

Magic envelopes a Uruguayan girl

The Invisible Mountain

By Carolina De Robertis
Alfred A. Knopf, 384 pp. \$24.95

Reviewed by Lynn Rosen

Latin American literary tradition is steeped in magical realism, and such masters of the craft as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende mean for us to accept that the fantastical elements they weave into everyday occurrences are not only possible, but believable.

First-time novelist Carolina De Robertis, a writer of Uruguayan descent, who was raised in England, Switzerland, and California, follows in this mystical method of storytelling in *The Invisible Mountain*.

When a baby disappears one night from a one-room hut in a rural mountain village called Tacuarembó, and reappears, "not quite a year old," on the first day of the 20th century alive and well and perched precariously on a tree branch so lofty that no human could have possibly climbed that high, we are meant to nod and say, "Ah, so that's where she was."

We are, at the same time, to understand that this is no ordinary baby, the child who comes to be called Pajarita (little bird), and that the powers this girl possesses will guide us through the saga to come.

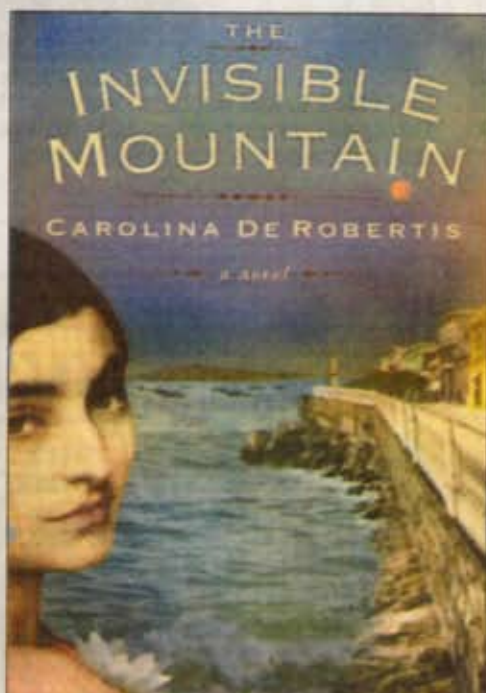
De Robertis certainly has the credentials to be our tour guide on this journey. Raised by Uruguayan parents and drawing on her own rich family lore, the author presents us with three generations of the Firielli family and, through them, introduces us to the rich, complicated, and troubled history of Uruguay. While she does successfully bring us into this history and tradition, the author's grip on the scope of the material and the mystical style seems to weaken as the story goes on.

The baby Pajarita grows to young womanhood in her remote childhood village, which has stood for centuries as Spanish conquistadors came and went and its native sons departed for various revolutionary forces. It is a village steeped in tradition and in its own mystical lore, as well as in its struggles to survive.

When a traveling troupe of carnival performers visits the town, Pajarita encounters Ignazio, who has himself journeyed far from his native Venice to escape his troubled family and make his mark in this new world.

When he spots Pajarita in the audience, Ignazio determines to woo her. Soon the two are off to Montevideo to begin a life together.

The capital city of Montevideo plays a large part in this book: "City of sailors and workers, of wool and steak, of gray stones and long nights, biting cold winters and Januaries so humid you could swim



From the book jacket

through hot air. City of seekers. Port of a hundred flags. Heart and edge of Uruguay."

In Montevideo, the family begun by Pajarita and Ignazio will spin out their story in a small house in the shadow of a jail, in a part of the city that begins as a remote outpost but becomes dense and crowded as the tale goes on, much in the way of the Firielli family.

"Monte. Vide. Eu. I see a mountain." The phrase is repeated often throughout the book, as the author explains how this tumultuous, vibrant city, which sits across the Rio de la Plata from Argentina, was named for the invisible mountain of the book's title: "Monte. Vide. Eu. I see a mountain, said a Portuguese man, among the first to sight this terrain from sea."

The mountain he thought he saw was really El Cerro, "a mound the shape of a huge fried egg." There is "no mountain at all, just flat cobbled streets" in a strangely flat city of "raw promise."

The storyline of *The Invisible Mountain* trails Pajarita and her daughters as the author seeks to "create room for women's unheard voices." De Robertis explains in publicity material provided by the publisher.

First, we follow Pajarita as she comes into herself in her new city, is eventually abused by her husband, and learns to support her family by prescribing and selling the herbal cures she learned so naturally from her aunt in her native village.

Next is Pajarita's daughter Eva, who must leave school to earn money so her brothers can be educated. Eva takes work from a family friend in his shoe store. She also learns the joys of the tango, only to pay a

high price for the lessons.

Eva, who also carries on the family stories in the poems she writes, crosses the river to Buenos Aires. She eventually returns to her native city with a husband who can no longer love or fulfill her, but she finds love later in unexpected ways (though perhaps far-fetched, even by the standards of magical realism).

Eva, too, brings forth a daughter, and it is this daughter, Salomé, who brings us up to the modern era and thrusts us into the harsh political life and more recent history of this agonized country.

The "Salomé" section of the book seems in many ways different in tone from the rest of the novel as the author veers from magical realism to political fiction, and her characters are driven more by angry and occasionally vague purposes than by any force of country or geography. Earlier sections, while encompassing the cruelty of life, focus also on the lyrical, the poetic, the magical moments. Salomé's story is unremittingly brutal, plunging us into the underground of the revolutionary Tupamaros, a terrorist group active in Uruguay in the 1960s and early '70s.

Soon enough, the prison that has thus far stood only as a looming metaphor near the family home now opens its gates to lure us into its twisted, tortured world. The prison is the repository of countless more stories, all dark and painful and difficult to hear.

As each character continues to climb her own invisible mountain, the women's overlapping stories weave together to present an indelible image of a complex country with a rich and diverse history.

In telling the family's story, De Robertis walks in the large literary footprints of Latin American magical realism — footsteps she is only partially able to fill.

Her evocations of landscape are passionate and beautiful, helping us to feel the intense connection between geography and history and to see how the country's people are driven to move their story forward in ways that are often self-destructive.

The multigenerational scope of the story seems at times unwieldy. Nonetheless, De Robertis has created a vivid new landscape, both internal and external, and provided the reader with a glimpse of the country of her ancestry, a land haunted by a mountain that is not really a mountain.



Carolina De Robertis: Mystical storyteller.

Lynn Rosen is the author of "Elements of the Table," (Clarkson Potter, 2007) about dining, etiquette, and history.