and the Weird. "Locos" revolves around a set of characters the author met in the Cafe des Locos whose identities and proclivities constantly shift in each section according to their own whim. In short, the author has lost control of his work and the characters themselves have taken over the narrative despite his best efforts. A truly bizarre book, similar to "At-Swim-Two-Birds". Highlights include the middle-aged necrophile woman who dies three months out of the year and a maniacal poet with bizarre aspersions towards spring.

Caroline says

Not as good as *Chromos*, but striking for its time. The postmodernist technique within a story was most engaging in the first tale.

The best story from a pure writing standpoint was “Students.” This is one of the most realistic and yet most emotional portrayals of the fears and agonies of a child I have ever read. A (apparently upper middle class) boy approaching adolescence is sent to a parochial school in a small town. His teacher is brutal and cruel, and he must face terrifying dogs en route to the classroom. The adults say he must go through this ordeal; it will toughen him. At school he also encounters a gentle, humanistic priest, and a young, lively nun. Alfau’s descriptions of how he tries to make sense of the events that unfold is absolutely convincing and touching.

Most of the effect of postmodernism in the remainder was in the way characters changed shape, role, name, background, and personality as they showed up in different tales. Very enjoyable. Considering that Alfau was a pioneer at this time, it’s well worth reading.

Christopher says

It takes more than a little something to write about your characters disobeying yourself, the author. Well, maybe it takes more of that thing today than in 1928, but still.

Despite that somewhat heavy-handed self-awareness at the beginning, (the authorial footnotes strewn throughout are a less grating touch) this text shines in the way it moves. It is funny and frenetic and invites you to do more than a little detective work.

Breezy tune-up read for *Chromos*, which I understand is his masterwork. Much better than this would be quite good indeed.

You can safely read the Mary McCarthy afterword on this beforehand. She's quite smitten and there's a bit of transfer.

3.75 stars

Vit Babenco says

Somewhere in Toledo, lost amongst narrow streets, there is the Café of the Crazy frequented by disused literary characters...

“Bad writers were in the habit of coming to that café in quest of characters, and I came now and then among them. At that particular place one could find some very good secondhand bargains and also some fairly good, cheap, new material.”

Characters live separately from authors and they wish to be independent and uncontrolled...

“...that which is reality for humans is a hallucination for a character. Characters have visions of true life – they dream reality and then they are lost.”

There is an episode in the novel called “The Butterfly Charmer” and in spite of all the declared autonomy of the characters **Felipe Alfau** like a butterfly charmer makes them perform all the tricks he wants.

Spring comes and the winter of our discontent is defeated.

MJ Nicholls says

Locos: A Comedy of Gestures is a lost gem from the late thirties and was forerunner for the postmodern movement of the '60s onward. The novel is a series of interlocking tales wherein characters are redistributed among the manifold Spanish topographies, sometimes for significant contrasts, sometimes for simple mischief.

The novel has more in common with the ancient storytelling tradition, narrated in a fable-like voice, but Alfau is conscious of the limitations of this form and deploys footnotes and authorial corrections to challenge the stiffness of the Great Canonical Novels. Their plots are immutable, whereas his book invites a reading in any order, with any number of interpretations. The stories are a mixed bunch, but The Necrophil stood out for me: a ghoulish tale about an old crone obsessed with death that leaves a haunting resonance.

