The Riveter

THE RIVETER

FEATURES

INTRODUCTION

by WEST CAMEL
Editor, The Spanish Riveter

‘Diversity’ is a much-used (perhaps overused) term across the English-speaking world, and particularly in publishing, so I hesitated before applying it to this Spanish Riveter. But I found it unavoidable, because ‘diverse’ describes just too perfectly the length, breadth and depth of the literature that has come out of Spain in the past few decades.

This is partly a function of the fact that Spain has four officially recognised languages – Castilian (known widely as Spanish), Catalan, Basque and Galician – as well as several more languages and a wealth of dialects. But it is also the result of the great social and political changes that emerged from the country’s Transition to Democracy in the 1970s.

We at The Spanish Riveter set out to track how these changes have been reflected in the literature from Spain over the decades since the 1970s – and found, fortunately, that the authors we’ve included seemed to have done much of the job for us. Most obviously, the official recognition of the four languages in the 1970s has resulted in a flowering of writing – so that our Spotlights on Catalan, Basque and Galician could have been filled many times over, with many new translations available, and, most importantly, a wealth of translators keen to bring writing from these languages to English readers.

Castilian hasn’t suffered for this concentration on other languages – far from it. We open our magazine with tributes to two major literary figures we have recently lost – Almudena Grandes and Javier Marías – and celebrate some greats who are still with us: Enrique Vila-Matas and Javier Cercas.

Grandes is just one of many women writers we cover in the magazine. As women’s rights have improved over the past decades and feminism has come to the fore in Spain, so women writers have created a space for themselves and their work. We celebrate this not just in a section devoted to writers such as Sara Mesa and Cristina Morales, but across the whole publication.

Diversity in its most modern sense is also evident in the literature from Spain, and as our pieces on queer writing (thanks to Jorge Garriz) and on literature by people of colour (nod to Layla Benítez-James) and immigrant writers show, authors from these groups are facing their particular challenges.

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challenges head on, as well as celebrating their hard-won freedoms.

Children’s literature in Spain is lively and active too, as Claire Storey from WorldKidsLit demonstrates in her feature. And Barry Forshaw, our resident crime-writing expert, shows us that the genre in Spain is in good health – as is fantasy and sci-fi, according to Rachel Cordasco, who gives us a run-down of Spanish SFT (speculative fiction in translation).

Our resident poetry expert, Anna Blasiak, teams up with translator, writer, poet, and knower-of-all-things-Spanish, Lawrence Schimel, to curate our poetry section, including poems from all the official languages.

All these genres and forms look forward, but they do not ignore Spain’s past. Jacky Collins discusses how the concept of historical memory has affected women’s writing in the past decades, and you’ll find mentions of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the subsequent Franco dictatorship scattered unavoidably across the landscape of this magazine.

\textit{The Spanish Riveter} is about writing from Spain, but we could not ignore the influence of Latin American writing on the literature from the peninsula – in particular those from the Latam Boom generation who took up residence in Spain and contributed so much to the diversity this Riveter is celebrating.

Diversity comes at a price though – and we’re proud to say we’ve been supported by diverse organisations: our thanks go to Acción Cultural Española (AC/E), the Spanish Embassy in the UK, Etxepare, Xunta de Galicia, Institut Ramon Llull and Instituto Cervantes for their generous backing.

Thanks must, of course, also go to all our contributors, especially the translators who’ve offered extracts and those who’ve curated our language spotlights and queer, children’s and poetry sections. And to our cover designer and illustrator, Ana Galvañ, a gasp of thanks at the splendour of her artwork.

A personal thank-you goes from me to our guest editor, Katie Whittemore and editorial assistant Alice Banks, both Spanish translators: what you hold in your hands is thanks in major part to their wide-ranging knowledge of the literature from the country.

Finally, thanks as always to the ELNet team – Anna Blasiak, design and production manager; Max Easterman, who looks after the books; and last – but first in all things – our Riveter-in-Chief, ELNet Director Rosie Goldsmith.

And now, to \textit{España} ...

\textit{West Camel}
EDITORIAL

by KATIE WHITTEMORE
Guest Editor,
The Spanish Riveter

In October 2022, Spain was Guest of Honour at the Frankfurter Buchmesse, thirty-one years after it was previously awarded the role in 1991. The 2022 theme was Creatividad desbordante, translated for the fair as ‘Spilling Creativity’. Spain’s Guest of Honour programme was clearly a thoughtful, deliberate (and, one assumes, at times fraught) curation of the country’s literary constellation, but the ‘Spilling Creativity’ theme suggests something more – a strategy, perhaps, for how Spain chooses to represent itself, and, to some degree, what it aspires to be.

Key to the Guest of Honour pavilion’s design were two circular stages. Each stage and its audience seating area was separated from the rest of the pavilion by a semi-diaphanous cloth curtain, which was hung from the ceiling and created a cocoon-like effect, a sense of intimacy inside a space that was actually quite porous. A space that, in effect, was conducive to ‘spilling over’, as the audience did during Inés Martín Rodrigo’s animated interview with writer Rosa Montero. I myself sat on the floor just outside the curtain during this event, along with a large group of German university students; we managed to duck beneath the curtain and tucked it behind our backs. The whole space seemed to expand like a great big breath as more people lifted the curtain-boundary between the stage area and the rest of the pavilion, and found their way in. There was a beautiful sense of expansion; a place, as it were, for all.

This sense of expansion and inclusion is key to understanding Spain’s creative sector as overflowing, abundant, uncontained – overrunning its borders. To this end, the delegation included more than two hundred writers and artists in the programme, and the line-up was a testament to the changes that have taken place in the Spanish cultural scene and book industry since its last appearance as Guest of Honour in 1991, highlighting as it did, in broad strokes, general trends in contemporary writing: writing by women across genres, Spain’s linguistic plurality, bibliodiversity, the Spanish language as a bridge to Latin America, sustainability and ecology, and a healthy tension between established literary figures and new generations of writers with their own stories to tell.

Indeed, the pavilion was a place where you might run into well-known, even famous, authors – pillars of Spanish literature and the darlings of both publishers and the culture pages of the main newspapers; figures such as Irene Vallejo, Enrique Vila-Matas, Javier Cercas, Sara Mesa or Antonio
Muñoz Molina, or the above-mentioned Montero, who truly packed the house. But casual visitors were just as likely to bump into some of my own personal favourites – writers on the rise, many of them women, like Lara Moreno, Aroa Moreno Durán, María Sánchez, Cristina Morales and Katixa Agirre; some of whose work is available in English, often from small or independent presses. Writers in Galician, Basque and Catalan were also represented, and many of them, and the writers I list above, are present in these pages too.

The trends seen at the Buchmesse certainly resonate within the pages of this Riveter. The general shape of the magazine had been decided before Frankfurt, so it was heartening to find a clear synergy between what we hoped to share with anglophone readers and what was on display at the Spanish Pavilion. Like the Guest of Honour programme, this Riveter endeavours to deepen the appreciation for key writers from the last quarter of the twentieth century to the present, as well as introduce readers to writing by authors who identify as queer, writers of colour, immigrants, and a whole wave of female writers whose talent, though long a constant in Spanish letters, is now swelling to visible, unignorable heights.

And while in many ways this issue of the Riveter looks towards the future, towards innovation, plurality and diversity, no exploration of the literatures of Spain would be remotely complete without a look backwards as well. As readers of this issue will perceive, the repercussions of the Civil War and the Franco dictatorship are very much present – whether directly, or obliquely – in literature from Spain, particularly the trend that deals with historical memory, a fact of Spanish history and life that continues to touch Spanish society and citizenry today. Nor can we forget the fact that authors who write in Catalan, Galician and Basque (as well as other regional languages, like Asturian or Valencian) do so under the shadow of the official persecution and repression previous generations of writers in their languages suffered under Franco. Today, however, the literatures of Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country are revindicated, fostered, and supported, both institutionally and by their readerships. To a greater or lesser extent, writing in Spain’s co-official languages is flourishing.

While the picture may look relatively rosy, I would be remiss if I did not mention the subtle and not-so-subtle challenges we faced when commissioning and editing this issue – the balance we tried to strike as we selected books to review and extracts to include. This dance is not unlike the slightly awkward choreography that the literatures of Spain, and the cultural organisations that support them,
perform at book fairs and festivals around the world. *Castellano*, what we know as Spanish, represents the overwhelming majority in terms of writers, original works published, readers and translations into English. This of course reflects Spanish’s actual majority in terms of speakers and its general cultural hegemony. And yet there is the sense that Spain’s other languages, while perhaps still on the back foot, so to speak, are experiencing growth in the book sector, with more institutional support, as well as a greater appetite from readers both within and without the Spanish territory.

Yet for each institutional act of inclusion, for each celebration of plurality and diversity of all stripes, there is often the accompanying concern with performative representation, the fear of ‘ticking the boxes’. For every writer or text included, dozens are necessarily left out. This absolutely essential winnowing-down of material was for me, a (first-time) guest editor, Spanish translator and avid reader of Spanish literature, the most hand-wringing part of this (wonderful) experience. If you have five minutes – or an hour or two – we can chat about all the writers and books and stories I think are exciting, important, illustrative and downright fabulous but couldn’t include in this magazine. That said, I know that the issue you hold in your hands came together organically and offers readers a compelling starting point from which to explore contemporary writing from Spain.

So, ‘Spilling Creativity’ indeed: such is the treasure trove of Spanish writing available in English that this issue could have easily been one thousand pages long (if not for printing costs and your editors’ sanity). Like all curators, we were limited by time, space, and resources, but not ganas – the desire or will. In fact, we were left with ganas de más and we expect that you, dear reader, will be too. And fortunately, we’re all in luck: when it comes to writing from Spain, the cup runneth over.

*Katie Whittemore*
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_MARÍA FERNANDA AMPUERO_ – _FREAKS_ ........278
This fantasy is as nonsensical as a sword-wielding St James riding a white stallion onto the Clavijo battlefield in the ninth century to earn his nickname Matamoros, ‘the Moorslayer’, or the same saint’s body floating on a stone slab from the Holy Lands to a Galician ría before being pulled inland by two oxen to Santiago de Compostela. Yet St James’s legend lies at the heart of a centuries-old phenomenon, the pilgrimage to Santiago, which is now a spectacular commercial success, attracting 438,000 people from 180 countries last year and producing one of the most-read stories on the New York Times website.

The most fascinating stories are false but present as fact. They represent desire – what people want to be true rather than truth itself. It is this gap that makes them interesting. Mostly, such tales carry an added emotional charge that imprints on our feelings, where things stick best. In Spain, stories like this often exist to buttress the idea of a country forever linked to western or Christian civilisation – whether by association with Hercules or in opposition to Iberia’s Muslims.

Some stories are believed even when they do not pretend to be true. Don Quixote, that endless well of interpretations of ‘Spanishness’, is a victim of this – driven mad by the chivalric pulp fiction of the time, the adventurous caballerías. The hapless hidalgo is determined to behave like the protagonists of those stories, who spend their time righting wrongs, upholding virtue and fighting felons. Before he sets off on his own foolish adventures, indeed, he has already frittered away much of his money on that most wasteful of things – literature.

The fact that Spaniards often tell themselves a different story about Quixote – that his nobility is real, even an essence of the Spanish soul (and, so, shared by them) – is a tremendous irony. The nineteenth-century philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, for example, saw him as representing the
wilder, creative side of Spanishness, and called for the country to renovate itself by taking back ‘the tomb of the Knight of Madness from the hands of the hidalgos of Reason’. In today’s fame-orientated society, Quixote’s success, or rather, Cervantes’s success in creating a popular character, is enough for people to consider the errant knight a national hero without knowing anything more about him. Cervantes, who wrote in order to ‘destroy the authority and influence that books of chivalry enjoy’ must be guffawing in his grave, which was only discovered at Madrid’s Trinitarias Convent eight years ago.

In a country that fights so heatedly over the past that it cannot agree on words for the national anthem (which can only be hummed), literature and film might be expected to fill the empty vessel of national identity. In fact, the inevitable hotchpotch of ideas produced by a very broad set of writers has failed to do that, though it is illuminating to see in which directions the tendencies run.

If anything, a country where age-old frictions between nationalities and regions have re-emerged in the safe space of democracy is returning to localism – or at least to hyperlocal scenarios or characters who must cope with the conflicting expectations of people from different localities. This triumph of the local or provincial can be found in the Canary Island dialect of Andrea Abreu’s 2020 *Panza de Burro*, in the rural Galician brutishness of Rodrigo Sorogoyen’s 2022 film, *As Bestas*, in the violent nationalism of the Basque Country in Fernando Aramburu’s writing, and in the parodic encounters of urbanites and country folk in Daniel Gascón’s *A Hipster in Empty Spain*. Indeed, a whole genre of blockbuster film comedies now mines the tensions of national cross-cultural marriages for humour – with the Basque-Andalusian pairing a favourite.

At a time when population decline is emptying out the country-side, these books also reflect a contrast between past and present that becomes anxiety about the future. Such rural tales contain fear about a disappearing essence – of a particular community or region, or of the country as a whole. Even city folk in highly urbanised areas, like the Basque Country and Catalonia, like to imagine their communities in terms of rural tradition – of farmers in Basque *caseríos* or of the disappearing Catalan *payés*. Perhaps small regional publishing houses that depend on local government funding are playing a part in this, by feeding the demand from each of Spain’s seventeen regional governments for material that reinforces regional identity and can be taught in their schools.

In truth, no one who has written about ‘being Spanish’ has ever produced anything convincing. In
the past, the authors who attempted this ranged from chest-beating patriots to late-nineteenth-century catastrophists like Ángel Ganivet, who, before drowning himself in a Latvian river, wrote in his *Idearium Español* of Spain as ‘a cage full of madmen all suffering from the same *manía*: their inability to put up with one another’.

A country with a still-living memory of dictatorship under General Francisco Franco, with a specific national identity based on exceptionalism and religion being rammed down throats for the four decades before his death in 1975, is especially aware of the pitfalls of defining the Spanish condition.

Perhaps that is why nobody (that I know of) now bothers to try. If anything, trends suggest that the true richness of Spanish culture (and its contribution to a diffuse national identity) lies in its diversity, even if the voice and layered identities of immigrants remain underrepresented.

At a time when nationalism and isolationism are once more surging around the globe, that is reassuring. After all, it is difficult to hum your way to war.

*Giles Tremlett*

*Giles Tremlett is an Anglo-Spanish writer and journalist.*
Jonás González Vergara was ready to face his therapist.

Before receiving the message with the date and the time of his appointment on his 7AP mobile, bought expressly for the occasion, he’d removed all the quilts, bed sheets and towels that were stored in the chest beneath his bed. Here he had been keeping – almost carelessly – what were about to become his two illegal laptops, a pair of external hard drives, three screens, two old smartphones, the phone he’d been using up until the Great Blackout, speakers, computer mice, and other gadgets that at first glance no longer served a purpose. He covered them back up with two quilts before lowering the bed, onto which he threw a mountain of clothes. Then he took what he’d removed from his stash – what was to be discarded – to the hall: a smartphone whose screen was in pieces, a printer that hadn’t worked for ten years, a mouse, two disassembled speakers, and Lucía’s laptop – this particularly annoyed him because it was brand new and no one had had the chance to turn it on since he’d brought it back from the store, neatly wrapped, but it wasn’t plausible that a man like him would not have a laptop, and the ones he had kept hidden were better.

‘Good afternoon,’ she smiled, showing off two rows of irregular but very white teeth, before shaking his hand with more force than he had expected. ‘Jonás González, right?’ She smiled again, this time with such tenacity that her lips twisted into an excruciating grimace. ‘I’m Leticia, and I’m your personal therapist. I’ve come to inform you that …’, she lifted up her hand to make a V for victory with two of her fingers, ‘… everything will get better.’
The new party that was leading government, Citizen’s Movement, Solutions Now!, had profusely declared that the end of the Third Pandemic’s lockdown would bring two big new changes. The first had been the installation of huge shopping centres that had been strategically placed to provide for all neighbourhoods, protected by the transparent domes that had been slowly taking over the horizon for a while now. These sections of the city, where every type of business imaginable had been installed in pre-existing buildings, could be walked through as normal. You could wander around with complete freedom and no need for protective equipment thanks to some enigmatic systems that guaranteed continuous disinfection of the air and acted as an armour against the virus. The second change, referred to as the Great Therapy Initiative, had arrived at Jonás’s house in the form of this forty-odd-year-old lady with bleached blonde hair, heavy make-up, a garish manicure, a cascade of curls down to her waist, and extremely high heels that failed to make her appear tall. If he had to draw her, thought Jonás, as he watched her walk through his living room, she would be a dwarf dressed in drag.

‘Wow, what a nice place. Do you own it?’

‘Yes.’ Jonás remembered it was best to act natural, and gave her a shy smile. ‘I bought it a few years ago, when this part of Lavapiés was still affordable …’ He paused to remind himself that fortune favoured the brave. ‘Would you like me to give you a tour?’

‘Ah! Well of course.’ Her enthusiasm did not stop her removing a notebook and pen from her bag. ‘What a great idea!’

Jonás’s apartment had a living room, a kitchen, three bedrooms, a bathroom and a second toilet. He was afraid that Leticia would make some sort of comment that it was too big for one person, but she didn’t say anything. Nor did she bring up the pile of clothes that covered the quilt on the double bed, not even when he told her she’d caught him in the middle of tidying up. However, upon entering the study, she pointed to the computer.

‘I’m taking that, right?’
‘Noooo, no, no,’ Jonás had to stop to take a breath, ‘you can’t take it, because it’s legal, it’s for my work. It doesn’t even belong to me, it’s the public television channel’s, I’m …’

‘Ah, yes,’ she consulted her papers and wrote something down, ‘yes, it’s stated in the documentation, what it is …’ She frowned for a few seconds, then smiled again. ‘You have a very strange job, don’t you? What exactly is it that you do?’

‘I’m a digital animator’, he explained, ‘basically, I make cartoons. I work for the television company making animations for two different channels. One’s a kids’ channel, I got the job through my old production company, and the other makes documentaries about the history of Spain.’

‘Ah!’ For the first time since she’d arrived, the therapist looked interested. ‘You’re the one who does the drawings of the speaking kings and the moving armies?’

‘Exactly.’ He didn’t have to force a smile, as this was the part of his job he enjoyed most.

‘Oh, I love it!’ She wrote something in her notebook and turned on her high heels. ‘Well, the computer will stay here, that’s for sure!’

She looked into the guest bedroom, her eyes sweeping over another double bed and an empty table that would soon become the most important part of the house, and returned to the living room. Jonás offered her a coffee, which she accepted. Upon seeing him return with a tray, she motioned towards where he should sit down. He chose the other end of the sofa without saying anything, and she got up to take the place that her patient had scorned.

‘Well, now we’ve got to the most important part.’ she started. ‘The objective of the Great Therapy Initiative is to boost everyone’s moods in this particularly hard time, which we are all finding rather tough. That’s why our motto is “everything will get better”. I’ve brought you …’ she went back to her bag and pulled out a plastic package with a T-shirt, a fridge magnet, some stickers, and some pin badges all pasted in the same phrase ‘… this! It’s so we don’t lose sight of the fact that we have a great future ahead, where all of this will be behind us, don’t you agree?’

‘Yes.’ Jonás took one of the white pin badges with red and blue letters out of the packaging and held it towards the therapist. ‘But I like yours more. Can we swap?’

‘We can’t.’ She touched the red badge with white and blue letters that she was sporting on her lapel and hurried to
suppress an expression of alarm that didn’t go unnoticed. ‘These are only for the therapists, it’s like an indication of our profession. I can’t give it to anybody.’

‘Yeah, of course …’ After confirming that there was a hidden microphone in the therapist’s badge that must be recording the conversation, he stuck one of the blue badges on his shirt. ‘No worries.’

‘Very well, so ...’ she stopped to note something down in her notebook, lifted her head and looked Jonás straight in the eyes, ‘tell me Jonás, are you happy?’

Almudena Grandes
Translated by Alice Banks

Todo va a mejorar: © Heirs of Almudena Grandes, 2022 / Tusquets Editores
Almudena had really liked Edurne’s first novel, Mejor la ausencia (Galaxia Gutenberg, 2017). She recounted it for me one afternoon in Madrid, in the Librería Alberti. Almudena used to expound on books by other women – plot, formal analysis, tone, atmosphere – with such rampant enthusiasm that we might have written the adventures of her admired Ulysses. She was a wise and voracious reader. Her enthusiasm was infectious. She knew how to recognise the power of story, emotion handled well, narrative risks, and, now that I think of it, courage in books.

She liked Aixa de la Cruz’s writing and Cristina Morales’s audacity in Terroristas modernas (Candaya, 2017). That afternoon in the shop, she bought the latest book by the Irish writer Maggie O’Farrell, I Am, I Am, I Am. I haven’t read this one yet, oh good, you have to read Maggie, she told me. And she pressed me to take Zuleikha by the Russian writer Guzel Yakhina.

Those books all have something in common: they are novels written by contemporary women who build fictional universes that are inhabited by indocile characters. Pages that tell stories that haven’t been told, where women of different origins and traditions, heiresses of different cultures, in different languages, tell, write, narrate, invent, and, from their points of view, take risks. And that exact literary crossroads, sitting before a blank page, is still something groundbreaking and political today.

I was always surprised that she read us. That she knew perfectly well what our best lines were. That she was attentive to the literature by women from the generation that came after her. That she rallied around us, helped and defended us and, above all, that she sincerely admired the tremulous writing in our first books.

I never spoke to her about my second novel, and she never got to read it. I’m conscious of the fact that few readers besides Almudena would have given me a more honest critique. So I was left never knowing that truth.

In a column from those days last November, the writer Lara Moreno said that long before the rest of us were crying out for equality, Almudena...
The Riveter

was already there, in the ‘new books’ displays, beside all the men.

And long before I would dream of publishing a book, I held The Ages of Lulu, which I read at fourteen or fifteen years old, in secret, hiding from my parents. I’ve heard and read other female writers – such as Elvira Navarro, Elisa Ferrer and Bárbara Blasco – describe the same experience. Through that novel, a whole generation of women in Spain knew something about sex and the infinite possibilities of writing. We knew more about ourselves and the country in which we were going to live.

All of that is called paving the way.

And Almudena paved the way for us in many directions. She did it through her commitment to freedom of creation, freedom of opinion, through the possibility of ideological militancy and the joy of dedicating oneself to one of the most beautiful professions in the world.

In a television interview from 1998, I heard her claim that there is no women’s literature, that it is just our point of departure. Just as there is literature for people who write influenced by any other aspect of identity. Just like she was from Madrid and built her fictions from there. But back then, she was already defending the position that literature written by women cannot be identified as something that’s opposed to ‘normal literature’ – literature written by men, in other words. I wonder about the validity of that label and its significance today. Whether or not we have overcome that breach. Because despite the fact that bookshops are filled with the names of female authors, the masterful works, the crucial, are still written by men, and men still choose the canon.

Almudena was talking about an oppressive glass ceiling, one that goes beyond labels and which we have inherited through culture. If writing is to look at the world and say what one sees, a man’s gaze continues to be universal, exciting for all, while a woman’s gaze continues to be a subgenre, and exciting, most of all, to us. And so, despite the books we publish, despite the subjects we are beginning to write about, the challenge she articulated is one we continue to have ahead of us. To be read without the shadow of our gender over the page. For our point of departure to incorporate and describe the different realities in which we all participate.

The speed with which discrimination against women withdraws from their lives varies according to geography. But literature makes empathy with the other possible, through words, through perspective, showing us we’re all hanging off the same line. Sometimes tied on tight, sometimes by an invisible thread. One of my greatest joys is sharing readings
with another woman who writes, discovering new or forgotten female authors, reading pages where we can finally recognise ourselves. And for this reason, it is so important when someone who has already made it chooses to hold her hand out to you, like Almudena did to me.

The afternoon she left us, I was writing at home, alone. I received a text and then hours passed before I could get up from my chair. Night fell over me, in silence; the house was dark. That day, I printed out a picture that seemed to me to be loaded with meaning about what it means to be a woman and to write. I pinned it up in my office. In the picture, Almudena is writing at a computer, in deep concentration; her son, who must have been four or five years old, is beside her. He looks into the camera.

When I write, there is always something that brings her back to me. About my first novel, she once said something about all the decisions I had made while writing it. Now, every time I make a decision, when it isn’t my intuition, I think: am I right, Almudena? I wish I could ask her about literature, how she did it, how she was always right. But, sometimes, I wish I could ask her about life, too. Am I making a mistake, compañera?

A few days ago, in A Coruña, two sisters came up to speak to me. They came to me through Almudena. They were her readers, readers I inherited with the sense that I can never compensate for her absence. I always feel regret for not measuring up to her readers. Because my way of constructing pages is very different from hers. But the sisters told me something: it’s how you look at life and at history, that’s all. I suppose, then, that this is the commitment.

We were unquestionably left more alone that day, more orphaned before our time, more in the dark, but we aren’t completely alone. Because we will keep talking to each other about the good books by our companions on this uncertain and often solitary road that is literature. With the comradery that can only be shared by those who are dedicated to vanquishing time through writing, to giving one another more life, more love, more adventure. Each of us on our own pages. Committed, each in her own way, to this craft that was Almudena’s, too. We will keep reading each other. And telling our stories.

_Aroa Moreno Durán_

This article was originally published in Spanish in Tinta Libre, 27 November 2022.
Many of the most acclaimed novels to come out of Spain in recent years are what you might call ‘aftermath fiction’, concerned with the legacies of the Civil War and/or the Second World War. Of these, Almudena Grandes’ *The Frozen Heart* certainly has more reach than most, finding the sort of wide readership that literary fiction rarely attains.

Grandes, who died just a year ago, was a huge seller in Spanish and was widely translated around the world. And it’s easy to see why. *The Frozen Heart* is a very winning book – extremely busy and totally immersive. It begins with a kind of question – *Who is that young woman who’s just shown up at the funeral of the narrator’s father?* – and answers it, gradually, over the course of its seven hundred-plus pages. But it’s not really this mystery that drives the reading. It’s a love story, at least in part; and it’s a story about revenge (but is it, really?); and it’s a story about how the many characters got to where they are. It’s about inheritance – both in a literal, concrete sense, but also in terms of how the present is complicated by what occurred in decades past, and whether that past is something we hold on to, or try our best to escape.

Grandes’ narrative leaps about in time, with forty-year-old Álvaro (a physics professor and ‘an ordinary guy’) as first-person narrator of the ‘present’ section, which is intercut with an evolving 1940s wartime storyline. As we see connections made, this becomes a book of revelations, both for the reader and for the characters themselves. We discover Álvaro’s background, and that of investment manager Raquel (especially about her grandfather), in the process meeting two families who fought (and made terrible sacrifices) on opposite sides of the same war. Álvaro learns about the new people he meets, but he also finds out more about people he thought he’s known, well, forever; and as he
does, many of his deepest certainties – about his father, about his own priorities – are wrenched out of place.

There’s a lot for Álvaro to take in – as there is for us. Like many family sagas, *The Frozen Heart* takes its time getting where it’s going; it is not an economical piece of storytelling. There are backstories and more backstories, constantly shifting family tensions (sometimes very well depicted), countless relationships introduced and explained (lots of glimpses of love affairs, which we rarely dwell on for long), with twists and turns both dramatic and trivial. New, temporarily central characters suddenly appear several hundred pages in, as the story expands, and fills out, its centre of gravity shifting. When we do stay put long enough to see a relationship develop, it’s engaging and even affecting; and episodically there’s some dynamism to the telling (thanks also to the light touch of its translator, Frank Wynne), so the haltingness of the big-picture story isn’t too much of a concern. While you’re waiting for the pieces to come together, though, the structure can at times feel chaotic, so if you’re looking for something tight and focused, this is not the novel for you. If you’re not in a hurry, however, it offers a wealth of rewards.

*Daniel Hahn*
I’ve always felt embraced upon stepping outside the Atocha train station. For the past twenty years, the Emperador Carlos V Plaza – which is nothing but a jumble of cars, the concentric circle water makes as it siphons down the drain and the dark, slender shade of the trees on the Paseo del Prado to the right – has received me with the fluorescent gaze of the Hotel Mediodía. It does me good.

Time and again, that hotel – where I’ve never slept and which sits beside the Museo Reina Sofía – says to me, ‘you’re home.’ Time and again, in spite of everything. Despite having escaped, despite the noise, the dirty air, the politicking and the politicians and the hole in my pocket; despite my feet, tired from running all over and arriving late, despite the fact that this city hurts your lower back and can be a cold hand squeezing your heart a little bit more each day, despite that, all of that, the Hotel Mediodía says ‘you’re home’ and I take a breath. A small smile of defiance appears on my lips.

It’s not a breath of rest or relief. It’s something else. For Madrid, being a home doesn’t mean being a fireside refuge. Madrid isn’t a mother’s embrace, there’s no scent of saltpetre or the comforting steam of a wood-fired kitchen. The Hotel Mediodía, its sign silhouetted in the high sky of this infinite city, is here to tell you: you’re back again, in the place where everything is possible.
No writer was more keenly aware of what is lost and what is gained by the process of translation than Javier Marías. Speaking to Paul Holdengräber in 2009, he said that ‘when you translate a book, the book loses the language that made it possible. It loses absolutely each and every word the author imagined’. It is the translator who makes the crucial decisions about which words will be used. Unusually, Marías could see this transformative process from the perspective of an author whose writing was translated into many languages, but also as a translator, into Spanish, of many significant English language writers, including Laurence Sterne, Sir Thomas Browne, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Hardy and John Updike. This process, he felt, greatly benefitted his own writing. As Gareth J. Wood writes in [Javier Marías’s Debt to Translation](OUP, 2012), ‘it is clear that Marías believes translation to have honed his skills as a writer, shaping his prose for the better to the point where he actively encourages others to follow his example’.

When we read his novels, therefore, we should be aware that they were written in Spanish by Javier Marías but that in the English translations ‘every single word has been changed and the wording of a translator has never been chosen by the author but by the translator’. Marías was very well served by Margaret Jull Costa, the translator of almost all of his novels into English. This has meant that not only was he translated with immense care and diligence but that her decisions lend the novels a consistent ‘voice’. The single novel not translated by Jull Costa was [Voyage Along the Horizon](OUP, 2012), which was translated by Kristina Cordero. This was an early novel – his second – written when he was twenty-one and which he described as a ‘pastiche’. Three other youthful novels remain untranslated. While [Voyage Along the Horizon](OUP, 2012) is a curiosity, it did introduce the lengthy, multi-clause sentences which would become a notable element of his writing style, starting with his first significant novel,
Marías’ next novel, *All Souls*, translated in 1992 is, again, labyrinthine in its extended sentence form. The setting is the Modern Languages department of the Oxford University college that gives the novel its name. Loose musings on the arcane rituals of the college and the manners and behaviour of the English mix freely around an affair the narrator is having with a married lecturer. With gossip wafting about like the cigarette smoke that is everywhere, there is plenty to amuse the reader. It is also the novel that first introduces readers to the intriguing story of the island of Redonda, which Marías returned to in *Dark Back of Time*. It is also a novel much concerned with ‘eavesdropping’, a major element of his subsequent novels.

The purpose of characters who listen and spy is to uncover well-concealed truths or secrets that are usually presented within the initial scene-setting. Such is the case in the novel *A Heart So White* (1995), the first of four books whose titles are taken from plays by Shakespeare (five if you accept a slight reworking of a quote from *The Tempest* for *Dark Back of Time*). As with all but one of his other novels, this one has a first-person narrator. In this instance, the narrator has a father who is fervently anxious to keep aspects of his past – regarding details of his first two wives – in the realm of the unknown. As the narrator was the product of his father’s third marriage, this prompts the narrator to think deeply about the nature of his own existence. Intricate examinations of people’s inexplicable behaviour, the never-quite-equal nature of love and recalibrations of the past are the concerns of much of the novel.

In all of Marías’s novels, interrogation of what can seem like incidental factors, or even apparently whimsical obsessions, occupy the space where, in other novels, the plot would advance. This is very much the case in *Tomorrow in the
Battle Think on Me (1996), in which digression and allusion – the search for connections and the impossibility of certainty – form the novel’s substantial heart. ‘I am the person doing the telling and people can either choose to listen to me or not,’ the narrator says.

As ever, there is a dilemma: a woman dies in the arms of a man who is not her husband. What to do? The predicament is the means to the author’s true purpose. He relishes the opportunity to linger over themes both familiar (the character of the English, the nature of the Spanish) and less familiar (the many manifestations of battles, interpersonal or military). For Marías, everything is contingent. In all of his work, the happenstance of life, and of death, is rendered with a kind of incredulity. This may be what happened, he seems to say, but it could so easily have been different.

With Dark Back of Time (2001), Marías returned to the Oxford setting of All Souls. Dark Back of Time is best approached after reading the earlier book because it is in conversation with that novel. Was All Souls based on actual happenings? Is this book? Or should we believe him when he tells us: ‘the elements of the story I am now embarking upon are entirely capricious, determined by chance, merely episodic and cumulative’? Much evocative time is spent in second-hand bookshops. We also return to the bizarre history of Redonda, the uninhabited Caribbean island that once belonged to the writer John Gawsworth and of which, following much gentle persuasion, Marías became ‘king’. He exercised his position to initiate a prize, the winners of which became Dukes of Redonda. Among those chosen were, J. M. Coetzee, Claudio Magris, Éric Rohmer and Alice Munro.

The trilogy of books, collectively titled Your Face Tomorrow (2005, 2006 and 2009) and totalling 1,262 pages, allowed Marías first to present his material as happening in a novelistic ‘real time’, and then to replay it in slow motion, permitting a meticulous examination, in the hope that the truth and intention of what has occurred can be determined. The trilogy is a spy novel (or anti-spy novel) but one that is primarily concerned with discernment. Close observations that bleed into voyeurism are conducted by the narrator, Jacques Deza, who is judged to have a particular talent for evaluating a person’s character by observing them intently. But, as he discovers, to see is sometimes to be. When he is contaminated by the actions of another, there can be no negating what he has witnessed.

All great novelists establish their own sense of reality as they write. The novels of Javier Marías can, at times, push hard against our knowledge of the world. Within his fictional creations, there is always
both a discernible coherence and a notion of unreality. This applies, in particular, to his dialogue, which is far too eloquent, and elegant, to bear any comparison with the ways in which people actually speak. Yet, it does not interfere with our acceptance of the particular circumstances presented to us in his fictional world, because Marías patiently lays down accretions of details – both physical and metaphysical – which convince us wholly as we read. In *The Infatuations* (2013), for example, it is impossible not to become ensnared in the shifting contrivance that may – or equally may not – explain the violent death of a businessman. There is no assurance in what we are being told and there is an artificiality about much of what is said. A resolution will not be forthcoming, and yet it is all immensely satisfying and even – within the given context – credible.

Doubt is, again, central to *Thus Bad Begins* (2016). As the narrator says, ‘novels are such arbitrary, impure things’. They are not the place to seek definitive answers. Yet, the truth is precisely what Eduardo Muriel, a film director, thinks he wants to confront. That truth, inevitably, proves to be elusive.

In *The Infatuations*, one of the main characters illustrates a point by reading Balzac’s *Colonel Chabert* to another character. Identity, he shows, is easily mislaid. Knowing who you are is no guarantee that others will stop thinking of you, in every sense, as the person you once were. In *Berta Isla* (2018), absence makes the heart grow doubtful. Berta married the man she has loved since they were at school together, but his secrecy and evasions, along with his increasingly lengthy absences, mean that misgivings accumulate and even the truth of his identity becomes uncertain. A rare instance of third-person narration (in the sections detailing his activities) gives the novel an extra sense of distance and estrangement.

The man’s name is Tomás Nevinson, which is also the name given to the final novel by Javier Marías, who died on 11 September, 2022. *Tomás Nevinson* (2023) returns us to Oxford and spies and people we have met before. ‘I was brought up the old-fashioned way, and could never have dreamed that I would one day be ordered to kill a woman’ it begins. Once again, we are presented with a quandary of extraordinary difficulty, and one that raises moral issues that must, in characteristic Marías style, be considered with due gravity and range. It’s a very fine ending to an outstanding body of work in which each novel has mingled with all of his other novels and with the great writing of western literature.

Declan O’Driscoll
Reviewing any novel by Spain’s celebrated author Javier Marías is always daunting (how can we possibly do justice to the great man’s prose?), but to review his final work, published in Spanish in 2021 and English in 2023, is especially intimidating.

When Javier Marías died in September 2022, we lost a leading literary light – a novelist, short-story writer, essayist and translator revered across the world. Tomás Nevinson, his 634-page ‘lockdown’ book (he signed off the Spanish manuscript in October 2020) is as erudite, witty and warm as any of his sixteen novels, but knowing of his death, knowing that these are the last words, makes each page more precious and poignant. Daunting also, it must be said, because of the novel’s length and long sentences (one sentence, I counted, had seventeen lines). Indeed, it takes a few hours to switch off the fast-paced world outside the work and immerse yourself in the rambling musings, the explorations of the human condition, his sweeping literary and historical references. But you do; your pulse rate decelerates, and Marías captures your heart. As a lover of long, immersive novels from France, Germany, Russia and Britain, Javier Marías is my Spanish amor.

From the tantalising opening sentence, we enter the mind of first-person narrator Tomás Nevinson as his thoughts free-associate on the executions of Marie-Antoinette, Anne Boleyn and Joan of Arc. We’ve met the secretive, bilingual Spanish-English M16 agent before, in Marías’s previous novel, Berta Isla, related from the viewpoint of Nevinson’s Spanish wife, Berta. Tomás is now back in Madrid, in his forties, retired from the secret services, and divorced but living close to Berta and their two children, in an attempt to repair relations after decades undercover.

This story begins in 1997, when John Major is still British prime minister, soon to be replaced by Tony Blair, and when the UK
government is engaged in the tense negotiations in Northern Ireland that will lead to the Good Friday Agreement. The IRA is active in Northern Ireland, as ETA is in Spain’s Basque region, and the links between ETA and the IRA have long been established. It is this frenzied political atmosphere that prompts Tomás’s former M16 handler to offer him the perfect opportunity to return to his profession. Tomás is reluctant, ‘I had become thoroughly fed up and disillusioned’, but after several chapters of analysis – of the morality of killing and of his own struggles, mistakes and memories – he agrees to return to being useful, because, ‘After having been someone, it’s very difficult to go back to being no one’.

His new prey is a woman – but which one? All he’s told is that she is, like him, bilingual, with one Spanish parent and one British – Northern Irish, in her case. For nearly ten years she has been living incognito in Ruán, an insignificant (fictional) town in north-west Spain. It is believed that she has collaborated with both ETA and the IRA, helped plan atrocities, and, in this heightened situation, might strike again. Tomás Nevinson takes on the name and persona of Miguel Centurión, a new English teacher in Ruán. The narrative voice also splits at this point so that both Tomás and Miguel relate events. The murderous terrorist, we learn, could be one of three local women – Inés, Celia or María – and Miguel’s task is to become close to each of them in order to ascertain which one he must kill and which two are innocent.

So much for the action, although in truth little actually happens as the investigations are exquisitely character led. There are park-bench, café and bedroom scenes; the novel is baggy in parts, and you occasionally long for Miguel to hurry up and discover his inner 007, but the suspense builds, and we are drawn into the complex inner lives of the three women, looking for clues. Miguel/Tomás/Javier clearly adores women; he describes, understands and respects them profoundly, and as a reader, this is immensely satisfying. No observation is made cheaply, no literary sacrifices are made to drive the plot forward. The knowledge that Javier Marías himself was a fluent English speaker, and familiar with the life and literature of Spain, the UK and the US, adds to the novel’s authenticity. Here is also the appropriate place to pay homage to Margaret Jull Costa, Javier Marías’s main English voice and translator for thirty years. When you finish the novel, don’t whatever you do skip the Afterword, when Jull Costa writes about her feeling of ‘bereavement’ at his death, the end of a relationship ‘rather like a marriage, except that you are married not to the person, but to their voice’.

