

THE LONE MAN

By Bernardo Atxaga.

Harvill/HarperCollins World, \$26.

The writings of Marx, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg provide a theoretical backdrop to this laborious thriller by the eminent Basque writer Bernardo Atxaga. Carlos, the lone man of the title, is part owner of a hotel on the outskirts of Barcelona, and a former Basque terrorist. The story unfolds during the 1982 World Cup, when the Polish soccer team is staying at the hotel — as are Jon and Jone, a terrorist couple on the lam whom Carlos has agreed to hide as a final service to the movement. The hotel is crawling with cops, ostensibly there to protect the Polish team, but Carlos knows that it's only a matter of time before they discover his clandestine guests. As he waits for an opportune moment to help them escape, he bides his time by reading Rosa Luxemburg and talking to Danuta, the Polish interpreter, whose conversation is studded with quotations from Marx and Lenin but whose interests turn out to be far from socialist. Recollections of past actions carried out for the cause continue to haunt him, and his every word and action is accompanied by an imagined running commentary from his two alter egos — Sabino (a martyred activist) and the Rat (an anthropomorphized superego). Despite (or perhaps because of) their advice, Carlos is unable to come to terms with his past or embrace his future. Margaret Jull Costa's wooden translation from the Spanish doesn't help the already molasses-slow pace of this process.

JENNY MCPHEE