

Intuition and Virtue in Miguel Delibes' *Las Ratas*

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (May 2019)



Boy Sitting on the Grass, Georges Seurat, 1882

Las Ratas (*The Rats*) is Miguel Delibes' (1920-2010) account of the joys and limitations of Spanish rural life. The story revolves around an intuitive six-year-old boy, el Nini, his stubborn uncle—tío Ratero—the cave that serves as their dwelling place in the hills outside of town, and the capture

of rats, which they sell to a tavern owner in town. The narrator explains that rats reproduce every six weeks, each litter consisting of five to six pups. The sale of rats enables Ratero and el Nini to eke out a meager living. The boy and his uncle live in the last remaining cave, for the town's mayor has demolished the others. Ratero refuses to move out. The strain between Ratero and the mayor, and the mayor and the governor of the province, who pressures the mayor to close the cave, serves as the backdrop of *Las Ratas*.

The story begins by introducing the ongoing tension between Ratero and Justo Fadrique, the Mayor. Quickly thereafter, the narrator explains the nature of Ratero's work as a rat catcher. The rats are field rats, thus being a little beefier than common rats. They are prepared by the tavern owner fried and sprinkled with vinaigrette.

Ratero hovers at the bottom of the social ladder. On several occasions, Ratero becomes defensive about his work. He explains that eating rats is no different from consuming quail or rabbits. These early exchanges are important because they allow the reader to think of Ratero as a feisty character, albeit an idiosyncratically peculiar one. Ratero is taciturn. The tavern owner compliments him as a man who "does not bother anyone."

The dominant themes of this nuanced novel are staples of Delibes' work: nature and life in the countryside; the relationship between people in a provincial town. Above all, Delibes makes use of a form of colloquialism that emphasizes vital human existence. Delibes captures the essence of vivid Spanish colloquialism that departs from the Spanish of the textbooks. This makes for some truly memorable characters and

situations. More than just a literary device, the author's colloquialism goes deeper than an exercise in expressive language. Delibes delves into what the philosopher, Ortega y Gasset, refers to as *vigencias*: customs, beliefs and convictions of the lived-experience of a given group of people. The spirited characters of this town in rural Castilla are vibrant, rugged and freedom-loving. Some may even be called mavericks. They are staunch defenders of their way of life against encroachment by the passage of time and centralized authority. They display admirable philosophical toughness in the face of joy and misfortune alike. What is at stake for them is not only the ever-expanding rule of positive law, but also the loss of their way of life.

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Being far removed from city life, the characters of *Las Ratas* are self-reliant and driven people who live by the strength of their convictions. They take delight in the splendor and mystery of the night sky and abide by the fickle nature of the seasons. Everyone knows each other by provincial nicknames. Some of these refer to people's line of work, like Yayo the blacksmith, others augment personal traits; the religious Doña Resu is called the Eleventh Commandment, and some are not very flattering, like Ratero, the rat catcher.

Las Ratas was published in 1962 and later that year was awarded the coveted Premio de la Crítica. In addition, Delibes was awarded the Premio Nadal for his novel *La sombra del*

ciprés es alargada (*The Cypress Casts a Long Shadow*) in 1947; the Cervantes Prize and the Prince of Asturias Prize for Literature. In 1973, Delibes was made a member of the Royal Spanish Academy. Even though some of Delibes' novels have been translated into English, the work of this prodigious writer is little known in the English-speaking world.

Miguel Delibes does not romanticize the backward lives that Ratero and el Nini lead. The author does not offer ideological commentary about the life of his characters. None of the characters in *Las Ratas* raise an angry fist at life or the world. The people of Old Castile, the birthplace of the philosopher, Julian Marias, are robust and life affirming. Yet they also possess a tragic sense of life, which they express through their existential longings. These tough-minded individuals are content with life on their own terms, which means the acceptance of reality as resistance, and what this entails for their respective lot in life. Their understanding of the order of reality and the passage of time makes these rural people humble, yet wise. Theirs is a peaceful existence that is ruled by the wisdom conveyed by the passage of time and the knowledge that those who respect this reap.