Much has been written about Javier Marías. He tackled the big
themes, the politics and crimes of history, as well as personal morality and responsibility, and the smaller, intimate details of daily life. His pursuit of truth through literature was lifelong. Literature mattered to him, witnessed powerfully in this, his final novel: when his investigations flag, Miguel decides that in order to delve more deeply into the background of the town’s inhabitants, and indirectly into that of the three key suspects, he will ‘interview’ Florentín, the local newspaper columnist, ‘the town’s watchman, the man who nothing escapes’, explaining that he is researching a novel he plans to set in Ruán. This is a scene full of warmth and humour, as the two men riff on appearance and reality, small-town crooks and corruption (versus ‘the truly shameless and the pompous’ Madrid) and on performance, art and literature. It’s a fitting epitaph to Marías himself:

‘Literature allows us to see people as they truly are, even though those people do not exist but who, with luck, will always exist, which is why literature will never entirely lose its prestige.’

Rosie Goldsmith
I was brought up the old-fashioned way, and could never have dreamed that I would one day be ordered to kill a woman. You don’t touch women, you don’t beat them, you don’t do them any physical harm and you avoid all verbal violence, although in that regard they don’t always hold back. More than that, you protect and respect them and give way to them, shield them and help them if they’re pregnant or with a child in their arms or in a pushchair, you offer them your seat on the bus or in the metro, you even safeguard them when walking down the street, keeping them away from the traffic or from the effluvia that, in the olden days, used to be tossed over balconies, and if a ship founders and seems likely to go under, the lifeboats are for them and their little ones (who belong more to them than to us men), at least the first spaces. When a group of people are about to be shot en masse, the women are sometimes spared and allowed to leave; they are then left without husbands, without fathers, without brothers and even without adolescent let alone grown-up sons, but they are allowed to go on living, mad with grief like tormented ghosts, for whom, nevertheless, the years pass, and so they grow old, chained to the memory of the world they lost. They are obliged to become the depositories of memory, the only ones left when it seems no one is left, and the only ones who can tell what happened.

Anyway, this is what I was taught as a child, but that was then, and it wasn’t always followed to the letter. Yes, that was then and was applied in theory but not in practice. After all, in 1793, a Queen of France was guillotined, and before that, countless women accused of witchcraft were burned to death, as was the soldier Joan of Arc, to give just a couple of well-known examples.

Yes, of course, women have always been killed, but it’s something that goes against the grain and causes great unease, it isn’t clear whether Anne Boleyn was given the privilege of being put to the sword rather than beheaded with a crude, bungling axe, or indeed burned at the stake, because she was a woman or because she was the Queen, or because she was young and beautiful, beautiful according to the tastes of the time and according to reports, although reports are never to be trusted, not even those of eyewitnesses, who see and hear only vaguely, and who are often wrong or else lie. In engravings of her execution she is shown on her knees as if she were praying, her body erect and her
head held high; if they had used an axe, she would have had to rest her chin or cheek on the block and adopt a more humiliating, more uncomfortable posture, to have grovelled if you like, and this would also have offered a clearer view of her backside to those who could see it from where they were standing. It’s odd that she should be so concerned about comfort or composure in her final moments in this world, and even about elegance and decorum; of what possible importance could this be to someone who was about to become a corpse and disappear beneath the earth, and in two separate pieces. These depictions also include the swordsman of Calais, as he is called in various accounts, so as to distinguish him from any ordinary executioner – brought over ex profeso because of his great skill and, possibly, at the request of the Queen herself – and he is always shown standing behind her and out of sight, never in front of her, as if it had been agreed and decided that she would be spared having to see the coming blow, the trajectory of the heavy weapon which, nevertheless, advances swiftly and unstoppably, like a whistle once it has left the lips or like a sudden strong gust of wind (in a couple of the images she has her eyes blindfolded, but not in most of them); so that she would not know the precise moment when her head would be cut off with a single clean two-handed blow and fall onto the dais face up or face down or on one side, on the neck or the top of the head – who knows, she certainly would never know; so that the movement would catch her by surprise, if there can be any surprise when the person knows why she has come and why she is kneeling there, without a cloak about her, at eight o’clock in the morning on a still-cold English day in May. She is, of course, kneeling to facilitate the executioner’s task and not call into question his skill: he had been so good as to cross the Channel and offer his help, and he probably wasn’t particularly tall. It seems Anne Boleyn had insisted that one blow with the sword would be enough because she only had a little neck. She must often have put her hands about it as proof.

She was, at any rate, treated more considerately than Marie Antoinette two and a half centuries later, for it is said that she was treated far worse in her October than her husband Louis XVI in his January, for he had preceded her to the guillotine by about nine months. The fact that she was a woman was of no interest to the revolutionaries, or perhaps they considered treating women differently to be in itself anti-revolutionary. A lieutenant called De Busne, who had treated her respectfully during her time in prison, was arrested and replaced by another, surlier guard. When it came to the King, they had simply tied his hands behind his back when he reached the foot of the scaffold; he had been
transported there in a closed carriage, which belonged, I believe, to the mayor of Paris; and he was allowed to choose the priest who attended him (a non-juring priest, that is, one who had not sworn loyalty to the Constitution and to the new order, which changed on a daily basis and which had condemned the King to die). His Austrian widow, however, had her hands bound before the journey, which she had to make in an open cart, thus leaving her far more vulnerable and exposed to the unbridled loathing on the faces of the rabble and to their insults; also they only offered her the services of a constitutional priest, which she politely declined. The chronicles say that although, during her reign, she had been said to be lacking in manners, these returned to her in her final moments: she went up the steps to the scaffold so quickly that she stumbled and trod on the executioner’s foot, for which she immediately apologised, as if this were her usual response (‘Excusez-moi, Monsieur,’ she said).

The guillotine had its inevitably undignified preliminaries: the condemned man not only had his hands tied behind his back, he would also have his arms tightly bound to his sides, like a foreshadowing of the shroud; once rendered rigid and ungainly, almost immobilised, two assistants would have to pick him up like a parcel (or as they used to do with dwarves in circuses before firing them from a cannon) and manoeuvre him into position, face down, prone, completely horizontal, so that his neck fitted in the designated space. In that, Marie Antoinette and husband were equals: they both found themselves objectified at the end, treated like sacks or bales of cotton or torpedoes in some archaic submarine, like bundles with a protruding head that would suddenly tumble off in no particular direction, until someone stopped it by grabbing the hair in full view of the crowd. Not one of them did what St Denis did, according to an astonished French cardinal, who described how, after St Denis’s martyrdom and decapitation during Emperor Valerian’s persecution of Christians, the saint-to-be picked up his head and walked with it under his arm from Montmartre to the place of his burial (thus considerably lightening the porters’ load), where the abbey or church that bears his name was later built: a distance of nine kilometres. This marvel left the cardinal speechless, he said, although actually it so fired him up that a witty lady listening to his account interrupted him, cutting the incident down to size with a single sentence: ‘But, sir!’ she said. ‘The distance is nothing, it’s only the first step that is difficult.’
A TOUR OF SPANISH WRITING

by MARGARET JULL COSTA

This will doubtless sound unbearably smug, but I have been extremely fortunate in the Spanish authors I’ve been asked to translate, right from the very start. Álvaro Pombo’s delightful and eccentric novel El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard (translated as ‘The Hero of the Big House’, and which really deserves to be reprinted) was my first commission, and quite a challenge for a novice like me with its stream-of-consciousness monologues from the wonderfully garrulous Maria del Carmen Villacantero. That experience made me realise how inexperienced I was, and also, and possibly more importantly, how vital it is for the translator to be both translator and editor, since they know the text better than anyone, possibly even better than the author. My next commission was Todas las almas (‘All Souls’) by Javier Marías, the first of his novels to be translated into English, and my first encounter with his work and his long, looping sentences. Again, this was a challenge, but fortunately, as a fan of nineteenth-century literature, I love long sentences, and so it did feel very much like a meeting of minds. I remained his principal English translator for thirty years, until his death last September. That long relationship proved particularly necessary because, in his subsequent novels, he often refers to previous works, and to previous characters and what they said, as if they were all members of the same family – which they are.

Then came Bernardo Atxaga’s Obabakoak, which another translator (luckily for me) did not have time to translate. That book, possibly still my favourite Atxaga, is a series of semi-connected stories, some set in the Basque Country, others in Germany, France, China and Iran, thus giving that so-called orphan language Euskara its proper place in world literature. There began another long translatorial friendship, for I’m still translating him now, thirty years on. And, yes, I do that much-frowned-upon thing: I translate from his Castilian translation of his Basque original. I have asked him about this several times, and he insists that he doesn’t mind at all. So I needn’t feel too guilty, need I?

Ramón del Valle-Inclán is better known for his plays, but I was
lucky enough to be asked to translate his four novellas, the glorious *Sonatas* (*Spring, Summer, Autumn* and *Winter*), with their wildly over-the-top prose. Just to give you a flavour:

‘The wine laughed in the glasses, and the Spanish guitar, the sultan of the feast, wept over its Moorish jealousies and its love affair with the white moon of the Alpujarras ... Chinese and Japanese merchants passed us, buffeted by the hot whirlwind of the market, their hair lank, their faces glum, not a tremor of joy shaking their long pigtails ...’

Then there is another too-little-known (by English readers) classic, *El Jarama* (*The River*) by Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, which combines a pitch-perfect ear for dialogue, superb descriptions of the river and the night, and the sense of a country haunted by the past, by death, the River Jarama being the site of the 1937 Battle of Jarama, in which both sides, Republicans and Nationalists, suffered huge losses.

I should also mention Carmen Martín Gaite, who was, for a time, married to Sánchez Ferlosio. I have only translated two of her novels, *Nubosidad variable* (*Variable Cloud*) and *La Reina de las Nieves* (translated for some reason as ‘The Farewell Angel’). They inhabit a very different world to the books of Sánchez Ferlosio, full of interior landscapes inhabited largely by women navigating their way through life. *Variable Cloud* is a particular favourite for many reasons, and I still often think of one especially moving chapter towards the end of the book, narrated by a mother returning as a ghost, but unaware she is a ghost, to the apartment she had lived in all her life:

‘I go out into the dark corridor, I count the steps to the next door, then from that door to the next, and then on to the next. The distances coincide with the approximate geography of touch that is evolving inside me, like a map with corrections superimposed on it.’

There are also the stories of Medardo Fraile. I translated a collection of these under the title *Things Look Different in the Light*, and they are little gems of prose, brimming with humour and insight into ordinary people’s lives. An additional pleasure was being able to send him my translations for his approval – and that of his wife and daughter. He died, alas, shortly before the book was published.

I worked equally closely with Jesús Carrasco on his visceral (I use the word advisedly!) novel *Intemperie* (*Out in the Open*), the account of a young boy fleeing sexual abuse and befriending an old goat herd. The novel is full of detailed descriptions of landscapes and places and agricultural equipment. I simply could not have translated it without Jesús sending
me drawings and illustrations, and explanations of everything from pack saddles to aqueducts to candlesticks to windpumps, and I learned rather more than I wanted to about disembowelling goats.

I have also translated the great nineteenth-century writers Benito Pérez Galdós and Leopoldo Alas (also known as Clarín); both of whom, I think, are far funnier than Dickens, and far more realistic about male-female relationships.

And that completes my tour. Tours of other authors are, of course, available, but I hope you have enjoyed this one.

Margaret Jull Costa

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**THE RIVETER FEATURES**

**MY SPAIN**

by ROBERT ELMS

Franco died just after I first set foot on Spanish sand. I was a teenager who had never before left England and despite only witnessing the gaudy tourist Spain of the 1970s I was entranced by bone-bleached white towns and unforgiving blue skies. I fell instantly in love with a country about to change dramatically, and vowed to return.

I certainly did so, as I have been back obsessively time and time again, and have watched and witnessed many changes, mainly for the better, as this intriguing, complex country, for so long cut off by Francoism, has found its way in the modern world. But I have also seen Spain retain its compelling, sometimes dark, always mesmerising soul.

When I moved to Barcelona in the 1980s the city was deep in the decade-long fiesta known as the movida, a hedonistic celebration of new-found freedoms. Throwing off the shroud of the Generalisimo, the anarchic side of the Spanish character came roaring out and everybody went out to party. That wild nocturnal abandon has inevitably calmed down a little since. Even in insomniac Madrid the madrugada is not as busy with clubbers as it was when I first went there, but Spain is certainly no longer the quiet, censorious, devoutly Catholic country of old.

A remarkable tide of tolerance has swept over the land when it comes to matters of morality, sexuality and gender. Women’s liberation still has a way to go and machismo still exists, but many battles have been won, and young Spanish women have an inspiring confidence and competence. The big cities all have prominent gay barrios, but even in the small Andalucian pueblo where I have a home it is now normal to see same-sex couples holding hands and rainbow flags flying.

The diminution of the power of the church is one obvious cause, yet they still pull on their pointy hoods and parade their blessed virgins at
every opportunity. The theatricality and communality of Catholicism still has great appeal, but it does not stop them flocking to the nearby naturist beach and shedding their clothes and their inhibitions.

I watched the television with transfixed horror on the day in 1981 that Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero and his fascist comrades stormed the Cortes and proclaimed a coup d’état. For years the fledgling democracy felt fragile and tenuous, as if the past was just waiting to usurp the future and plunge this historically fractious land back into darkness. But almost imperceptibly, just as Francoist monuments and street names have vanished, so that threat faded and diminished to the point where it now seems almost comical to imagine moustachioed men in tricorn hats holding the country to ransom.

Yet it is only in recent years that Spain has really opened up on painful questions about the past. The Pacto de Olvido, the agreement to forget, led to a kind of collective amnesia, a forced silence, with people reluctant to talk about the Civil War and its aftermath, as if still scarred and scared. The wounds are still raw, the graves still shallow, but at least they are now being openly discussed and healing can begin.

But there are still great divides and fissures. Regionalism has acted like a centrifugal force, almost tearing Spain apart. Ancient languages have thrived, but so have ancient antipathies. Up in that elegant northern town I first lived in, Catalanismo has asserted itself with ferocious effect, reshaping Barcelona into a more self-conscious, self-confident, avowedly European, much less Spanish city. Speaking Castilian is looked down upon, the siesta is forgotten, the corrida is banned and Madrid is seen as the enemy. But conversely, up in the once-tormented Basque Country, devolution has succeeded in stopping the separatist bombs and the bullets that once ravaged that beautiful corner of Iberia.

Culturally Spain has flourished through internationally famed actors and film makers like Almodóvar, Cruz, Banderas and Bardem, and writers like Rosa Montero and Javier Marías. Yet much of the excitement and energy in music and the arts has originated, not from native Spaniards, but from the former colonies. Once cultural diversity came only from those very varied regions, but the Latinisation of Spain has been an almost unnoticed process of enrichment, as Venezuelan expats abound, Cuban artists exhibit, Mexican telenovelas rule the airwaves and reggaeton fills the air.

Thankfully Anglo culture still has limited impact, and Rosalía is currently bigger than Taylor Swift. It’s relatively rare to hear British or
North American music or see yanqui TV, but the other Americas now play an incredible role in Spanish life. Multiculturalism is a long way off though, and sadly there is sometimes a residual, casual racism against people who look markedly different.

One area where the indigenous culture has really flourished is in cuisine. Spanish food was once looked down upon as a poor relative of that from France and Italy, but not anymore. Star chefs abound and Michelin stars proliferate. From pintxos in San Sebastian to tapas in Sevilla, and just about everywhere in between, you can eat fabulous food in fine restaurants. There’s an easy sophistication to dining out in Spain today although you can still find good rough-and-ready local places.

Certainly if you’re in any of the big cities, with their swanky boutiques and designer bars, hip architecture and cool hotels, it can feel like Spain is now a fully paid-up member of the modern consumerist society. But get out there into the near-empty interior, lose yourself on the planes of La Mancha, explore baking Extremadura or wander in the distant hills of Granada, where the eagles fly and the dark rhythms of cante jondo float on the levante, the hot wind that blows in from Africa.

Drink cold sherry by the Guadalqivir, talk football in a dusty Costa Brava bar or watch a procession in the medieval alleys of some, once-grand, now near-forgotten town, and this beguiling country, for all the changes it has seen will still exert that age-old magic.

Robert Elms
If the gatekeepers of English language fiction have their way, postmodern literature will soon go the way of jazz fusion and the Hula Hoop. We live in an age of confessional realism, marvelling at the stories of writers from nations and identities that have hitherto been unpublished. We might doubt the truth of their confessions, we might dress those confessions up in the costumes of superheroes. But there’s little time to consider the construction and mechanism of the confessional – the nature of the strange collisions of letters and words that allow a writer to create voices and pitch them into readers’ imaginations.

So all hail the protean efforts of the independent publisher New Directions to refresh thirsty monolingual Anglos with translations of one of the most entertaining philosophical fabulists still writing today. Since the early 1970s, the Barcelonan Enrique Vila-Matas has been chronicling the lives of hapless souls infected with an inability to engage innocently with language. Vila-Matas’s heroes are voracious readers, if not overwhelmed by the weight of all the writing that has preceded them, then at least conscious of their precursors – Borges, Bolaño and Beckett. They are publishers, as in his 2010 novel Dublinesque, who are haunted by the ghosts of writers, writers drowned by words. His 2000 Bartleby & Co. is a book of footnotes.
without a text, filled with anecdotes about painters who don’t paint, writers who don’t write, artists who, like Melville’s refusenik of a copyist, would ‘prefer not to’.

The hero of Mac’s Problem is a sixty-year-old man from Barcelona whose construction company has suddenly gone bust. To fill the yawning gap in his days, he decides to begin a diary. Every day he writes in a notebook, fills it with notes on his neighbourhood walks, his drinks in its bars, his chance conversations. Then, he types up the diary entry on a computer, prints a copy, edits, and reprints, to the intense uninterest of his wife. Just like a novelist.

And yet, Mac insists, he is not writing a novel. At most, he contemplates rewriting the most unsuccessful novel of the most successful writer of his neighbourhood, Sánchez. Sánchez’s novel, titled Walter’s Problem, tells the story of a famous ventriloquist who flees Lisbon after a final performance in which he confesses to killing a barber from Seville who has stolen the woman he loved. Each chapter, according to Mac, is written in the style of a different author, from Borges to Hemingway to Malamud – a work of ventriloquism, whose magic is marred by odd passages that Mac credits to either drink or temporary insanity.

Ventriloquism, the throwing of voices, is not a new subject for Vila-Matas. In ‘Sea Swell’, the shaggiest in the wild selection of short stories published a few years earlier under the title Vampire in Love, the narrator, as Vila-Matas did in his youth, finds himself at a supper at the Parisian apartment of the writer Marguerite Duras, auditioning for the chance to live in her attic. Introduced by his friend Andrés, the nervous young writer has fortified himself with two or three amphetamines that have rendered him entirely incapable of speech. Andrés jumps to his rescue, not only explaining that his friend is upset because he has just left the only draft of his novel in a taxi, but proceeding to recount the plot of the lost novel – the story of a ventriloquist who flees Lisbon after murdering, with the sharpened tip of a sun umbrella from Java, the Sevillian barber who stole the heart of the woman he loved ... in short, the plot that jumps from the mouth of Sanchez into Walter’s, and later into Mac’s Problem. (Although, in a piece of perhaps accidental ventriloquism, the excellent translator Margaret Jull Costa metamorphoses the murderous ‘sun umbrella from Java’, ‘la sombrilla de Java’, into ‘a Javanese sunshade’ in the novel.)

Whose story is it anyway? Are all writers ventriloquists, if not copyists and vampires, feasting on the ink of all the books they have read? These are the questions that Vila-Matas asks us to ponder as we read not only ‘Sea Swell’ and its accompanying stories, but Mac’s Problem. Sure enough, Mac
eventually confesses he is not the owner of a bankrupt construction company – when, after all, would he have had the time for such intimate acquaintance with literature – but a lawyer who has been suddenly cashiered for drunkenness and incompetence. Sánchez may or may not be the lover of Mac’s wife, Carmen. There may or may not be a murder at the end of the tunnel, with or without an untranslatable object from Indonesia. And the non-novel that is a diary might be a novel after all, written by the master ventriloquist himself: Vila-Matas.

Jonathan Levi
In February of '74 I travelled to Paris with the anachronistic intention of becoming a writer from the 1920s, ‘lost generation’ style. That was my, shall we say, unusual aim on moving there, but even as a young man I couldn’t fail to notice, as I wandered the streets, that Paris was absorbed in its latest revolutions, and this filled me with a vast, monumental laziness, an overwhelming lethargy at the mere thought of having to become a writer there, let alone a lion hunter à la Hemingway.

To hell with everything, especially my aspirations, I said to myself one evening as I crossed the Pont Neuf. There must be some way of escaping this fate, I’d been thinking non-stop throughout the whole of that day. In the end, I turned down a dimly lit street and embarked on a life of crime that somehow plunged me back into an adolescent mindset that I thought I’d put behind me: the classic dispirited state of a young man whose great poems would revolve around ‘solitude’ and ‘his weatherworn soul’, were he not too busy selling drugs to write them.

In Paris, at any rate, I wasn’t so foolish as to be taken in by the total void, which had already wrecked my first youth, in Barcelona. Instead, I succumbed to a kind of controlled meaninglessness, bordering almost on pretence, and did little else but explore, in considerable depth, and from top to bottom, the seedy side of Paris, the diabolical side, that glorious city described in *The Other Paris* by Luc Sante (neighbourhoods teeming with flâneurs, Apaches, chanson stars, clochards, brave revolutionaries and street artists), the Paris of outcasts, the Paris of anti-Franco exiles with their well-organised drug network, the Paris of washed-up has-beens, the Paris of dizzying social frenzy.

A Paris that, many years later, would be the setting for my account of those days spent dealing hashish, marijuana and cocaine, during which I failed to devote a single minute to writing, and was overcome, what’s more, by a sudden lack of
interest in culture more generally; a lack of interest that cost me dearly in the long run and was even reflected in the oafish title I gave to my account of those turbulent times: *A Garage of One’s Own*.

Paris, for me, during that first two-year stay, was simply a place where I sold drugs and where, for a brief three-month period that went by in a flash, I was addicted to lysergic acid, LSD, which led me to understand that what we call ‘reality’ is not an exact science but a pact between a great many people, a great many co-conspirators, who might one day decide, for example, that the Avenida Diagonal in your hometown is a tree-lined boulevard, when in fact, after a dose of acid, you can see quite plainly that it’s a zoo rife with beasts and tropical birds, all with a life of their own and running amok, some even swinging in the treetops.

During that first two-year stay, my Parisian world was limited to a modest patch ruled by small-time dealers, and the odd party full of depressed Spanish exiles; lousy parties, albeit with plenty of red wine, and about which all I remember is the habit I developed of saying goodbye to each and every one of my pseudo-friends and acquaintances with the words:

‘Did you know I’ve stopped writing?’

At which point someone would invariably jump in and correct me:

‘You never wrote in the first place!’

And it was true, I didn’t write, or rather I hadn’t since I published my first and only book, the exercise in style I completed in some barracks in the North African city of Melilla. It was titled *Nepal* and consisted of a veiled take-down of the bourgeois family, along with an explanation of how I intended – blessed innocence, I had yet to set foot in Paris, or venture down that dimly lit street – to remain utterly unchanged, identical to my current self for as long as I lived; in other words, to remain in thrall to the wholesome hippie tendencies I had found so seductive until some countercultural, libertarian, pacifist scoundrels took me to work a sugar-beet harvest and everything suddenly changed.

No one in Paris knew, nor was there any reason why they should, that I had written and published a book on my return from Africa, a little novel that passed itself off as having been written in Kathmandu and whose prose was so experimental.
that the critique of the bourgeois family went entirely unnoticed. I’d never told anyone about my days in Melilla spent playing at feeling like Gary Cooper in Von Sternberg’s Morocco (though I lacked all the requisites to pull it off – Marlene Dietrich, for starters), and this gave me, among other things, the chance to try my hand at being someone else, at reinventing myself, though in the end I always found that, much as I longed to be many different people and to have been born in many different places, my likeness to myself was just too strong, and not a day went by when I wasn’t reminded that the risk of trying to be someone else is precisely that we end up resembling ourselves.

Enrique Vila-Matas
Translated by Sophie Hughes and Annie McDermott

Translation © 2023 by Sophie Hughes and Annie McDermott.
Montevideo is forthcoming in 2024 from Dalkey Archive Press.
On the ninth of March 2020, as was only fitting, I observed this day as best I knew how, with a long siesta. The world had begun to fall apart, but I hadn’t realised it yet. The constant flow of news on the cases of Covid-19 in China and in Italy still felt like a distant problem, a disaster that could never happen in Spain. I was living in a bubble of naïvety. Just five days later, the numbers of infections and deaths began to shoot up, and on Friday the thirteenth the president held a press conference to announce that a state of emergency would be imposed at midnight on Sunday the fifteenth.

Over the first weeks of the lockdown I found it very hard to concentrate. To concentrate on anything at all— but above all on reading and writing. The situation was so overwhelming and...
The home – or to be more precise, the screen – became the workplace, the bar, the TV, concert hall, bookshop, gym. Urgent that my attention refused to be held by matters beyond the horizon of the present moment. I’ve since discussed it with many friends, and we all experienced the same thing. We were hemmed in by the immediacy of things, as if the world had turned dense and murky.

When that period began, I was trying to organise a series of notes I’d begun writing on the siesta. I’d completed an essay about time in contemporary art, and before embarking upon my new novel, I’d had the idea of writing a short essay on this custom, one that I practise with great pleasure. I had it all sketched out, and I would have finished it within a few short weeks. However, everything came to a standstill. I couldn’t focus. But above all, I felt that what I’d written no longer made sense. Or at least, it made no sense to publish it. An essay on the siesta, amid this catastrophe? It was too trivial for what was going on around us.

I also believed that this period of lockdown would serve to reformulate our priorities, to pay attention to what really mattered, to write about what was truly important. The siesta? My notes? That could happily go in the bin. Nevertheless, for days I tried to rescue it. My writing felt artificial and muddled. The paragraphs were mountains and I was unable to grasp the words I needed.

What did come in their place were siestas. Siestas several hours in duration, from which I would awake with little idea of where I was or the time of day. Siestas in pyjamas – some days I never got changed at all – that reminded me of the long siestas of my teenage years. In this midday slumber I took refuge, as if it were an island amid the disaster.

Over those weeks, time sped up and also became heavier. For those of us who had to stay at home, every day was the same. No one knew when the nightmare would be over. There was no end in sight – not that the end is clear at the moment of writing this, either. In part, I would lie down to sleep with a secret hope that time would move faster, that things would happen more quickly, and that the world would be back to normal when I awoke. At the same time, sleeping was a way of putting the brakes on time. The siesta interrupted the frenetic daily rhythm that had filled our homes. This time of information overload, of remote working, of constant connection with the outside world, the frenetic pace of the factory and the city that had fully penetrated domestic space.
A mad rush that left no space for boredom. That was one of the obsessions from the outset: doing stuff. Not stopping for a moment. And the flood of ever-changing news items that overwhelmed our capacities for understanding and assimilation was supplemented by a crazy number of digital leisure activities that threw our routines out of joint. Social networks were filled with live videos, recommendations, concerts, recipes, exercises, virtual museum tours: it was impossible to keep up. On top of that, the home office and the ever-increasing use of video calls and messages to keep in touch with family and friends, some of whom we hadn’t conversed with properly for years. It was necessary to stay constantly active. Communicate. Create. Produce. Move the system forwards. ‘I’m rebelling against this demand for productivity, when all I feel is bewilderment,’ wrote Mariana Enríquez in her contribution to the ‘Pandemic Diaries’ published by the Revista de la Universidad de México. She articulated the sense of anxiety that had spread like a virus of a different kind.

The home – or to be more precise, the screen – became the workplace, the bar, the TV, concert hall, bookshop, gym. It was the same everywhere. The public and private spheres even more tightly interwoven than they already were. Our domestic spaces were revealed to all, and the last lingering shadows of privacy went out the window.

Miguel Ángel Hernández
Translated by Fionn Petch

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Melchor burst into the place and, pushing his way through the customers, walked straight to the bar, sat on a stool and ordered a whisky. The bartender looked at him as if he had landed from outer space.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked.
‘Don’t worry,’ Melchor said, ‘I come in peace.’
‘In peace?’
‘That’s right. Are you going to pour me a whisky or not?’
The bartender was slow to answer.
‘Neat or on the rocks?’
‘Neat.’

It was past three in the morning, but the place was still quite busy. Several girls were dancing naked or half-naked on the illuminated catwalk that ran through the middle of the main room, bombarded with strobe lights, while a few men watched them with hungry eyes; here and there, other girls, alone, in pairs or groups, waited for the night’s last clients. Or the end of the night. ‘Like a Virgin’, an old Madonna song, was playing over the speakers.

‘If I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t believe it,’ Melchor heard behind him.

While the bartender poured his whisky, the man who had just spoken sat on the stool next to Melchor’s. He was a bald, tough-looking, mixed-race guy in a dark suit, at least two metres tall. The police officer took a long pull of his drink and the guy pointed to it.

‘Have you kicked the Coca-Cola habit?’
‘Yeah,’ Melchor said. ‘I’m celebrating.’
The guy showed two rows of very white teeth.
‘You don’t say?’ he said. ‘And what are you celebrating?'
That the judge believed we were right and left you high and dry?

‘The judge didn’t believe you, dickhead,’ Melchor corrected him. ‘He said only there wasn’t enough proof against you. But don’t worry, I’ll find it. Pour me another shot.’

The bartender, who had not left their side, still had the bottle in his hand, and poured Melchor another whisky. The big guy spun his stool around, rested his elbows on the bar and leaned back on it, watching the dancers on the catwalk and smiling. Melchor took another pull of whisky.

‘Do you know why I like this place so much?’ he asked.

The guy didn’t say anything. Melchor brought the glass back to his lips.

‘Because it reminds me of my childhood,’ he said, after he swallowed. ‘My mother was a hooker, you know. So I grew up in places like this, surrounded by whores like her and pimps like you. That’s what I’m celebrating: a homecoming.’

The Madonna song ended, and the man’s laugh resonated loudly through the growing silence of the brothel. On the sound system, Rosalía replaced Madonna, and two or three girls started dancing among the customers and their colleagues. The man placed one of his huge hands on Melchor’s shoulder.

‘That’s what I like to hear, poli,’ he said. ‘A man’s got to know how to lose.’ He stood up and, winking at the bartender and nodding towards Melchor, added: ‘On the house.’

Melchor carried on drinking without raising his eyes from his glass and, although all the girls knew him, none of them approached. When he ordered a third whisky, however, one of them sat down beside him. She was Spanish, dark-haired, mature, full-figured, wearing a black corset and bare breasted. She held a hand to her throat and asked for a glass of cava. The waiter warned Melchor:

‘Drinks for the girls aren’t part of the boss’s invitation.’

Melchor nodded his assent, and the bartender poured her cava. They drank as they waited for him to move away from them. When he went to serve someone at the other end of the bar, Melchor asked:

‘Are we going through with it?’
‘Of course,’ she answered. ‘You sure?’ Melchor insisted. ‘If they catch us, you’ll be in trouble.’

The woman looked indifferent. ‘I don’t get scared anymore, kid.’

Melchor nodded without looking at her. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘Let’s wait a bit. When you see me go upstairs, you go with them. Leave the door open and tell them I’ll be right there.’

‘They’re really frightened. Do you want me to stay until you get there?’

‘No. Calm them down. Tell them nothing’s going to happen. Tell them I’ll be right there. And then open the other two doors, the ones to the balcony, and go home or come back here. No, you better go home.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Understood?’

‘Yeah.’ Melchor nodded again, but this time he looked at her. ‘Be careful,’ she said. ‘You too,’ Melchor said.

The woman stood up and, leaving half the glass of cava on the bar, walked away.

Melchor kept drinking without talking to anyone except the bartender, without moving from his stool, except to go to the toilet. When the place was almost completely empty, the big guy reappeared and smiled unpleasantly when he saw Melchor. ‘You still here?’ he asked.

‘He’s had six whiskies,’ the bartender answered for him. ‘Too bad it wasn’t six Coca-Colas: he’d be dead.’

‘I need to see your boss,’ Melchor announced. The big guy wrinkled his brow; his smile had disappeared, swallowed by his full mauve lips. ‘He’s not here.’

‘You think I’m stupid? Of course he’s here. He never leaves till you’ve closed: he’s not going to let you steal the takings.’

The guy looked at him with a blend of curiosity and suspicion. ‘What do you want to see the boss for?’

‘That’s none of your business.’

‘Of course it’s my business.’

‘He says he’s come in peace,’ the bartender chimed in. ‘I want to apologise,’ Melchor said. ‘For the trial. For the trouble. Well, you know.’

The guy seemed to relax.
‘Sure. That’s great. But you don’t have to see him for that. I’ll tell him. Consider yourself forgiven.’

‘I also want to make a proposal.’

The guy became wary again.

‘What proposal?’

‘That’s for me to know ...’

‘Then you can forget about talking to him.’

‘If you say so. But the proposal is a good one and he’ll be interested.’ He looked at the bartender and added: ‘I don’t think he’ll be pleased to hear you wouldn’t let me tell him about it.’

Now the big guy seemed doubtful; he looked back at the bartender and, scrutinising Melchor, after a few seconds stepped away, just far enough to speak on the phone without being overheard. When the call was finished, he gestured unenthusiastically for the policeman to follow him.

They crossed the deserted dance floor, and walked up two narrow flights of stairs, when they got to the second landing, the man opened a door and told Melchor to step inside. In the office on the other side was the boss, who did not stand up when he saw Melchor come in. He didn’t shake hands either. He was sitting behind a rickety old desk, with his hands in sight and a mocking glint in his eyes.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you were here?’ he said, motioning to a seat in front of him. ‘I would have come down to say hello.’

Melchor did not sit down. The boss was an overgroomed man in his fifties, his hair slicked back, neat beard speckled with grey, hands swarming with rings; he was in shirtsleeves, wearing braces and a silver chain with a large gold medallion. His name was Eugenio Fernández, but, for reasons unknown to Melchor, everyone called him Papá Moon.

‘I hear you want to apologise,’ he said. ‘I also heard you’ve been drowning your sorrows in whisky. Well done. In any case, I already warned you that you were getting yourself into a mess. That’s the advantage of living in a democracy, kid: here we are all innocent until proven otherwise. Including me who does not read books, like you do. But I got this far. You won’t sit down?’

Melchor didn’t answer. Papá Moon directed a questioning look towards his henchman, who was standing behind the policeman and who shrugged. Behind him was a standard lamp, and in front, on the desk, a table lamp; they both cast a feeble light around the room. Fitted into a panel at the back, facing the desk, a flat-screen TV with the volume turned way down was showing an NBA basketball game.

‘Aren’t you going to say anything?’ Papá Moon asked again.
‘I have a proposition for you,’ Melchor finally said. ‘That’s what Samuel told me,’ Papá Moon said. He swivelled around in his chair and opened his arms in a welcoming gesture. ‘I’m all ears.’

Melchor turned to look at Samuel for an instant and then back to his boss. ‘Don’t worry,’ Papá Moon tried to reassure him. ‘You can say whatever you like. Samuel is completely trustworthy.’

Melchor did not take his eyes off Papá Moon, who, after a couple of seconds, sighed and, moving his head slightly, indicated that Samuel should leave. After a moment’s hesitation, the big guy patted Melchor down; Melchor let him, as he was not armed; he only had a couple of pairs of handcuffs in his pockets. Then Samuel asked:

‘Are you sure, boss?’

Papá Moon nodded. ‘Start closing up,’ he ordered. ‘I’ll be right down.’

Reluctantly, the henchman left, closing the door behind him. ‘OK.’ The boss leaned back in his chair. ‘Let’s hear it.’

Melchor took two steps forward, leaned his knuckles on the desk and, stretching his torso across it, moved in very close to Papá Moon, as if he wanted to whisper something to him. ‘It’s about those young girls,’ he said. The boss looked bored. ‘Still on about that?’

Melchor stared at him. Papá Moon asked: ‘What is it about the girls?’ There was another silence, until the man’s expression began to give way to a complicit smile. ‘Let’s get this over with,’ he said. ‘You like them too, don’t you?’

He was about to add something, but he couldn’t: Melchor head-butted him and, without giving him time to react, grabbed him by the back of the neck and smashed his skull against the desk, which crunched as if he’d broken it. Then he circled the desk, lifting Papá Moon up by the neck, and started hitting him again, first a punch to the stomach and then a kick to the testicles. Papá Moon fell to the floor with a shriek. ‘Don’t yell,’ Melchor warned him: he’d grabbed the silver chain and was pulling it tight against his Adam’s apple, as if wanting to choke him. ‘If you yell again, I’ll break your neck.’

Papá Moon was kneeling, gasping for breath. ‘Have you lost your mind?’ he managed to whimper, his face as red as a tomato.

Melchor banged his head again, this time against the side of the desk, then he slapped him. With the same hand that held the chain he twisted his arms behind his back while searching
with the other hand until he found his mobile. He smashed it underfoot.

‘Where’s your pistol?’ he asked.
‘You’re breaking my arm.’
‘I said, where do you keep your pistol?’
‘What pistol?’

Now Papá Moon’s face was slammed against the floor. When Melchor pulled it up again, a trail of blood was dripping from his nose onto his beard. Melchor repeated the question. The boss answered it and, without letting go of him, Melchor opened a drawer, took out a pistol and checked to make sure it was loaded. Then he forced Papá Moon to his feet.

‘This time you’ve lost the plot, poli,’ he managed to splutter. ‘Your career ends here.’

Melchor twisted his arm harder and put the barrel of the gun under his jaw.

‘We’ll talk about that later, boss,’ he said. ‘Right now we’re going to walk out of here and you are going to fucking behave yourself.’ Then he warned him, rubbing the pistol against his face: ‘If you shout, I shoot. If you do anything stupid, I shoot. Is that clear?’ Papá Moon kept quiet. Melchor twisted his arm again and the man nodded. ‘Very good,’ Melchor said. ‘Let’s go.’

Javier Cercas
Translated by Anne McLean
Javier Cercas is professor of Spanish Literature at the University of Girona and one of Spain’s best-known and most popular writers. His fifth novel, *Soldiers of Salamis* (also translated by Anne McLean) is a million-seller and, like much of his writing, is about ‘historical memory’, with its focus on the legacy of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent state created by General Franco. Cercas is also a frequent contributor to the Catalan edition of the daily newspaper *El País*.

*Even the Darkest Night*, though, is something of a departure for him, being the first in a planned series of police procedurals set in the rural backwater of Terra Alta, in the far south-west of Catalonia. Though here too, the Civil War remains an issue: in 1938 Terra Alta was part of the Battle of the Ebro, which was a disaster for the Republic and destroyed the town of Corbera d’Ebre. Memories are long and bitter, even in the back of beyond. But this is the least of the problems facing the book’s central figure, police officer Melchor Marín, when he is first posted to Gandesa, the *comarca* (county) capital some four years before the events in this book.

Marín is not your average investigator and around a third of the novel is devoted – through flashbacks – to his back story: and a surprising one it is. His mother was a prostitute, who brought him up in the Barcelona working-class district of Badalona, his nights filled with the comings and goings of her clients. He spent several teenage years in prison for being a member of a Colombian drug cartel, where he became obsessed by *Les Misérables* – a book he found in the prison library. He comes to see himself in the main characters:

‘... he thought of Jean Valjean and of his certainty that life was a war and in this war he was one of the vanquished ... But most of all he thought of Javert ... of Javert’s integrity and ... his sense of justice.’
The policeman Javert, and the news that Marín’s mother has been murdered, inspire the young criminal to turn his life around and to become a policeman himself. On his release, he manages, with the help of a mysterious but cunning lawyer, to join up. He gets involved in hunting down a group of terrorists and wins the sobriquet ‘hero of Cambrils’, when he kills four of those involved in the attack. But it is precisely to escape this notoriety and possible reprisals that he accepts the posting to Terra Alta, where, his immediate superior tells him, ‘nothing ever happens’.