Ben Winch says

Strangely, for a book recommended to me by a man who claims not to like short stories, this is not a novel (as its cover-blurb claims) but a collection of short stories. Linked they may be, but cohesive enough to be a novel they are not. Nor (while I'm on the subject of the cover-blurb) do they 'anticipate works like *Pale Fire* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*'. The metafictional element - the 'whimsy of a loss of authorial control' as Mary McCarthy writes in the afterword - is no great innovation, and while it is entertaining and, in at least one story ('A Character', in which a fictional character falls in love with a 'real' woman), moving, it rarely occupies centre-stage. As McCarthy says: 'If any aspect of the book has aged, it is this whimsicality.' Maybe that's exaggeration, or maybe I don't care that it has aged; for my part, I liked the whimsy, but felt it was unevenly spread across the stories. As to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, huh?! In the book's one true magical moment ('The Necrophil', about a woman who dies for months at a time and is resuscitated) Alfau channels Poe, and the resultant fairly traditional gothic tale resembles Marquez not at all. That said, I'm not complaining. For the first half of this book I had a merry old time. Old-fashioned storytelling with a touch of Pirandello and a bunch of bellyLaughs - it was great! But around about 'The Chinelato' I fancied it slackened off in intensity, and by the last two stories, 'The Necrophil' and 'A Romance of Dogs', I felt sure Alfau was serving up earlier work with familiar character's names inserted to superficially maintain cohesion - though I'll admit I'm no fan of quizzes or crosswords either, so I no doubt missed some (tacked-on, I maintain) minor revelations. Whether there's any real 'depth' here I can't say, but when Alfau's at his best I don't care, because he's so entertaining. Nor does the idea of his having been a supporter of Franco (from the sidelines in the U.S., not while shedding blood in Spain) bother me in the slightest. This is about as apolitical as fiction gets, and (apart from the last story) close to pure invention. I think it's great, in places, and some kind of 'lost classic'. But to call it a great innovation is a bit of a stretch.

(Oh God, and spare me the *Hopscotch* comparisons! So you can read the stories in any order - so what? You can read *Winesburg, Ohio* in any order as well, but no-one calls it experimental - nor do they call it a novel, for that matter. And don't even get me started about how pathetic the structural ruse of *Hopscotch* is in the first place!... Forgive me the rant: I just get so sick of people praising these books for what seem to me the wrong reasons. *Locos* is fun, period. Read it for that reason and I doubt you'll be disappointed.)

Harry Collier IV says

This book was exceptional in every way. I loved the way people were hidden within the stories but it did cause me to ask "Who was that again?" several times. I think it requires more than a single read-through to fully appreciate its nuances and subtleties.

The reason for the 4 stars has to do with the final couple of stories which I thought were longer than needed and didn't really fit with the rest of the book.

I am planning on reading *Chromos* next which I have heard fits together with this one so maybe the final stories will make more sense then.

As for now it is 4 stars on a book that was everything I could have wanted and more.

Türkay says

Locos özel bir kitap. Çarpıcı, etkileyici, ariştıcı... .

Okuru atmosferi içine alan Alfau'yu dilimize kazandıranlara teşekkürler. .

Ludmilla says

çok eğlenceli, tekrar okuyacağım. 5/5

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Read this little tightly structured novel as a prelude to Alfau's BURIED/Lost Classic *Chromos* [recommended/required]. Or read it on its own. It's delightful!

Mike Puma says

[spoiler (hide spoiler)]

Jeff says

This is an interesting book and with an interesting back story. The author was from Spain and emigrated to New York City around the time of World War I. He wrote this book in the late 1920s, but was not able to get it published until 1936. Although he was Spanish and set the book in Spain, he wrote in English.

Apart from a children's book that was also published in 1929, he didn't publish any other books for over 40 years. After *Locos* was republished in the 1980s, a novel called *Chromos* that he wrote in the 1940s but left in a drawer was published in 1990. In 1992 a book of poems he wrote in Spanish from the 20s to the 80s was also published. (I haven't read these other books but now plan to do so.)

It's too bad this output was limited and his talent not recognized earlier in life; this book is quite good and original. It's a collection of short stories set mostly in Madrid over the course of several decades. The various stories interconnect in surprising and amusing ways. Many characters show up unexpectedly in various stories and new information is revealed that gives earlier stories a new dimension.

If you do it read, you may find yourself like me; jumping back to re-read sections of earlier chapters to pick up foreshadowing and seemingly unimportant details mentioned in the earlier stories. In particular, pay close to the first chapter; when I first read it seemed unimportant but after I finished the book I realized it held many important clues for the rest of the book.

The stories are out of order chronologically and in some ways it almost felt like an absurd twist on films like Crash, Amores Perros and Pulp Fiction, in that it makes interesting connections between characters who at first seem unrelated. I guess these new ideas aren't so new after all.

PaperBird says

Did a review of this book here: <https://youtu.be/yNvFgHb51mQ>
