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KIRKUS REVIEWS

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Delibes, Miguel
THE HEDGE
Trans. by Frances M.
Lopez-Morillas
Columbia Univ. Press \$16.95
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There is a bag of tricks and japes and methods and set-pieces in this Spanish novel that may please devotees of postmodernist "metafiction"; others will find it merely burdensome. In the little sliver of actual story here, Jacinto San José, a counting-house clerk, suffers a phobia about zeros. Meanwhile, Jacinto's co-worker seems to have turned into a dog. And the counting-house overseer and all-around generalissimo is the lordly, female-breasted, ritualistic Don Abdón. There are sections of incomplete speech; in other sections all punctuation is spelled out ("... as if he were trying to catch something comma nervously comma and from between his fingers comma near his nose comma a partridge flew out with a short whistle whic, whic period); in still other spots all personal pronouns are reassuringly double-identified. Moreover, at the end, Jacinto turns into the hedge he has been cultivating all through the book. The point of these thick but unaccountable elements? A message, it seems, about individuality and its annihilation:

"The only chance we humans had, the Tower of Babel, we threw it away like fools. But can you imagine, my boy, a free man without a coin in his pocket? Don Abdon, you are the most motherly father of all fathers. Then, are you insinuating, Jacinto San José, that order is not freedom? Jack, jack, under every bed a whack! Is it true that there are times when you have to write more zeroes than others before you get dizzy? The hedge is the defense of the timid." Linguistic, political, and theological/metaphysical musings: an unappealing metafictional stew.

MD