And so we first meet Marín at the Adell’s country residence, where something quite definitely has happened. Paco Adell, in his eighties, runs the biggest business in Terra Alta, a printing company, with branches in Eastern Europe and Latin America. He and his wife are found brutally murdered, tortured to death. At first it looks like a professional job: there are few clues, the crime scene is wiped clean and because the victims are big names, the case is taken up by the regional crime squad. Terra Alta is engulfed by the national media, and the police are under pressure to solve the crime quickly. But for Marín, the answer crystallises around possible enemies rather than professional killers: who hated the Adells enough to do this? Marin’s wife is a local (a librarian whom he married after some months of heated discussions about *Les Misérables*) and she knows the family well:

‘The Adells are like a tree that gives a lot of shade, but doesn’t let anything grow around it. They control everything ... half of Gandesa belongs to them, so they give people work in their factories ... the truth is that Adell was a despot.’

It could be anybody local, then ...

The Adell factory manager, Josep Grau, has a different take on this:

‘Were there lots of people who didn’t like Paco and cursed him? Of course! People always complain about those in charge. [But] believe me, if it weren’t for Paco Adell, Terra Alta would be dead. Everything else is a fairy tale.’

There are some leads, but they gradually dry up and the Adell case goes cold. Marín is told to drop it. But, having failed to solve his mother’s murder, he is determined not to abandon this one. It soon becomes clear that Melchor Marín’s professional and private lives are entwined in ways he can hardly imagine, and his unofficial investigation leads him to experience the darkest night of his life ...

Javier Cercas tells this tale with firm assurance and an instinctive understanding of the dramatic pause that’s crucial to a good thriller. Each time the case hits
a snag or a revelation, we are diverted to another detail of Marín’s past – all beautifully translated by Anne McLean. But at no point does the narrative feel artificial or irrelevant. As the facts and events unfold, *Even the Darkest Night* comes to a brilliant and quite unexpected conclusion. I have the feeling that Terra Alta is not going to be the place where ‘nothing happens’ for much longer.

*Max Easterman*
Those of us who use language chiefly as a means of communication (most of us, in other words) can never fully understand what it’s like to select it as a way to express identity or even political resistance. Spain has four national languages, and anyone who isn’t speaking the one used by the majority – Spanish, or Castilian – has made a decision on some level to choose a different form of self-expression, be it for reasons relating to family, culture or politics. Language, among other things, is feeling put into words. So it’s not surprising that people who feel Catalan, Basque or Galician want to express themselves in the language of their homeland.

That’s not always a simple choice, though. I remember, as a student in the late 1980s, meeting a young Basque woman who had decided never to speak Spanish. Given that less than 3% of Spaniards speak Basque (‘Euskara’), that was a weighty commitment. On our evening out, it meant relying on a mutual friend, Jokim, to translate everything, even though we could all have spoken Spanish (going out for tapas has rarely been more laborious). I don’t know how much longer the woman was able to maintain her purist stance, but what looked like obstinacy then impresses me now. Languages have to be spoken to survive. Like other regional languages, Euskara was suppressed during the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1936–75) and may have disappeared if not for the determination of some Basques to keep using and teaching it. My friend Jokim’s father, for example, ran a secret language school in the basement of his house.

From the mid-1950s onwards language restrictions eased. The Royal Academy of the Basque Language, ‘Euskaltzaindia’, began working to establish a standard form of Basque, no easy task with a language that has no links to any other language family. Described as ‘genetically isolated’ Euskara is also historically mysterious. Its rampant x’s and k’s are daunting to all but the boldest linguists.

That difficulty is reflected in its literature. Until the nineteenth century, almost all works in Basque were religious. In the twentieth century, novels were often deliberately pedagogic in an effort to build a fluent readership. After the enactment of the 1978 Spanish Constitution, which gave minority languages equal status with Spanish in their home provinces, Basque literature flourished. The publication in 1988 of Bernardo Atxaga’s novel Obabakoak, was a landmark, the first time a book written in Basque had
scooped Spain’s Premio Nacional de Narrativa. But *Obabakoak* had to be translated from Basque to Castilian before it could reach the wider world. We have Margaret Jull Costa to thank for bringing it into English.

Unlike Euskara, Galician, or Galego, spoken in the north-western province of Galicia, and Catalan, over in the east, are romance languages and thus easier both to learn and translate. The books of Galician author Manuel Rivas have been translated directly into English by Jonathan Dunne, whose Small Stations Press has done more than any other publisher to bring Galician writers to international attention (new names to look out for include Teresa Moure and Anxo Angueira).

About two and a half million people speak Galician, which is linguistically closer to Portuguese than Spanish. The region’s identity has been shaped by its remote position on the coast, its maritime tradition and the fact that so many of its inhabitants have been driven by poverty or politics to leave the area. When a teacher in Manuel Rivas’s memoir, *The Low Voices*, asks the class what they want to be as adults, one child shouts back ‘Emigrants!’ The Galician is a legendary émigré across the Atlantic, too: in Latin America, ‘gallego’ is a somewhat disparaging synonym for ‘Spanish’.

In Catalonia, perhaps more than anywhere else, language is a matter of principle. After the Franco years there was a determined effort to increase the number of speakers through legal and cultural initiatives. Legislation passed in 1983 made Catalan the ‘language of reference’. About two thirds of the region’s inhabitants now speak it; a third consider it their mother tongue. Teaching has been almost exclusively in Catalan for more than forty years, a policy that continues to meet resistance from the region’s many non-Catalan-speaking residents. In 2021 the Supreme Court in Madrid ordered Catalan schools to provide at least 25% of their teaching in Spanish, but the ruling has been fiercely contested by Catalonia’s government. In June 2022 they struck a compromise with legislation that allows schools to take a more flexible approach, depending on the needs of their intake.

The energetic promotion of Catalan culture abroad, thanks especially to the Institut Ramon Llull, is evident in the fact that seventeen UK universities currently offer Catalan studies, compared to nine in Spain. However, only about twenty Catalan books are translated into English every year (Italy and France do much better), and on recent evidence we deserve to see more. Emili Teixidor’s *Black Bread* (translated by Peter Bush) is a searing account of rural life in the years immediately following the Civil War. Irene Solà’s *When I Sing, Mountains Dance* (translated by Mara Faye Lethem) is a paean to
Catalonia’s landscape, giving voice not only to its people, but to its animals, mountains and trees. It won Solà the European Union Prize for Literature in 2020.

When I had dinner with a group of Catalans a few years ago, we all spoke Spanish. I asked the others how frequent that was for them, expecting to hear that they juggled both languages daily. But one woman said she never spoke Spanish. Someone else said he hadn’t spoken it for ten years. Even allowing for some exaggeration, that was surprising. I used to feel proud (and even smug, to be honest) of my ability to speak to people in ‘their own language’. Now I realise that this group might have been happier speaking English than the language they associated with an occupying culture. English, once the voice of colonisation, increasingly serves as a neutral lingua franca in places where the local choices may be contentious. A Flemish speaker in Belgium may prefer it over French, for example.

Spain has four official languages, but in 2010 Catalonia also conferred official status on a fifth: Aranese, or ‘Aranés’. This version of Occitan, spoken in the Val d’Aran, close to the border with France, has about four thousand speakers and is taught alongside Spanish and Catalan – and a foreign language – in schools. Not long ago it was endangered, now it’s enjoying a renaissance. It’s heartening to think that young people may once again study the poetry written by their Aranese forebears. Language is a bridge after all, not only to our contemporaries, but to our past and future selves.

*Miranda France*
It’s great news then, that many of Spain’s cultural institutions are providing extensive grants for translation costs. For example, in the lead up to Spain’s appearance as Guest of Honour at Frankfurt Book Fair last year, Acción Cultural Española (AC/E) really upped their grant game. Since the Guest of Honour announcement, they have put out five calls for translation grants (all spanning long time periods) that cover the cost of translation, and their fifth grant call is still open until October 2023. The AC/E grant application consists of an accessible and extremely straightforward online form, making for a relatively quick process when compared to other applications. This is great news for publishers who have nightmares about tome-like grant applications that seem to ask for everything but the kitchen sink. Another very important point is that AC/E also offers grants for printing, distribution, and promotion costs, all easily applied for within the same application for the translation grant, making for a streamlined application that covers all bases.

The Institut Ramon Llull also offers a comprehensive programme to aid both the translation and promotion of works from the Catalan language, and there are normally two long-term, open-call windows each year for each
grant. Unlike the AC/E programme, the grant for translation costs and the grant for promotion costs must be applied for through two separate applications. This makes for a slightly longer application process, but it is nothing too onerous. The grant for the promotion of literature in translation is wide-ranging, covering everything from speakers’ fees and venue hire, to flights and accommodation for authors and translators, and graphic design and advertising fees. While the application process can be long, it is the perfect example of how a cultural institution can go one step further in helping publishers who are working with translations. The Institut Ramon Llull clearly understands that it’s one thing to get the book out there, it’s another to get people hearing about it and reading it.

The Etxepare Euskal Institutua also opens a yearly, month-long call for applications for translation grants for literary works published originally in Basque, or from Basque authors writing in Castilian. Importantly, these grants also cover both the publishing and promotion costs for the book, another example of a cultural institute that understands that what happens after a book is published is just as important as bringing it into existence.

The Xunta de Galicia too opens a grant call for support for translations from Galician, and in the past, have also opened a separate grant window for support in publishing, marketing and distributing the book. While the grant can only be applied for by a publishing house, there is good news for translators too, as often, the Xunta also funds one translation residency per year, which funds a month-long stay in Galicia for a translator currently working on a translation from Galician.

While it is fantastic that grants for translations and the promotion of translations from Castilian, Catalan, Basque and Galician are covered (in three of these cases, twice over), still missing are grants for languages such as Asturian and Aragonese. These are two languages spoken on the peninsula that are not considered ‘official’ languages by the Spanish state, and therefore not covered under AC/E’s terms and conditions. Hopefully, in the future, we will see these languages, which are both considered endangered, better represented and supported by national cultural institutions so we can get an even more well-rounded view of the literature coming out of Spain.

If you are a publisher interested in translating a book from one of Spain’s official languages, there’s plenty of financial help out there for you, but if you’re not sure where to start in terms of what to publish, there are many fantastic extracts in this magazine of works yet to be published in English, and an even more extensive list (along with samples and/or reader’s reports) on www.newspanishbooks.com.

Alice Banks
HIGHLIGHTING THE INDIES

by ALICE BANKS

Independent presses are some of the biggest champions of literature in translation, and without their dedication and unflinching audacity, the English-language literature scene would be far less vibrant and diverse. What better way to highlight small press contributions than with a round-up of recent or forthcoming translations from Spanish languages from UK and US indie presses.

This beautiful novel is an intimate and honest reflection on motherhood. Five years after becoming a mother, our narrator finds herself facing the decision of becoming one again. Feelings of guilt, regret and obligation invade her most intimate thoughts as she navigates this pivotal point in her life. Dávila’s prose is astute and delicate, and I’m delighted that 3TimesRebel and Jacob Rogers have come together to bring this wonderful author into English for the first time.

Loved Ones by Berta Dávila, translated from Galician by Jacob Rogers
3TimesRebel Press, Forthcoming in 2023

3TimesRebel Press was founded in 2022 with the ambition of bringing often-silenced voices and themes to the forefront. The press only publishes translations of female authors who write in minority languages, thus drawing attention to literature that may be overlooked by larger publishing houses. So far, they have published literature translated from Basque and Catalan, and in summer 2023 will publish their first translation from Galician, Loved Ones, by Berta Dávila, translated by Jacob Rogers.

The Strangers by Jon Bilbao, translated from Spanish by Katie Whittemore
Dalkey Archive Press, 2023

Founded in 1984, Dalkey Archive Press is a publisher of fiction, poetry, and literary criticism and has quickly become a reference for fantastic, daring
literature in translation. In February 2023, they published *The Strangers* by Jon Bilbao, translated by Katie Whittemore and Bilbao’s introduction to English-language readers. A couple is spending the winter on the Cantabrian coast, isolated, bored, and distant, not just in relation to the rest of the world, but also to each other. Their tense, somewhat monotonous routine is disturbed when they witness some strange lights in the sky over the village and ufologists begin to arrive, anxious to make extraterrestrial contact. From here on out, their stay becomes more unusual and more uncomfortable.

*September and the Night* by Maica Rafecas, translated from Catalan by Megan Berkobien and María Cristina Hall

**Fum d’Estampa Press, Forthcoming in 2023**

Fum d’Estampa Press was founded in 2020 to bring exciting Catalan language literature to an English-speaking audience. Though small, the press quickly established itself as an ambitious publisher of high-quality titles. And in 2022, it branched out and began to publish translations from other languages. In July 2023, they publish *September and the Night*, by Maica Rafecas, translated from Catalan by Megan Berkobien and María Cristina Hall. It’s a moving story about environment, family and the paths leading us back home. When Anais learns of the imminent sale of her family’s small vineyard to make way for the construction of an estate, she demands that her father refuses, in order to preserve his dignity. From here, Anais embarks on a solitary struggle that is seen as obsessive and irrational by those around her. Written in sweeping, elegant prose, *September and the Night* is a fable-like novel, a call to arms and a reminder of the important things in life.

*My Father’s House* by Karmele Jaio, translated from Spanish by Sophie Hughes and Margaret Jull Costa

**Dedalus, 2023**

Founded in 1983, Dedalus is a publisher of literary fiction that has established itself as a leader in the realm of literary translation, thanks to its numerous translation collections. In early 2023 they publish *My Father’s House*, by Karmele Jaio, translated by Sophie Hughes and Margaret Jull Costa. A quiet, interior novel that is written from two perspectives, the first narrator is Ismael, a writer who is struggling with his next novel, and who becomes stuck in his past when his mother has an accident and he is forced to spend every afternoon taking care of his father. Our second narrator is Jasone, Ismael’s wife, who for years has acted as the first editor and proofreader for her husband’s work, and who has finally decided to begin
writing for herself again, in secret. *My Father’s House* is a novel that speaks to the ways in which masculinity is constructed and transmitted, and the enormous influence of gender in the lives of women and men.

**Let No One Sleep by Juan José Millás, translated from Spanish by Thomas Bunstead, Bellevue Literary Press, 2022**

Bellevue Literary Press is an independent US-based publisher devoted to publishing literary fiction and nonfiction at the intersection of the arts and sciences. In 2022, they published *Let No One Sleep* by Juan José Millás, translated by Thomas Bunstead.

After the protagonist Lucía loses her job at an IT firm, she has a vision of her future career as a taxi driver, brought on by the intoxicating opera that seeps through her apartment’s air vent. After getting her licence, she meets the neighbour responsible for the music, Calaf. When he moves out of her building, Lucía becomes obsessed with finding him again and drives through Madrid searching for him on every corner, meeting intriguing people along the way. In Millás’s unique and humorous style we read of the collision of the mundane and the extraordinary, of betrayal and revenge.

**The Ally by Iván Repila, translated from Spanish by Mara Faye Lethem, Other Press, 2022**

Other Press is a New York-based publisher founded in 1998. They focus on literary fiction and nonfiction, and many of their titles are in translation. In 2022, they published *The Ally*, the latest novel from Iván Repila, translated by Mara Faye Lethem. *The Ally* is a humorous social commentary, in which the misguided protagonist tries to beat his girlfriend at her own game, becoming the ultimate feminist. When he first meets Najwa at a lecture by Siri Hustvedt, our protagonist discovers a whole new world of feminist thought. Determined to impress Najwa, he sets out sincerely on his journey to allyship, and he can’t help notice that feminists are going about their activism the wrong way … So he does what any good ally should: he gathers the worst of the macho men in town and begins a campaign to provoke the feminists. By ‘putting them in their place’ with this club — pelting demonstrators with raw eggs, posting obscene, threatening manifestos — he’s convinced he can make women understand, and get them to fight harder for the cause. Following him as his plan spectacularly fails, *The Ally* mixes humour, clever storytelling, and hard-core feminist theory to battle the macho superiority complex and our modern gender wars.
Wenling’s by Gemma Ruiz Palà, translated from Catalan by Peter Bush
Héloïse Press, 2023
Canterbury-based imprint Héloïse Press launched in 2022 and focuses on contemporary female narratives both in original English and in translation. With a focus on intimate, visceral and powerful narratives, the house brings together women’s issues and literary sophistication from across the globe. In 2023 they publish Wenling’s by Gemma Ruiz Palà, translated by Peter Bush, a novel in which female characters, both historical and fictional, find their voices. Our protagonist is Wenling, a Chinese immigrant who arrived in Barcelona six months pregnant and looking for a better life. Despite having no knowledge of the local languages, she manages to open a salon. A female space par excellence, it becomes the crossroad for many women’s stories, including Wenling’s, that have remained silenced. Intertwining journalistic precision with the casual tone of joyful conversation, Gemma Ruiz Palà immerses the reader in a story of gender, migration, and friendship.

The Volcano by Anna Dodas, translated from Catalan by Clyde Moneyhun, ed. Ester Pou Jutglar
Francis Boutle Publishers, 2022
Francis Boutle Publishers are committed to publishing texts in minority and regional European languages, with the aim of celebrating the fantastic diversity of languages and cultures in Europe and giving writers in those languages a wider audience – an important and challenging feat. In March 2022 they published The Volcano by Anna Dodas, translated by Clyde Moneyhun. This collection is particularly poignant as it brings together the brilliant work of the Catalan poet Anna Dodas, who died at the age of twenty-three in 1986. In her lifetime, Dodas wrote two remarkable and increasingly influential collections, presented together in this volume, along with a selection of uncollected poems. The Volcano communicates, with terrible urgency, both pain and wonder, mystery and clarity, and love and dread. Dodas’ imagery creates a completely realised poetic world that is an analogue to the poet’s lived experience.

Alice Banks writes the La Española blog on eurolitnetwork.com
Katie Whittemore: First could you talk about Open Letter and Dalkey Archive and your role with both presses?

Chad Post: Sure thing. I started in publishing in 2000 with a ‘fellowship’ at Dalkey Archive Press, which was, at the time, one of the three to four largest nonprofit publishers in the United States, specialising in ‘experimental’ literature from around the world. That was where I cut my teeth on editing and acquiring international books – frequently seeking out titles that might not be ‘bestselling’ but add something unique to the corpus of world literature. As John O’Brien (Dalkey’s founder) and I travelled the world on editorial trips, we cultivated relationships with presses with whom we had an affinity. Again, not necessarily the big, corporate presses, but the ones with a strong editorial vision. This carried over to what we did at Open Letter, which launched in 2007 – great, unique international voices, oftentimes from smaller, more boutique presses.

And just to clarify the last part of your question: I’m the publisher of Open Letter, responsible for all aspects of the business, and the editorial director for Dalkey Archive, overseeing new acquisitions while reissuing ‘Dalkey Essentials’ to continue John O’Brien’s vision of preserving great, strange works for future generations of readers.

You mention ‘boutique presses’ that you like to work with – any from Spain?

Definitely! For both Open Letter and Dalkey. Back in 2017, I was invited to Barcelona as part of an editorial trip arranged by Institut Ramón Llull, where author Jordi Nopca gave an overview of Catalan literature. He highlighted a number of well-established authors – two of whom, Mercè Rodoreda and Quim Monzó, we’d been publishing for years – along with a number of contemporary writers, including Max Besora, published by Editorial Males Herbes, a relatively young press (founded in 2012) dedicated to publishing ‘prose that takes the risk of creating its own world and own language.’ We were able to meet in person, and hit it off right away, and, long story short, we’re doing three Besora novels (the first of which, The Adventures and Misadventures of the Extraordinary and Admirable Joan Orpí, Conquistador and Founder of New Catalonia won its translator, Mara Faye Lethem, the inaugural Spain-USA Foundation Translation Award) and Muriel Villanueva’s The Left Parenthesis.

Any other Spanish presses you’ve discovered this way?

When I first started looking at Dalkey Archive’s current publishing list, I read, worked on, and fell in love with Carlos Maleno’s The Endless Rose, a must-read for any and all Bolaño fans. (The title is an allusion to one of Archibald’s books that appears in The Savage Detectives and 2666). I devoured The Irish Sea, the earlier Maleno book Dalkey had published, which, along with Luis Magriñyà’s Double Room and the works of Julián Ríos, is one of the most structurally interesting books I’ve ever read from Spain; and through both of these books, discovered Editorial Sloper, a Mallorcan-based press that’s also pushing boundaries.
So, there’s affinity out there between indie presses internationally?

We have published a number of authors published by larger Spanish presses like Lumen, Seix Barral, Anagrama, etc. (including Sara Mesa, Lara Moreno, and Spain-based Latin American writers, like Rodrigo Fresán and Andrés Neuman), but there is something fun about looking at the network of smaller, indie presses around the world who share authors, a similar passion for literature that goes beyond making money, and a desire to produce important works of art that may not be read by millions, but will have a deep impact on the fortunate readers who discover these voices. (Like Barcelona and UK-based Fum d’Estampa, who also shares an author with Dalkey Archive.) Frequently, big presses prefer only to sign on translations once that book has been acquired by presses in six or more different countries. Works like Javier Serena’s *Last Words on Earth* fly under their radar but are there for the picking. Galaxia Gutenberg’s Pilar Adón titles (*Of Beasts and Fowls* and *The Mayflies* will be published by Open Letter) are a similar situation that requires a special connection between international publishers to discover some of the most interesting works.

Why do you think so many books from Spain are published in translation?

Lot to unpack here, but back in 2008, I started the Translation Database to keep track of every work of fiction and poetry that was translated into English *for the first time ever* and sold in America. As a stat nerd, well, I wanted data! I wanted to know how many new international voices were reaching our shores, who was doing them, where they came from.

The Translation Database – now housed at *Publishers Weekly*, and available to all – has expanded to include nonfiction and children’s books, and with more than fifteen years of data, is an irreplaceable source for anyone wanting to get a snapshot of the state of translation in the US.

I’m not going to drown you in numbers, but of the 9,500+ titles included in the database, 1,306 (~14%) have been translated from Spanish, with 520 – over a third of all the Spanish-language books – from Spain. Part of this is due to the size of the country, the strength of its literary history, and presses like the defunct Hispabooks, which focused exclusively on works from Spain, but I don’t think this quite captures the full picture.

This is my half-baked theory, but I think that Spanish – like German and French – is the most-translated language both because more Americans speak this than, say, Finnish, and because Spanish-language authors have had commercial success. A lot of publishing – and entertainment media in general – is about trying to capture the magic of previous successes through repetition. The Boom opened the door to a lot of Latin American and Mexican authors, and ‘magical realism’ gave way to exploring other styles and trends from Spanish-language authors around the world.

What do you see as the future for books from Spain translated into English?

I think it’s very bright! Being Guest of Honour at Frankfurt this past year is going to be a huge boom for Spanish lit, perhaps especially for non-Castilian writers. The interest in Basque, Galician and Catalan writers continues to grow as publishers, editors and translators seek out new talent. And as an indie publisher, I look forward to continuing to publish some of the greatest Spanish authors of our time.
Functioning like a triptych, the novel is broken up into three distinct books, each with its own set of characters and concerns, tied together through the repetition of certain phrases, ideas, scenes, etc. For example, the first book is about a middle-aged author who is invited to participate in a conference on digital networks taking place on the mostly deserted island of San Simón in Galicia. During his time there, he wanders the island trying to reproduce the images found in the book *Aillados* (‘Isolated’) and taken during the Spanish Civil War when the island was a prisoner of war camp. In a Sebaldian way, these photographs – first featuring prisoners, then the emptiness of the island in the present day – ground the book, which, shortly thereafter starts to veer off into the strange and unreal. Our narrator sneaks back to the island post-conference for a solo retreat, then, after an unexplained gap (‘from that moment on, for almost a year, all trace of me is lost. A period I have no memory of whatsoever’), he reappears in New York City, converses with the ghosts of Dalí and García Lorca, spaces out for another year (prefaced by the exact same sentences quoted above) and then travels to Uruguay to return a copy of some handwritten poems of Lorca’s to the family of a friend who has passed away.
This story essentially ends there, although this writer is alluded to in the third book, in which a woman visits Normandy to relive a trip she had taken with a man who went to San Simón island and then vanished. Before vanishing, that man had been working on a story about the ‘fourth astronaut’ from the Apollo 11 moon mission, Kurt Montana, whose first-person account of his life story makes up the second book in this triptych. The most patently surreal and experimental of the three, this volume is most indebted to writers such as Enrique Vila-Matas and Paul Auster, complete with doppelgangers, a retelling of a Michael Chabon story and more ghosts.

The three books weave in and out of one another, but finding a grand, coherent plot is hardly the point. Instead, the structure of the triptych, the way in which it creates a neural network of associations and repeated phrases takes precedent, as seen in this quote:

‘What’s truly significant about Sebald’s book, the narration itself is fractal-like, I repeat, the narration itself is fractal-like. Sebald’s style, the way he presents the facts and the history alike, is also a fractal, because he doesn’t proceed in linear fashion like your usual itinerant storyteller, or your usual writer either, stringing exceptional moments and more or less sentimental memories together, rather he approaches history and his own walking tour in a fractal-like fashion, folding it together like a fractal.’

Anyone interested in the possibilities for the novel and its ability to explore the space between reality and fiction will find themselves sucked into this quite playful book, tracing connections and recon-textualised motifs back and forth between the various parts, experiencing the book not as a linear narrative, but as an artwork to be explored and revisited.

Chad W. Post
Katie Whittemore: I’m so glad you all agreed to have this conversation. This is the first time *The Riveter* has been dedicated to writing from Spain, and we’re excited to bring in as much as we can from the official languages of Spain. This conversation with the four of you is an important part of that. We have Jacob Rogers, who translates from Galician and Spanish; Julia Sanches, who works from Catalan, Spanish and Portuguese; Charlotte Whittle, from Spanish; and Kristin Addis, from Basque and Spanish. Let’s start by hearing about how you got into literary translation. And to follow up, how did you find your way to the languages you translate from?

Kristin Addis: I came to literary translation mostly by accident. I was just doing some translation for fun and translating for an author friend, and he was chosen to be included in an anthology and asked me to translate the text. I started studying Basque because on a family trip to Spain when I was in high school, we went north to the Basque Country, and I heard this weird language and saw posters and such on the walls with words full of Zs and Ks, and went, what is that thing? It turned out that there was a woman here in Iowa City who was able to teach it, so I started with her. Then I moved to taking summer courses in the Basque Country, then lived there for a while and did intensive courses and so on.

Jacob Rogers: I had a similar experience with Galician. At university, I happened to take a class on the variety of regional cultures and languages in Spain and was randomly assigned Galicia for a group project. I found a website in English with all these authors that you could click through, and since I was a literature major, my interest lay there. This happened right around the time that I was realising that translation was something you could do professionally, and I figured maybe Galician was a chiller niche than trying to enter the fray of Spanish. I happened to be going to Galicia for a summer and was able to take government-subsidised language classes, which were really cheap. I went to Galician class and just tried to read as much as I could. I felt very welcomed.

Julia Sanches: I’m Brazilian, so I’ve been speaking Portuguese my whole life. After living in the US for a bit my family moved to Mexico City when I was seven or eight years old, and we lived there until I was about thirteen or fourteen, so I learned Spanish. Then I moved around to several more places, and in university I got bit by the literary-translation bug. I was really curious about it. There was no one really talking about that at Edinburgh University, even though I asked all the creative-writing professors, what is this thing called literary translation? How do you do it? And they were like, I don’t know. And I thought, well, I guess I’ll do some research on my own. And although my family has lived in Brazil for a several generations, one of my great-grandmothers was Catalan. After university, to stay in Europe legally, I enrolled in a master’s programme in Spain, got a visa and started taking Catalan
classes, and realised that at our big family reunions, we would sing Catalan songs and my mother would sing versions of Catalan nursery rhymes that she’d learned from her grandmother – my great-grandmother. I now translate from all three of my languages.

**Charlotte Whittle:** I grew up in England in a monolingual household. In my late teens, I started reading Latin American authors and wanted to learn Spanish. I ended up going to Mexico for a year when I was eighteen. Just learning Spanish and having a lot of freedom. And then I studied literature and Spanish as an undergraduate and went on to graduate work in Hispanic studies. I was on the academic path and planned to become a scholar, but I realised that it was this treadmill, and for multiple reasons that wasn’t a treadmill I wanted to be on. So, I taught Spanish for a number of years before I really realised that literary translation could be a ‘job’. I soon stumbled upon an author I got really interested in and basically started pitching her work.

**KW:** Tell me about some of the challenges of translating from your particular languages.

**JS:** I recently translated Montserrat Roig from Catalan, and one challenge was that Roig was very pro-Catalan, very enmeshed in Catalan literary culture. In writing this trilogy (the first book was translated by Megan Berkobien and María Cristina Hall) she wanted to educate readers on Catalan history that might have been neglected during the Franco dictatorship, to rescue history that had been obscured. One of the challenges in translating was to try to put some of that same education in without having to gloss constantly. I also had to make certain decisions that would make it clear this was a Catalan-language book and not a Spanish-language book.

The challenge with Spanish right now is that there are loads of really great, young authors writing in their own particular vernaculars and varieties of Spanish that are worlds apart, and you have to figure out where your translation is going to stand in relation to the original. How much to domesticate, how much to keep the reader at a distance – and all the research that goes into that, because a lot of these terms haven’t actually entered any dictionaries. The fact that Spanish is a language spoken by hundreds of millions of people across vast swathes of land means it has that particular challenge, the sort of variations and varieties within a single country, but also across all of the American continent.

**CW:** I was going to mention that first and foremost: the massive variations across countries and regions, and going through that experience of learning a new vernacular for every book. It’s very rare that as a working translator, you get to concentrate on a single geographical area if you’re working in Spanish. I recently translated a book from the south of Spain that was a real new area for me. The vernacular was not one that I was familiar with. But this is also one of the joys of translating from Spanish, developing these pockets of regional knowledge.

**JR:** Galician has technical standardisation from the Academia Gallega. But people aren’t particularly happy with that fact in and of itself, and their dictionary isn’t really all that comprehensive. I always use two or three online Galician dictionaries whenever I’m looking for things. One of them aims for a more Portuguese sort of solidarity, so they’re looking at the language in that broader context. You can usually Google with enough search terms that you sort of figure it out, but it’s not always easy. Often if I’m having trouble, I’ll try to find a Spanish equivalent and then go from there. There’s a lot of triangulating. Otherwise, the main challenge is that it’s not a very well internationalised literary system. It’s very vibrant, but only recently do some of the bigger authors I work with have agents at all, and the fact that they have agents for writing in Galician is unusual; a lot of Galician writers became famous from writing in Spanish, then got agents.
KA: There’s a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of support for getting Basque into other languages. There’s the Etxepare Institute, and a translator’s association with a massive website with everybody who’s ever translated a single word of Basque on it, with all their qualifications and what they’ve translated, and there are more and more resources online. When I first started, I was using an actual physical dictionary, so that was quite slow. But now there are many dictionaries online and a lot of specialised dictionaries as well, including resources for things like old sayings, old songs, and so on. The main problem with Basque is that it’s quite easy to make up your own words, so as a translator, you often have to break down a word into its components and then look things up separately, and then put them back together and go, OK, what could this mean? And there is a very strong tradition in Basque for wordplay and word games, which are difficult for translators.

KW: Can you tell me about how you tend to get your translation jobs? Are you pitching projects yourselves? Working with agents or cultural institutes?

JR: I’ve pitched endlessly and built good relationships, so, I don’t have any negative feelings towards editors, but it’s been so much work for, concretely, very little.

JS: I’m currently translating the only project I’ve successfully pitched. The stars aligned for this book, *Living Things* by Munir Hachemi. I sent it to loads of publishers and I got interest from Fitzcarraldo. I think one of the reasons they were able to offer is because the book had already been translated into French and the editors there read French, but not Spanish.

CW: Translating younger authors can also be an advantage, because you’re working with writers who will be producing new work. But there is no single way that books get acquired, or how translators become attached to them. Every book I’ve done has been different. I’ve had a pitch accepted and then I’ve been attached to a project that an agent then sold, or I’ve been recommended by the agent and then contacted by the English-language publisher. There are many ways it can happen, it’s kind of like the Wild West.

KA: There are probably three or four groups supporting Basque that consistently send things my way. They’re the ones that deal with the agents. They’re the ones who get the rights, get the funding. Then they bring it to me as a project that’s already funded, which is very nice. I do kind of plant seeds, though. My experience translating from a minority language is that it’s a small world, and word of mouth counts for quite a lot.

KW: Are there cases where you have advocated for a particular author or work to be translated? Someone, in your estimation, ‘missing’ from work represented in English?

JS: Well, thankfully, translation is having a popular moment, which I hope lasts for a long time. Translation is suddenly sexy now. And part of this is that publishers have latched on to recovering lost voices, most of which happen to be women or people of colour.

KW: Maybe there’s a sort of a cultural caché associated with it. Instead of viewing it as a total risk to take on this sort of project – either somebody who’s unknown, or underappreciated, or under-recognised –from a publisher’s standpoint, it’s almost a badge of honour to be ‘discovering’ these voices and bringing them back in.

CW: I think there’s now a space for that in the publishing ecosystem. If you say this is a project that recovers an underrepresented or underappreciated author who hasn’t had the attention they deserve, there’s the idea that those kinds of projects are on people’s radars a little bit more, perhaps, than they used to be.
KW: Can you tell me a little bit about your process of reading in your languages, and discovering books? How actively do you keep up with what’s being published?

CW: If I’m in a scouting period, I like to travel if I can. One of my projects came about just because I was in a bookstore in Madrid and the bookseller hand-sold it to me. I read it and immediately knew that I wanted to work on it. I’m not always on top of what’s coming out, but if I reach a point where I’m ready to make room for some new projects, then I’ll go into a scouting phase and I’ll put up my antenna and see what’s there.

JR: It’s a little easier with Galician. Instagram is great just for seeing what’s being published. There are a lot of people that I’ve already read and are publishing more books, so that’s easy. Something I’ve realised as a bookseller is that I want to read everything that comes out. When people are talking about a book on Twitter, they tend to get really excited about things… but are they still excited about it six months later? That’s how you start to see what’s standing out versus what’s just hot in the moment.

JS: I like your method of waiting six months, because maybe by then the hype will have calmed down and you’re not having to elbow your way between other translators to get on this book. It’s such an unpleasant feeling to fall in love with the book and find out someone’s already working on it.

JR: That’s a rather rare experience in Galician.

KW: It happens a lot in Spanish. It can be a complicated part of the work. Julia, you mentioned the sexy moment translation is having. Do you think that’s going to result in more money paid to translators?

JS: It depends on the publisher. There’s no standard. I’ve managed to get a US publisher, a big US publisher, to pay me like three times what a small UK publisher pays me. But that feels like a one-off.

KA: I think part of the problem is that there’s no standardisation, but also there’s very little understanding of what goes into a translation. If you ask most people, they think, well, you just sit and put what they said in the one language into a different language, you put your fingers onto the keyboard and you’re done. Obviously, it’s not as easy as saying, oh, well this word means that, so just plug it in and you’re off.

JS: Sometimes we never know what to ask for until we’re deep in the project and we realise, oh God, this is so much harder in all of these ways, and I absolutely need more support. To your point, Kristen, I actually do think people know what goes into literary translation, especially indie publishers. I don’t think that it can be used as an excuse anymore.

KA: True. A lot of indie publishers have had personal experience with translation, whereas some of the bigger groups, they just have no idea.

JS: Literary translation happens in so many different places, and often they do know what goes into it, but often don’t have the budgets. Or if they do have the budget because they’re a bigger publisher, they get top-down orders not to spend it on this. I think people know what we do now is more of an art, or at least they know better than they did twenty years ago.

KW: And that note – translation as an art – is a lovely place to end. Kudos to you all, great luck with your next projects and thanks so much for joining me. I really appreciate the conversation.

www.eurolitnetwork.com/the-riveter/
Hello, Mother, I hope you’re well and have got over your cold. I’m in Barcelona, of all places. It’s hot, sweaty and the people are noisy. There is, however, a lot to be said for the city, or, at least, the part of the city I’ve seen – it’s a sprawling place crawling up from dirty beaches into mountains that seem both distant and close at the same time – most strange. The architecture is beautiful, and the food is good. One thing that might be said about it, though, is the atmosphere: culturally, it is fascinating, and I think one of the things that most stands out is the use of Catalan rather than Spanish, at least in terms of the street signs and things like that. Of course, to a poor tourist like me, these Catalans seem more at ease using Spanish or even – the horror – their English on me: it is almost as if they want to keep it for themselves as a sort of secret cultural barrier marking the insiders from the outsiders. Or perhaps it’s just me. Anyway, when they do speak among themselves, it seems to be a faintly exotic mix of French and Spanish, some ancient language still whispered behind closed doors between grandparents cooking dinners. One only has to wander the streets of the Eixample neighbourhood, however, to see the real force and power of the Catalan language – its literature! Gosh, what bookshops they have here, and what books they have in them. Mountains of novels, collections of poetry, historical tomes.
and philosophical texts from all over the world – and all in Catalan. I dipped in and out of these places in awe of these people – browsing, discussing, even drinking coffee in the cafés attached to these institutions – and I call them institutions as that’s really what they seem to be ... A little while later, wandering the old part of town a while after lunch, I bumped into what is known here as an Ateneu – Ateneu Barcelonés, to be precise. It is a literary juggernaut of a place: the kind of place that leaves your heart aching for a bygone era of portrait-painting and large beards. Quite apart from the grandiose building in which it resides, its garden – an oasis in the midst of the faint urinal stench that hovers across the old town – is a place for smoking cigarettes and discussing thoughts, words and deeds with friends. And one only has to take an old lift (one of those with no automatic doors) up to the library on the first floor to really have the wind fill one’s romantic sails. There are displays of antique books by Pascual, row upon row of clothbound titles, and stalls where one might sit to read a newspaper, look out of the window, read or do whatever these quiet people in here do all day. I must admit to being most taken aback by it all. Well, that’s it from me, Mother. Give my best to Father and give the dog a pat from me. I’ll be back over soon, so don’t forget to water my strawberries – I expect they’ve grown since I last saw them. And do tell Father to go easy on the cheese; it’s good for the soul, but bad for his waistline!

Your ever-loving son, Douglas
A clear underlying circumstance is that the US and UK publishing markets have become more receptive to foreign authors. Anglophone publishing remains an export market; however, literature in English translation is undoubtedly having a moment. The number of books being translated has nearly doubled in the last few decades, and this has inevitably led to a slow but sure expansion in the range of source languages that are represented.

So why has Catalan literature been so well poised to take advantage of this development within the English-language market?

One reason is that Catalan is not as small a language as it may seem. With more than nine million speakers, it is larger than some official national languages, such as Finnish or Danish, and it also has a long literary history. It’s well known that spoken languages are much more endangered than written ones, so it stands to reason that a language – albeit minoritised – with a history of texts dating back to the twelfth century is a good candidate for survival. Another sign of Catalan’s relative health as a literary language is the number of young authors currently writing in it, and the number of smaller presses publishing this work. Half of the Catalan prose translations published in the last year are works by writers born since 1970, many of them coming out of Catalonia’s lively independent publishing scene.

The Catalan language is an important part of the Catalan identity, and explicit language-preservation policies are in place in the region. The Institut Ramon Llull, now twenty years old, is a public organisation devoted to the promotion of Catalan culture throughout the world, with one arm devoted to literature and thought. English-language translations are, arguably, key for a language to thrive, and are undoubtably an important

www.eurolitnetwork.com/the-riveter/
strategy to promote it. Using statistics Institut Ramon Llull compiles in its TRAC database, we can sketch the development of Catalan prose in English translation.

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, most of the Catalan works translated into English were by medieval writers, principally the Mallorcan Ramon Llull (1232–1316), a mind-blowingly productive figure, who wrote more than a two hundred works in Catalan, Arabic and Latin. Not only does Ramon Llull lend his name to the indispensable cultural organisation, but he is among the most-translated Catalan writers of all time. And it is by the hand of one of the most important Llullists, Anthony Bonner, that we find the first translation into English of a twentieth-century Catalan novel: *By Nature Equal* by Josep Maria Espinàs, published in 1961.