The characters of *Las Ratas* safeguard the lessons that time has garnered for them. This enables them to make their way through the world. Delibes' prescience as a skilled writer and thinker is his understanding of what is lost when human history is not passed on through succeeding generations: tradition. Castilians are not known to ruminate over melancholic concerns, though they are philosophical in many unsuspecting ways. They are practical and jovial souls. It is significant that the epigraph that appears on the first page of the book is taken from the Gospel of Mark, 9, 35-38: "Whoever wants to be the first, he must be the last and the

servant of all." This signals humility, especially in el Nini.

The second part of the citation from Mark's Gospel: "And then taking a child, He placed before them" points to the boy's innocence and virtue. Not much is known about the boy, except that he lives with his uncle. The boy recalls how, Roman, his grandfather scared birds away from his planted field by hanging a dead raven upside down.

What is most compelling about the boy is his highly intuitive nature. El Nini is versed in understanding weather patterns. Many people in town regard him as a predictor of weather. The boy is very familiar with the fields and streams that he frequents alone with his dog and in the company of his uncle. He is wise beyond his years. El Nini's enthusiasm for life, the world and people who he encounters daily is a sign of his sense of awe and wonder. Once, after telling some men that the weather was going to turn icy, one of the men utters: "That boy knows everything. He resembles God." In addition, a young woman with whom el Nini talks frequently says that watching el Nini talking to the men reminds her of Jesus among the town elders. This is the kind of respect that is reserved for much older sages.

El Nini knows, the narrator interpolates, because he has the gift of observation. The latter is an indispensable character trait of visionaries and seers. The boy does not take the world that surrounds him for granted. This is in keeping with Delibes' understanding of nature, for he was a conservationist-hunter-writer, much like James Herriot (James Alfred Wight), a country veterinarian and writer of *All Creatures Great and Small*.

El Nini never squanders an opportunity to learn from tío Rufo, the centenarian. While other children come to tío Rufo just to watch his hands tremble, el Nini is curious of the old man's knowledge. The old man speaks in sayings that convey meaning to anyone who has an ear to gain from his wisdom. From the old man the boy learns weather patterns and how to equate weather conditions with the seasons of the year. He learns about the migration of the swallows and late season frost. From his grandfather, Abundio, the pruner of trees and vines, the boy learns about tending the fields, which the old man thinks of as being alive. The old man tells the boy that pruning is not hacking, for every layer of tree and bush requires a specific trim.

One resounding characteristic of Delibes' literary work is the regard that the Spanish writer has for integrity. He contrasts humble rural life, even with its many demands and shortcomings, with the often-competitive nature of metropolitan life. There is great respect for sincerity in Delibes' work, the kind of virtue that has its roots in the austere beauty of the land. The lives of rural people, Delibes suggests, are tied to the land and each other. This form of existence is not overly concerned with saving appearances—with affected grimaces. These are people for whom a spade is still called a spade.

When a character named el Pruden asks the boy if he knows how to laugh, the boy answers that he didn't have a reason to laugh at the time. Then el Pruden bursts out laughing, telling the boy that one does not need a reason to laugh. Later, there is a scene of Ratero busy baking a potato that he is going to serve with codfish, el Nini, his dog and a baby fox that the

boy has adopted, play around the stone oven. The boy laughs aloud.

Delibes vividly describes prairie fields, bushes, rivers and streams, frosty winter mornings and blue umbrella skies like a latter-day romantic poet. He tells of the joy that the townspeople experience when “watching rain fall from the sky, after months of hoping for rain.” His knowledge about that region of Spain that he communicates to his readers is an expression of his lived-world, for the horizon of Miguel Delibes’ life was dominated by the countryside.

Rufo, the centenarian, utters that everyone knows that in Castilla the weather is “nine months of winter and three of hell.” Of course, el Nini’s power of observation goes hand in hand with his ability to intuit the reality of the world and the nature of the people in his vicinity. This, no doubt, is a vocation. Whenever the boy has doubts about people, animals, cloud-formations, plants or the weather, he always consults tio Rufo for valuable advice. The old man tells the boy that, while he has always remained the same that he was as a young man, external reality is always in flux. The old man uses the passage of time as a teaching tool. He tells the boy that youth eventually comes to an end and that reality is hued according to one’s capacity to decipher it. El Nini is told that he must cultivate his intuitive gift. He must listen to those adults who can best guide him, by offering him the kind of heuristic knowledge that is passed on from teacher to receptive pupil. Doña Resu tries to convince Ratero that the boy’s intelligence is being wasted; the boy needs to attend school. Ratero refuses to send the boy to town.

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