

"To start being what we dreamed of": A review and reflection on *Undiscovered* by Gabriela Wiener

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS...

When Random House Editorial Group first released it in 2021, the novel wasn't billed as a detective novel, but in many ways, it is. *Huaco retrato* (English title: *Undiscovered*) is Gabriela Wiener's hybrid novel-memoir in which the Peruvian author investigates—excavates, one might say—her life and family legacy in a tone that is both academic and deeply intimate.

FACTS, DATA, INFORMATION...

The central character confronts her family history, specifically the legacy of the "Wiener" half of her family. Charles Wiener, who lived between 1851 and 1913, was best known as a long-time explorer of Peru; he even came close to encountering Machu Picchu. Such a history cannot be separated from the violent legacy of colonization and the racial tensions still relevant in Peru. The central character (whom I will refer to as Gabriela Wiener, considering that in this novel it is difficult to distinguish fiction from memoir) sifts through documents about Charles, looking for more information about the Peruvian woman with whom he had a child, initiating Gabriela Wiener's family tree. In addition, she is obsessed with the brief and mysterious mention of a child, "Juan," whom Charles may have brought back with him to Europe from Peru.

In a family Facebook group, Gabriela Wiener asks to find out more about these facts. Her process of critiquing Charles also becomes an experience of self-reflection:

Wiener is, in fact, a fluent storyteller, a chronicler of detail and excess... If he had lived in the twenty-first century, he would have been accused of the worst thing a writer can be accused of today: autofiction. ... I can't help but relate to his atrocious way of intervening in reality when reality fails.
(Wiener, 105-106)

Our narrator critiques him as a historical figure, and in a way identifies with him at the same time, a fascinating balance. Here, and in many moments throughout the novel, Gabriela Wiener does not shy away from the complicated, the confusing, the difficult. Such audacity makes for a very captivating read.

ROMANTIC LIFE...

I will say that, while reading parts of *Undiscovered*, I felt out of my comfort zone at first. It felt almost too intimate. I'm sorry to say that at first, I wanted all her explorations of these themes to be comfortably lodged in the realm of fiction. However, her honesty convinced me. Also, regardless of how we feel as readers when approaching a text like this, queer writers should be listened to, and the space they claim in their writing should be respected. Narratives of real queer love—sometimes contradictory and difficult, as is any relationship in life—don't need to become gentle and polite for anyone. In my opinion, Wiener's writing about her romantic life is one of the most important tools in this book.

Now that I mention that life is complicated rather than orderly and perfect, the word "jealousy" appears fifteen times in the book. During a difficult time when she experiences a lot of jealousy in her romantic relationships, she tells us, "it's scary, but jealousy only dies with the body. I don't know how many times I've felt like dying to to free myself from it" (Wiener, 64). This feeling is so brutally honest, a good summary of the character's emotional state in that instance, but also of her capacity for reflection and self-awareness.

Without giving away too many details, i.e. "spoilers," I will mention that toward the end of the novel, she joins a group of queer Latina women who are exploring the act of decolonizing their desire. Both decolonization and desire are essential themes in *Undiscovered*, and Gabriela Wiener makes it incredibly clear that you can't separate the body/the personal from the racial, the cultural and the national.

BEING A PARENT...

Much of the book has to do with the narrator's father and his infidelity, which in itself is an interesting recurring plot. However, one of the most fascinating moments in the book for me is when Wiener prepares to become a mother. She talks about having a *white-passing* child. She makes the following analogy: "A mother who is afraid of water and a boy who swims. Or a mother dragon and her baby who doesn't spew fire" (Wiener, 115). She is acknowledging that she and her son will experience the world differently. She follows this acknowledgment with a statement that she wants to "teach him to see with both eyes" (Wiener, 115). It seems to me that *Undiscovered* is as much about healing as it is about shouldering pain.

POETIC PROTEST...

I have titled this review after my favorite line, which appears in the long, free-form poem entitled "Panchilandia" that Wiener uses to conclude her novel: "We never stopped searching for what we were to begin to be what we dreamed" (Wiener, 121). The poem speaks of the personal, "lonely motherhood", "my new family" and of the historical, "a church on a huaca", referring to the colonization of Peru by Spain (Wiener, 117-118). Again, the body is an important sign of racialized experience: Wiener compares colonization to the act of "cutting our braids" (Wiener, 117). Wiener makes ardent demands in response to oppression. If you can only read part of *Undiscovered*, read this part.

MY FINAL THOUGHTS...

Some reviews of this book that I've found on the web describe it as "fragmented" and not "cohesive." I know what they mean. Many different themes emerge in this work, and arguably none of them comes to a satisfactory conclusion. However, I would reply that life is not coherent, and life is exactly what Wiener writes about. A critic on YouTube said that she didn't like this main character at all. Personally, I love unlikeable women in literature and even autobiographies! Women who do ugly things and write about them, women who constantly struggle with themselves and are open about it, women who talk about sex, women whose stories make people uncomfortable, who challenge our assumptions about what a narrative should be. In response to criticism of a "fragmented" style, I really liked how it mixed styles. In one chapter you'd find her relentless, erudite approach to her Wiener family background, and in the next you'd find a self-referential anecdote.

In my personal life, I love to know more about the women I know. My friends and I talk about our past lives and call it "lore." Yes, reading someone's book is different than sitting at the lunch table with someone, or on the floor of their bedroom, but I really enjoyed hearing Wiener's "lore" in this novel. I felt like I knew her a little, or at least I knew well the things she was willing to say here. I'll say it again: Wiener made me ask myself, why not? Why don't more authors write like this?

Edition cited:

Wiener, Gabriela. *Huaco Portrait*. Literatura Random House, 2022.