Six years later, an Irish woman named Eda O’Shiel would publish the first translation of Mercè Rodoreda’s classic *La plaça del Diamant* (for which she was paid forty-five pounds!). The next entry in the TRAC listing is from 1981, a new translation of the same novel with a very different title, *The Time of the Doves*. This marks the eruption onto the scene of the poet David H. Rosenthal, the first English-language translator to bring Catalan literature to real prominence in US and UK bookstores. Despite his premature death in 1992, some of his translations remain in print. Rosenthal’s *The Time of the Doves* also marks the first modern retranslation of a Catalan work, and presages Rodoreda’s prominence in the canon of translations from Catalan worldwide.

In terms of numbers of prose titles, Rosenthal’s work has now been eclipsed by translations by Peter Bush, Martha Tennent (often in co-translation with her daughter Maruxa Relaño) and even myself. However, the circumstances in which we have been able to work over the last two decades are drastically different from those Rosenthal faced, largely due to the invaluable efforts of the aforementioned Institut Ramon Llull. It not only helps to fund translations and their promotion, but it also trains translators, and works tirelessly to promote both classic and contemporary books to foreign publishers, as evidenced at the 2022 London Book Fair, which featured a Spotlight on Catalan literature. Its role in this translation boom cannot be underestimated; since it began, the number of Catalan prose titles being translated into English has increased ten-fold.

While the publishing industry is hard to predict, this century has seen a steady rise in independent publishers interested in foreign authors. The combination of high-quality books, dedicated translators and multi-faceted support for translation has earned Catalan literature a place on the world stage.

*Mara Faye Lethem*
CONTEMPORARY CATALAN LITERATURE: WHERE WE’VE COME FROM AND WHERE WE’RE GOING

by MARINA PORRAS

Contemporary Catalan literature carries a weight on its back – a tradition so heavy, we can’t understand our literary system without looking back at it. Like most European literatures, Catalan literature has its origins in the medieval period, which was its first golden era. Troubadour poetry produced great ambassadors for the Catalan language – Ausiàs March, for example, is one of the founders of European poetry – and these poets created a strong base from which Catalan literature could develop over the ensuing centuries. However, it was not long before Catalan saw the emergence of the political, and therefore linguistic, conflicts that have been at the centre of its literature throughout history. After a few centuries of repeated onslaughts, which led to its marginalisation and burial, Catalan literature resurfaced in the middle of the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, with great poets – Jacint Verdaguer being the greatest among them – and a sophisticated literary system that would lay the foundations for the twentieth-century boom.

The most brilliant moment for Catalan literature, in my view, is the beginning of the twentieth century, coinciding with a period of significant political stability in the country, and with the rise of Barcelona as one of the most cosmopolitan and modern European cities. It was a golden age for poetry, and also for Catalan publishing, which produced its best authors, who often combined the professions of journalist and prose writer – Eugeni d’Ors, Joan Maragall, Josep Carner or Josep Pla are some key names from this era. These journalists prepared the ground for the writers who would come during the second half of the twentieth century and who had to survive two dictatorships and long decades of language bans and censorship. Mercè Rodoreda and Pere Calders are at the top of this list. However, the influence of the early-twentieth-century journalists can still be seen in the best Catalan prose writers of the twenty-first century.

Catalan writers have had few periods in which they could develop normally, without taking into account their political circumstances, but the power of Catalan literature is so great that whenever it is given a little air, it refloats and great figures rise to the surface. One of
With the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975, Catalan literature was able to develop its own autonomous literary system, and Catalan literature has experienced the same changes all Western literatures have undergone in recent decades. Several generations of writers having now worked within this new publishing world, and it has produced some well-known international names, such as Quim Monzó, whose short stories have been translated around the world, Jaume Cabré, with more conventional and historical novels, and Albert Sánchez Piñol, an author closer to science fiction, whose titles are also sold globally.

Globalisation has made literary themes universal, and Catalan literature is no exception. Themes that have seen most success include the rural environment and the return to nature. Irene Solà, author of *When I Sing Mountains Dance* (2019), has been translated into more than twenty-five languages. Set in the Catalan Pirineus (Pyrenees), it gives voice to natural elements and tries to explain how the place where we are born shapes and explains our inner nature. One of the most interesting novels of 2022, *Distòcia* by Pilar Codony, also has a rural setting, and sees a young veterinarian protagonist explaining the effects of living in nature in the twenty-first century.

Feminism is another topic that occupies a lot of space in Catalan bookstores. The writer Eva Baltasar (*Permafrost*, 2018) has published a trilogy of books, translated around the world, with motherhood as a central theme. We can also include Marta Orriols, who with the sales phenomenon *Learning To Talk to Plants* (2018), has been translated into more than fifteen languages. And the writer and journalist Gemma Ruiz has sold more than 25,000 copies of her novel *Arigelques* (2016), about the effects of recent historic events on women.

These narratives written by contemporary women can be traced back to Marta Rojals and her unusual bestseller *Primavera, Estiu, Etcètera* (2008), a novel about a young woman’s return to her hometown and the intergenerational problems that ensue. In fact, like literatures all over the world, Catalan is seeing the growing importance of young authors and first novels. A recent notable case is that of Pol Guasch with *Napalm to the Heart* (2020),
a novel of ideas that reflects on the boundaries of gender and queer relations.

Nonfiction is booming in Catalan literature too. The last decade has seen a significant increase in essay collections by philosophers, in investigative journalism and in books about contemporary historical phenomena. In addition the market for translations of classics is among the best in European literature, which have a growing prestige among readers.

I couldn’t finish this overview without mentioning contemporary Catalan poetry. Because of its importance in our tradition, Catalan poetry still holds great importance in Catalan literature. The Catalan poetic system remains alive and influential in our literature, and a large number of Catalan prose writers are also poets.

What is most important to me about Catalan literature of the last decades, however, is what happens outside these official circuits. Beyond the authors who are promoted because they are in line with global trends are the writers who distance themselves from passing fads. They have been a constant, offering the most interesting work in Catalan. And if these last decades have not produced a Josep Pla or a Mercè Rodoreda, who are unquestionably at the top of the twentieth-century canon, it is because the twenty-first-century canon is yet to be built. I think it will be constructed by writers who are able to think about their literature both with a view to its age-old tradition but also to its future. Whoever is able to write without thinking about current trends, and with an idea of a greater Catalan literature, which is stronger and more transcendent than that presented to us by current authors, will be the one who will take everything ahead.

Marina Porras
Baltasar’s 2018 novel Permafrost is the first part of a triptych (her choice of word), in which three women tell their stories in the first-person voice. The second book, Boulder, was published in Spain in 2020, and the third, Mamut, in 2022.

Baltasar’s interest in conveying information through poetics is evident in these novels. In an interview with Mathias Énard on Radio France in 2022, she discusses the value of concision when applied to poetry and how she has transferred this to her prose writing. Language in Baltasar’s novels is made to work hard; sound and stress and rhythm are deployed to show how her protagonists experience their lives. Each short, rich chapter provides innovative metaphors and insights, and each offers something to delight the reader – and through Sanches’ beautiful translation, English-speaking readers are able to find the original textual construction as well as the soundscape of the language.

The women in Permafrost and Boulder are Catalans, women-loving women who are confident in their sexuality; multi-skilled non-professionals with jobs rather than careers, people who emigrate to seek a more fulfilling life, or to follow a lover, or out of curiosity. These are recognisably modern lives full of the worries and certainties of these women’s generation. But in Baltasar’s fiction, queerness is normalised, so their anxieties arise from elsewhere. Baltasar has spoken of her own life as a Catalan lesbian and, particularly, of the extent to which the societal homophobia endured by older generations is no longer part of her experience (see her interview with the Letture Metropolitane).

A common thread throughout Permafrost and Boulder is the toxicity of motherhood, gender conformity and heteronormativity; the sudden hardening of societal expectations for women after childbirth, the struggle to find a role in society beyond that of ‘woman’, and how different women respond to
these pressures through their own understanding of their gender.

The origin story of *Permafrost* comes from Baltasar’s experience of a therapy session; she was asked to write about her life, and after forty pages found that she did not want to stop. Yet Baltasar makes it clear that these books are not autobiography or auto-fiction, but rather a ‘new way of getting to know women’.

In the translator’s afterword, Julia Sanches, citing the novelist and translator Jennifer Croft, talks about finding the heart of the books and using that as key to the translation. One of the ‘heart-keys’ Sanches finds is ‘searching’. As a concept ‘searching’ opens interesting vistas across the works; seeking the physicality of desire; searching for the precision and concision of expression; or searching as a stand-in for the restless mobility of contemporary European immigration. It can also serve as key to the narrative method; for all their poetic and linguistic innovation, *Permafrost* and *Boulder* are novels with plots, events sequentially offered, weighted, described, dramatised or obfuscated. The narrative is pushed forward by intensity, desire, time-lapses and bad habits.

One might think of ‘searching’ as a quintessentially modern experience, without the old certainties regarding gender and sexuality, family life, home ownership, job fidelity and career progression – challenges that Eva Baltasar’s protagonists live through, fight over and explore with endless curiosity. But ‘searching’ might also constitute the trajectory of a novel; the narrative imperative of movement across time, and the occupation of the restless mind whose thoughts we follow.

Baltasar’s protagonists are concerned with the fundamental solitude of experience: how do we feel inside our bodies, and how do we feel about the bodies of others? (Engagement with the bodies of other women without ‘othering’ is fundamental here). But these novels also ask how we as individuals feel, assess and position the shocks and pulls of the external world in our own mental structures.

*Jennifer Sarha*
Rodoreda began her writing career as a journalist and short-story writer in 1930s Barcelona, in her words, living ‘an authentic, brilliant, Catalan life’. During this time she produced a wealth of short stories, as well as five novels. Notably, none of this work is available in English.

But the ‘brilliant and authentic’ life was cut short by the Civil War, and Rodoreda went into exile in France, along with many of the writers in her circle. Any hope of a comfortable, if displaced, existence was soon scotched, however, by the outbreak of the Second World War, which saw Rodoreda fleeing once again, settling eventually in Geneva. Her health and literary output both suffered – she wrote poetry and some short stories, but published no major work until the short-story collection *Vint-i-dos contes* in 1958, pieces from which can be read in English in 2011’s *The Selected Stories of Mercè Rodoreda*, translated by Martha Tennent.

For a time during this exile she worked as a seamstress – an experience she draws on with great impact in her story ‘The Threaded Needle’, available in English in *The Selected Stories*, in which a seamstress works alone at home on a nightgown for a bride, her thoughts a combination of hope for the future – ‘Three or four years from now I’ll set up business for myself. I’ll hang a brass sign on the door’ – and regret for her unfulfilled life: ‘If I had married my cousin, I would have made myself a white, white nightgown. Just like this one.’

But it is not until 1961 and the novel *La plaça del diamant* (translated into English as ‘The Time of the Doves’ and in Virago’s 2013 edition as ‘In Diamond Square’) that the Rodoreda who was to be acclaimed as the greatest Catalan writer of the century truly emerges. In 1982, a year before she died, she wrote a ‘prologue’ to *La plaça del diamant*, in which she describes her protagonist, Natalia, as ‘in a constant state of wonder’ – ‘[she]
has only one thing in common with me, namely the fact that she feels at a loss in the midst of the world’. This sense of wonder, of being at a loss when faced with her existence, is surely Rodoreda’s reaction to the ordeals of war and exile. And it is surely what informs that particular position in which Rodoreda places each of her protagonists in the sequence of novels that made her name in the sixties, seventies and eighties.

In *In Diamond Square*, Natalia faces a succession of trials, beginning when she falls in love with Joe, who abuses her physically and mentally, and nicknames her the derogatory ‘Pidgey’. When the Civil War breaks out, Joe goes to the front and is killed, leaving Natalia and her children close to starving. She eventually meets and marries an honest, caring shopkeeper, yet her sense of confusion at her lot in life remains: ‘I was thinking how I had done everything I had ever done not knowing where I was or when, as if it were all planted and rooted in a time that had no memory’.

In *Camellia Street* (1966) this sense of bewilderment and being out of place is even more marked. Cecilia, the protagonist, is a foundling, a fact she’s regularly reminded of, along with speculation about her parentage: ‘They said [my father] must have been a wicked man and I had ears like a murderer, with the lobes flat against my cheeks.’ She seeks escape, and as a teenager breaks from home completely, quickly falling into prostitution and then, through chance rather than design, becoming a kept woman, a courtesan. Compared to the penury of Natalia’s existence, Cecilia’s life is luxurious, but, unlike Natalia, she seems absolutely without choices, robbed of all agency. Her confusion at the world takes the form of apparent paranoia – about her neighbours spying on her, about the cream-coloured car always parked on her street. Yet, it transpires that she is being manipulated, that to the men around her she is an asset to be bought, abused and sold.

In her lowest moment, when Cecilia is drugged, kept captive and sexually abused, we see Rodoreda turning to an impressionistic technique she’ll use regularly but sparingly across her later work to express such moments of trauma and confusion:

‘The flames flickered back and forth and a voice said they weren’t dead people, they were from the cognac, but sad and lonely, they flickered all around the cemetery and kept going in one door and out the other and fluttered around the foot of the bed.’

Even in *A Broken Mirror* (1962), which in many respects is Rodoreda’s most conventional novel, we see this technique used to great effect. The book is, to all intents and purposes, a family saga, covering
three generations of a wealthy Barcelona family from the late nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War. Rodoreda reserves her impressionistic passages not for the family members, but for those who observe it from the outside. When the loyal housekeeper discovers the broken mirror of the title in the wrecked and abandoned villa towards the end of the book, she drinks a glass to the family members who have passed away:

‘She was offering it to the dead in a toast of fear that was not quite fear. In the glass, swimming in the golden liquid, there was a speck: a boy, as small as a fly, holding a tiny boat in his hand, amid the bursting bubbles. She picked him up between index finger and thumb; she did not want him to drown.’

The boy is the family’s youngest child, Jaume, who has drowned – in the pond in the villa’s garden. His death is labelled an accident by the family, but the reader is permitted sight of the moment of his death – and it is at the hands of his brother and sister. There is no clear explanation given, no exploration into the siblings’ motives. The reader is left with a sense of stupefaction at something so deliberate and so cruel.

The source of this confoundment at senseless killing and destruction is most evident in two late novels, *War, So Much War* (1980) and *Death in Spring* (published posthumously in 1986). Both deal with the experience of war, but in indirect ways. *War, So Much War*, is a picaresque tale, in the style of Don Quixote, in which a teenaged deserter, Adriá, travels the Spanish countryside, meeting a variety of characters, each with a story of their own. The sense is that he’s making his way home, but, like Cecilia in *Camellia Street* or Natalia in *In Diamond Square*, his agency is limited or vanishing as he falls into the events of each chapter and is, by turns, abused, given care and hospitality, tricked and rewarded. At the close of the book, nothing he’s experienced seems to exist, there’s ‘only me and that fever’.

*Death in Spring* is Rodoreda’s most experimental book – but at the same time the one where she seems most obviously to confront the demons that have plagued her since the outbreak of the Civil War. This confrontation is indirect, however, for the novel is a grand allegory. The location is a cliffside village, threatened from above by the beetling rocks, and from below by a perilous river, the inhabitants bound by a series of strange rituals, rules and beliefs, their lives dominated by violence and the threat of exile. Her protagonist, like Adriá in *War, So Much War*, is a teenaged boy, set adrift in this damaged and dysfunctional society, bewildered by its strictures but with no means of getting away – his destiny to die
a violent death only to return to this violent world. Pondering this circular fate, he sits by the river and moulds figures from the clay on the banks; ‘a whole village of figures’, to whom he speaks tenderly.

‘Tenderness changed me into water and everything that fled from me was in that water. I don’t know why. I don’t know what those mornings were because no words exist for them. No. No words exist. They have to be invented.’

Perhaps that was Rodoreda’s conclusion – that faced with the senseless violence that robbed her of the promise of her ‘brilliant and authentic’ life, she was at a loss, she had no words. The evidence of her later works suggests, however, that she managed to invent the words she needed, and used them to express that universal feeling of bafflement at the world in which we find ourselves. It is exactly her ability to express this feeling that so strongly engages new readers with her work and gives each the sense they have made a discovery.

*West Camel*


*In Diamond Square*, translated by Peter Bush, *Virago*, 2013


*A Broken Mirror*, translated by Josep Miquel Sobrer, *Daunt Books*, 2017

*War, So Much War*, translated by Maruxa Relaño and Martha Tennent, *Open Letter*, 2015

All of 3TimesRebel’s books represent a challenge to the reader – literally so, as there’s always a provocative question on the back cover. In this case, it’s ‘Do you think you are so strong you would never be a victim of abuse? Well, then think twice.’ The challenge laid down here is to understand: to put oneself in the place of the protagonist, appreciate what it was like for her in an abusive relationship, and why she stayed.

As narrator, Andrea describes her relationship with Ibana in harrowing detail. Ibana’s tactics run from physical violence to blaming and shaming Andrea. The central metaphor that the novel uses is the abusive partner seen as a carnivorous plant:

‘Bit by bit the plant establishes her roots where you have yours, which are destroyed little by little. There comes a time when only her circle, her friendships, are worthwhile, and you distance yourself from your own ... You do everything possible to avoid suffocating yet the only thing you achieve is to move deeper into the funnel.’

This comparison emphasises that the abuse is both insidious and all-encompassing, a system that traps the victim. Moreover, it’s a system that turns the victim’s efforts against her. That helps explain why Andrea stayed where she was: ‘We stay put to think, we stay put to gather strength, we stay put in case something comes to mind, we don’t ever believe it’s forever.’

Andrea acknowledges that, to an outsider, it might seem an easy
matter to step away from such a relationship. But the novel puts us inside that relationship, and there we see that it’s a vicious circle – one that is built into the very structure of the novel itself: non-linear, short chapters each numbered ‘one’, returning to the same themes again and again ...

There is a sense of movement but not progression, which brings home the nightmare of Andrea’s situation.

The novel is deepened further by Andrea’s observations of the person behind Ibana the monster, including the astute ‘to control my world she had to abandon hers’. These insights don’t in any way excuse Ibana’s behaviour, but they do put it in a context, and they also highlight the question of Ibana’s daughter, and whether she can escape her mother.

There is hope in Andrea’s story, but it’s tentative and ambivalent. To read *The Carnivorous Plant* is to step into an ever-shifting world with no obvious way out. We’re right there with Andrea, and we feel what she feels every step of the way.

*David Hebblethwaite*
Imagine Moby Dick, but instead of Captain Ahab picture a failed university professor, and instead of a white whale, a great and magnificent idea that will save and redeem the professor’s career. This novel, like all great novels, is about trying to find meaning in life. After nineteen years in academia, Morella can no longer convince himself that he is a genius who will change the course of literature. When his obstetrician wife, Sesé, delivers a deformed yet biologically viable baby, its birth calls into question their conceptual and aesthetic certainties. Els angles morts is structured as an academic paper, and its form mocks the absurd and rigid academic structures that have tortured Dr Morella during his career. As Maya Faye Lethem writes, ‘Bagunyà’s multi-faceted, supersaturated narration – with its monstrous barrage of footnotes, serial parenthetical clauses, digressions, knowing winks, sentences that end abruptly or trail off – challenges the reader’s perspective through a constant upending of their expectations, setting the novel of ideas on its ear’.

BORJA BAGUNYÀ

From ELS ANGLES MORTS (‘Dead Angles’) Edicions del Periscopi, 2021 Translated by Mara Faye Lethem Introduced by Marina Porras

It was one of those things you wished you hadn’t had to see, not so much because you didn’t want to see it, but because, once you had, it could never be unseen. The matador’s goring, the corneal operation, the recipes for making your own placenta into stew. Up until then, everything had been fine with the dean, right as rain, but after a painfully detailed report on the state of the repairs to the cloister, he announced that he would give the floor to (pause) Laura, to see if they could finally give Olivier’s new post the red light. He accompanied his announcement with one of those nods you use to greet someone in passing, but that wasn’t what irritated Morella; it was the shabby detail of saying ‘Laura’ instead of ‘Doctor Camps’, which is what he should have said had his university been a normal one. It should be a scandal. And yet it wasn’t. In any other European college, he would have been given a warning and told to address the committee in the proper fashion. What was that belly-showing, cigar-smoking godfatherly familiarity?, Morella wondered, satisfied, at least, to
confirm the ridiculous need the dean had to prove the special chumminess he had with his happy few, the same chumminess that allowed him to eschew the forms of address dictated by protocol (that is, ‘doctor’ or ‘professor’, etc.) and to impudently introduce the lucky ones, that is (pause) (nod) ‘Laura’, an offence that seemed even more monstrous to him considering they were in the middle of an official ceremony of the college’s highest executive authority, and that, just like in any other liturgy, it was the protocol that dictated the event, and not the other way around. He liked that idea of the liturgy. It wasn’t his, but that didn’t matter; Antoni Morella was the kind of man who would spend his whole day writing down stuff if the image didn’t strike him as so ridiculous. Besides, if he had learned something in his nineteen-year career, it was the grotesquely ritualised nature of the academic institution. Classes, exams, department meetings, contract renewals, the inaugurations of each academic year, speakers’ presentations, and many other academic or para-academic activities (but also the conversations in the cafeteria and the greetings in the corridors) (the way you asked about someone’s sick wife or the cost of fixing the carpet), everything was perfectly standardised, pre-structured and detailed in a way that pretty much everybody knew as the way things work. The way things work was the vade mecum of university practices. Saying that something was ‘the way things work’ was the best way to end a conversation. You think the sabbaticals were handed out unfairly? It’s just the way things work. The senior professor was abusing his power and using his intern to cover half of his classes and grade his exams? The way things work, of course, to the point that, in their university, for a long time now you didn’t just ‘know’ something, but you ‘already knew’ it. And, besides, the immense majority of things had no other explanation (it’s the way things work, you know), and this ended up turning ‘the way things work’ into a perverse way of excluding anyone who asked any questions, because everybody was supposed to know how ‘the way things work’ worked, which meant that everybody had known everything since forever, since the remote origins of professional time (even though nobody had ever been explained what that way was, or where it came from, or whether it made any sense at this point, since the logic of the way things work established right away
that not only did you not ask about certain things, but also that asking about them was dangerous). That’s why you never talked about the way things worked, in case you ended up letting the cat out of the bag and revealing that nobody had ever actually known what they meant with ‘the way things worked’, regardless of how much that phrase was repeated and consolidated, and, useful as the phrase was, Morella was convinced, after nineteen years on the job, that nobody had the slightest idea of what ‘the way things work’ meant, or why things worked the way they worked, and therefore, whoever made the mistake of asking was not really a university person, because in order to be a university person you needed to be in the loop of how things worked, and in order to work you needed to know certain things. For example, you needed to know who to go to in order to solve an administrative problem and who to go to for an academic problem. You needed to know that, if you wanted to reach the one efficient secretary in the department, first you needed to consult the two useless ones without them noticing that your consultation was a mere formality. You needed to know that Monday was khaki pants and Tuesday was beige pants. And that, in order to ‘innovate in teaching’ you needed to speak Pedagoguese, and that pedagogues were the only ones concerned with the concept of teaching innovation. You needed to know that interns were useful and students were irritating. And don’t forget the greetings. The greetings were very important.

Borja Bagunyà
Translated by Mara Faye Lethem
Evil and its moral implications is one of the main topics of Toni Sala's work. Èlia is a middle-aged woman tired of men who don't understand her. But Albert Jordi, the main character of Persecució, is an exception. They met on a dating site and she thought he was the one, until she discovers – because he tells her – that he killed his previous wife. Èlia, scared and paralysed, breaks up with him, leaves town and tries to forget him. But after a few days she finds herself calling him obsessively, desperately trying to know more about what happened. Forgiveness and its possibility are the themes in Persecució. Sala explores the ambiguities and dark sides of the human mind through a story that focuses on love and death and its tensions. Set in Barcelona during the political events of 2017, the novel mixes individual and collective chaos through the lives of its characters.

I went out with a guy for a year, until I found out he’d killed his wife. He told me himself. It was ten years earlier, with a knife, and he’d gone to prison. I couldn’t stand to hear any more. I walked him to the door and I gave him his jacket, and he opened the door and left.

I got into bed, still in my clothes. That morning I had changed the sheets for him, the pillowcase smelled of fabric softener and I was sent into a daze by the perfume of the flowers printed on the sheets, the flowers on the T-shirt and pants I hadn’t taken off. The scent of the garlands on the lampshade on the night table, the scent of the borders on the walls, of the bouquets on the curtains, of the crowns of flowers on the mosaic. I fell asleep on a cloud of petals, as if I were the dead woman.

I can’t transform the year I spent with Albert Jordi into a bad year, I can’t go back in time and relive it knowing what he was hiding from me. It was a very good year. My real estate agency was rebounding, we had clients coming out of the woodwork,
and he was filled with the energy of a new relationship. I can still see him laughing. It was like when you walk into a new house for the first time and you immediately know it’ll improve your life because it perfectly fits the moment you’re in, your shape, as if you had drawn the blueprints yourself. Houses are like bespoke suits, they get tight or loose when you gain or lose weight, they bore you when your life is boring, they make you anxious or calm depending on your emotional state. They are sounding boards, they can be a way out or a prison, they change moment by moment.

I was over forty and I happened upon a man who was tailor-made for me. I spent my whole life without a steady partner, and it was finally my turn. I was good and ready, I deserved Albert Jordi for all the time I had waited for him, for my disposition, I deserved a stroke of good luck, and I fell head over heels like a teenager. He was ten years older than me and worked as the sales manager at Noumón, an important bookstore in Barcelona. He read a lot for work, but he knew all sorts of things that weren’t found in books. Details about people, crevices inside of crevices. He had a knowledge of the world that fascinated me. He was current on the latest books, but also on the magazines and newspapers, on international politics and wars. He said he envied me because I couldn’t name the French president.

I learned a lot with him, much more than the name of the president of France. I discovered how great my ignorance was, but also how great my possibilities were. None of my girlfriends could have imagined it, no one among my family members. All of a sudden someone flipped a switch inside me. He was my private university. We talked on the phone every day, we saw each other on weekends, at least, we went out, we drank, we talked, we went on trips. He knew the roads, the names of places and plants, of trees, birds and butterfly families. I would see two identical trees where he saw three different ones. I would say to him: how can you know that? He pointed to his head. A million gigas.

He also had a dead woman in that head, and that secret gave him the energy to always be attentive, always on point, always alert, and I spent an entire year sucking her blood.
I learned of Dora Bonnín’s death on a train platform, peering at the newspaper of a man who was also waiting for the train to Barcelona. I lived at the time in a small town on the Costa Daurada, where I’d sought refuge after breaking up with my partner. What remained of the relationship was a three-year-old son, a lot of resentment and some debts. My mood swayed between a mild, non-dramatic meltdown and an impulsive and irascible cynicism (I’m a writer), a volubility that led me to undertake all sorts of literary projects. I lived from day to day: I hadn’t published a book in four years. I got by thanks to the increasingly scarce cultural journalism (forgive the contradiction) and various commissions I received from my editor, who must have felt somewhat responsible for my fiasco as a novelist. It was her idea to publish my last book in June, with a hideous cover and after cutting out five chapters that were, needless to say, wonderful.

[...]

My plan for that spring morning, when I learned of Bonnín’s death, was the following: I was going up to the city to interview a photographer and then spend the afternoon with my son in his mother’s flat until she got back from work. The visiting arrangements we’d agreed on included Thursday afternoons, as
well as Saturdays and Sundays, when I took him to my small bachelor pad and we spent the days playing ball in the hall, or else going for a tricycle ride on the boulevard, or watching videos of Japanese kittens on YouTube until we both got sleepy.

I went and picked up my son at his school and took him to his mother’s home. I gave him his lunch, which was conveniently waiting for me, prepared, in the fridge, and while he took his nap and I nibbled on something I’d pinched from the pantry of what until recently had been my kitchen (a habit that infuriated my ex: ‘go buy your own food for once!’), I began to transcribe the interview; I had to get it to the newspaper by noon the next day.

But it was very difficult; I spread the photos of Bonnín out on the table and looked at them again, carefully. The memories of those almost legendary summers gripped me. Twenty years had gone by, or more, and still it was as if she was right there in front of me, in those short dresses covered with tiny flowers, wearing a scarf or straw hat on her head, singing for her husband’s guests there on the terrace of Son Gros. Her son and I gazing at her from the upper balcony, fascinated not only by her voice but also by the awe she produced in an entire, silent crowd of adults.

In the newspaper I’d bought after leaving the photographer’s flat there was an enormous death notice for Dora; it announced that at five in the afternoon a ceremony would be held for the singer at the funeral home on the Ronda de Dalt. While the boy slept, I let myself drift in memory, and when he woke up I was in such a cloud of my own that it’s possible I didn’t dedicate as much attention to him as he deserved. The boy began to cry desperately, he even went over to the door of the flat and kicked and pounded on it with his fists: he yelled for his mother with a fury I didn’t know how to calm. All my attempts to distract him were in vain; no song, ball or game, no funny face or bribe – a piece of cheese, Bruno? – could extract him from the crisis of longing and feeling of abandonment.

When his mother arrived, almost an hour later, the boy was still bawling; and she also got angry with me. She told me I didn’t know how to take care of him. I hadn’t even removed his diaper; he only wore it when sleeping and it was now damp with a big piss. The boy, when he saw her, immediately calmed down and started pleading for his snack. My ex was angrier with me than my son had been; she guessed (she knew me too well, Olga did) that the child had been crying because I hadn’t known how to be with him. She saw Dora’s photo spread out on the table in

‘And buy your own food!’ she let fly as I, dejected, exited the flat.
the dining room, next to the newspaper and my laptop, and began to tell me I was a Bad Father, who was always ‘spaced out’ and ‘fucking out of it’ and if I didn’t change, she wouldn’t let me see the boy, even on weekends.

I made the mistake of responding and we argued for a good bit, shouts and reproaches, explosives and machine guns. The boy also began to yell, hugging his mother; I felt as if my head was filling with fog and my irritation became mixed with a confused sadness.

‘And buy your own food!’ she let fly as I, dejected, exited the flat.

Melcior Comes
Translated by Adrian Nathan West
Rosamunda woke up. She still had a pleasant picture of herself in her mind as the light filtered through her half-closed eyelashes. Then she realised that her head was leaning backwards, pressing against the back of the seat and that her mouth was dry from hanging open. She composed herself, sitting up straight. Her neck was aching, her long, scraggy neck. She looked around the compartment and was relieved to see that her travel companions were still asleep. Her legs were stiff and she needed to stretch them. The train rattled along, blowing its whistle. She left the compartment with the utmost care, in order not to wake anyone up or disturb them. ‘Fairy steps,’ she thought to herself, as she walked towards the open platform at the end of the corridor.

It was dawn, at last. The third class compartment smelled of weariness, cigarettes and soldiers’ boots. They were emerging from the night as if coming out of a long tunnel and you could see people huddled up, men and women asleep on the hard seats. It was an uncomfortable carriage, with the corridor crammed full of baskets and suitcases. You could see the countryside and a silvery streak of sea through the windows.

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It was a glorious day. She scarcely noticed the cold, early morning air. She glimpsed the sea through the orange groves. She was almost hypnotised by the lush greenness of the trees and the clear blue watery horizon.

‘Horrid, horrid oranges. Horrible palm trees. The marvellous sea ...’

‘What did you say?'
There was a soldier standing beside her. A pale young lad. He seemed very polite. He looked like her son. A son of hers who had died. Not the one who was still alive, no, not like him in the least.

‘I’m not sure that you’d understand what I mean,’ she said, somewhat snootily. ‘I was remembering some lines I wrote. But if you like, I don’t mind reciting them.’

The boy was astonished. The person beside him was a thin, elderly woman, with dark rings under her eyes. Bleached hair and a very old, green outfit. She was wearing a pair of old dancing shoes – fabulous, silver dancing shoes – and a silver ribbon in her hair as well, tied up in a bow. He’d been watching her for quite a while.

‘So, what have you decided?’ Rosamunda asked impatiently. ‘Would you like to hear me recite them or not?’

‘Yes, I’d ...’

The boy didn’t laugh, because it made him feel sad to look at her. Perhaps he’d laugh about it afterwards. And also, he was interested because he was young and curious. He hadn’t seen much of life and he wanted to experience more. This was an adventure. He looked at Rosamunda and noticed that she looked dreamy. Her blue eyes were half-closed. She was gazing at the sea.

‘Life’s so difficult!’

The woman was astounding. Her eyes were brimming with tears as she spoke.

‘If only you knew, young man. If only you knew what this new day means to me, you’d forgive me. This rush to the South. Back to the South, back to my home. Back to feeling smothered in my own backyard, back to my husband’s lack of understanding. You wouldn’t smile then, my son. You don’t have a clue what life can be like for a woman like me. This endless torture. You might ask why I’m telling you all this, why I feel like confiding in someone, when I’m actually a very shy person. Well, it’s because right now, talking to you, I’ve realised that you have a big heart, full of compassion and because this is my confession. Because, after you, all that’s left for me, so to speak, is the grave. Not being able to talk to any other human being, to any other human being who’d understand me.

She stopped talking for a moment. Perhaps she was tired. The train ran on and on. It was getting warmer and brighter. It was going to be a scorching hot day.

‘I’m going to tell you my story, because I think you’ll be interested. Yes. Picture a young blonde with big blue eyes, a young girl passionate about the arts. Her name, Rosamunda. Did you hear me? Rosamunda. I said, did you hear my name? Do you like it?’
The soldier blushed at the imperious tone of voice.
‘Yes I do, it’s a really nice name.’

‘Rosamunda,’ she continued, a little hesitant. Her real name was Felisa but, for some reason, she hated it. Inside, she’d always been Rosamunda, ever since she was a teenager. Being Rosamunda was a magic formula that saved her from the strictures of her home life, the monotony of the days. Being Rosamunda transformed her coarse, weather-beaten fiancé into a fairy-tale prince. Rosamunda, to her, was a name to be cherished, a name with exquisite qualities. But how could she explain all that to the young lad?

‘Rosamunda was a very talented actress. Her performances were brilliantly successful. And she was a poetess, too. She was already quite famous at an early age. Just imagine her, little more than a young girl, lavished with praise, a charmed life and then, suddenly, disaster. Love. Did I mention that she was famous? She was barely sixteen, but she was surrounded by admirers everywhere she went. At one of her poetry readings she met a man who led to her downfall. It was ... my husband, because, you understand, I am Rosamunda. I married a brutal, sleazy, jealous man, without realising what I was doing. He kept me locked up for years and years. Me! That beautiful golden butterfly. Do you understand?’

Yes, she had got married, but not at the age of sixteen; she was twenty-three. But at the end of the day ... and it was true that she had met him one day when she was reciting her poems in a friend’s house. He was a butcher. But how could she explain such things to this young lad? What was not in doubt was that she had suffered, for so many years. She hadn’t been able to recite a single poem, or boast about her past successes, possibly imaginary, she couldn’t remember clearly, but ... her own son used to tell her she’d go mad thinking and crying so much. That was worse than the beatings and rantings when he came home drunk. She didn’t have anyone except that son of hers, because her daughters were shameless dunces and made fun of her and the other son, like her husband, had even tried to keep her locked up.

‘I just had one son. An only child. Do you understand? I called him Florisel. He was very slim and pale, just like you. Maybe that’s why I’m telling you all this. I’d tell him all about my wonderful earlier life. He was the only one who knew that I’d hung on to a chiffon dress and all my necklaces. He would listen to me, he listened to me, like you, now, entranced.’

Rosamunda smiled. Yes, the young lad was hanging on her every word.

‘Then my son died. I couldn’t cope with it. The only thing that tied me to my home was my son. Acting on impulse,
I packed my bags and went back to the big city where I’d spent my youth and had my success. Ah! I’ve had some marvellous times and some miserable times. I was given a rapturous welcome, acclaimed again by my audiences, adored once more. Do you understand the tragedy of it? When my husband found out about it all, he began sending me sad, heart-wrenching letters. He couldn’t live without me. He just can’t, the poor thing. And also, he’s Florisel’s father, and behind all my success there was always the bitter memory of the son we lost.’

The young lad could see that scrawny, eccentric figure of a woman getting animated at times. She talked a lot. She described an amazing hotel, the faded glory of the theatre on the day of her big comeback. She described delirious standing ovations and her tired, sylph-like figure, taking the bow.

‘And now, despite all that, I’m going back to do my duty. I gave all my money away to the poor and I’m going back to my husband’s side, like someone going to her grave.’

Rosamunda became sad again. Her earrings were long and cheap; they swayed in the breeze. She felt ill-fated, like a grande dame. She’d forgotten about those awful days in the big city with no food. Her friends mocking her chiffon dress, her glass beads and her fantastic projects. She’d forgotten that long dining room with stripped pine tables, where she’d eaten pauper’s meals along with all the coughing, spluttering street beggars. Her weeping, her abject terror for hours on end, when she’d even missed her husband’s insults. How she’d kissed that letter from her husband written in his brusque, authoritarian style, where he’d evoked the memory of their dead son, had asked for her forgiveness and forgiven her.

The soldier stood there, staring at her. What an odd person, my God! The poor thing was obviously mad. Now she was smiling at him. She had two teeth missing.

The train was pulling in at a station along the way. It was breakfast time, and an appetising aroma wafted in from the station café. Rosamunda looked over towards the doughnut stall.

‘Would you allow me to buy you a doughnut, madam?’

An amusing story began to take shape in the young soldier’s mind. What if he told his friends that he’d met a magnificent woman on the train, and ...

‘Buy me a doughnut? Very well, young man. Perhaps you’ll be the last person to ever buy me anything. And please don’t be so formal. You can call me Rosamunda; I wouldn’t object to that.’
A MUDDY ROAD AHEAD – SPANISH WOMEN’S WRITING SINCE THE END OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

by MAZAL OAKNÍN

Since 2000, ten women authors have won the Premio Planeta de Novela, the world’s most lucrative literary award. Nonetheless, before attempting to answer the question of whether gender parity has finally been achieved in Spain – and we would of course be limiting ourselves to the cultural landscape – we must bear in mind that in 2023, only eight of the forty-one current Real Academia Española (Spain’s language academy) members are women. Thus, it would appear that gender bias in the reception and marketing of women writers in Spain is not behind us – and the road ahead might be muddy. Yet, today we can celebrate that, despite the numerous legal, social and cultural obstacles in their way, from the end of the Spanish Civil War until the present day, the role played by Spanish women writers in rewriting the country’s defining historical moments, as well as in shaping its collective identity, is both astonishing and revealing.

The label ‘woman writer’ is still a highly contentious one in Spain. While confining women to a literary ‘ghetto’ might be a danger, it cannot be denied that the label sheds light on their work and brings them wider public attention. Still, the ideological connotations and prejudices associated with this label would explain why, whenever asked about the existence of a women’s literature that has specific characteristics and a distinct tradition, Spanish women writers from different generations seldom offer unambiguous, unbiased answers.

Whatever their views on this debate, the recognition of the particular difficulties they have faced as women writers is a common feature in interviews with authors from generations from the end of the civil war until the present. This is true even of those widely acclaimed by the cultural establishment, such as Ana María Matute (1925–2014). When interviewed by Rosa Montero (1951–) in 1996, Matute reflected on the isolation and intimidation she felt when, at the time of her first marriage, she was the only woman to frequent Café Gijón, the legendary meeting-place for intellectuals, writers and artists in post-war Madrid. Nowadays, despite the emergence of an increasingly commercialised and web-based literary market, which has brought an ever-growing number of promotional opportunities for women writers, studies conclude that the gender bias in the
marketing of writers continues. Not only are women writers personalised as more domestic and as more closely aligned with their literary characters, they are not immune to the objectified and sexualised mass-media approach to the female body in general. Thus, in recent years, Paula Izquierdo (1962–) has repeatedly lamented that the way her work is promoted is conditioned by the importance attributed to her physical appearance. And the image of a leather-clad Lucía Etchebarria (1966–), who inserted herself on the cover of Nosotras que no somos como las demás (‘We Who Aren’t Like the Others’), is a powerful example of how marketing strategies for male and female writers differ.

Following the approval of the ‘only yes means yes’ consent bill, Spain’s equality minister, Irene Montero, made international headlines last summer as she claimed to be pushing through the most progressive gender equality reforms in the world. Nevertheless, despite the widespread perception that Spanish women writers are now living in an era of unprecedented opportunity, traditional sexist stereotypes persist. In the area of literary criticism, writers of various generations have united to denounce the ongoing tendency to make negative allusions to the sex and gender of women authors, and to define writing by women as over-emotional and deprived of action and excitement; a genre that portrays only female characters and addresses only a female readership. According to Etchebarria, a long-time supporter of the ‘women’s writing’ label and self-declared feminist, women writers will struggle to attain parity as long as critics and reviewers continue to identify male issues as universal and female issues as niche. Not only has the virtual era failed to mitigate the traditional gender stereotyping dating back to the Franco regime, but it has also added to its complexity by over-emphasising the visual marketing of the literary author.

Another shift that has affected the Spanish literary market in recent decades is the arrival of the current globalising, capitalist consumer economy in which an author’s exposure to the mass media is key to determining their selling potential and success. In the case of Rosa Montero, while she described the launch of Crónica del desamor in 1979 as a small, intimate event in a bookshop that was attended by a small number of friends, twenty-six years later the launch of Historia del rey transparente at the Teatro Español de Madrid boasted celebrity contributions, including a dramatised reading by actress Pastora Vega and medieval songs by countertenor José Hernández Pastor. Yet this same globalisation, and the literary boom it has engendered, have also offered spaces for women writers to depict new role models for women and to examine the shifting social expectations around them; in this
sense literature by women is seeking to end the confusion between women’s socially constructed roles and their biologically determined ones.

Yes, it might be a muddy road ahead, but there is light at the end of the tunnel, and it is taking shape as, arguably, one of the most refreshing and ground-breaking contributions by Spanish women writers for decades: the fictional representation of experiences and issues that have seldom been seen in literature. By embracing intersectionality, a theory from Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) that posits that all forms of oppression are linked, Spanish women writers are increasingly acknowledging that, besides gender, social categorisations such as race, class, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, formal education, neurodiversity, etc., can marginalise people. Hence, bringing together intersectionality and literary innovation, Esther Bendahan has rewritten the demise of Moroccan Sephardic communities and shed light on the little-known Sephardi Jewish community in Spain; Ángeles Caso has narrated the ordeals of women from poor countries who emigrate in search of a better life and by doing so enable the career progression of Western women; Sara Mesa has denounced the use of language as a tool to pursue exclusion and difference; Najat El Hachmi, by focusing on Maghrebian immigration, has engaged with questions of migration, nationhood, cultural assimilation and the mother-daughter relationship; Cristina Morales has carried out an earth-shattering exploration of female desire and autonomy, queer sexuality, female solidarity and institutional oppression; Aixa de la Cruz has grappled with the question of whether there is a genetic predisposition to addiction and mental disorder, and with the notion of psychiatry as a form of institutional violence; and Trifonia Melibea Obono has denounced the lack of women’s and LGBTQI+ rights and the legacies of Spanish colonisation in Equatorial Guinea.

The fight goes on, but this wealth of voices, perspectives and experiences provides an expansive and generous vision of what is possible, and thus offers us a powerful weapon against stereotyping and bias.

Mazal Oaknin
May the grace of the Holy Spirit be with your reverence my confessor, guard your rest and keep you warm on this cold night, amen.

It is well past twelve yet my eyes are wide as saucers. Women sleep little in old age, the exact opposite of old men. I am certain that by now your reverence is slumbering long and soundly, that you have been recumbent no fewer than two hours, breathing from the depths of your stomach. I have little stomach and still less sleep. Even so, I will employ these hours to do as the friar has commanded, which is no easy task. As he rests, I work.

And so, may the grace of the Holy Spirit bless and keep the Dominican who brought his mouth to the lattice and, in a lowered voice, said to me: ‘Write, Mother Teresa, of the grace and favour the Lord has given you, so I may better understand your confession.’ And added: ‘So you may better understand yourself.’ And further added, in a whisper: ‘So men of great learning may understand you.’ In imitation I, too, inched closer to the lattice, and I smelt the breath of a man well fed. How festive his command seemed, what promise of abundance I perceived in his voice. I felt myself an apprentice holding for the first time his teacher’s brushes, a squire allowed to brandish the sword of a knight, a slave looked in the eye by his master. With a smile I accepted, with a smile I received his blessing and with a smile I ran to my quarters, arranged the pages, settled myself and drew closer to the inkwell. I removed my veil and rolled up my habit. Only then, with the quill set on the page and the first sentence already escaping my head through my hand, did I pause. I recalled his words: ‘Were you not a vain and wicked woman before taking vows?’ ‘Who better than you, Mother, to explain the gifts the Lord lavishes on women who leave their worldly life?’ ‘Surely you, more than any other, will be capable of defending yourself, affirming that you embrace no reform, forever extinguishing the Inquisition’s enmity towards you so you will be seen for what you truly are: a living saint.’

The quill lingering on the page had left a black stain, as if manifesting the presence of the devil. Perhaps I, again in imitation of the Dominican, who spoke the unspeakable, had summoned...
him in my avarice to write the unwritable. I wonder, sometimes, if Satan’s dark cunning stems from his demonic nature, or merely because he has grown shrewd with age? This humble servant of the Lord is forty-seven. Who is the older, Father, you or I?

I replaced my veil and went down for Rosary, then to supper. As ever, I ate little. My confessor is so present upon my mind that he remained with me even in my prayers before retiring. I again entreated the Lord to bless and keep the Dominican, my shield against those who would attack me. And even as I wished to continue to another intention, I found myself unable, my mind still busy with our conversation. I asked God for light to better understand my confessor’s commandment. I prayed: Oh Lord, must I write that in my youth I was vain and wicked, only for You to reward me now? Must I write to please my confessor? To please learned men? To please the Inquisition? To please myself? Must I write that I embrace no reform? Must I write because I have been so commanded and have taken a vow of obedience? Oh Lord, must I write?

Despite this, in the end, the Lord and I are in agreement: I must write what the Dominican expects of me, for he would accept nothing else and I owe him obedience. I must write because I wish for men of learning to draw close to me, so I may become a better writer and thus a better servant of the Lord, and because I wish to evade the Inquisition’s accusations, although on that matter I deceive myself. If it so wishes, the Inquisition will prosecute me for the act of being a woman and writing about God, or less: for being a woman and writing at all, for being a woman and reading. For being a woman and speaking. And so I again find myself smiling at this commandment, for at last I understand it. Oh Father, my confessor, cloaked in the warm embrace of angels’ wings: I will give you what you ask, and what you do not ask I will not give to you, though I will write it all the same, for a woman grows weary of being misunderstood, she grows weary of calls for her to be burned at the stake, a torment she sorely yearns to be concluded, but she never tires of contemplating the world, never tires of describing it and of endeavouring to be less a fool. And that is what I am doing at one o’clock in the morning at Doña Luisa de la Cerda’s palace in Toledo, this eleventh of January in the year of our Lord one thousand five hundred and sixty-two.

May all this be for the greater praise and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, He who is capable of improving upon these poor words of His ever-unworthy servant,

TERESA OF ÁVILA

Cristina Morales
Translated by Kevin Gerry Dunn

109  The Riveter
Since storming onto the Andalusian literary scene two decades ago, Cristina Morales has sealed a nationwide reputation as a writer who isn’t afraid to rattle the status quo. *Easy Reading*, her uproarious fourth novel and the first to be translated into English, is no exception.

Originally published in 2018, the book follows four small-town cousins – Àngels, Patri, Marga and Nati – who, after being certified as ‘intellectually disabled’ in their teens and twenties and spending their adult lives being funnelled through the Spanish residential care system, have acquired what appears to be a sliver of freedom in the form of a supervised flat on the Barcelona beachfront.

Essentially, the cousins fall into two camps. In one corner, Àngels and Patri are fighting tooth and nail to keep the flat by bowing to the various edicts of the Generalitat’s ‘independent-living’ infrastructure. These run the gamut of jargon-laden bureaucratic hoops, from weekly ‘self-advocacy’ meetings and compulsory ‘recreational activities’ geared towards promoting ‘involvement in community life’, to ad hoc inspections by the cousins’ caseworker and the flat director to ensure they are meeting their ‘integration, normalisation and independent-lifestyle targets’. The latter also reports to the Catalan government on every cent of spending from the women’s monthly disability benefits.

Meanwhile, in the opposite corner, Marga is waging a stealthy yet equally fierce battle to decamp to her own squat with the help of an anarchist social centre, and Nati is very loudly at war with the apparatus of the ‘disability-support’ bureaucracy and society at large.

The fundamental tension fueling the divide is one of perspective. Àngels and Patri, having been reared and (in the case of Patri) doped into submission in institutions for the ‘intellectually disabled’, have internalised a system that ostracises them and brands them as deficient, then perversely hails their acquiescence to this view of themselves as the first step towards
their ‘integration’ and ‘normalisation’. As Patri notes, the cousins’ right to stay in the flat hinges on the ‘ability to adjust our expectations to our real capacities’. Enablement, then, when sought through the official channels, comes with a paradoxical ceiling attached.

In their different ways, Nati and Marga challenge this path. Rather than being pitifully grateful that the state has granted them a modicum of autonomy through the switch from residential care to supported living, they resent the continued imposition on their lives. If Àngels and Patri’s focus is on the ‘flat’ – which, as Nati bluntly notes, the pair would ‘eat dick in order to keep’ – Nati and Marga’s is on the ‘supervised’. Both want to live independently as passionately as their cousins do, but they want to do so on their own terms. For Marga, this includes the right to sleep with who she wants, without running the gauntlet of state-decreed sterilisation for any sexual initiative she takes. For Nati, it means the right to think what she wants, even if it contravenes the confines of conformity.

The four-pronged narrative that Morales weaves from the cousins’ respective standpoints is very, often outrageously, funny, but its underpinnings and implications are serious. In the author’s words, her aim was ‘a questioning of the notion of disability’ – a notion which, in the book, is deconstructed to become synonymous with each woman’s degree of compliance with the structures and strictures that govern their lives. It’s no accident that Nati, officially classed ‘the most disabled’, is also the most outspoken critic of the state-backed status quo.

Morales raises more questions than the book resolves, but her decision to have the women telling their own stories provides a forceful restoration of the agency that the system has wrested from them. By casting them as three-dimensional narrators, who express themselves with all the idiosyncrasies and complexities that the ‘easy read’ format usually reserved for the ‘intellectually disabled’ denies, the disjunction between how they are and how they have been labelled becomes flagrant, and it’s hard not to conclude that the problem lies with the label itself.

Serious plaudits must go to the translator. This can’t have been easy translating, but Kevin Gerry Dunn has made it look effortless. The result is a thought- and laughter-provoking triumph.

Rosie Eyre
A few years back I was having drinks with a writer friend. He’s wildly accomplished, and (even though he deserves it) annoyingly praised. I asked him about blurbs. He was constantly being asked to blurb books and often lamented about being buried in them. I asked how he cranked so many of them out. He laughed and told me his secret.

Book?
Book.
Book!
Much like his blurb formula, you either have:

I’m not sure about this one.
Sure, it worked I guess.
Or:

Damn – you’ve got to read this.

Just like the blurbs, the reviewer chooses which ‘book’ they’re going to use, dredge it in some literary terms, pull a few choice lines from the manuscript for support, and voilá. The review.

My friend told me it was stupid idea - three words, the same word, to describe everything ever written, but that it was also kind of smart. I should do something with it. Of course, me being me, I sat on it and did nothing, too embarrassed to share it with anybody else. But that was then. With the world on fire and the seeming shortage of water – fuck it. We’ve all got places to be.

If you’re short on time here it is: Sara Mesa writes books!

Sara Mesa is a Spanish writer and poet that should be on your radar. She’s young, talented, humble, and publishes outstanding work at a steady rate. If you’re a writer, she’s totally annoying. Currently, Sara Mesa has four titles translated into the English: the novels Between the Hedges, Four by Four, THE Riveter Features

‘You either say, “Now that’s a writer.” Or you say, “Now that’s a book.”’

‘That’s it?’

‘I switch it up depending on my mood, but yeah. That’s kind of it.’

If you pull a book from the shelf and read the quote on the dust jacket, what would you find? Maybe there’s a few jazzy words sprinkled in, but it’ll either tell you how the author is a writer or how the author has written a book.

I chuckled at this revelation and told him book reviews were just as bad. I don’t write a lot of them, but I read more than I care to admit. And I’ve found that most book reviews could be distilled to three words:
and *Scar*, as well as the story collection *Bad Handwriting*. I’m not exaggerating when I say they’re all books!

What I love about Mesa’s work is how she tackles big, scary subjects – abstractions like Power, Control, Patriarchy, Protection – with simple, unadorned prose. The lines are fiercely simple and terse. But they are tightly coiled and explosive. As the material becomes heavier, Sara Mesa delivers cleaner and lighter lines. Her work exemplifies the wonderful advice James Baldwin gave in an interview with *The Paris Review*, a line I keep on a Post-it note behind my computer: ‘Write a sentence as clean as bone.’ Mesa strips her prose down to its essential elements, making us feel and participate in her stories, rather than just sit back and observe. In her story ‘Cattle Tyrants’ – a disturbingly apt title – a group of boys terrorise and attack a young girl walking home. It’s a heavy, loaded scene. Mesa lets us marinate in dread when she describes the boys as having ‘smooth smiles’ and ‘mouths hungry for cruelty’. Clean and simple, stripped to the bone. But juxtaposed with the terror and violence of the material – the lines smack with a wallop.

In her ‘now that’s a writer’ blurb, Laura van den Berg points to Mesa’s sharp lines. She says, ‘Mesa’s sentences are clear as glass.’ I couldn’t agree more. In George Orwell’s essay, ‘Why I Write’, he shares, ‘Good prose is like a window pane’. Prose should be so clean we look through it, don’t notice it. We shouldn’t notice the glass but the world on the other side of it, beyond it. Look all you want, but Mesa can’t be found on the page. There’s only the image, the horrors on the other side of the glass. In fact, Mesa’s writing is so sharp that (even though she deserves it) when she uses a word like ‘inchoate’, it feels out of place, it grates against the cleanliness that surrounds it. One word in a story. She’s that good.

Another aspect that I admire in Sara Mesa’s work is how her lines impact the oddness of the world. Kids in cages. A girl who observes the world behind a hedge. Love and obsession via internet forums. Mesa’s worlds are troubled, dangerous and strange. But because of her clean, sharp lines, she imposes logic on the oddity of these worlds. When an innocent girl is attacked, she questions if she can be truthful with the women in her life. Will anybody support her? ‘What to tell the aunts? What to tell them?’ Or simple lines like: ‘Brazen women tend to lie.’ The double standard of being strong and feminine in a male-dominated landscape.

The hallmark of a good line is when it imposes its logic on the weirdness of life. At the height of the heroin-chic model craze, someone asked supermodel Kate Moss how she stayed so dangerously thin. ‘Nothing tastes as good as skinny
feels.’ It makes you shudder. But for better or worse, it’s powerful. It’s a line that works. Mesa does the same throughout her work. Take her novel *Four by Four*. How do we investigate boundaries, borders, walls? The detritus and decay of civilisation? Our false sense of protection? Mesa uses clean lines that force their logic. ‘Politics don’t exist in the city.’ (Come on Mesa, of course they exist.) ‘Or at least the inhabitants aren’t aware of the existence of politics.’ (Well … okay.) ‘The existence of something comes into being only through the awareness that it exists.’ (Oh.) ‘That’s why.’

The power in Mesa’s work comes from the tension between the ease of her phrasing and the shock of its thought hitting your mind. If she added more, she’d limit our imagination. But the terse nature of her lines lets the idea slink from the page and burrow into our brain.

Sara Mesa’s deft control and economy of language shouldn’t come as a surprise. She’s a poet. Her nouns are razored. Her verbs are explosive. And she fixes her eye on imagery that illuminates the horrific abstractions I’d like to pretend did not exist. She makes you aware. If you haven’t read her, you should. She won’t waste your time.

Because Sara Mesa is a writer.
She writes books!

*Brian Wood*
In this intriguing book, distinguished Spanish author Rosa Montero explores how writers and other artists create, and the extent to which their eccentricity, sometimes insanity, is a necessary part of that process. Imagination, fact and fiction, neuroscientific research, her own memories and those of other creative artists are woven together in Montero’s inimitable way to produce a brilliant, quirky reflection on the relationship between creativity and madness. The Danger of Being Sane is a hard-to-classify book that considers whether writing and insanity are flip sides of the same coin. This is a must-read essay by one of Spain’s most well-known writers.

RAMON MONTERO

From EL PELIGRO DE ESTAR CUERDA (‘The Danger of Being Sane’) Seix Barral (Planeta), 2022 Translated by Lilit Žekulin Thwaites

I’ve always known that something inside my head wasn’t right. When I was six or seven, every night before falling asleep, I’d ask my mother to hide a small ornament we had in the house, a horrendous little copper cooking pot, a typical item found in cheap souvenir shops, or maybe even a gift from a restaurant. I asked her to do it, not because the ugliness of the pot made me uncomfortable – that might have seemed a bit odd but, in a sense, discerning – but because I’d read somewhere that copper was poisonous and I was afraid that I’d sleepwalk in the middle of the night and start licking the pot. I don’t really know how such an idea could have come to me – added to which I’ve never been a sleepwalker. Even back then, it struck me as a little weird, but that didn’t stop me from being able to visualise myself quite clearly running my tongue up and down the metal and, terrified as a result, actually asking my mother to please, please, please keep hiding the object in some out-of-the-way spot, a different place each time if she could, so it would be impossible for me to find it. My imagination, as you can see, has always had a mind of its own. And my wonderful mother agreed gravely and promised to hide the pot really well. She magically understood children; moreover, I now think it likely that similar things occurred to her when she was little. Because she also had a flighty mind.

To top it all, as an adult I found out that copper isn’t toxic; it’s not even very poisonous. It can be harmful, of course, but only in large, prolonged
I would even say that being a little bit stranger than usual is not uncommon either. In fact, it often crops up in people who are creative (in the widest sense of the word), among artists of every sort, good or bad. That’s precisely what this book is about – the relationship between creativity and a certain eccentricity. It explores the idea that creativity has something to do with delusion; if being an artist makes you more prone to mental instability, as has been suspected since the beginning of time: ‘There is no great genius without some touch of madness,’ said Seneca. And Diderot: ‘Oh! how near are genius and madness!’.

Rosa Montero
Translated by Lilit Žekulin Thwaites
In recent years, Spanish literature has seen a boom in female writers, with a new generation of women writing novels that deal with important, contemporary, worldwide issues such as capitalism, globalism, politics, or gender and sexual violence, as well as more personal issues, such as ideas of motherhood or friendship—all through the medium of excellent writing. Here are just a few of the female authors that are changing the face of contemporary Spanish literature...

**Elena Medel** is a poet, author and founder of La Bella Varsovia, an independent Spanish publisher of poetry. First and foremost a poet, Medel has been publishing poetry collections since 2002. Her first foray into narrative fiction, *Las maravillas*, came out eighteen years later with Anagrama. The novel explores feminism, family, class, and politics, and won Medel the Francisco Umbral Prize. This is particularly significant as Medel is the first female writer to have ever been awarded this prize (as of today, she continues to be the only female winner, a shocking fact when we consider the prize was founded in 2011). *Las maravillas* was translated by Lizzie Davies and Thomas Bunstead, and published by Pushkin Press as *The Wonders* in 2022.

**Meyrem El Mehdati El Alami**'s debut novel, *Supersaurio*, was published in 2022 by Blackie Books and has been extremely well received. It is now in its second edition and in almost every bookshop I walk into in Madrid *Supersaurio* is front and centre on the ‘bestseller’ or ‘recommended’ tables, and rightly so. In this humorous novel, El Mehdati uses precise prose to intertwine acidic humour and melancholy, and offers sharp, witty criticisms of capitalism and the trivialities of labour. If this exciting young writer’s first work is a sign of things to come, we have a lot to look forward to.

**Aixa de la Cruz**’s first novel was published in 2007, however, it was with *Cambiar de idea*, published by Caballo de Troya in 2019, that de la Cruz really began to make a name for herself as a contemporary Spanish writer. In fact, *Cambiar de idea* won her her first two literary prizes, the Premio Euskadi de Literatura for writing in Spanish, and the Premio Librotea Tapado. Much of de la Cruz’s work falls into the ever-contested genre of auto-fiction, as does *Cambiar de idea*. We follow our narrator as she comes to terms with mistakes she has made and low points she has suffered throughout her life, and how these have made her who she is today. De la Cruz creates a universal space in which readers can find connections to, and
Irene Solà is a Catalan writer and artist. Her first poetry collection, Bèstia (Galerada, 2012), won the 2012 Amadeu Oller Prize, and her first novel Els dics (L’Altra Editorial, 2018), won the 2017 Documenta Prize. Despite these great successes, it was her second novel Canto jo i la muntanya balla (Anagrama, 2019), that really got her name out there. This mystical novel is set in a secluded mountainside village in the Catalan Pyrenees, and through Solà’s beautiful prose, we encounter the voices of men, women, ghosts, nymphs, clouds, mushrooms and deer. This ghostly, magical and breathtaking novel won Solà the Premi Llibres Anagrama de Novel·la, and the Núvol and Cálamo Prizes for the Spanish edition of the book. Thanks to the huge success of Canto jo i la muntanya balla, in 2020 Solà won the European Union Prize for Literature. Mara Faye Lethem’s translation of the novel, When I Sing, Mountains Dance, was published in 2022 by Granta in the UK and Graywolf Press in the US, and a translation of her first novel Els dics, is forthcoming in 2023 from Graywolf Press.

Irene Vallejo is a Spanish philologist and writer. She is best known for her nonfiction work which often focuses on literature and language, and how classical authors and styles connect with and influence the present. In 2020 she was awarded the Premio Nacional de Ensayo for her book El infinito en el junco (Ediciones Siruela, 2019), for which she also won the Premio Aragón 2021. In 2022 the book was published by Hodder & Stoughton in Charlotte Whittle’s translation as Papyrus. In this fascinating book, Vallejo chronicles literary culture in the ancient world and explores how the book as we
know it today came to be. *Papyrus* featured on the *Economist’s* best books of 2022 list and was described by the *Times Literary Supplement* as a ‘literary phenomenon’.

**Almudena Sánchez**’s first book of short stories, *La acústica de los iglús* was first published in 2016 by Caballo de Troya and is now in its eighth edition. Since then, she has published numerous short-story and flash-fiction collections. In 2013, she was included in *Bajo 30*, an anthology of new Spanish writers, and in 2019 she was selected among the ten best ‘thirty-something’ writers in Spain by AECID. Her latest book, *Fármaco*, was published in 2021 by Random House, and was translated into English by Katie Whittmore as *Pharmakon* (Fum d’Estampa, 2023). This work perfectly showcases Sánchez’s unfaltering, hard-hitting, but incredibly poetic prose. This beautifully written testimony to the experience of depression and recovery marks Sánchez as one of Spain’s most singular voices.

**Katixa Agirre** started her career publishing short stories and children’s literature, writing her first novel, *Atertu arte Itxaron* (Elkar), in 2015, a work which won her the Akademia award. Katixa’s most notable work to date is *Amek ez dute*, (Zubikarai Saria, 2016) which she self-translated into Spanish as *Las madres no* (Editorial Tránsito, 2019). In the opening pages of this book, a mother commits the unthinkable act of killing her young twins. In this brilliantly provocative novel, Agirre brings together elements of journalism, thriller, essay and literary fiction to create a story that keeps you gripped. It was translated from the Basque by Kristen Addis and published by 3TimesRebel press as *Mother’s Don’t* in 2022; you can read a review on page 152 of this magazine. Agirre’s most recent book was translated into Spanish as *De nuevo centauro* (Editorial Tránsito, 2022) by none other than Aixa de la Cruz. Although it is written in Katixa’s unmistakable unfaltering and precise style, the themes couldn’t be more different from her previous work, only proving this author’s fantastic range.

*Alice Banks*
Just before turning forty, Silvia falls in love, and soon after, she loses her father. It is then that she decides to get pregnant. She feels that her life owes her another life. This courageous autobiographical novel reels off the milestones that every woman with a desire for pregnancy faces month after month: biological urgency, uncertainty, the ghost of infertility, the reactions of loved ones, mechanical sex. Within all this, Nanclares does not forget the good: love, family, friends and passion.

SILVIA NANCLARES

From QUIÉN QUIERE SER MADRE (‘Who Wants To Be a Mother’)  
Editorial Alfaguara, 2017  
Translated by Lily Meyer

People say that every woman without children has a story. What about women with children?

Sonia barely realised what was happening before she was touching Simon’s head.
Laura had her baby at home, in a kiddie pool, a couple of hours after her water broke during choir practice.
Gloria got an episiotomy at the public hospital.
Celia left the private one without a single stitch.
Lidia sobbed her way through her Caesarean section. So did Bárbara. Both would have died during vaginal births.
Lorena panicked when she realised there was no alternative option. One way or another, her son was coming out.
Ana had one and then two scheduled C-sections.
Natalia failed to remember, when her period was late, the name of that stranger with whom — shit — she had also failed to remember a condom. Lucas is seven now.
Alba asked the midwife, who was at her house for a visit, if she was in labour yet. Her midwife laughed and said Alba would know when the moment arrived. Guess what? She knew.
Carolina was shocked by her own howls during labour, as if they were coming from another person.
Helena was in labour forever.
Tania asked her brother to sneak her some food.
Sara fostered eleven-year-old Lena, then started the long process of adopting her.

Inés’s water broke at night when she had her third baby. She went to bed, knowing the show wouldn’t start till morning.

Paula says no way in hell. She’s an extinctionist. Cruz wouldn’t put it like that, but she’s not interested in reproduction either.

Olga tells a story about an Asian woman who spoke hardly any Spanish. She walked into Labour & Delivery, pointed at her stomach, and cried, ‘Knife! Knife!’

Nora had her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck twice – and she was still born vaginally. A miracle.

Julio came out butt-first.

Victoria’s stitches got infected.

Bibiana and her friends made a placenta milkshake and drank it.

Andrea has chronic abdominal distension from her twins.

Ari didn’t want her nipples to get stretched out, so she decided not to breastfeed. Pepa requested pills to suppress lactation, too. Afterwards, she heard judgemental murmurs running through the whole maternity ward.

But this story doesn’t start with my friends and their stories of motherhood and not-motherhood. It starts much earlier. It starts with me alone in front of the television, transfixed by the Sesame Street episode where Maria goes into labour. She wailed uncontrollably. As I sat in my parents’ house, watching a woman give birth, a desire popped into my head. It was as sudden as the baby’s emergence. I thought for years, looking back, that I wanted to be a midwife.

Wrong.

I wanted a baby. I wanted one right that second. I was seven. I started corralling all the little kids I could, wearing my younger cousins out with my early maternal fantasies. At my mom’s instigation, the adults I knew began calling me The Paediatrician.

My ambivalence about maternity showed up later on.

For a while, I had a Facebook album called ‘Friend Thieves’. It represents an era of my life. So much of the 2000s is a blur in my memory, a shapeless mass of zeroes and years. But I know that around my thirtieth birthday, some of my girlfriends started ditching our communal lovefest to raise and nurture little creatures who demanded all their attention. I was...
jealous. Friendship with mothers was a real revolution in my little world.

My album contained photos of my friends’ babies. Occasionally, instead of saying, ‘I’m pregnant,’ a friend would tell me, ‘You’re going to need to add another thief.’ But after curating my gallery for a long time, I got rid of it. I had given Mark Zuckerberg the rights to enough baby pictures. Besides, I was starting to wake up. Pretending to laugh at the mothers being born around me had been a good joke, but it was starting to get stale.

Now I have friends with fourteen-year-olds, seven-year-olds, four-year-olds, and infants. I still have a lot of friends without kids.

One of my new habits is looking up birth years so I can subtract children’s ages from their mothers’. Alicia had Tomás at forty-one. My Grandma Teresa had her last at forty-two, as did Julianna Margulies, of *The Good Wife*. Elvira had her first, Aitor, at forty-three, long after she’d assumed she wouldn’t be a mother. Renata Adler had her first and last at forty-six.

My story is made of stories. I need points of reference. My possible pregnancy, my intense *Kinderwunsch* – of course German has the perfect word: *Kinderwunsch*, the desire to bear children, the search for a baby – and my imagined labour: all are beads on the chain of a tale of fertility and family that’s mine already. I have more faith in this rosary of potential than I do in science, medicine, or technology. I trust it more than the ageist fatalism of the gynaecologist glancing at me over her prescription pad. I pray by writing, which is the only way I know.

_Silvia Nanclares_
_Translated by Lily Meyer_
Gudú, The Forgotten King is Ana María Matute’s masterpiece, and one of the great novels of this century. Full of fables and fantasies, it narrates the birth and expansion of the Kingdom of Olar, with a plot full of characters, adventures and a symbolic landscape: the mysterious North and the inhospitable steppe of the East and the South, rich and exuberant, that limit the expansion of the Kingdom of Olar, in whose destiny the cunning of a southern girl, the magic of an old sorcerer and the rules of the game of a creature from the subsoil participate.

The sons of Count Olar had inherited from their father his enormous physical strength, his grey eyes and wiry red hair, and his humiliatingly short legs.

Sikrosio, the first-born, had the reddest hair of all, and he was not only stronger and bulkier than his brothers, but braver and more skilful with his sword. He was also the weakest rider, thanks to those stumpy and slightly knock-kneed legs that made some people (behind his back) call him ‘donkey’. If anyone had ever been careless or malicious enough to say it to his face, he couldn’t or wouldn’t say it again.

It was clear from a young age that Sikrosio was neither shy, nor patient, nor scrupulous in his dealings with others. Brave and fearless by nature, he knew nothing of despondency or illness, cowardice or doubt, respect or compassion. He said only as much as was strictly necessary to make himself understood, and he listened only if someone happened to be talking about him or his horse. He didn’t dwell on things that weren’t battles, skirmishes or local conflicts, and he generally lacked interest in any chitchat that didn’t concern him. When he wasn’t fighting he would spend his day cleaning his tack, polishing his weaponry, hunting, or indulging in war games and private pleasures, activities that were neither very sophisticated nor, to be honest, exacting. He was naturally cheerful and noisy, and he was much more prone to laughter
than conversation. His guffaws, they said, could shake the
debows of a rock, and though he suspected that one day the devil
would take him, he had such a vague and
unformed idea of what that meant (deep
down he was wary of such notions) that he
barely thought about it. He had an intense
love of life – his own, that is – and he tried
to squeeze all the juice and substance out
of it he could. And in his own way, he did.

But one day, Sikrosio came to know
fear. This fear began with a memory and
culminated in a prophecy. The memory
seized him unexpectedly and with
increasing regularity, making part of his
life very bitter. But the prophecy – which
came much later – destroyed his life
completely.

And this all began one morning, in the
very earliest days of spring, on the banks of the River Oser.

That winter he had his nineteenth birthday. He knew he had
gone hunting – though he could never remember when or in
what circumstances – and that he had been tired when he lay
down on the fresh new grass, very near where the ground
sloped towards the river. There were still patches of ice and
snow unmelted in the shadowy hollows, among the thickets
that turned to wildwood on the other side of the Oser.

The source of the river was a mystery to the inhabitants of
the region. The spring that was its fountainhead arose in the
northern thickets, which nobody ever dared venture into. No
one could remember how they knew the name of this place, but
it made them shiver like the words of a forbidden book or some
dreaded and unwanted encounter, the very thought of which
filled them with foreboding.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, something made the undergrowth
rustle, but it wasn’t the breeze, or a flapping of wings, or a human
or animal footstep, or any other sound familiar to his hunter’s
ears. For no reason at all – he knew this instinctively – a bird
took off in fright; then it dropped at his side, as if it had been
wounded. But there was no blood, either on its feathers or in
the smell of the morning. Its death was incomprehensible, as if
the bird had fallen, unharmed, onto itself, with only the wounds
inflicted by the invisible weapon of its own fear. He watched its
pulse fade as it lay on the ground, saw it shiver, gasp, and
finally, stop moving.

Fear was, for him, a completely new
and very bitter experience. Usually
when he sniffed
danger his heart
would leap with
something like joy
at the imminence
of battle and
of killing.
Sikrosio didn’t so much as put out a finger towards it. A ray of light had fallen across the barely risen sun, across the brightness that went on spilling into the sky like a liquid. Then he felt the earth shake, very gently, under his body. For somebody less familiar with the ruggedness and delicacy of nature the tremor would have been almost undetectable; like a dull booming, only noiseless; like the beating of distant drums, only muted.

Sikrosio realised that he was drenched in sweat, though the weather hadn’t turned hot yet in those lands. As he had so often seen snakes and salamanders do, he crept into the thicker brush and leaves and pressed his spear against his side. Then he jumped as his horse, which until that moment had been grazing at his side, took flight in a frantic gallop. Its whinny pierced the sky, like an arrow of death, and Sikrosio smelt death, clearly and physically; the smell was all too familiar to him.

It took an enormous effort to stop his eyelids, which were suddenly heavy, from closing. He usually found it easy to stay alert, his senses primed; but at that moment a great heaviness, a terrible sensation of uselessness, overtook his whole body, and it was only surprise that stopped him falling headfirst into the dark and dense regions opening up in front of him. He thought he could feel his heart pounding against the earth. ‘Who or what is coming for me,’ he thought, ‘from over there ... from the bottom of the river?’

Fear was, for him, a completely new and very bitter experience. Usually when he sniffed danger his heart would leap with something like joy at the imminence of battle and of killing. But this was different, this rough pulsing that shook him and which felt – though he could hardly believe it – like terror. He had never, even in the most daring ventures of his life, had the remotest sense that he was going to die, yet at that moment death brushed up against him, alone. And it wasn’t just fear, but something worse he felt: a damp sweat, a sticky coldness, as if he already knew he was dead.
When the protagonist of Estaré sola y sin fiesta finds an old diary, tossed in a pile of rubbish by the side of a canal, there is something in the simple prose of this stranger, called Yna, that makes her want to know more. Yna’s story has a contagious force that, despite the distance, obliges our narrator to think about herself, to the point of putting her whole life on hold while she begins an investigation that will take her to Bilbao, Barcelona, Salou, Peñíscola and finally, back to Zaragoza. An amazing novel of love and learning that is also a journey through Spain written by a young and award-winning literary revelation.

SARA BARQUINERNO

From ESTARÉ SOLA Y SIN FIESTA
(‘I Will Be All Alone And without a Party’)
Lumen, 2021
Translated by Iona Macintyre

She hates being here. The open coffin is a depressing backdrop to such dull conversations. Voices seeking comfort in the past, talking about the village, growing up after the Civil War. Other voices looking to the future: has your cousin started university? Are you planning to stay in your job? And more frivolous questions: did you guys get a new car? When are you going on holiday? Where are you going? And the awkward question, the one they’re expecting either her or her mother to ask the in-laws, the one which must annoy Ángel: have you heard from your father at all? It’s not that they actually care, they’re just passing the time until they can go home.

She talks more than usual: about the company she works for, her latest projects, Carlos, going to Cannes. She feels miserable, lost in all these words she’s obliged to say, prayers she has to recite, tears she has to shed, promises she has to make. After an hour there’s a bottleneck at the front of the chapel. Everyone wants to leave, but no one wants to be the first to walk out the door. Except her. She says she needs to stretch her legs and her mother catches her eye. What are you doing? But she lets her leave. No, it’s not that she lets her. She can’t stop her.

She decides to walk home. Walking along the canal, she sees it. She doesn’t normally walk around here; she was born and bred in this city but she doesn’t live here anymore, and
even when she did, she didn’t live anywhere near this area. Regardless, she walks like someone who knows a place well. With that composure. She doesn’t have much chance to think about it. She sees an orange skip piled with stuff on the other side of the road and she realises: this is a singular moment. It’s going to be a singular moment. It’s like she’s recognised the ‘something happened’ feeling and knows there’s a tale to tell. And she wishes it wasn’t like this, as she crosses over the road she has time to wish it wasn’t like this. She wishes the story was unfolding in response to a heroic act, or something she’s able to control, instead of starting just by chance.

She stops in front of the skip. The way the rubbish is piled up puts her in mind of a catastrophe, like a death, an escape, an eviction. Curtains. Cushions. Broken lamps. Dresses. Shelves. And books, a few photo albums, half of them sticking out of the skip, others in boxes or strewn around on the ground. Dolls, rugs, toothbrushes, shoes. She finds herself rummaging through some sheets, picking up some semi-transparent shopping bags full of women’s dresses and jackets. It reminds her of summers in the village, of brightly coloured photos in old magazines, of her grandparent’s house, of places consigned to the past. Hats. Tablecloths. Snow globes with miniature cities trapped inside them. Velour, picture frames, rags, a whole life chucked away. She’s crouching down, she’s rummaging around. The curtains, the cushions, the dolls. She stops: what exactly is she doing? She remembers her first impression from the other side of the road: an eviction, a death, a disaster. She imagines a house with the blinds down, an old lady dying while waiting for the phone to ring. Motionless. Impassive, eyes fixed on the receiver in a complete act of faith. She doesn’t know why that image comes to mind. Is she finding something horrible amusing? She tries to conjure up the scene: maybe it’s nothing bad, why is she always so negative? Maybe it’s something good, the start of a better life: they threw the stuff away to buy a nicer house, a bigger house. Maybe it’s nothing more than that, what is she doing wasting her time on this?

She’s ready to go but something keeps her there. She’s stuck in front of the skip, now, not daring to touch anything. Passive. As passive as can be, bearing in mind she is half...
a metre in front of an overflowing skip. And then she sees it. There, in among the curtains, the miniature cities, the grimy sheets. It’s a small blue notebook with a swallow on the front cover. It’s sticking out from under a tablecloth and a magazine rack. She grabs it. There’s a name on the cover: ‘Yna 04/1990.’ Barely legible pages, a calendar from 1990 with some months crossed out, lines written in English: ‘I love you, I need you.’

She gets up with the notebook in her hand. She thinks to herself vaguely that it’s fine, it’s better than entertaining herself with someone else’s photo albums or rifling through their drawers. This is something so small that no one would really care.

Heading along the road, she can hear a voice following her in the noise of the passing cars. It keeps whispering words that accumulate shapelessly, fading away before they can become sentences. She walks slowly, as slowly as she can. She remembers that when she was a little girl she went through a phase where she’d go to great lengths not to step on any insects, obsessively looking out for them on the pavement. She remembers that she eventually forgot and how one afternoon she suddenly remembered that she hadn’t been looking where she was going for more than a week. She burst into tears: seven whole days without looking where she was going, entire families of ants crushed under her feet. She puts the notebook in her bag and continues her slow walk. It’s a secret, a magic object. It’s the first Thursday in August and it’s impossibly hot. But she keeps walking. She doesn’t catch the bus.

Sara Barquinero
Translated by Iona Macintyre

An extract from Estaré sola y sin fiesta, by Sara Barquinero (published by Lumen, 2021), translated by Iona Macintyre.
For more details please contact: cecilia.palacios@penguinrandomhouse.com
Cristina Araújo Gámir’s debut is a harrowing, honest, and oftentimes difficult-to-read novel that tells the story of Miriam, a young girl who is the victim of a sexual assault. Araújo Gámir writes with careful and painstaking detail about the events before, during, and most significantly after this horrific incident, and confronts uncomfortable but necessary themes such as victim blaming, sexism and toxic masculinity. Most importantly, she gives space to Miriam’s voice as she attempts to come to terms with trauma that will change her life forever. The novel won Araújo Gámir the XVIII Premio Tusquets in 2022.

CRISTINA ARAÚJO GÁMIR

From MIRA A ESA CHICA (‘Look at Her’)
Tusquets Editores, 2022
Translated by Alice Banks

You’re sat on a bench, hands clutching your bag against your ribs, eyes blurred. It looks as if they’d tried to mug you. But nobody mugged you. It’s cold, you feel it most in your feet, and if you were in the position to think, you’d think about, for example, how long it was until sunrise. But you don’t think, and the only thing you feel is nothing. Nothing. The graze on the soft part of your knee stings. It’s taken on a wet, pink colour, and it hurts like hell every time the skin moves, peeling away just a little more flesh. You didn’t have a single injury when you left the house. You must have scraped yourself in the mess of grit and dirt that was on the floor.

At the end of the road, a streetlight hums discreetly. You swallow mucus. You spend about twenty minutes with your gaze lost in a stain on your sandal. After a while it changes shape, it grows limbs, expands. But it doesn’t really move, it’s just an illusion, and in the blink of an eye it shrinks back to its original form. That stain, you don’t remember that either. It must be a splatter of mud or the splash of a drink, or perhaps you stepped in a puddle of piss on your way to the foyer. Or someone’s vomit. Or it could even be, perhaps. Semen.

You should stand up and start walking. You should. But you don’t know if you can. And you don’t even know where you’d go. The graze on your knee throbs like a bite or a sting.
For a moment, you think about spitting on your fingers and cleaning it with saliva, but you can’t, you don’t want to, you don’t have any saliva. Nor the energy. You can’t move. You’re crying, you’re scared shitless. And what must you look like, messed up hair, leggings covered in dirt. You’ve rubbed at your eyes so your eyeliner is smudged across your hoody and now your tears sting too. You would have called Vix if only they hadn’t destroyed your phone.

The slice of sky beyond the square clears into an indecisive mauve. There’s almost no one on the street, and those passing don’t even want to look at you. Some are still partying. They giggle and stumble over one another as they embrace, bellowing indecipherable songs. The homeless are more discreet, their drunkenness shifts them with dragged feet. Further away within the fragments of the shadows, a man turns the corner. He walks along the line of trees alone, his motor functions are intact. His back is stiff, trim, measured, like a bishop. He carries a newspaper rolled up beneath his arm, his hands are buried in his pockets. They’re easy to spot, those who have already crossed over into the realm of today, while you gasp in the gloom, languishing in the fuzzy edges of last night. A few metres behind the man is a poodle. It stops to pee on the leg of a bench and afterwards it makes its way over to you. Its paws scratch along the paving stones. You think you can reach out your arm to stroke it, but no, you can’t do that either, so more tears come, a sob or some sort of hiccup, you just want the dog to stay. And then a whistle, come here. The bishop man. He definitely thinks you’re hungover, or on something. Maybe you stink of sex. Definitely. You notice your wet underwear. They’ll use that detail later.

_Mira a esa chica_: © Cristina Araújo Gámir, 2022 / Tusquets Editores
Los nombres propios is an inquiry into identity and the relationship we establish with the world around us. Dominated by a narrative voice of exceptional maturity, this debut novel by Marta Jiménez Serrano reflects on how we come to be who we are and on growing up and the way we do it: by learning to name what matters to us.

MARTA JIMÉNEZ SERRANO

From LOS NOMBRES PROPIOS ('Proper Names')
Sexto Piso, 2021
Translated by Kathleen Meredith

She breathes with difficulty. It’s a laboured breath, audible. It’s Friday. The rhythm constant. Each inhale identical to the one before it. Each exhale equal to the previous one. Her breath coming and going, chipping away at the time like the second hand of a clock. Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick.

Now each inhale no longer serves as the model for the next. Then one exhale is the last. You all wait for the silence to linger long enough to rule out the possibility of a reprise. How do you know when something is the last one? A breath, a kiss, a confession, an argument, how do you know when they’re the last ones? You just have to wait. You all wait. With your breath held in that space between your chest and your navel, you wait. The silence ticks on. Finally, you call the doctor. The world, that only a few moments ago stood still, fast forwards at full speed.

Mom gets up, you do too, you both go to look for a doctor, your grandma’s cool hand, the silence, a nurse comes in and goes out again, your grandma’s cool forehead, her pale skin. A doctor arrives followed by another nurse and without even needing to check, they confirm the evidence, the evidence that it’s your grandma who is dead on the white hospital bed. ‘Phone your aunt.’ You go out to the hallway to make the call, ‘it’s over’ you say and there’s a sharp whimper from the other end of the line; it’s still possible to be surprised by something you already know. More people leave the room, another nurse enters, then another doctor, you hang up and go back in. You
look at Mom, at your mom who is losing her own mom right this moment, ‘it’s over’ you repeat, you’ve already called your aunt. Someone covers your grandma’s face with the bedsheet and it’s over, it’s over, you’re never going to see that face again. You feel like it’s been whipped away from you without warning, completely out of the blue, the pool net, you were just holding on to the pool net, the water lapping at your chin, you’re kicking your feet with all your might to stay afloat and suddenly it’s yanked right out of your hands and there’s barely time to breathe before you’re sinking. You wave your arms frantically but your belly is sinking, you kick your feet, you’re in the deep end, you’re sinking, water is in your eyes, in your nose, in your mouth, and you feel as if you’re drowning, you feel as if you’re sinking, you flail desperately in the water until suddenly – boom! – you feel the solid rim of the pool. Your hand, the pool’s edge, safety. You cling to it. Leaning on your forearms, you prop yourself up on the edge, coughing, you catch your breath. The sun is blinding. There’s so much light. Nobody’s around. I told you: eventually you would end up on your own.

A doctor asks you to keep the doorway clear, so you go back out to the corridor. You see Dad arrive.

‘Your mom?’

‘Inside.’

He goes into the room. You don’t cry. You don’t sit down. You have no idea what to do. You were with Mom when Grandma died – she just died, your grandma – and now your mom and dad hold one another. Dad holds Mom. Who will be with you when your mom dies. You don’t want kids. Who will hug you in a random hospital room when your mom dies. Who will take care of all the paperwork for the funeral home for you, who will cook for you that day, and get a bit drunk with you that evening until you fall asleep. Who will sleep next to you. Is there going to be someone to hold you at night, the day your mom dies? Because some day your mom will also die. One day even you will die.

Marta Jiménez Serrano
Translated by Kathleen Meredith
This literary boom includes some of the country’s most renowned fiction writers, several of whom have adopted a narrative strategy rarely used to explore the nation’s contentious past: metafiction in all its variations. This work seeks to bring the socio-political violence of the past into the present and preserve those experiences for future generations.

While there are many texts to choose from, for this article I have made a small selection of key authors (from different areas in Spain) who, to my mind, best capture this cultural trend and whose work offers the reader challenging, informative and enjoyable reads.

In the first-person narrative *La fuerza del destino* (1997), Josefina Aldecoa (from León) provides a beautifully sensitive treatment of the experience of exile and returning, and how it can be felt as an enormous loss of self. Gabriela looks back on her life before and after the Civil War and her subsequent years in exile in Mexico. This is the final instalment of a trilogy spanning generations that can be read as a depiction of Spain’s twentieth-century history.

Surveying the panorama of Spain’s literary production, it soon becomes clear that one of the key themes growing out of the 1970s Transition to Democracy, particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, has been that of recovering and conveying historical memory. Indeed, the passing of the Historical Memory Law in 2007 has made it even easier for Spaniards to examine the difficult years of the Civil War and subsequent dictatorship. This legal development and its ramifications have also provided a wonderful incentive for storytellers, with contemporary authors opting for a blended format of reality and fiction to tell their stories.

What stayed with me most strongly is how this personal testimony highlights the importance of reclaiming the memory of mothers and older women – voices so often absent from officially recorded history.

Rosa Règas’s *Luna lunera* (1999) tells the story of four children, narrator Anna and her siblings, whose parents were Republicans in the Civil War and fled with them into exile as the Franco’s Nationalist troops reached Barcelona. Like Aldecoa, Règas addresses intergenerational relationships and how these are disrupted, especially following the loss of a mother. She
also addresses the repression of political and regional identities that followed the war, and how successive generations felt the repercussions of this. Regàs draws on aspects of her own parents’ and grandparents’ lives here, using active memory to explore both a family and a nation divided.

In *La mitad del alma* (2003) Carme Riera (Palma de Mallorca), another Catalan author, skilfully weaves fiction and documentary sources in an emotional thriller, combining two threads, past and present. The novel also addresses the instability of memory and how we cannot rely on it to recover the past and establish historical truth. Unlike other works published in Spain dealing with this theme, Riera avoids historical binaries. Instead, she invites us to recognise the integration of diverse histories and the complexity of lived experiences. I particularly enjoyed how the protagonist, in discovering aspects of her mother’s life, also encounters ways in which it was possible to disrupt the Francoist ideals of femininity.

These lived experiences are also at the centre of Dulce Chacón’s (Extremadura) *La voz dormida* (2002), based on the testimonies of women who were imprisoned during the Franco regime or who died resisting the dictatorship. This novel shows how trauma is passed down from one generation to the next. Some of the most moving examples of this are in its depiction of female solidarity and various forms of motherhood, portraying not just ways of sharing trauma, but also different sites of resistance and transgression. Chacón’s use of authentic testimonies and historical documents means that generations of readers are afforded a chance to hear voices previously silenced.

Any consideration of this theme must contain reference to author and journalist Almudena Grandes (Madrid), whose work, both fact and fiction, has been instrumental in progressing the cause of the recovery of Spain’s historical memory. In *El corazón helado* (2007), Grandes shows how the past disrupts the present, especially the impact it has on those living in exile. She expertly represents Spain’s struggle to reconcile with its past, both for those who left the country and those who remained. A key element of this novel is the depiction of deep-seated divisions around historical memory pre-2007, with Republicans being denied their grief and memorials, while Nationalists were able to commemorate theirs freely.

My final choice, in among all the women’s voices, is Javier Cercas’s (Extremadura) controversial bestseller and a hybrid ‘historical novel’ *Soldados de Salamina* (2001). First, I felt it important to include it, since following its release at the turn of the millennium, *Soldados* has acted as a catalyst for many
more novels dealing with Spain’s historical memory. Second, I very much enjoyed the shift in the attitude of the investigative journalist narrator, which mirrors the way we are invited to consider historical events not as cold facts, but as a series of individual personal experiences.

Historical memory seeks to transmit not the version of the victors, but rather to convey what happened through the eyes of the defeated, of those who suffered the repression of the victorious, and to bring forth the voices of so many whose stories went unheard or were not allowed to be told. The texts discussed in brief here, particularly those dealing with women’s experiences, offer readers a wonderful opportunity to hear such stories and understand Spain’s troubled years from a rich array of perspectives.

Jacky Collins

The Sleeping Voice by Dulce Chacón, translated by Nick Caistor, Random House UK, 2006
The Frozen Heart by Almudena Grandes, translated by Frank Wynne, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010
Soldiers of Salamis by Javier Cercas, translated by Anne McLean, Bloomsbury, 2004
The narrator’s ‘Faulknerian, tweed-jacketed publisher’ is more enraged by the surreal fantasy flecked with the historical. Great subject, why couldn’t he emulate the bestselling Anglo-Saxon authors?: ‘Keep strictly to the facts!’ Fortunately, Robert McCrum at Faber had no such qualms when he commissioned me to translate The Marx Family Saga in 1994. Juan Goytisolo had long since abandoned realism, linear narrative and conventional punctuation for fictions that are at once personal, political and poetic.

Not that he held any post-modernist aversion to ‘facts’. His mother was killed in a 1938 bombing raid on Barcelona by Mussolini’s fighter pilots – she was shopping for birthday presents for her children – and he became aware from the age of seven that he belonged to an ‘inhuman’ species embedded in history. He was to write regularly for El País covering civil conflict in Bosnia, Chechnya, Algeria, the Middle East and the ‘Arab Spring’ in Cairo, as well as constantly defending human rights in a stream of articles attacking Fortress Europe and racism. His was a huge intellectual presence in the Spanish-speaking world, though he left Spain in 1956 for Paris and never returned to live there.

Juan Goytisolo’s voluntary exile meant he escaped the yoke of self-censorship and provincialism that plagued writers under Franco and embarked on a life that would lead him to live partly in Paris with his wife-to-be, the writer and Gallimard editor Monique Lange, and in Marrakesh with his Moroccan lover, Abdelhadi. He became fluent in Moroccan Arabic in the streets of Tangier and in and around the square of Djemaa El Fna, and learned Turkish talking with immigrant workers in the Le Sentier district in Paris. The multilingual flâneur already knew French and English, though he always lamented being unable to speak Catalan: his right-wing widowed father imposed a Spanish-only policy at home, and he and his siblings were raised by a series of maids and nannies, migrants.

A WRITER WITHOUT FRONTIERS: JUAN GOYTISOLO

by PETER BUSH

Karl Marx and his wife Jenny sit on the edge of their threadbare armchairs in a gloomy flat on Dean Street watching a television news bulletin: images of a ‘dissipating dolce far niente’ on a private beach in Italy disturbed by the small craft and swimmers approaching their gilded haven: the Albanians! A few months later Karl and Jenny are glued to scenes of statues of Stalin crashing down and free-market oligarchs licking their lips.

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from the south of Spain who spoke Castilian with broad Andalusian accents. He wrote about this life in a two-part autobiography that is one of his most widely read books in English. In a deliberate attempt to break the Hispanic tradition of self-serving, ‘forgetful’ autobiographical writing, he charts his journey from Francoist Barcelona to Sufi Marrakesh, from realism to poetic adventure, from heterosexuality to homosexuality, in a narrative that alternates chronicle and meditation. *Forbidden Territory* and *Realms of Strife* (Verso, 2003; in Spanish, 1985 and 1986) is also one of the finest literary introductions to politics and literature in modern Spain and Latin America.

Juan Goytisolo used his unique confluence of experience to highlight Iberian culture’s Islamic and Jewish roots in every way possible. His scholarly essays delineate a radical alternative literary canon including, say, the Archpriest of Hita’s bawdy medieval poem, *The Book of Good Love*, the language of which draws on the street vernacular of a society dominated for hundreds of years by the use of Arabic, to *Celestina*, the 1499 tale of class conflict and star-crossed love in a Castilian city written by the converso Jew, Fernando de Rojas. He created three series of the *Alqibla* documentaries for Spanish national television that explored different aspects of Islamic culture throughout the world. The Catalan writer Najat El Hachmi once told me how vital they had been for her as a first-generation Moroccan Catalan in reaching an understanding of the variety of the Islamic experience. These programmes were often accompanied by photo-essays in *El País* and many of the texts were published in English in the *TLS* and the collection *Cinema Eden* (Sickle Moon, Eland, 2003).

Jean Genet used to drop off things to store at Monique Lange’s flat and joined her there for her first supper with Goytisolo after he started working at Gallimard. It made the invitation so attractive! Lionised on his arrival by the ‘Gauche Divine’ as the young radical anti-fascist novelist, the Spaniard was then dropped when their attention turned to a new cause. He admired Genet’s rejection of the literary establishment and conventional manners, and his view that writing should be an adventure, an exploration of new stylistic and moral territory.

In 1990 a friend Goytisolo had made while teaching at NYU died unexpectedly. She had been exploring connections between Spanish mysticism, Sufism and Dante. Juan began a new narrative that was to be a homage to her and would focus on these religious crossroads that had come to obsess him too. The Iraq War began, and he wrote an article for *El País* that was published on 26 January 1991.
I translated it as ‘Vision of the “Day After” in Djemaa el Fna’ and it was published in the *Village Voice* in June. It is an evocation of the square and its story-tellers, his favourite space, after a war has broken out; it is flooded with blood and dead bodies. I didn’t realise that it would be chapter eight in *Quarantine*, which would be published later that year. Nor could Juan have imagined that his comparison of Dante’s Christian severity towards sinners in the Inferno with Ibn Arabi’s more forgiving Sufi stance and his mourning of his friend’s death would eventually be imbricated in a text that was a literary response to a new imperial onslaught. There could be no better example of his literary union of the personal, political and poetic:

‘Were they Kurdish survivors of Halabja, Dahuk, or Mosul, or simply fellow citizens of his who fifty-two years earlier had passed through the Catalan village where he lived as a refugee, dirty and ragged like that, leaving behind a trail of corpses and excrement? Did the images shown on the television news relate to events after forty days of airborne hell or unearth reminiscences buried in his memory of sombre civil war? He was undecided, still undecided.

For who was really writing that page? The writer in his sixties bent over his desk or the ignorant child who for the first time in his life saw a dream destroyed, a hope abruptly dashed?’


*Peter Bush*
For the first time, The Hive is available uncensored, unabridged, for English-language readers. Set in the early years of General Francisco Franco’s regime, this scabrous and scandalous novel was first published in Buenos Aires in 1951 because in Spain it could not be published at all. Opinions differ on whether the suppression of The Hive is attributable to its ‘profane’ content, its grim portrait of life in Francoist Spain, or both. Widely considered Cela’s masterpiece, this formally innovative novel is exemplary of the outsized role that Cela played in shaping post-war Spanish literature.

The novel explores a web of more than three hundred characters across Madrid over the course of a few days in December 1943. Though fragmented in chronology and perspective, the characters are linked by a chain of exchanges and debts, shared moments and common struggles, creating a whole that is socially rich and continuous.

A young man with long hair is writing verses in the midst of all this uproar. He’s away with the fairies, doesn’t pay attention to anything; it’s the only way to write beautiful poems. If he looked left or right then he’d lose his inspiration. Inspiration must be like a little deafblind butterfly that shines very bright; if not, then there’s a lot of things that are difficult to explain.

The young poet is writing a long poem titled ‘Fate’. He had wondered if it wouldn’t be better to call it ‘Our Fate’, but in the end, and after consulting with other, more experienced poets, he thought no, that it would be better to just call it ‘Fate’, straight up. It was simpler, more evocative, more mysterious. Also, calling it ‘Fate’ meant it was more suggestive, more ... how shall we put it? more imprecise, more poetic. This way you don’t know if he is talking about fate, or a particular fate, or an uncertain fate, a desperate fate, a happy fate or a blue fate or a pink fate. ‘Our Fate’ tied things down too much, left less room for imagination to fly free, unbounded.
The young poet had been working on his poem for several months now. He had just over three hundred lines set down, a carefully drawn mock-up of what the book would look like, and a list of possible subscribers to whom, when the time came, he would send a press release, asking if they wanted to cover the costs of publication. He had also already chosen the typeface (a simple, clear, classic font; a font one can read with ease; you know what we mean – a Bodoni), and had written the copyright information for the verso of the title page. Two doubts, however, still assailed the young poet: whether he should or should not finish off the colophon with a laus Deo, and whether he should write, or get someone else to write, the biographical note for the dust jacket.

Doña Rosa was definitely not what one would call a sensitive soul.

‘You know what I’m saying. If I want layabouts, then I’ve got my brother-in-law. What a useless bastard he is! You’re still very green, you get me? Very green. When have you seen a lout with no manners and no morals come in here, coughing and stamping like he was God’s own gift? Never! Not on my watch, I’m telling you!’

There was sweat on Doña Rosa’s forehead and in her moustache.

‘And you, you dope, heading off to buy your newspaper. No one’s got any respect here, no one’s decent, that’s the truth! If one day I get properly angry, I’ll give you something to moan about, that’s a promise!’

Doña Rosa locks her ratty little eyes onto Pepe, the old waiter who came here, forty or forty-five years ago, from Mondoñedo. Behind the thick lenses, Doña Rosa’s little eyes look like the stunned eyes of a stuffed bird.

‘What are you looking at? What are you looking at? Idiot! You’re just the same as the day you got here! There’s no power on earth that can get the straw out of your hair! Get out of here, run along and leave us alone. If you were even a tiny bit of a real man, I’d have kicked you out into the street already! You get me? Don’t try to pull the wool over my eyes!’

Doña Rosa feels her belly and calms down a little.

‘All right, all right ... Back to work. Don’t let’s lose our sense of proportion, for pity’s sake. Don’t let’s get disrespectful, you get me? No disrespect.’

Doña Rosa lifted her head and took a deep breath. The hairs of her moustache quivered aggressively, with a solemn, proud movement, like the little black horns of a cricket in heat.
It’s the summer of 2012, and Paula Quiñones, a brilliant researcher with Spain’s Finance Ministry, volunteers for a project in rural eastern Andalucía to excavate mass graves and identify the remains of men, women and children killed and buried there by Franco supporters after the Civil War.

Paula quickly works out that there are more missing people than remains and realises that more mass graves must exist nearby. But the townspeople aren’t talking. The only voices Paula hears are the ghostly echoes of the missing dead, who speak to her in her sleep, trying to warn her of the dangers that lie ahead.

Paula got out of the cab in the centre of Azafrán as the clock tower on the squat, ugly town hall struck four. Not a soul in sight. Apparently, the residents were at home enjoying the desiccating pleasures of air conditioning and the stupor produced by watching afternoon TV talk shows. The talk-show guests consume tons of chocolate, gallons of coffee and babble at an unintelligible speed. A violent white noise at once anaesthetises them and envelopes them in an atmosphere of fury; in an instant one of them could grab an axe to crush the skull of another without knowing why, but convinced he was in the right. Paula squints to see through the slats of the green blinds. The facades of the two- and three-storey buildings are brick, but some have been dressed up in traditional graphite siding. Paula tries to peek inside but sees nothing and only hears the voices of the talk show. She would have loved it if, at the end of the show, the participants had ended up licking and then devouring each other in a quick cannibalistic ritual. But no, behind the glass of the TV screen, those kinds of operatic scenes never happen. Instead, other, more subtly inhuman acts unfold and thicken your skin into armour like snakes’ scales. Paula scratched her elbow so hard it almost bled. I didn’t used to bleed so easily, she thought. These days, everything wounded her.

It was summer, and everyone in town was having a siesta on the sofa. And yet Paula had the sensation that at least twenty hands, ten pairs or more, were ranging across her body. It must be the heat, and the eyes of the men behind the windows in the
bar who began to watch her without seeming to watch her at the exact moment she turned and walked back toward the houses by the town’s entrance and the sign with its name, Azafrán: ‘Saffron’. Someone had used black paint to vandalise the letters, changing the second ‘a’ to ‘u,’ and blacking out the belly of the accented ‘a’ to make it an ‘o,’ and convert the name to Azufrón: ‘Sulfur’. The prank had the whiff of a curse about it, damning the delicate fragrance of the pistil inside the mauve saffron flower to the stench of sulphurous brimstone. There were many good reasons this toponymic cruelty was justified, but Paula wasn’t sure whether to react with compassion or intolerance. She could never figure out who would devote so much time to committing such miniscule crimes, these pebbles hurled at civilisation and order. Maybe they were warnings, or maybe critiques, an unruly parody of vindication. Maybe it was nothing more than a bit of vandalism by some hooligans. The nourishing, gourmet aroma of the saffron used to flavour rice and suspect seafood in this high desert plain had been debased to the level of toxic fumes in a chemistry class. When Paula got out of the cab, the air smelled of chlorine. It was summer. In winter, the air would be impregnated with the aroma of wood smoke. Now it smelled of pigsty, depending on which way the wind was blowing, and of meat lockers, of the blood and fat of animals sacrificed on the sly, and of piss outside the supermarket doorway, which was covered by a bead curtain. On the counter inside, Paula could see sausages and iridescent flesh.

Azafrán. As she cut the imaginary inaugural ribbon and entered the town, Paula was assaulted by the premonition of being a filleted fish. An explorer boiled in a pot by cannibals, and by talk-show hosts. A misshapen haunch, so to speak, in the stew. The bony finger of Hansel that appeared in her dreams. Premonitions tend to come true in most novels, and also in real life, just before death. A very bad feeling. Sweet Jesus. My sweet friend.

As she retraced her steps from the town centre toward the sign reading Azafrán or Azufrón, depending on whether you see things idealistically from above the ground or cynically from below the surface, Paula felt the intense weight of eyes upon her. The eyes weighed one arroba each – the equivalent of eleven kilos or a quarter of a quintal, which is about twenty-five pounds.
They followed the jerky rhythm of her right leg and her left leg and the abnormally circular movement of her hips, and the unusual way her clothes seemed to cling to her body. In the bar, the men were probably laughing to themselves. At least none of them pressed his face against the window to frame for her a portrait of the wicked and lascivious citizens of Azafrán. The men all played cards in their clean cotton shirts, as if they weren’t really looking at the limping beauty dragging her suitcase with a humiliating clatter toward the only hotel in the town that had never received any stars for charm and had not been converted into a spa or a foodie bar. It was the oldest hotel in town and was right next to the altered sign that had demoted the place from an exquisite spice to a diabolical chemical element. It was a big, rambling house with at least two or three different sections, inside of which exist, perhaps, other sections and secret chambers. It was surrounded by a suburban housing development that featured rigid Heil Hitler rows of identical two-storey homes with porches that, because of the extreme temperatures, can’t be used either in summer or in winter but were included in the design anyway because that’s how porches looked in movies set in South Carolina.

Paula only hoped that those men, probably bad ones, would, as quickly as possible, get used to the lame lady who couldn’t disguise the orthopaedic lift in her shoe. She hoped they would stop looking at her. And maybe soon her limp would become, in effect, invisible because the work that had brought her to Azafrán would camouflage her beauty as well as her physical defects. That day, in addition to the men’s predictable stares at the body of this outsider, a woman, a beautiful lopsided gimpy woman, Paula felt the weight of other eyes that arose from amid the scrub brush, and she heard murmurs, dense and musical in quality in the air around her. A choir, singing abracadabras to her, was trying, with an elastic band stretched tight, to pull her back away from that place.

Marta Sanz
Translated by Katie King
Chirbes’ *Cremation* (the third of his books to be translated into English) takes place over a single day – the day of Matías Bertomeu’s cremation. Kaleidoscopic in its representation of post-Franco Spain, the novel is primarily narrated by Matías’s brother, Rubén, a financially successful, once-idealistic art lover who now constructs buildings that remind his daughter of Albert Speer, and isn’t above doing whatever is necessary to get ahead.

Much as he did in his dark, devastating *On the Edge*, Chirbes confronts the corrosion and decay of modern life: familial, economic, social and political. The late Spanish author, in prose beautifully disproportionate to its subject, uses Matías’s final days as the focal point for exploring an extended family’s response to and reckoning with the loss of its long-time patriarch. Facade, privilege, wealth, excess, greed, Chirbes chronicles society’s decline with remarkable (and unflinching) acuity. Perhaps not quite as caustic or acidic as *On the Edge, Cremation* (published six years prior, both winners of the prestigious Premio de la Crítica de Narrativa Castellana) is nonetheless a stirring, and stunning, reflection of culture seen through the deeds and doings of a single family – a polyvocal appraisal of avarice and apathy.

This is embodied in Rubén’s son-in-law, a comparative-literature professor who is writing a biography of an author who, for years, refused to sell his property to Rubén. In the battle between art and capitalism, the practical always wins:

‘Her husband’s tone became bitter whenever he talked about culture, about his work as a literature professor: we’re not cancer researchers, he’d say, we’re not trying to come up with a polio vaccine, or something that will end up saving humanity. We’re a whim that rich societies can indulge, while poor ones can barely consider it. We’re like escorts, lotus blossoms that open above a nauseating puddle of opulence, we provide entertainment that is barely more refined than what the street girls offer.

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(and less intense). Beauty, sentiment: malarkey – ado, as the comedy goes. We read a book, see a painting, hear a song that moves us so deeply and maybe even stirs up a tear, but then it's over, and we go back to daily life and forget we ever even heard that song. Feelings aren’t that strong, that certain or that lasting. We exaggerate their value. They’re closer to the animal, to Pavlov’s salivating dogs who hear the noise alerting them that food is on the way. They’re drool. Emotion is not the most human of things. The intellect is human, and surely also the capacity to come up with evil for the long term: like what my idiot brother’s bosses are doing, fabricating long-term instruments for killing. This is surely the most specifically human thing there is, death on the instalment plan, to give it a Céline-like title.’

Raw and powerful, with a lyrical flow second to none, Chirbes’s novel is a remarkable achievement, reinforcing his status as one of Spain’s most unflinching chroniclers whose readership in English will continue to grow despite his untimely passing.

Jeremy Garber
In the city where I live and write, there was a poet named Gabriel Aresti. In one of his poems, he beseeched: God forbid they put my name on a street in Bilbao. He was — how can I put it? — a giant. With very little support and enormous talent, he accomplished a momentous task. And he did so during the darkest years of a dictatorship. He took a battered, forgotten, scorned language, Euskara, which had already disappeared from Bilbao’s streets, and made it first-class literary material. He died young, at forty-one, my own age as I write these lines. In accordance with his wishes, Bilbao’s local government never named a street after him. They did, however, give him an avenue. Gabriel Aresti Avenue, in the Txurdinaga neighbourhood. Sometimes the wishes of poets come true in the most twisted of ways.
English was not on the map when I first began studying Basque, during a year-long poetry fellowship in Bilbao, in 1999–2000: I was in a total-immersion class, where we all left our mother tongues outside the door. At the first session, we were given two Basque phrases, printed beside the blackboard – ‘What is ________?’ and ‘How do you say ________?’ – and for ten hours a week only, that second blank was allowed to be in erdara, ‘the other language’. For the rest of the students, erdara was Spanish. In my notebook I drew pictures for definitions, trying to get a grip on this language isolate by not relating it to anything verbal. The sensation was similar to being aged two, with that periodic dose of the crankily impatient disorientation of two-year-olds.

I had a Basque-English dictionary in my Bilbao apartment, a bare-bones, 669-page paperback published by the University of Nevada Press, which I’d found in a Barnes & Noble some six months before I left New York. When I got it home, the first thing I did was hunt down the original title of the second Basque novel I’d read in my makeshift preparations for a year of things Basque. On the copyright page of Bernardo Atxaga’s *The Lone Man* was ‘Gizona bere bakardadean’. Gizon was man; bakardade, solitude; but bere was ‘adj. his (own), her (own), its (own)’. The next column over was berekoi: ‘adj. selfish, self-centred (used with the 3rd person sing.)’. Whereas ‘selfishly adv.’ was ‘berekoiki, neurekoiki, zeurekoiki’, taking care of the first and second persons. Browsing around, I was struck by the number of farming terms, fishing terms, pastoral terms, as if the dictionary catered to the Basque diaspora. It nevertheless had words I needed, like ‘perhaps’ (agian, beharbada, menturaz). For surfacing from immersion it was useful; in a year or two the thumb edge of the pages had turned a deep nicotine brown.

In February 2001, I was introduced to what my Basque tutor and I came to call San Morris: ‘Let’s go see what San Morris has to say.’ This
was the Morris Student Plus Euskara-Ingelesa English-Basque dictionary, an imposing, twelve-hundred-page hardcover tome, barely touched in the Santurtzi school library, where the erdara was overwhelmingly Spanish. It had come out three years before, in 1998: the first definitive Basque-English dictionary ever, compiled over nineteen years by one Mikel Morris. I recently found out that San Morris went online later that very year. Morris, an American, ran an English school in Zarautz, on the Basque coast, and his dictionary, though extremely helpful, sometimes seemed designed more for Basque speakers learning English than the other way around¹.

Looking up words in Basque is tricky, in part because the ‘a’ you see at the end of a word may be an article, and if you put that in the search term in Morris online you’ll get: ‘Barkatu, baina sarrera hau ez dago hiztegia. / Sorry, this entry is not in the dictionary.’ Diminutives, dialect words – Basque has five main dialects, in addition to Unified Basque, or Batua, which was standardised in the 1960s – any variant spellings, all get that response.

Also online is Elhuyar Hiztegia. Its webpage offers you a handy drop-down list of root words as you type, and if nothing drops down, you will often get taken to Spanish or French entries, which are more expansive than the English. The site is in Batua only and is minimalist or diffident in its English definitions.

For words that don’t appear in either place there is the unabridged dictionary of the Euskaltzaindia, the official academy of the Basque language. There, dialect spellings will cross-reference to the Batua spelling; a tree or bird will appear with its Linnaean genus and species. Unfortunately, the definitions and usage notes are in Spanish or French, and not in English.

So that is the sequence of dictionaries I use when I’m making a translation, along with the elbow of a Spanish- or French-English dictionary if needed, plus – and especially – a thesaurus. Mostly I’m floating up from my old-time rebus vocabulary and whatever I’ve learned in the meantime; the sensation of searching for an English word to translate into is effectively the same as searching for a word while writing. Translating from Basque to English has got to be entirely different for someone brought up in the language – the enviable Amaia Gabantxo, for instance, who was born on the Biscayan coast and learned her English later. And, in fact, over the past twenty-some years the map has shifted: direct translations from Basque to English and elsewhere have multiplied.

The last thing I translated in 2022 was the soundtrack for Loti (H)errena, an unclassifiable album-book on the subject of sleeping and
The Riveter

waking. (An accurate but unsatisfactory English title would be, I decided, ‘Sleeping Beauty (Hobbled)’.) Most of the texts and lyrics are by the super-neoteric Basque writer/poet Harkaitz Cano, and when I had been through all my dictionaries, one of the last unsolved problems was the word atxurtu, which didn’t appear at all in Morris or Elhuyar, and for which the Euskaltzaindia gave two possibilities, both agricultural: burning, as in clearing land by fire; or hoeing, breaking ground. In the context of Cano’s postmodern theatre piece about a wild, late-night party with Spaniards, neither of those made any sense. I flagged it for him: ‘digging [burning? atxurtu?] for truth’? The word, Cano wrote back, had become an urban idiom, and in American English might be something like ‘wasted’.

Elizabeth Macklin

¹ Mikel Morris has since completed a still larger dictionary, the Morris Magnum, though it isn’t yet online.
ON THE CURRENT STATE OF BASQUE LITERATURE

by JON KORTAZAR
Translated by ANDREW McDOUGALL

In one of the last poems he wrote, Gabriel Aresti (1933–1975) declared that his Basqueness was defined by four boundaries and reflected some of his firmest convictions:

‘Ene euskalduntasunaren mugak hauk
Dira: Ifarrean: Justizia.
Hegoan: Libertatea.
Oestean: gizoank bizitza noble bat edukitzea […]
Lestean: mutikoek ( eta neskatxek) estudiatzeagatik alokairu sufizient bat irabaztea’

‘These are the boundaries of my Basqueness:
To the north: Justice
To the south: Freedom
To the west: that a man may have a dignified life […]
To the east: that he earns enough for his children to study’

To describe the current state of the Basque literary system, we could use a similar mechanism and show the four cardinal points of the system.

To the north: institutionalisation

It is often said that the Basque literary system is in a very good place, sometimes that it has rarely been better. This is due, without doubt, to the institutionalisation of the literary system. Or rather, to a body of laws that protect the language and determine its teaching in educational centres. The Basic Law for the Normalisation of the Basque Language in the Basque autonomous community (1982) and the Foral Law for Basque in Navarre (1986) gave legal backing to the presence of Basque and its literature in education. This brought about, first of all, the strengthening of the unified Basque language and the chance for Basque literary texts, and writers, to be present in classrooms. In turn, this paved the way for the professionalisation of a wide network of publishers, thanks to the production of textbooks, which ensured they would not suffer losses. Hence, the publishers who have dedicated themselves solely to literary publishing have struggled more in crisis years than those who have maintained a range of textbooks.
To the south: the creators

One of the strongest aspects of the Basque literary system is the visibility of authors, who maintain a presence (be it small or large) through the publication of their works, through their appearances in the press, which is sympathetic to Basque-language publications, and with their participation in education and book clubs.

Some writers have been able to make a living from their craft, often through collaborations involving the press, scriptwriting and contributing to education. The situation for authors is probably best represented by the fact that four (or five) generations of writers can coexist on the literary scene – these days we can read work by authors born in the 1940s to those born in the 1990s. This continuity of creation can be seen as one of the pillars of the system’s current health, which hasn’t suffered, as in previous eras, a traumatic rupture. This continuity also offers young authors a literary tradition with which they can identify, or from which they can break free.

However, a doubt emerges with regard to the number of readers in the literary system. There are some 10,000 regular readers and around 40,000 occasional readers of Basque literature, which represents a weakness in the system.

To the west: renewal

The stability of the literary system (those four generations), has brought about a persistence in the canon, as has occurred in other Spanish literatures, by virtue of which authors who began to publish in the eighties and nineties remain indisputable axes of Basque writing. We see the same thing with publishers: those who started out in those decades are still around.

It is said that historic events are reflected by changes in the literary system. And there is no doubt that the twenty-first century has seen some major events: the attack on the Twin Towers (2001), the financial crises of 2008 and 2009, ETA’s cessation of activity (2011) and its dissolution (2018). These are historical landmarks that could have produced changes in the Basque literary canon. But the truth is the real literary renewal has been thanks to the work of women writers and feminist writers. Literature written by women has had a huge impact in the last decade, and we should consider it a landmark that the Premio Euskadi for literature in Basque has been won by women in all but one of the last five years: in 2018, it was won by Eider Rodríguez (1977–), in 2019 by Irati Elorrieta (1979–), in 2020 by Karmele Jaio (1970–) and in 2022 by Uxue Apaolaza (1981–). It’s a turning of the tide in Basque letters, indicated also by Miren Agur Meabe winning Spain’s National Prize for Poetry in 2021.
To the east: internationalisation

It is understandable that authors want their work to become known outside the Basque language (first in Spanish and later in English). Since Bernardo Atxaga won Spain’s National Literature Prize in 1999 for his work *Obabakoak* (1998), the notion of progressing outside the Basque scene has become an ambition for writers. Some have managed it, such as Kirmen Uribe (1970—), who now resides in New York. Others are on their way, as demonstrated by the positive reception to translations of work by Eider Rodríguez, Katixa Agirre and Karmele Jaio.

It is possible to point at the various stages Basque literature has gone through in terms of the internationalisation and globalisation of its works, and there is no doubt that, thanks to direct translations from Basque to English, knowledge of the Basque literary system is now growing. Sometimes it can feel like insufficient effort is being made, but knowledge of Basque literature is spreading through various networks, and *Ínsula* magazine, a leader in the field of literary studies, offers a strong platform for discovering Basque literature. We trust that this issue of *The Riveter* will also contribute generously to the internationalisation of Basque culture.

Jon Kortazar
Translated by Andrew McDougall

\[\textsuperscript{1}\] Translated by Andrew McDougall via Jon Juaristi’s translation into Spanish.
A young nanny entering her employers’ lavish home in the Basque Country has a sudden premonition that something is amiss. The scene that awaits in the master bedroom is horrific: her twin charges, just ten months old, lie cold and purple-lipped in their parents’ bed. Drowned. The lady of the house sits blank-faced. All she can say is: ‘They’re fine now.’ Soon her husband will arrive in his chauffeur-driven car, while the police drive her to a psychiatric ward.

A few weeks later, a novelist giving birth to her first child realises with a shock that she has met the accused, Alice. She will later take leave of absence from her job – not to devote herself unreservedly to the new baby, but to write about the circumstances of the killing. Her obsession with the crime feeds on her own ambivalent attitude to motherhood, with its joys and constraints. As much as she loves her son, her main feelings during his first months are exhaustion and boredom. Writing is her vocation; she speaks of ‘an instinctual feeling telling me that I could change the world for the better by filling a white screen with black scribbles.’ Yet being a ‘good writer’ means transgressing the traditional rules for being a ‘good mother’. It is almost impossible to square the circle: ‘The good writer would actually like to be a man.’

In a historical excursus entitled ‘Killing children’, Agirre notes that infanticide has been a common phenomenon down the ages for reasons as diverse as placating the gods through sacrifice, controlling family size, the avoidance of female ‘dishonour’, son preference and eugenics. Even today, it is more common than one might suppose. Yet infanticide is a taboo subject if ever there was one. Finnish author Johanna Holmström is the only contemporary writer I know of who has tackled it – chiefly in her historical novel Själarnas ö (‘Island of Souls’) – but here the mitigating circumstances include sexual violence, extreme poverty, social exclusion and spousal abandonment.
How can a mother commit so terrible a crime? The quest to shed light on this particular case leads the fictional novelist to examine Alice’s unhappy, impoverished youth and the transactional nature of her marriage to a well-heeled wine grower, the aptly named Ritxi (pronounced ‘Richie’). She advances five hypotheses, each with a different frame of reference (psychological, sociological, medical and so on), but concludes that the reasons for ‘the act’ are probably a complex mixture of all of them. Moreover, while it is possible to account for a crime in scientific terms, to understand is not necessarily to forgive. In the prosecutor’s words: ‘Evil exists. We would like ... to attribute evil to social inequality, or mental imbalances. But sometimes ... evil is just there: the dark side of humanity in all its purity.’

*Mothers Don’t* is an unflinching examination of both an unconscionable crime and the dilemmas facing a creative writer who is also the mother of a young child. Congratulations are due to 3TimesRebel for publishing this challenging novel, translated from the Basque by Kristin Addis, in its first year of existence.

_Fiona Graham_
Written in straightforward, open language, the book’s aim is to spotlight that which is hidden in everyday lives.

‘Her mother’s hands rest on top of the sheet. Her hands cover the name of the hospital, as if she wanted to hide where she is ... Just as through the years she hid so many sighs and tears, drying them on her kitchen apron.’

Nerea’s mother, Luisa, has been found wandering the street in a state of disorientation. She does not recognise her daughter, nor her son. Indeed she recognises no one until the arrival of her sister Dolores, who has lived abroad for many years. At which point, a chink into her past opens. Having been overheard calling for Herman (not her husband, Paulo) in her sleep, during her conscious moments she demands to be taken to the lighthouse.

Herman? Lighthouse? This is all a complete mystery to Nerea. Dolores explains it in perhaps my favourite among Jaio’s many fine metaphors. Likening humans to a wardrobe painted brown, but with chips of the original white paint showing through, she says:

‘We repaint ourselves endlessly, putting one event on top of another ... But one day we take a hit ... and other layers can be seen, earlier ones.’

While Dolores recognises the impetus behind her sister’s request, it is something that breaks her apart. Thanks to clever interweaving of the past with the present, the reader understands Luisa’s yearning but not yet enough to comprehend why Dolores reacts as she does.

It took more than a decade for Karmele Jaio’s prize-winning 2006 novel to make its way to the English-speaking world. That journey should have been much quicker, because Her Mother’s Hands, 144 pages of structural interest, intertextuality and tender emotional intelligence make rewarding reading.
Nerea also has her secrets. She is as haunted by a man called Karlos as Luisa is haunted by Herman. Karlos’s arrival back in town is the tipping point for a woman already struggling with a full-time job and a bullying boss, and her guilt at not seeing much of her young daughter and not recognising the first signs of her mother’s illness. A terrorist attack in a nearby town brings her to the edge of a nervous breakdown: ‘She is not okay. Like a car bomb, something has exploded in her mind.’

Fortunately Nerea realises that to prevent herself unravelling completely, she must stop running hither and thither, and that unlocking her mother’s mind, making her remember who she is, demands a holistic approach – something more immersive than showing her old photographs. The hundred-kilometre trip to the lighthouse might not be so crazy after all ...

It is a matter of perspective. In the final scene three women are leaning over the edge of a cliff next to the lighthouse. Viewed from the sea by an unknowing observer, it looks as if they are preparing to jump. On land, however, the women are watching the waves crash onto the rocks below – the waves from the past that have been threatening to overwhelm them. Now that their secrets are no longer hidden, we understand that Luisa, Dolores and Nerea are facing down those waves, changing the present and enabling recovery and a more emotionally rewarding future.

*Lizzy Siddal*
Within the brackets of his own travel – a flight from Bilbao to New York – the narrator’s mind rambles through various elements he would like to weave into his hypothetical novel: interviews, folklore, philosophical reflections, images, and anecdotes. He meditates on structure and process, always on the precipice of making decisions, giving the whole novel the impression that it’s just about to start.

Uribe is from the Basque fishing town of Ondarroa, where the men have historically spent large parts of the year on the water. Urbanisation, industrialisation, and the mechanisation of the fishing industry have by now, however, made the traditional way of life nearly obsolete. As a member of the intermediary generation, the rhythm of this extended round-trip journey is still familiar to Uribe; movement is not a means to an end, but a comfortable and creative mode of being that always ends in a provisional homecoming.

Throughout, the reader senses that his search for the novel’s structure is a search for meaning. Uribe’s desire for the moments that make up his personal, family and national history to coalesce into narrative is tangible, though he struggles to make them conform. Details, encounters, images – he feels their weight and wants a story to give them coherence. But they resist, and his resulting frustration is echoed by the reader. When a new anecdote begins, we wonder: where does this fit in? Why should I immerse myself in this moment? Is this character major or minor?

‘I realised that our dad’s whole family history was made up of round trips, flights, and returnings,’ reflects author Kirmen Uribe. Bilbao – New York – Bilbao, a novel which won Uribe the 2009 National Prize for Literature in Spain, stems from the family history in question. Translated from the Basque by Elizabeth Macklin, it is a sort of metanovel that straddles fact and fiction, laying its mechanisms bare.
Memory has always been the terrain that grounds seemingly disparate moments, and Uribe’s memory is like the ocean maps that his ancestors drew for their fishing journeys; the features depicted are those most salient to the cartographer. Before the time of GPS, Uribe recalls his father drafting a map of his habitual fishing ground off the coast of an uninhabited Scottish island called Rockall. It was a personal map, jealously guarded, that showed the significant underwater features and the migratory patterns of the fish. Rockall echoes through the novel, looming large like a landmark, as it would have been for Uribe in his youth – the place where his father was when he wasn’t home. I looked it up on Google Maps, but as I zoomed out to see where it was in relation to the United Kingdom, it quickly disappeared.

Memory can also be organised like a museum, and one of the central anecdotes of the novel takes place in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. On the day of his cancer diagnosis, Uribe’s paternal grandfather takes his mother there to see a particular painting by Aurelio Arteta. Arteta allegedly marginalised himself to regional importance when he passed up the 1937 commission for a painting to represent Spain’s Republican government at the Paris World’s Fair – a commission that then went to Pablo Picasso and became the famous Guernica. Arteta is a recurring character throughout the novel because of his tenuous connection to Uribe’s family; a museum is a meticulously curated space, yet visitors, like Uribe’s grand-father, tend to navigate by the heart.

Or perhaps memory is like a dictionary. Uribe is hyper-aware that when a language is endangered – like Basque is – there are certain words that die first. The lexicon of coastal tradition falls into this category. In resolving a dispute about the Basque word for a particular seabird, Uribe consults the Biscayan Fishermen’s Lexicon, a formal dictionary which contrasts with informal ones. In the bank where Uribe’s wife works, ‘A retired fisherman regularly gives her words, sayings, the names of fish. He deposits antique words safe in the same place they keep the money in.’ Meanwhile, Uribe himself tracks down another informal dictionary of lost hand signals.

‘Maritxu recalls very well the last time she saw her father. From a distance he was looking out for his little girl. He signalled with his hands, laying one on top of the other in a stroking caress. Maritxu made the same gesture to me, two hands caressing. It means “Love you, love you,” my aunt explained in her diction of eighty years ago.

I hadn’t known of that hand sign, it must have been a signal lost long before.’
But no matter what object one compares memory to, it is a capriciously structured thing, and the structure of the novel mirrors this. Its method and intention are subject to emotion and chance.

The transmission of memory – cultural, regional, and personal – relies on storytelling, and as such, Uribe’s storytelling often takes on the flavour of myth. ‘Our Aunt Margarita,’ he relates, ‘used to tell us when we were little that Dad had once lost his wedding ring in the ocean and that she herself had found it in the belly of a hake.’ The improbability of the story so entrances him that he writes a poem about it as an adult, prompting a deluge of letters from readers telling variations of the same story. Some are personal, but others trace the roots of the story back to Herodotus. A dash of the supernatural and the creation of a participatory discourse transform a story into a myth. The mythologisation of one’s personal repertoire begs the question of significance: what makes something worth telling? Are our myths different from the myths? How does the role of protagonist differ from that of bard?

Translation is a constant companion to the act of storytelling – especially for a marginalised language like Basque. An English speaker once remarked to Uribe on the visual strangeness of Basque, a language that makes liberal use of the letter x, ‘Your language looks like a treasure map … if you just forget all the rest of the letters and focus on the letter x, it looks as if you could find out where the treasure is.’ When Uribe lands in New York, he will give a talk about a gathering of writers from various European languages, which he attended in Estonia. During that encounter, he found catharsis and affinity in the exchange between minority literatures, particularly with Gaelic. The speakers of both Basque and Gaelic, he discovers, believe their language to be that of Tubal at the Tower of Babel. Gaelic, furthermore, is the language indigenous to the region where his father spent so much time fishing. Bringing this experience – and indeed this book – into English isn’t presented as a concession to the world’s colonialist languages: ‘Our literary tradition … small, poor, disorderly. But the worst thing is its being secret … the best way to air out a house is to open up the windows.’

If the act of translation bridges speakers of disparate languages, something else is needed to resolve ruptures between speakers of the same language. In the Basque Country, as in the rest of Spain, the Spanish Civil War created fissures within communities and families. Uribe recalls how neighbours turned each other in to the authorities, friends turned on each other, and society refused to allow anyone neutrality. Though Franco’s rule ended decades ago, Uribe still feels
The fallout of that divided time. His own beloved paternal grandfather had supported Franco’s fascist regime.

‘That man who when he had a scant few months to live took our mum to the museum, that man who used to gather the kids around him and tell them stories, the allegedly good and open-handed man, was in Larrinaga jail, apparently, for having come down on the side of the fascist uprising. At first I found that hard to take. I couldn’t comprehend it.’

It’s his maternal aunt whose simple words help him cope with the contradiction: ‘Yes, I know it’s startling to have people from both sides in your home in wartime. But ideas are one thing and the heart is another.’

‘A boat that’s steady in the water catches the most fish. She has to squat down in the water, sturdy. That’s why your ballast is important. The more weight, the more fish. If her prow is higher than her stern, or vice versa, there’s no fishing. People are like that too. A person’s got to be steady on his pins. And so does a boat. Otherwise there’s no catching fish.’

Upon hearing these reflections from a fishing boat captain, Uribe immediately draws a parallel to his own writing process. Movement isn’t fruitful in itself. It’s instead the interior gravity that gives a vessel orientation and strength to thrive, to eventually return home, overflowing with bounty.

Lindsay Semel

This review first appeared in November 2022 at the Asymptote Journal Blog, a free online journal for world literature and the winner of the 2015 London Book Fair Award for International Literary Translation Initiative.
As Nora told it to me, the lamias could communicate in their own language. Naturally they knew Basque, but they liked to make up words, to turn language into a game, as very intelligent boys and girls do when they can’t find the words in the dictionary to reflect what they imagine or experience, and

According to the beliefs of the first Basques, people who fell in love with lamias – mythological creatures similar to mermaids – were turned into dolphins. That was the price lamia-lovers had to pay for their audacity: transformation into a marine creature that looked the opposite of a human, as different as could be imagined, and immersed in an unknown habitat far removed from solid land. A radical change that happened overnight, something like the beginning of a voyage, perhaps an unfortunate odyssey, perhaps a benign adventure, but in any case a voyage very far removed from routine, a sort of expedition to an uncharted destination. No one knew what awaited the people reincarnated as dolphins, but whether it was happiness or melancholy, the important thing is that there was no going back.

From IZURDEEN AURREKO BIZITZA (‘The Past Life of Dolphins’) Seix Barral, 2022
Translated from Uribe’s translation into Spanish by Megan McDowell

KIRMEN URIBE

An old Basque legend tells that dolphins were once humans. They became dolphins by loving mermaids. By taking that step, their life changed completely, just as the lives of migrants change when they start a new life in another country. The Past Life of Dolphins intertwines three different story lines: Kirmen Uribe’s research at the New York Public Library about the life of suffragette Rosika Schwimmer; the life of his own family in New York during 2018 and 2021; and remnants of a past linked to a small coastal town in the Basque country where the writer grew up with a group of revolutionary women.

It is important to note that while Uribe writes in Basque, this extract has been translated from Uribe’s self-translation into Spanish. This is a common issue that crops up in Basque literary translation, where Castilian versions of Basque books are often used as a bridge translation into English, despite translators who work from the Basque being readily available.
Vienna was merely a brief stop on her exodus to the United States, where she yearned to receive the warm and well-deserved recognition that an unstable Europe had denied her. 

And so they coined the term izurdau ('to dolphinise'), meaning 'to win someone's heart'; the definition of a metamorphosis – punishment or blessing – that turned men and women into their marine lovers. 

If I've been remembering this legend about dolphins it's because the lives of migrants also change when we cross borders. Once we've started off on the voyage, our path transforms, becomes something very different from the one we imagined, and the dreams that fed our departure perhaps turn out to be every bit as fanciful as the lamias themselves. At every step you encounter something unexpected – not better or worse, but different. Even your native land becomes strange; or rather, your perception of it now, as a migrant, becomes strange. You not only move further away in distance, you also leave behind time as you knew it, its familiar passing, and your land loses its physical presence and becomes evocation, image, memory ... in short, fiction. 

Migrants do not know what the future holds for us, but we well know that the past will never be the same. There is no word to describe this certainty. Maybe in the language of the lamias. 

In January of 1920, at dawn, a small steamer with a woman hidden below deck set off from Budapest and headed upriver towards Vienna, through broad sheets of ice floating on the surface. The Danube moved them in large blocks that broke at the feet of the Széchenyi Chain Bridge, opening narrow channels, through which the ship carefully made its way, avoiding the frozen walls.

The emigrant woman hidden among the sails of that ship was Rosika Schwimmer, one of the most important intellectuals of her era: the first woman to be named ambassador of a country, a renowned speaker, and esteemed champion of social rights. The same woman who sometime before had defended women's right to vote in the majestic parliament built on the shores of the Danube, when she was a very young activist who awed the political class with her speeches and along the way became famous for her armless glasses, an image reproduced in every newspaper of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The same woman who in London had directed the International Alliance of...
Women and fomented a pacifist movement to try and avert World War I. A brilliant and resolute woman who, nonetheless, in 1920, had no choice but to set off for exile as a stowaway. The Hungarian Republic had run aground all too soon. Her post as ambassador in Switzerland had lasted only five months. The Red Terror led by the communist Béla Kun had quickly given way to the White Terror embodied by the ultra-right-wing Admiral Horthy, and both extremes made Schwimmer seem suspicious: to the dogmatic communists for being bourgeois; to the Hungarian fascists for being Jewish. And so fleeing was her only option.

Vienna was merely a brief stop on her exodus to the United States, where she yearned to receive the warm and well-deserved recognition that an unstable Europe had denied her. A longing, a certain hope for a better future, shared by all migrants since the beginning of time.

Nine years later – specifically, 24 May 1929 – Rosika Schwimmer was defending her right to American citizenship and appeared before the United States Supreme Court, the highest judicial body in the land. Her case, ‘Schwimmer versus the United States’, had ended up there after successive appeals, and thirteen previous decisions in which seven judges had ruled against her.

Kirmen Uribe
Translated by Megan McDowell

*Article removed from the downloadable PDF at request of publisher. Print copy can be ordered from newsstand.co.uk.*
When I read stories by Katixa Agirre my curiosity awakens, and I feel nervous. What’s happening to me? Whether it’s a great event or something trivial, the main character will be affected as if there were a fast-moving stream silently flowing beneath the skin of apparent normality, movement which will leave its unavoidable mark by the end. Haven’t you realised that things aren’t as they seem? Tucked into a peaceful, carefully organised way of life there are so many frustrations, lies, desires, feelings of insignificance, obsessions; so much manipulation, desire to destroy, narcissism, cowardice, boredom, vulnerability, sensation of insignificance, lack of security, shame, treason, self-flagellation, hurt, guilt, jealousy, egoism … However, there is no space for sentimentalism in these stories. The dramas (these texts are made up of substantial dramatic components), whether in the first person or the third, are put to us from close by, in the way an impartial chronicler might. To such an extent that the strong endings leave it up to the reader to answer the questions which have sprung up while reading each story. In fact, openness and ambiguity are two of the writer’s main characteristics, and the reader has to take some time for reflection before moving on to the following story. How do we know when life is going to deceive us?

From the Forward by Miren Agur Meabe
Bilbao, January 2020

Katixa Agirre

From ‘Hesperia, California’
From the short-story collection Sua falta zaigu
Elkar, 2007
Translated by Aritz Branton

Travelling together was the best way to save money. That was why we got into a car with a couple we hardly knew.

I think that by then things weren’t going well between H and me, although we hadn’t realised it. That was why we sought out other people’s company, thinking noise from the outside would cover up the noise between us. That was why we got into a car with a couple we hardly knew. If we had realised, perhaps I would have spent the summer alone. It might have been a moment when a short break could have sorted something out. A summer break. At the end of the day, it was only three months, and I was going to work at the university in Reno. But H signed up too, his company having been one of the first victims of the crisis –
in fact, a victim of it two years before the crisis had started, which is quite something.

He had been the owner of a small mobile-marketing business along with a further three partners; it had only lasted three years. Their greatest achievements: a virtual telephone guide commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum, which visitors could download via Bluetooth. He faced up to the disaster with optimism; it didn’t seem as if the dreams of his whole life had been flushed down the toilet from one day to the next. There will be new opportunities, he used to say, and when I told him that I had been given a grant to spend time at Nevada University that summer, in a city which was just four hundred kilometres from Silicon Valley, he felt that his most optimistic hopes were being fulfilled: he could come with me, take an English course at the university – the weak point in his curriculum, something which always gave him grief – and, perhaps, visit some company in the Valley, introduce himself, get some contacts, who knew.

Was I disappointed when I found out he was going to come with me? I don’t know, but if I was I didn’t admit it to myself. We made all the preparations together, quickly and efficiently. An apartment not far from the campus. An English course for H, which turned out to be horribly expensive. In my introduction email I said that I wanted to interview all of the lecturers.

Once we got there, I took my work seriously and ignored my jetlag. Reno’s neon lights and decadence did not distract me. We used to bike to the university. H went to a classroom full of young Asians, and I enjoyed the air conditioning in the library. The place I liked best was a room called Rotunda. There, surrounded by books, with a never-ending latte in my hand, I would spend the best hours of the day. Often I would just stare into the clean Nevadan sky for a quarter of an hour, for half an hour. H used to turn up by twelve o’clock, sit down opposite me and do his homework until it was time for lunch. He used to drive me up the wall with all those phrasal verbs. Try as he might, he couldn’t see the difference between ‘call off’ and ‘put off’.

I met Sandra in the library cafeteria after the fourth of July long weekend. I heard her speaking in Spanish with the
Nicaraguan who used to prepare my lattes, and I think I introduced myself first. She was the vice chancellor for international students at the Valencia University psychology faculty. She wasn’t there for research like me: she was laying the ground for a student-exchange scheme between Nevada and Valencia universities. Sandra was too friendly right from the start, and I always distrust people like that. Even so, as I didn’t come across many friends out there – from the Basque Country there were only four track-suit-clad Basque University PE kids, and a pristinely dressed girl who wanted to write a book or make a documentary about Basque shepherds’ wives – and we started having coffee together every day. Three days after we met I had to bring H into our circle and sometimes, if Sandra had nothing to sort out and I had no interviews, we had lunch together. Our discussions were highly critical of the US and Spanish university systems, but we always made sure we included H in the conversation.

When there were a dozen or so days left before our return, Sandra’s husband, Jorge, arrived after taking a trip around America. By that time we had already agreed and thoroughly organised the journey that we were going to go on. A rented car, bookings in hotels in San Francisco and Las Vegas, and an imaginary line on a map, a line drawn without much imagination. We were going to go to San Francisco first of all and, from there, along Route 101, to Los Angeles. From Los Angeles we could have carried on to San Diego, but we didn’t have enough days and decided to go straight to Las Vegas – Sandra had told us that Jorge was a dedicated poker player – and, from there, back to Reno. H mentioned Silicon Valley a few times before we set off, but not forcefully enough, and in the end those corporate visits were left out; to such an extent that we never heard the word ‘networking’ again.

Jorge worried me a bit; although we didn’t know him at all, we were going to be in a car with him for who knew how many hours, and the worst of it was that on the first night we were going to have to share a room at the hotel too. That had been Sandra’s idea, coming to her as a result of hotel prices in San Francisco. She was tight with money, I was soon to realise.
Iban Zaldua is a historian by profession, and he lectures on economic history. He loves data, is concerned about finding out what objectivity is, and tries to be rational, to have precise perspectives …

[...]

But what he creates most is fiction, although he never stops addressing reality. He is a teller of tales, but the paths of the unwell tend to be unpredictable, affecting unsuspecting organs, and Iban has committed several misdemeanours, writing essays, comics too … but that’s not so serious an offence: he has also written novels, and literature for children and young readers …

[...]

Zaldua’s short stories, even the more fantasy-based ones, do not leave reality in its usual order; rather, they take us to the impossible time/reality you find in Escher’s drawings. If you were to call him a realist writer, that would be true and false at the same time: Iban’s realism is soiled by fantasy, and his fantasy is as precise as a work of history.

From the Forward by Uxue Apaolaza

IBAN ZALDUA

From ‘THREE CONCERTS’
From the short-story collection Guided Tour (‘Nola izan garen gauza’)
Erein, 2021
Translated by Aritz Branton

1.– King Crimson/Roxy Music Anoeta Velodrome, 24th August 1982

I told Juanpa there wasn’t any problem about going to the festival: the management press conference was going to be the following week, or two weeks later at most. I agreed to everything that would happen after that with Rosón, and the police knew all about it. He could be sure they wouldn’t bother us; in any case, how were they going to find us among so many people? But he was wary, and I couldn’t convince him to leave the flat. In fact, he’d been highly strung since the incident at Lorea, even though he hadn’t got out of the car. But two years had gone by, and I thought that was long enough to start forgetting about things, or, at least, not to think about them so much. And even less so now that they were about to become part of the past.
I don’t like going to concerts alone, but I didn’t have a choice. My idea was to go and see Roxy Music. I’ve been a fan for a long time – all the tapes are there in my room to prove it – and I thought the record they were touring, *Avalon*, was OK; perhaps just a single criticism, perhaps a faster song was missing from it, something like on the older records. But the concert wasn’t at all bad, not at all: Bryan Ferry was as elegant as I had imagined him, and the sound was very clear. Having said that, Phil Manzanera came across as a bit of a yob sometimes. But I have to admit I didn’t pay as much attention as I’d wanted to.

For one thing, the supporting band was amazing. I knew King Crimson, of course: they were one of the stars of symphonic rock; my brother had a few records by them; for instance, that first one with the face on the cover. In fact, until the concert was announced I had thought the group had broken up. But they were astonishing from the very first song. They came out one by one: firstly the drummer, playing electronic percussion; then the singer, a skinny bloke, who joined in with the drummer on electronic percussion; then a bald musician with a moustache who played a weird string instrument – I was later to find out his device was a Chandler Stick; and, finally, we caught sight of Robert Fripp, the band’s leader, in a corner, sitting on a stool, surrounded by machines and getting bizarre sounds out of his guitar. The song rose in a crescendo as instruments and musicians joined in. They all gave out a lot of energy.

In fact, I almost danced more to King Crimson than to Roxy Music. They didn’t play many old songs, although that was what most people had been expecting, and, of course, the concert seemed too short to us, which is the fate of support groups. I thought they sounded really modern, almost New Wave – I know them better now because I bought their two latest records right away, *Discipline* and *Beat*. The latter, in fact, was the one they were touring at the concert in Donostia.

And I have to admit that I didn’t pay so much attention to the next act because I came across the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen halfway though King Crimson. She was four or five rows in front of me, just a few steps away; until that moment I had only seen her long dark hair. And then, halfway through ‘Frame by Frame’, she turned back towards me and stared, her
look deeper than the ocean. And I realised immediately that she was looking at me, only at me; I held her gaze for as long as I could, but eventually I had to lower my eyes, I don’t know why. And when I looked up again the song had finished and the girl was no longer there. I pushed my way forward, which people didn’t like, to look for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. And I wasn’t able to concentrate properly on the following act: I walked all around the place looking for that girl. I waited in the middle of the velodrome after the concert until everyone had left.

But it was no good.

Iban Zaldua
Translated by Aritz Branton

This short story is available at booktegi.eus. Published with permission.
If I were a swift,
a swift among swifts,
I’d go to sleep
in a trice.

When a swift falls asleep
it keeps on flying:
to heal its wounds,
the air a salve.

Beating its wings
to throw off raindrops:
love, they say,
is made in heaven.

‘There’s no other way’
they inform us
and us, poor things,
captives of Earth ...

Earth is a heavy heaven,
light earth the sky;
no matter what happens choose
birdsong.
Heaven and earth, 
the centre’s branches: 
we swing in the trees, 
us nonconformists.

Up to the branches 
don’t touch the ground, 
with the tip of a finger 
pierce violet cloud.

Since the sky has 
muddied your fingertip, 
now let me taste 
the mulberry there.

Where does this song 
come from and what is hobbled? 
If we’re waking or sleeping 
is hard to know ...

Born crying and 
by our calling black 
we do resemble 
the swift in that.

Life midway 
it’s strange how it is, 
to try with one eye 
to conclude this song.

Harkaitz Cano 
Translated by Elizabeth Macklin
It isn’t often that an author explains themselves. But then, it seems that Bernardo Atxaga is no ordinary author, and Water Over Stones, the latest of his works to be translated into English, no ordinary book either. This work of quiet magnitude, which sits somewhat fluidly on the spectrum between novel and short-story collection, concludes with ‘An Alphabetical Epilogue’ penned in the author’s own voice: a series of fragments in which he explains some of the novel’s inner workings and brings this polyphonic tale to an unexpectedly touching conclusion.

Opening in 1972 and concluding in 2017, Water Over Stones is a series of interlinked stories that tell of life in the Basque mining town of Ugarte. Characters appear and reappear throughout the novel: the main protagonist of the first section, Elías, a young boy who has stopped speaking following a traumatic experience, returns in later sections as a figure now only discussed or seen in photos, living far away in Austin, Texas. His childhood companions, twins Martín and Luis, disappear for a time, only to resurface each in his own section, one now linked to political terrorism, and the other trapped in a nightmarish case of mistaken identity. Both find themselves spending long periods in hospital, a setting that reveals one of the novel’s main preoccupations: the fragility of the human body and how our minds are both trapped within and entirely distinct from it.

Illness and the prospect of death loom large in this novel, even in the lives of children, yet Atxaga is gentle with his characters, on the whole allowing life to continue to burble along. Significant experiences stand out from the everyday routine, leaving their mark on each person and their environment so that, as the sections progress, we gradually see the town transform. The shift is often subtle, conveyed more by Atxaga’s dialogue-rich prose than any particular event descriptions,
and encompasses changing universal attitudes as well as the political conflicts specific to the Basque Country.

*Water Over Stones* is not a novel of grand passions, but rather adopts a quiet register that feels infused with compassion for the small struggles, triumphs, loves and losses that go hand in hand with being human. The text is packed with detail, yet Atxaga’s gaze is capable of moving wider, too, often choosing to focus on animals and landscapes. Wild boars, dogs, flowers and, of course, water recur throughout the novel, thematic threads that help to bind the sections together and combine with copious references to food, music and popular culture to give a strong sense of time and particularly place. Even the one chapter that moves away from the Basque Country, taking us on an unexpected journey into a television programme filmed under the hot Texas sky, is hugely atmospheric, as well as being a tongue-in-cheek nod to our propensity for ‘escaping’ – as indeed we are with this novel – into other people’s often unenviable lives.

‘Words are not like distilled water,’ Atxaga writes in his epilogue, ‘without substance, untouched by life and the world.’ Nor is any individual life – as we see with such clarity in this novel, each one of our actions sends out ripples that nudge the lives of others. Just as ‘water over stones’ is a metaphor for the way in which life unfolds, a constant progression of ups and downs, sometimes more turbulent, sometimes more still, so too does the author use carefully selected language to convey the small mundanities that are the chief substance of human existence. It is a care that has been echoed by Margaret Jull Costa and Thomas Bunstead in their crisp translation of Atxaga’s work, which doesn’t attempt to impress with showy descriptors but instead adopts a pleasantly engaging tone, from which recurring motifs and attention to details such as date, time and weather stick out like anchor points as the story sweeps us along.

A slow burn, *Water Over Stones* is one of those luminous and surprisingly memorable works of fiction that sink into the reader’s conscience almost without our noticing. Enthralled by the many smallnesses that make up the day, the way we react to them and to each other, and the interconnectedness of lives, Atxaga has written a beautiful novel that cements his place as one of the pre-eminent voices in Basque literature.

*Eleanor Updegraff*
The crime fiction of the Iberian Peninsula has acquired a distinctive character over the decades, fashioning sometimes quirky Spanish variations on the standard police procedural format. The local approach to the genre might be said to have had its gestation in the nineteenth century, but it achieved one of its most characteristic developments in what was dubbed the ‘novela negra’ movement of the 1970s. The key authorial name in this era was Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, whose examination of the socio-political aspects of society added a considerable gravitas and commitment to the crime-fiction form. Subsequent developments included a marked feminist perspective in crime novels of the 1980s and 1990s, while Catalan and Basque strands in the genre addressed issues of regional nationalism.

Sometimes is – more self-consciously literary than the usual standard. I am not saying that crime novels cannot be stylishly written, but I bet you know what I mean! And most of them have only reluctantly accepted the idea of being filed under the label of “noir” recently; significantly, after the phenomenal success of Stieg Larsson. Of course, all these prejudices are being eroded, and in a few years there will probably be more authors prepared to be perceived as writers of pure crime fiction. In fact, there are some new names who don’t feel self-conscious at all defending the once-undervalued “crime” genre.’
'Crime fiction in Spain must be seen from a different perspective than in other European countries or in North America ... Franco’s dictatorship – which lasted, remember, for almost forty years, from 1939 to 1975 – made it very difficult to write fiction with crime elements. Why? Well, perhaps for reasons that had to do with a national concept of morality and also – let’s face it – with the unlikely choice (in that era) of a policeman as a hero. Back then, the police and army were loyal forces, symbols of the dictator and the totalitarian establishment, and they worked, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, as ruthless repressors, putting down any hint of rebellion against the government. Of course, nobody could write about their methods, which routinely included torture, beatings, etc. The mere mention in any narrative of police corruption, so endemic in US noir from Chandler and Hammett onwards, or suggestions that social differences could cause or even justify (at least psychologically) any sort of crime was unthinkable. The prevailing notion had to be like Stalin’s Russia or today’s North Korea: “Spanish people were all blissfully happy, and criminals were aberrations, bad guys who had to be deservedly punished by the all-knowing state.” All novels (and films) from Spain – or foreign films we saw – had to be filleted by draconian censorship, moral guardians from some government office or the Catholic Church (perfect arbiters of course, of what the rest of us should see or hear) who stamped the product as “good” or “bad”, erased offending paragraphs from novels and cut any but the most anodyne scenes in movies. It was a dark time.’

Despite Hill’s reservations, some remarkable novelists have thrived in Spain, and I present here a selection of the best:

**Manuel Vázquez Montalbán** (1939–2003) is probably the Spanish crime writer best known abroad. His protagonist, Pepe Carvalho, is an ex-member of the Communist Party and also, ironically, an agent of the CIA. A disillusioned figure and a gastronome, his first appearance was in the novel *I Killed Kennedy* in 1972, in which he was a bodyguard, but Montalbán really found his form with *Tattoo*, published two years later. Some consider that the two finest books are the Barcelona-set *Galíndez* (1992) and *The Loneliness of the Manager* (2000), but a favourite of British readers is *Murder in the Central Committee* (1982).

**Francisco González Ledesma** is a classic case of an important author frustrated by censorship. At twenty-one he received an award for his novel *Old Shadows*, but the book was not published; censorship bodies labelled Ledesma as a ‘communist’ and ‘pornographer’,
which forced him to stop writing for a while, at least under his own name. Finally, in the 1980s, his novel *Expediente Barcelona* was published in France. The writer had a huge success there – bigger, in fact, than in Spain. His crime novels feature Inspector Ricardo Méndez and are typical police procedurals. Despite his considerable age and poor health, Ledesma published his last novel in 2013, *Worse Ways to Die*. All of his Méndez novels are set in Barcelona.

**Juan Madrid** was strongly influenced by Chandler, Hammett and co., and set his novels in the Madrid of the 1980s. His series features Toni Romano, an ex-boxer and ex-policeman, who is something of a loser but who undertakes investigations while he works for a company specialising in forcing debtors to pay up. However, what may be his best novel does not belong to the series: *Numbered Days* (1993) concerns a photographer in the Madrid of the 1990s, where drugs have decisively ended the halcyon period of the previous decade.

**Alicia Giménez Bartlett** (born 1951) is the creator of the first important female character in Spanish crime fiction: Inspector Petra Delicado. Bartlett has had great success and even gleaned the Raymond Chandler Award (*Death Rites* is a key novel).

**Eugenio Fuentes** was born in Montehervos, Cáceres, in 1958. His work lays bare a clandestine Spain, where alibis matter less than a dark and desolate description of the human condition.

The Spanish crime scene remains lively, as evinced by *Even the Darkest Night* by **Javier Cercas**. The author made his mark with intricately constructed novels such as *Soldiers of Salamis*, but his move to the detective story is remarkably effective, with urban policeman Melchor Marín relocating to the sedate backwater of Terra Alta only to become involved in the investigation of a savage crime with tendrils extending back to Spain’s Civil War.

Similarly impressive is **Juan Gómez-Jurado**, an award-winning journalist who is a notable star of the contemporary Spanish crime genre, along with **Javier Sierra** and **Carlos Ruiz Zafón**. Gómez-Jurado’s protagonist is Antonia Scott, daughter of a British diplomat and a Spanish mother who has an IQ of 242, which comes in useful when encountering grim criminality. A vein of black humour is set against the machine-tooled plotting.

With writers such as these contributing to the contemporary genre, the Spanish crime field is clearly on something of a roll at the moment. Hopefully, the British public will ultimately become aware of the riches on offer from the Iberian Peninsula.
TERESA SOLANA’S TERRIBLE TWINS

by NICK CAISTOR

Sea, sun, sand, sex ... and murder. Barcelona has it all, and has often provided the backdrop for thrillers and detective stories, most recently in the many books by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán and his unorthodox detective Pepe Carvalho. Since Vázquez Montalbán’s untimely death in 2003, the Catalan writer Teresa Solana has continued the tradition, above all in her trilogy featuring the twins Borja and Eduard.

Solana’s novels mainly explore the neighbourhoods north of the Avenida Diagonal, which, as its name suggests, cuts Barcelona in two. Her characters are at home in barrios such as Sarrià and Bonanova, where the ‘well heeled’ live, even if her wealthy, pretentious characters occasionally dip down to the Port Olimpic on the seafront to see and be seen.

It is in these more salubrious parts of Barcelona that her pair of unlikely detectives find their clients, and stumble on crimes committed in the city’s high society. Solana’s seemingly hapless twin brothers are a long way from the hard-boiled private investigators of novels by writers like Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald (or Vázquez Montalbán himself) where tough, world-weary investigators scour the mean streets. In Solana’s there are no guns, a minimum of violence (apart from a shootout with the Russian mafia in the third book of the trilogy, The Sound of One Hand Killing), and a perhaps surprising compassion towards the perpetrators of the crimes.

In fact, Eduard Martínez, who narrates the stories, insists that he and his brother are not really detectives at all. They run a dubious agency normally dealing with marital infidelities and the like, operating out of one room – the mahogany doors suggesting they have a much bigger suite of offices are fake, built into the wall. Nor do they employ anyone else – they pretend to have a secretary, announcing her presence by spraying perfume in the room whenever a client comes to call.

Borja, whose real name is Josep or Pep, is a fantasist who has invented an entire aristocratic lineage (calling himself Borja Masdéu-Canals Sáez de Astorga). He likes to portray himself as a rich playboy, which enables him to fit more smoothly in the wealthy world of their clients. His brother Eduard is the realist, describing himself as a ‘hesitant, shrinking violet’ who sees his twin as ‘the capricious, daring type’.

Eduard has a wife, who runs the Alternative Centre for Natural Wellbeing, twin teenage daughters and a young son. The brothers are more Don Quixote and Sancho Panza than Holmes and Watson (although Solana www.eurolitnetwork.com/the-riveter/
often references the latter two in the novels). But despite their differences, they are both basically on the side of good, and their contrasting methods somehow gel to help them resolve the crimes they are hired to investigate.

It’s often said that thrillers are one of the best ways of commenting on the society they portray, and one of the great pleasures of Solana’s trilogy is the way she uses the tropes from crime novels to satirise aspects of life in the Catalan capital in the early years of this century. As she has written: ‘The noir genre is art, it is fiction, and readers know it, and that is why they enter into the game of a parallel world in which the tragedy of a crime becomes aesthetic enjoyment. Good literature should not compete with reality, but rewrite it. In this respect, a good crime novel is much more than a mere account of a crime and an investigation; it allows us to reflect on the human condition and on the world from the imposed distance of fiction’.

In the first book of the series, *A Not So Perfect Crime* (first published in English in 2008 by Bitter Lemon Press), it is the corrupt world of local politicians that comes under her microscope. The twins are hired by a politician Lluis Font, described as ‘one who liked to hold forth, hog the headlines and appear in football chat shows’. Font suspects his wife Lidia of being unfaithful with an artist who has painted her portrait (although it turns out that he is the one who is involved with someone else). The brothers manage to extract a comforting amount of money from him for doing very little, but events take a more serious turn when Lidia is found dead after eating a poisoned *marron glacé*. With a nod to Agatha Christie, the list of suspects are gradually whittled down, until the twins finally confront the murderer, with surprising results.

The second book, *A Shortcut to Paradise* (Bitter Lemon Press, 2011) casts a jaundiced (and very funny) eye on the Catalan literary scene, when the brothers are called in to investigate the killing of bestselling author Marina Dolç, who literally gets it in the neck from the Golden Apple statue that she won as a prize. Solana’s description of the petty rivalries between authors is hilarious: ‘Your books are the real shite! They’re only good for wiping your arse on. It’s you people who queer the pitch for us true writers!’ one of them declares during an evening of homage to their murdered colleague.

In the third and as yet final book featuring the twins, *The Sound of One Hand Killing* (Bitter Lemon Press, 2013) it is the alternative-medicine industry and specifically Bach flower remedies that is at the heart of the intrigue, although in this novel Solana indulges in even more adventurous playfulness, as it also involves a CIA spy and the trafficking of stolen antiquities. Borja and Eduard are contracted by
a writer called Teresa Solana to research the lucrative world of yoga, meditation and quack remedies. This leads them to a clinic run by a Doctor Horaci Boi and an array of clients, including Alicia, who has self-diagnosed herself as having cancer, and decides to commit suicide when she discovers the doctor she idolises has another love interest. She takes two hundred of the homeopathic pills Doctor Boi has prescribed for her, but survives, leaving her to reflect ruefully: ‘How can medicine cure you, if it doesn’t kill you when you take an overdose?’ As in the previous books, the comedy becomes much darker when the doctor is found murdered, and once again the obvious line-up of suspects is narrowed down to one, although not before the twins have gone through various hair-raising escapades, and the epilogue with the enigmatic Lord Ashtray suggests they may face even greater problems in the future.

Teresa Solana began her professional career as a translator, and for seven years ran the Spanish National Translation Centre in Tarazona (which also features in The Sound of One Hand Killing). She translates her own novels from Catalan into Spanish, and appears to have found the ideal translator of her work into English – her husband, Peter Bush. Translating from the original Catalan, throughout he provides an agile, convincing version of the novels that succeeds in capturing the knockabout aspects of their humour as well as remaining faithful to the different styles of thriller writing.

Solana has written another trilogy, this time featuring the Barcelona police inspector Norma Forester (these have not so far appeared in English). All her books strike an entertaining balance between spoof detective stories and the dissection of the comic absurdities of contemporary Barcelona society. One of the most interesting aspects of Solana’s books, though, is her refusal to judge: the people responsible for the murders are not necessarily brought to justice, and as she has said in interview when asked if her books were ‘an apology for murder’: nothing in this life is ever black and white, but is more a kaleidoscope of many shades of grey. (Now there’s a good title for a book).

Nick Caistor

A Short Cut to Paradise, translated by Peter Bush, Bitter Lemon Press, 2011
SPANISH SFT – SPECULATIVE FICTION IN TRANSLATION FROM SPAIN

by RACHEL CORDASCO

Spain is one of the relatively few countries that makes its speculative fiction widely available to Anglophone readers on a regular basis. Thanks to talented translators and enterprising editors and publishers, speculative fiction in translation (SFT) from Spain has entered readers’ imaginations in the US, UK, Australia, and Canada like never before. Indeed, only since 2001 has this flood of SFT come from Spain, despite centuries of speculative fiction being written and published in that country. Thanks to a more globalised publishing industry, the above-mentioned work of translators, and the willingness of Anglophone publishers to accept and promote these stories, we’ve been able to read fantasy from award-winning writers like Mercè Rodoreda and Carlos Ruiz Zafón, science fiction from Rodolfo Martínez and Rodrigo Fresán, and horror from writers such as Manel Loureiro and Carlos Sisí, among many others. Spanish and Catalan writers dominate the adult long-form speculative fiction available in English.

Unlike many other countries and source languages, whose SFT leans heavily towards one subgenre or another, Spain offers a roughly equal amount of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Here the adventurous reader can find surrealism, Lovecraftian and zombie horror, steampunk, Fantastika, space opera, and more. SFT from Spain, then, is a rich source of ideas about the past, present and future that readers can use to better understand their world and what it will become. What follows is a condensed overview of what interested Anglophone readers can find.

Science fiction and fantasy are represented in Catalan SFT by authors Manuel de Pedrolo, Mercè Rodoreda, Albert Sánchez Piñol, Carme Torras and Irene Solà, featuring witches, cryogenics, weird reptiles and other fascinating creatures and technologies. And while the science fiction subgenre developed in the Catalan language as early as the end of the nineteenth century (influenced by Flammarion, Wells, Čapek and Stevenson), much of it has not yet been translated. Furthermore, the Spanish Civil War, which not surprisingly informs many titles from Spain, disrupted genre publishing in the country for decades. Nonetheless, the novels of de Pedrolo, Sánchez Piñol and Torras give us an important window on Catalan science fiction over the last several decades. Both de Pedrolo’s post-apocalyptic Typescript of the
Unlike Catalan speculative fiction in translation, which comprises only eight texts as of the end of 2022, Spanish-language SFT from Spain includes thirty-six novels, six collections and two anthologies. This necessarily reflects the modern institutional power of the Spanish government and its institutions, but also this particular SFT’s development over several centuries. Since 2001, Anglophone readers have been introduced to older science fiction by writers like Santiago Ramón y Cajal, whose *Vacation Stories* was first published in Spanish in 1905 and only translated into English in 2001. Similarly, one of Spain’s first-ever works of science fiction in Spanish – Enrique Gaspar’s *The Time Ship: A Chrononautical Journey* (1887) – was only published in English in 2012. Gaspar’s investigation of time travel and its relationship to Spanish history continues into modern Spanish science fiction via writers such as Félix J. Palma (the Victorian Trilogy) and José Carlos Somoza (*Zig Zag*), while others focus on everything from memory-erasing chemicals to genetic engineering and alien languages.

Modern science fiction from Spain was given an exciting infusion by writer and publisher Rodolfo Martínez, who wrote the first work of Spanish-language cyberpunk, *Cat’s Whirld* (1995; 2015), a story about malicious AIs, political conspiracies and space-station shenanigans. Ever the flexible and innovative writer, Martínez has also published Lovecraftian/detective horror (*The Wisdom of the Dead*) and alternative-universe fantasy (the Queen’s Adept trilogy). His most recent work in English is a collection of stories about humanity’s relationship to aliens, *Second Origin* (published in Catalan in 1974; in English in 2018) and Sánchez Piñol’s terrifying *Cold Skin* (2002; 2007) explore how individuals faced with extreme isolation (either due to alien invasion or a government assignment) form bonds with anyone they can find in order to keep human civilisation going. Torras’s *Vestigial Heart* (2007; 2018) extends this idea, exploring a journey into an unrecognisable future via cryogenically induced sleep. Individuals forced to adapt to extreme circumstances in order to retain their humanity and survive calls to mind the targeting of the Catalan region during Franco’s reign in the early twentieth century.

In terms of fantasy, Rodoreda and Solà’s surreal and at times hallucinatory texts offer another perspective on Catalan writing, with villages that practise bizarre rituals (*Death in Spring*) and landscapes imbued with spirits and ghosts (*When I Sing, Mountains Dance*). In Rodoreda’s *War, So Much War* (1980; 2015), a wandering young man travels across a Catalonia-like landscape, encountering strange yet endearing characters trying to survive and thrive in a poverty suffused with the threat of war and various evils.

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technology, and more (The Road to Nowhere). Hovering between multiple subgenres, we find Rodrigo Fresán’s trilogy – The Invented Part (2014; 2017), The Dreamed Part (2017; 2019), and The Remembered Part (2019; 2022) – an ambitious and extensive metafictional investigation of how a writer remembers, and how the use of different genres can help him understand a troubled and complicated life. The nature of reality, narrative and dreams is explored in the trilogy through other genres, such as film (2001: A Space Odyssey) and music (Pink Floyd). Fresán’s science fictional The Bottom of the Sky (2009; 2018) also uses the device of metafiction to imagine that humans are pawns in the hands of a stronger alien power, with a group of friends helping launch early American science-fiction fandom against the backdrop of 9/11.

Science fiction by Spanish women, in particular, has blossomed in the last few decades. While Lola Robles imagines an interstellar linguist learning to communicate with an extraterrestrial species (Monteverde) and Cristina Jurado explores both alien intelligences and the dark corners of the human psyche (Alphaland), Sofía Rhei focuses on language itself and how its materiality and evolution influence how humanity evolves and adapts to changing times (Everything Is Made of Letters).

Spanish fantasy in translation is similarly diverse and exciting, featuring metafictional texts about special libraries, near-future religious thrillers, reincarnation and witches. In a thousand-plus-page tetralogy, The Cemetery of Forgotten Books (2001–16; 2004–18), Carlos Ruiz Zafón celebrates literature’s resilience in the face of state and religious oppression. Elia Barceló’s Heart of Tango (2007; 2010) and The Goldsmith’s Secret (2003; 2011) are fantastical love stories involving relationships and transcend time and space; while the alternate-world of Sergio Llanes’s epic fantasy The Twilight of the Normidons (2016; 2016) focuses on a Rome-like empire as it deteriorates and is plagued by rebellion. More recent fantasy includes stories of an underwater world and werewolves (Moon Scars), shape-shifting cities and unethical experiments (Rabbit Island), and a world in which identity, art and coincidence melt together in bizarre and unexpected ways (Let No One Sleep).

Classic horror in Spanish SFT comes to us, so far, from just two authors – Carlos Sisi and Manel Loureiro, both of whom are interested in zombies. While the former’s postapocalyptic thriller tells the story of pandemic survivors trying to survive the zombie horde the pandemic itself created (The Wanderers), Loureiro’s Apocalypse Z trilogy, which began life as a blog, explores the social and political
disruption that comes with the transformation of certain parts of the population into zombies. Other Loureiro novels use historical and psychological situations to build stories that elicit horror. Merging the bizarre with the horrific, Tamara Romero in Her Fingers crafts stories about threatening witches, body parts replaced by metal replicas, and more.

Anthologies of SFT from Spain allow Anglophone readers to learn even more about the various subgenres as written by Spanish-, Castilian-, Basque-, Catalan-, and Gallego-language authors over the centuries. In The Dedalus Book of Spanish Fantasy (1999), editors/translators Margaret Jull Costa and Annella McDermott feature symbolist, surrealist, and expressionist stories about doppelgangers, transformations, and transmigration. Meanwhile Mariano Villareal’s Castles in Spain: 25 Years of Spanish Fantasy and Science Fiction (2016) brings award-winning classics to a wider reading public, with stories about cloning, AI satellites and alternate realities.

Given its breadth and depth, speculative fiction in translation from Spain reflects SFT as the global phenomenon it is, written by a diverse array of people about a seemingly infinite amount of topics that imagine what is, or could be, possible. For this reason, SFT from Spain should be much better known in the Anglophone world and beyond.

Rachel Cordasco
Molina-Gavilán and Bell’s decision to translate a Spanish sci-fi story from nearly thirty years ago might seem odd when you consider that the genre often relies on imaginative, sometimes prescient, speculations about the world(s) of the future. Yet, as the translators emphasise in their informative introduction, Barceló’s novel has not only ‘stood the test of time’ but the feminist themes that she ‘tackles so straightforwardly [...] are still relevant today’.

While feminist sci-fi from nineties Spain might not have everyone immediately rushing for their shopping carts, this entertainingly provocative story is a long-overdue addition to the select number of Barceló’s works that are now available in English. Taking place in the twenty-third century, when gender equality laws have created a less patriarchal social model, *Natural Consequences* begins with the human crew of the Victoria space station receiving a plea for emergency assistance from a malfunctioning alien cargo ship. The ensuing meeting between the astronauts from Earth and their Xhroll counterparts will be a truly unprecedented occasion, a historic ‘face-to-face encounter with beings from another world’.

In any regular alien first-contact story, such a momentous event would probably occupy the greater part of the narrative. But not so for Barceló. In fact, as soon as their vessel is repaired, the Xhroll are keen to be on their way without the need or wish for future communication with Earth. But not before Spanish lothario Lieutenant Nico Andrade, a ‘macho’ throwback to the more toxic culture of the human past, has had time to seduce one of the Xhroll delegation:

‘Even if there was just one woman among them, one single woman, she would be his. He no longer cared how ugly she might be. What mattered was that he’d be the first human to ...’
While Andrade is confident that his conquest will seal his reputation as a sexual pioneer, the outcome is unprecedented in a way he could never have imagined. Initially unnerved by his Xhroll partner’s aggressive dominance during their intercourse, Andrade is further horrified to discover he has been impregnated with a foetus that ‘in the absence of a uterus to grow in builds a net for itself that implicates almost every one of the host’s vital organs and literally sets up a parasitic existence’.

In a magnificent translation that maintains Barceló’s keen satirical humour, *Natural Consequences* goes on to explore both the consequences and the significance of Andrade’s miscegenation with an alien being for whom human binary categorisations such as ‘male/female’ are inadequate. In fact, in Xhroll culture, anyone who is impregnated – including Andrade – becomes a ‘mother’, irrespective of their biological identity as a man or woman.

Barceló’s gender-bending novel is a masterfully constructed exploration of important contemporary feminist issues, such as the nature of agency, inclusivity, toxic masculinity, and the tensions that exist between identities and their representations in language. Molina-Gavilán and Bell provide an extremely dextrous translation of the story, particularly given the problems of using gender-specific subject pronouns in English that are often suppressed in the original Spanish text. Their careful rendering of Barceló’s meticulously crafted prose admirably conveys the novel’s powerful and often challenging ideas, while keeping the author’s mordant humour to the fore.

*Paul Mitchell*
While the impact of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic hit many industries hard, the Spanish children’s literature sector appears to have survived relatively unscathed. According to data from the 2021 Comercio Interior del Libro report, the entire publishing sector grew, but within that, sales of books for children and young people did particularly well, growing 17.6% on the previous year to some 432 million euros. According to Geòrgia Picanyol, rights & permissions manager of Barcelona-based publishing house Grupo Edebé, this success was down to the fact that children’s books were viewed as necessary items and so the sector worked to keep bookshops open throughout lockdown.

In researching for this article, I was given the opportunity to survey several independent publishers who form part of the association ¡ÁLBUM!. This a collaboration of twenty-five nationwide independent publishers, ranging from Asociación Galtzagorri in the northern Basque Country to Diego Pun Ediciones in the southern Canary Islands. Although many also publish books for older age groups, it is their mission, through ¡ÁLBUM!, to provide greater visibility and social relevance to the picture book form. They have an eleven-point manifesto, and they work in collaboration with each other as well as with schools, libraries and booksellers.

Every year they organise La semana del álbum – ‘Picture Book Week’ – with activities held across Spain. These events address both the public – children and their caregivers – and business, with forums featuring educators, librarians and booksellers. In 2022,
these sessions were held in Almería, Zaragoza and Girona. In the feedback from the association’s members, these forums were named as definite highlights, together with an event at the nineteenth-century Apolo Theatre in the southern city of Almería, where picture books were narrated on stage for the audience.

For the participating publishers, ¡ÂLBUM! gives them support and strength. Gema Sirvent from Almería-based Editorial Libre Albedrío says that through the association they can ‘share their concerns, their projects, join forces to ensure children’s books and the infinite possibilities of the picture book format are valued … We form a part of something bigger with colleagues who support us.’ Sirvent goes on to say that ¡ÂLBUM! is also helping to raise standards across the industry, organising training for industry professionals, mediators, librarians and booksellers.

I enquired about the participants’ greatest successes of 2022, and for some, these were books translated into Spanish. *La extraña visita* (‘The strange visitor’) by Gracia Iglesias, illustrated by Vicente Cruz Antón came top of the list for Editorial Libre Albedrío, while Elodie Bourgeois from Editorial Juventud highlighted their nonfiction STEM-based series *Mi Primer Libro de …* (‘My first Book of …’) by Sheddad Kaid-Salah Ferrón, illustrated by Eduard Altarriba i Bigas. The rights for this series have sold into eighteen languages, including English, translated by Andrea Reece and published by Button Books.

I also asked about the current challenges facing the children’s and YA industry in Spain. With the current global financial squeeze, it comes as no surprise that the difficulties of balancing production costs with price at point of sale featured among the responses. Also mentioned was the challenge of standing out among the ‘immense volume of new publications’, not only to feature on a ‘new releases table’ but to become a part of a bookshop’s bread and butter.

For those publishers who also create children’s books in the other official languages of Spain – Basque, Galician and Catalan – there are other considerations. Based in Catalonia, Picanyol tells me that the market for these languages is much reduced compared to Castilian Spanish. Creating books in these languages involves lower numbers of copies and smaller print runs. There is also the challenge that the target audience is potentially bilingual with Castilian, meaning there is often greater competition when the books are sold alongside each other in the same bookshops. Asociación Galtzagorri brings together writers, illustrators and other professionals working with children’s books in the Basque Country. One of their aims is to promote and share children’s literature written in Basque. Miriam
Luki Albisua, who is also an ¡ÂLBUM! collaborator, tells me that the number of books being produced in the Basque language – Euskara – and the quality of those books has been steadily increasing since the end of Franco’s dictatorship in the seventies; under the dictatorship, these regional languages were violently repressed. Authors Mariasun Landa, Bernardo Atxaga and Anjel Lertxundi have particularly helped this surge. Several of Atxaga’s works have been translated into English and translator Margaret Jull Costa won the 2015 Marsh Award for Children’s Literature in Translation for *The Adventures of Shola*. Luki Albisua continues, saying that works originally created in Basque – including poetry, picture books, illustrated chapter books and non-fiction – are now more numerous in themselves and are also being translated into other languages. She also recognises the role of illustrators – predominantly young women – who are working within the sphere of children’s books in Euskara.

This paints a fairly rosy picture of a robust kidlit panorama in Spain, so how does this correspond to rights sales into English? Of the participants from ¡ÂLBUM! who responded to this question, very few are selling rights into the English-speaking market – they find it difficult – with one respondent ticking the ‘we’ve given up’ box on my survey. With Spain as the Guest of Honour at the 2022 Frankfurt Book Fair, the Spanish cultural bodies have been generous in supporting publishers in Spain to create samples in English to facilitate rights sales, followed up with translation grants for foreign publishers who wish to publish works from Spain.

Grupo Edebé was one of the publishers who took up these grants and I translated several samples of their young-adult books into English, including sci-fi adventure *Doce Soles* (‘Twelve Alone’) by Amaya García and Alberto Minguez, and 2021 Edebé prizewinner *El síndrome de Bergerac* (‘Bergerac Syndrom’) by Pablo Gutiérrez. However, despite attending the book fairs in person in Bologna, Frankfurt and London, Rights and Permissions Manager Picanyol has found it difficult to sell into the English-language market, echoing sentiments I have heard elsewhere. She puts this down partly to the fact that it is not the tradition in English-speaking markets to translate foreign-language books, but also down to a lack of foreign-language skills among English-language publishers. To facilitate this, Project World Kid Lit has a downloadable list of expert readers of children’s literature in many languages to help publishers assess children’s books written in languages they may be unfamiliar with. The news isn’t all doom and gloom, however, and one of Picanyol’s success stories is the *Against All Odds* series by Claudia

www.eurolitnetwork.com/the-riveter/
Bellante, released in autumn 2022 by Crocodile Books.

This leads us nicely to talk about the Spanish books that have been translated into English. On the World Kid Lit 2021 publications list, there were only seven books from Spain listed, mainly picture books, and all translated from Castilian Spanish; nothing featured from the other languages of Spain. Of these books, This is a Dictatorship by Equipo Planet, translated by Lawrence Schimel and published by Book Island with financial support from the Acción Cultural Española translation grant scheme, has recently been nominated for the UK Yoto Carnegie Medal for Illustration and the UK Literacy Association Book Awards.

No article about children’s literature translated into English from Spanish (both from Spain and worldwide) would be complete without a special mention for Lawrence Schimel. His untiring work within this sector over the years is both astonishing and inspiring. Some of his noteworthy recent translations from Spain include It’s So Difficult by Raúl Nieto Guridi; Different: A Story of the Spanish Civil War by Mónica Montañés, illustrated by Eva Sánchez Gómez; and One Million Oysters on Top of the Mountain by Alex Nogués, illustrated by Miren Asiain Lora (all published by Eerdmans Books for Young Readers).

Schimel writes in both English and Spanish as well as translating in both directions. His self-penned rainbow families board books Early One Morning and Bedtime, Not Playtime, illustrated by Elīna Brasliņa, were written originally in Spanish and are now available in fifty editions across thirty-nine different languages. These joyful books have also seen success within Spain, with translators Angel Erro and Rikardo Arregi winning the Vitoria-Gasteiz Prize for the best translation into Basque. Schimel also turns up in this magazine, co-curator of the poetry section.

The year 2022 was a better one for children’s books translated into English from Spain, written in Castilian Spanish at least; I am not aware of any 2022 books translated into English from Basque, Catalan or Galician, an issue that surely needs addressing. The majority of these books are aimed more towards the younger age groups, with few books for young adults in particular.

New releases include nonfiction titles Majestic Mountains: Discover Earth’s Mighty Peaks and Majestic Oceans: Discover the World Beneath the Waves by Mia Cassany and illustrated by Marcos Navarro, translated by Clare Gaunt (Welbeck Publishing), The Amazing and True Story of Tooth Mouse Pérez by Ana Cristina Herreros, illustrated by Violeta Lópiz, translated by Sara Lissa Paulson (Enchanted Lion), a delightful tale about why Spain

To conclude, some fantastic books from Spain written in Castilian Spanish do seem to be crossing over into the English language; however, there are still lots of great books, written in all four official languages of Spain for children and young people just waiting to be discovered by readers in English.

Many thanks to Clara Jubete from ¡ÂLBUM! for helping to coordinate the survey, and to Geòrgia Picanyol from Grupo Edebé for sharing her experiences.

Claire Storey

White text on a stark, black background opens this twenty-page picture book that follows one little boy during his day at school. He’d like to say hello to the baker, or his neighbour Ana, or the bus driver. But it’s all so difficult. This little narrator is at a loss when it comes to answering questions. He finds it hard to concentrate and is unsure how to navigate the complicated arrival at school each day – there are too many people talking at the same time! Will there ever be a day when his words will come out, he wonders.

The plain black pages of text expressing the narrator’s innermost thoughts alternate with bright illustration spreads depicting his day: the moment he steps out the door, his journey to school, the busy city, his classroom, his mother, and the baker to whom he is finally determined to speak. The colours of the other characters contrast with the black pencil drawings of the comparatively smaller narrator who is always highlighted – or perhaps isolated – by a scratchy pencil circle scribble around him.

Drawing on his experience as a secondary-school teacher, Guridi has captured the inner emotions and thoughts of a character who struggles to interact with others around him and seeks comfort in calming actions like counting and trying to concentrate on shapes and colours. The juxtaposition of the ‘quieter’ black spreads, skilfully translated by Schimel, with the ‘louder’, ‘busier’, yet largely text-free illustrated pages sensitively recreates the sense of tension and stress the narrator feels.

This story will echo with readers who also find it hard to use their voice – including older ones like the people who, the narrator notices, also prefer not to talk or smile. They will be reminded they are not alone if sometimes they have the feeling that … it’s just so difficult.

Johanna McCalmont
Aimed at children between the ages of five and nine, Madani’s Best Game is a heartfelt story featuring a neighbourhood football team and its star player. Originally published in Spanish in 2021 by Ediciones Ekaré, the narrative has now been translated into English and Japanese and has been warmly received across the globe, even being listed as one of New York Public Library’s Best Spanish Language Books for Kids in 2021.

Madani’s Best Game introduces readers to Madani, a young boy who as ‘everyone in the neighbourhood knows’, plays football like no other. Albeit not wearing any shoes, Madani can make the ‘ball twirl’, ‘catch it on his head’ and of course score a multitude of fantastic ‘gooooals!’ Everyone in the neighbourhood loves him, but for Madani, there is something missing. Rather, it is someone: his mum. Having missed all of Madani’s games due to her unremitting mountain of work, Madani’s mother has only ever experienced her son’s talent through the distant cheers that reach her house as a whisper. That’s all about to change, however, with what Madani has planned.

More than a story about a little boy’s football prowess, Madani’s Best Game is about a child who dreams of sharing his skill with the person he loves most. A story that, as Pintadera himself notes, is very human and close to us all. What I adore about Madani’s Best Game is how the love within the characters manifests itself in every fibre of the narrative. From gentle humour and lively illustrations to personal touches such as Madani wearing the number 14 (the date of both Pintadera’s and his son’s birthday), warmth and affection radiate from the pages, a concept that likely arose from the story’s inspiration being Pintadera’s work in new immigrant housing; a time he looks back on fondly.

Furthermore, transitioning from the textual to the visual, this warmth is portrayed through...
Raquel Catalina’s illustrations. Warm sepia tones and gentle strokes convey both the love the neighbourhood has for Madani and the love that Madani has for his mum. What is particularly beautiful about Catalina’s illustrations is that they incorporate the entire community and do so with detail: the waiter serving tables, the new mum looking after her child and the street cleaners clearing the footpaths. It is clear through the imagery that this is not just a story centring upon one little boy’s skill; the community surrounding Madani is equally important.

Unadorned and heartfelt, *Madani’s Best Game* is refreshing and poignant. It teaches us to look beyond the visible and see that what matters most in life isn’t who owns the fanciest pair of shoes, it’s being surrounded by those we love. A message which we can all agree is quite true.

*Charlotte Graver*

**AINA BESTARD**

**WHAT’S HIDDEN IN THE SKY: ANIMAL CONSTELLATIONS AROUND THE WORLD**

*TRANSLATED BY ANNIE CRAWFORD FOR ERIKSEN TRANSLATIONS INC. TRA PUBLISHING, 2022*

*REVIEWED BY CLARE GAUNT*

Aina Bestard’s wonderfully creative nonfiction books for children allow new readers to enjoy awe of the natural world.

This skyward addition departs from the style of her earlier titles, *What’s Hidden in the Woods* and *What’s Hidden in the Sea*, and tailors her characteristically intricate designs to the theme of constellation-seeking in the dark. The resulting imaginings of children’s night-time bedrooms all over the world invite readers to hold the book up to the light, peep through windows, and find animals in the sky.

The page set in a Mongolian yurt is incredibly immersive and the drawings of the animals layered over actual constellations at the end of the book are more gorgeous than any star-spotting app I have come across. To use the jargon, this book is a 360-degree experience, making
reading something you really can do together, and an immediate and lasting journey through space and time.

Some of the translated ‘riddles’ inviting readers to guess the animal they need to look out for are more successful than others. Metre is such a tricky game, and I have great admiration for those with the skills to try it. However, the poetic imagery adds to the fantasy of the illustrations, creating wonderfully precise, fanciful, original and evocative ideas. Who would have thought that a lion would make a good guide in the dark? Or that a peacock is waving at you when it fans its tail?

It is indeed a comfort to encounter books that inspire such communion in days like these. And it’s fun to snuggle up with your young reader and interact with pages that remind us that we are all under that one mantle, the sky.

Clare Gaunt

ANA CRISTINA HERREROS
THE AMAZING AND TRUE STORY OF TOOTH MOUSE PÉREZ

ILLUSTRATED BY VIOLETA LÓPIZ
TRANSLATED BY SARA LISSA PAULSON
ENCHANTED LION BOOKS, 2023

REVIEWED BY KELLEY D. SALAS

What if the Tooth Fairy isn’t real? Or what if she’s ... a mouse? In The Amazing and True Story of Tooth Mouse Pérez, Spanish author Ana Cristina Herreros teams up with translator Sara Lissa Paulson and illustrator Violeta Lópiz on a whimsical journey to show how people in different countries collect baby teeth, and how the practice has evolved over the years.

As it turns out, in Spain, it’s not a fairy who collects the teeth, it’s Tooth Mouse Pérez. And back in the day, kids didn’t have it so easy. (Ha, of course they didn’t.) After losing a tooth, a child would stand outside and throw the tooth backwards over their shoulder up onto the roof, then pray that the Tooth Mouse would catch it before some other animal got hold of it. All this to ensure that the new tooth would grow in quickly, so the child could avoid a whole host of scary
outcomes: germs getting in through the gap where the baby tooth had been, or a donkey tooth growing in its place – or becoming toothless altogether, like a chicken.

There’s a synergy between the folklore, the translation and the illustrations, a clear sense that these traditions served to ward off ill health and other disasters. I loved Lópiz’s drawing of the sick little boy in bed, covering his mouth for dear life while a group of concerned mice look on. And in the text, a warning: ‘Some even believed that your very soul could escape through that hole.’ But there’s a bright side, too: losing teeth ‘means you’re growing up ... you can do things on your own, and you can take care of yourself’.

As Herreros details how the Tooth Mouse rituals in Spain changed over time, Lópiz’s illustrations keep the story lively with unique angles, perspectives and colour palettes. We see a colourful cluster of houses with big, billowing, tooth-shaped smoke clouds emerging from the chimneys, and we learn that when homes got too tall, children began throwing their teeth into the fireplace instead (always over the shoulder, of course). At some point, kids began to receive little gifts or coins in exchange for their teeth. And eventually, Tooth Mouse Pérez moved to northern Italy, where he met the Italian version of the Tooth Fairy – the Tooth Ant. The mouse and the ant had a daughter, who was born with the body of a mouse and giant ant wings, and when she moved to New York, voilá, The Tooth Fairy was born.

Herreros and Lópiz’s previous book, The True Story of a Mouse Who Never Asked for It, made the New York Times Best Children’s Book list in 2021. Their new book, also published by Enchanted Lion Books, is sure to be equally well received. It does a wonderful job of weaving folklore and art into a charming tale that spans continents and generations.

Kelley D. Salas
To be different is to exist. One hundred years ago, that phrase, taken from a book by Vicente Risco, was the motto that encapsulated Galician culture’s raison d’être, as well as its right not to depend on its metropolis, Spain, with its all-powerful language. But it was not only the Galician language that provided us a room of our own, our distinctive nature also allowed us to build ourselves a community, a nation, and a space in which to explain the world.

Galicia – even by way of its name which, like the Gaul of Goscinny & Uderzo, comes from the Indo-European etymon gal-, which meant ‘fortress’ – has always been an exotic area on the edge of the empires that have subdued it over the centuries. Encircled by sea and mountains, Galicia has always been seen as a more or less impenetrable bastion, inhabited by beings able to live between legend and reality as naturally as they inhabit the vague border between life and death. That’s why literature is the raison d’être of this Atlantic corner of Europe, a land more similar in landscape and character to Ireland and Brittany than anywhere else.

To maintain our aura of a strong and unconquerable people, we Galicians have created a whole literature, one that has elevated us. We built ourselves from a mountain, the...
Medulio, and started a rebellion against Rome and even defied the laws of Newtonian physics: only here do stone boats float. And those same boats brought us Santiago the Apostle, who founded Compostela. And that city would not exist without its legend, just like so many other places in Galicia.

George Borrow, one of the first foreign travellers to write about Galicia, has also described us as storytellers. He dedicated a chapter of his curious book *The Bible in Spain*, published in 1843, to this corner of the peninsula. He arrived by sea, ravaged by storms and swells, but was fascinated by the sudden calm of the estuaries, the strange coastal phenomenon we have here. Just another of our legendary rarities immortalised in photos and poems.

In some ways, we are still exotic. This is the reason that the world, from time to time, turns its eyes towards the Galicia recounted in the rich literature that acts as its letter of introduction. Thousands of people have discovered our difference through the elegant poetry of Olga Novo or the detective novels of Domingo Villar. Our writing, existing because it is different, is today the calling card of a people whose fiction nourishes them like their blood. We are that way. Our flesh is literature. And Galicia is a place where – fortunately – reality is stranger than fiction.
The train throbbed under my body, eager to continue its journey. I realised it had stopped in a station. What I didn’t realise at the time was that this station was my destination, and I was still in my couchette. I had decided to take the train from London – via the Channel, Paris, and Irun – instead of a plane: forty-two hours instead of two. I wanted to get used to the change. I had always loved the ferry from England to France, those white swans that glide effortlessly across the water, the romance of uncertainty.

I stayed with a friend in Paris, slept on the wooden floor. Changed trains in Irun, where I had to speak to a nun in Latin in order to find out which platform my train was leaving from. And finally Lugo – a city with a Roman wall and lots of greenery, the director of the English academy had told me. The train was in Lugo right now. It was 7:42 in the morning (I still remember this detail thirty-two years later). I rushed to the door. Looked out. Glimpsed the sign that said ‘Lugo’. Raced back to my compartment.

Grabbed my suitcase and other belongings and flung them onto the platform. Jumped out just as the train doors were closing.

The train from Lugo to A Coruña snaked around a corner, quickly disappearing from view. The platform was deserted except for two shady characters, who eyed me up and evidently decided I wasn’t worth the effort. A few minutes later, from out of the mist that characteristically shrouds this land, appeared a man in a Hawaiian short-sleeved shirt. It was Will, the academy director, whom I had met once previously at the job interview in a fancy hotel in London. He took me to the apartment on the Ronda da Muralla, the road around the wall, which I would share with
the two other teachers starting with me. That year, we would live epic adventures, learning Spanish in the street (Galician would come later – not in Galicia, but in Barcelona), staying up all hours, borrowing a jeep and travelling to the coast, the mountains (Os Ancares, O Courel), the neighbouring provinces of A Coruña and Pontevedra. A couple of years later, I would take a train in Santiago, travel east to the French border, and turn around to walk the Camino de Santiago (even though I’d been there to start with). Four weeks confirmed my initial impression. There is nowhere in northern Spain as beautiful as Lugo.

A year later, I moved to Barcelona and wept (again on a train) as the green of Galicia was replaced by brown. I had learned Spanish, but my Galician accent was so strong (it is sing-song) that people in Barcelona were convinced I was Galician and would ask which part I was from. I always replied proudly, ‘Lugo!’ I argued with the Spanish teacher at Barcelona University when she informed me about the present-perfect tense, which is not used in Galician (all actions in the past are in the past tense, there is no present perfect). And when the nostalgia (called morriña in Galician, ‘homesickness’) became too strong, I returned to the university to take the beginner and advanced courses in Galician language given by Camilo F. Valdehorras from the Department of Galician and Portuguese. Little did I know it then, but this would be the start of a very long relationship ...

Thirty years later, and I have translated more than sixty books of Galician literature into English. I started by translating two books, *Galician Songs* and *New Leaves*, by the nineteenth-century poet Rosalía de Castro, one of the main figures (together with Eduardo Pondal and Manuel Curros Enríquez, who curiously are very little translated) of the Galician Renaissance, which followed the so-called ‘Dark Centuries’, when very little literature was written down in the Galician language, albeit there was a strong oral tradition during this time. When I was occupied with translating Rosalía’s poetry, people would ask, ‘Oh, where’s Jonathan?’ And someone would reply, ‘He’s with Rosalía.’ I received a stipend for two years, but continued working another year for free. Although these translations would never see the light of day, they would help enormously when it came to editing and publishing new translations of these books by Canadian poet Erín Moure twenty years later, and it was really here where I cut my teeth as a translator of literature. The cadences I learned translating Rosalía de Castro’s poetry have stayed with me to this day and still influence my translation.

My first contract was to translate a Galician bestseller, *The Carpenter’s Pencil* by Manuel Rivas, for the Harvill Press in London. I still
remember receiving a typed, signed letter from the editor, Euan Cameron, at the offices of The Folio Society, where I was working as a picture editor. Rosalía and Rivas represent two pillars of Galician literature – the one because she kick-started the Galician Renaissance and the use of Galician as a literary language, for which she is still revered today; the other because he became the first really international Galician author. I was privileged to translate nine books by Manuel Rivas in the period 1999–2014 for the Harvill Press (later part of Penguin Random House), my favourite being his autobiographical novel, *The Low Voices*. Other standouts are *The Carpenter’s Pencil* and *Books Burn Badly*, two novels set in the Spanish Civil War, the latter an astonishing feat of engineering it took me ten months to translate. His latest novel, *The Last Days of Terranova*, is published by Archipelago Books in Jacob Rogers’ translation.

Between these two pillars lies the twentieth century, interrupted somewhere along the line by the Spanish Civil War, which caused a certain break in transmission. Poetry and short stories (Castelao and Dieste at the beginning of the century) were followed by plays and novels – in particular, Álvaro Cunqueiro; check out his *Merlin and Company*, translated by Colin Smith.

With the return to democracy in 1975, we see a gradual increase in the number of authors writing in Galician. During the 1990s, when I first got involved, the two leading figures – almost to the exclusion of all others – were Manuel Rivas and Suso de Toro, (though I prefer his younger brother, Xelís de Toro, a performance artist who lives in Brighton; check out his *Feral River* in John Rutherford’s translation). But that relatively limited field exploded at the turn of the century, and now we have many excellent writers, in particular women: Ledicia Costas (*An Animal Called Mist*, stories set in and around the Second World War – this author has a penchant for shocking the reader); Marilar Aleixandre (whose *Head of Medusa* about a school rape mirrors another of her works, *Head of Jupiter*, which is about cyberbullying); the poets Pilar Pallarés and Olga Novo, both of whom have won the Spanish National Book Award (four of the last eight awards in the categories of fiction and poetry have been won by Galician writers, a remarkable feat); and a personal favourite of mine, Rosa Aneiros (check out her *Resistance*, a book I admire for its unusual metaphors and because she writes not about Galician or Spanish political history, but about the Estado Novo in neighbouring Portugal). In the field of poetry, an unmissable name is Chus Pato (check out *m-Talá* in Erín Moure’s translation. Moure has translated six books by Pato in the last fifteen years).
There are also some excellent crime writers. Domingo Villar is perhaps the best known, but see also *Without Mercy* by Pedro Feijoo (the literary equivalent of going for a joyride), *Night of the Crow* by Abel Tomé (this author has the ability to create new worlds, and myths and legends to go with them), and the forthcoming *Night of the Caiman* by Diego Ameixeiras, who wrote this book as a tribute to David Goodis.

Such a brief survey of Galician literature would not be complete without making special mention of Galician young people’s literature, not only because of the exceptional, often poetic and humorous writing, but also the high-quality illustrations. I direct the biggest publisher of Galician literature in English, Small Stations Press. According to Chad W. Post writing for the *Three Percent* website, we’re also the second-largest publisher in the US of books from Spain between 2008 and 2018, which I think just goes to show the investment in translators and interest generated by translations. (I think this has to do with listening to the voices of others; we’d much rather listen to ourselves.) Small Stations has a collection, Galician Wave, devoted exclusively to Galician young-adult fiction in English, and wherever we can, we include illustrations. One exceptional title is *Brother of the Wind* by Manuel Lourenzo González, the story of a village boy during the 2003 invasion of Iraq whose family is torn apart by the conflict and who has to undertake a daring mission.

If you’re afraid that the water is cold, like the Atlantic Ocean on Galician beaches, and your idea is to dip in and out very quickly, then the three bestsellers of Galician literature are: *Memoirs of a Village Boy* by Xosé Neira Vilas, *Winter Letters* by Agustín Fernández Paz, and *The Carpenter’s Pencil* by Manuel Rivas. You could do much worse than to read these three.

Given that Small Stations has published half of all Galician books in English, our website is a good place to start (www.smallstations.com). Check out also the *Portico of Galician Literature* (www.galician-literature.gal), which offers synopses and sample translations of contemporary Galician works. New projects include a series of online texts under the guidance of Kathleen March, *Seara*, to be housed by the Council for Galician Culture (www.consellodacultura.gal), an organisation that could do more to support translation, and *Galician Reader* (www.galicianreader.com), where you can read the opening chapters of works in both Galician and English.

It is ironic that I studied Classics at Oxford, Spanish in Galicia, Galician in Barcelona, and now I translate and publish Galician literature from Sofia, Bulgaria. I like the tension, yes. Bulgaria has been a revelation. But the fact is I could
never hope to live from literary translation in the UK, and this is a sad reflection on the low importance we accord cultures other than our own, which only leads to misunderstanding and, in the final instance, war. There has been a tendency in the last thirty years to reduce literary translation to an academic subject (thereby making more money), when it is not that, it is, rather, a spiritual exercise. It is, in fact, a metaphor for our role as human beings, for what is there in this life that begins or ends with us? Air, food, conversations we take part in, the life we give our children—they all pass through us. Nothing begins or ends with us, which (like it or not) makes us translators. We take what is there and transform it, hopefully for the better. And just as the translator gives meaning by translating a text into a language the other can understand, so they themselves derive meaning from the experience. Meaning is a two-way process. It is what makes life worth living, but, like having children, you can’t do it on your own.

Jonathan Dunne
With a population of 2.7 million, it would appear that Galicia’s literary output is destined to face the issues inherent in a ‘small nation’s’ literature, of which there are many examples in Europe. But there are additional complexities: the language’s long history of marginalisation – from the early-modern era through to the Franco regime – means that a significant percentage of the Galician population currently do not have Galician as their primary reading language.

A comparatively small but vigorous and committed group within Galician literature (reintegracionismo) advocates for the Galician language to take on Portuguese spelling conventions, on account of the close similarities between the languages. This might solve the ‘small nation’ problem by opening up markets in Portugal, Brazil and beyond – but that’s not to say it might not create other difficulties.

In this context, it is not surprising that the successes of Galician writers outside Galicia are often celebrated as something of a collective victory. These successes are certainly plentiful – for example, in the last few years, the Spanish government’s Premios Nacionales (aimed at distinguishing the best work in a given genre published in Spain, in any language, during a calendar year) have been awarded to a comparatively high number of Galician authors, including Ledicia Costas (children’s literature), Gonzalo Hermo, Ismael Ramos, Alba Cid (poetry by a young author), Pilar Pallarés, Olga Novo (poetry), Xesús Fraga and Marilar Aleixandre (prose). These celebrations are often intertwined with debates about what Galician

And in the case of older generations, literacy in Galician can be a barrier: before the 1980s, the language was not taught in schools, so Galicians learned how to read exclusively in Spanish. Among younger demographics, Galician-language literature also faces competition from a range of cultural products, mainly in Spanish. For every Galician-language book sold in Galicia, as many as three or four might be sold in Spanish, and levels of professionalisation in the literary scene are extremely low: the average Galician publisher employs no more than five people, and it is highly doubtful that there are more than a dozen or so authors in Galicia who live exclusively from their work. Most others combine creative writing with other jobs – typically in teaching, academia or the publishing industry itself.
literature should be and how Galician writers should attract new readers both in Galicia and abroad, and these debates in turn shape what gets written, what gets published and what is made visible. Two writers’ names frequently come up in these conversations: Suso de Toro and Manuel Rivas (both still active), who have been credited with reviving Galician-language prose formally and thematically since the 1980s and expanding audiences beyond a small circle of highly educated and committed readers. To these names we might add Domingo Villar (who died in 2022 at the age of fifty-one), who in the 2000s finally realised one of the long-standing aspirations of the Galician publishing industry: the Galician genre bestseller – highly profitable yet at the same time relatable to broad sections of the Galician population, and exportable too. Indeed genre fiction continues to thrive in Galicia, mostly noir and thrillers, with authors such as Diego Ameixeiras, Xavier Quiroga and Pedro Feijoo proving that they are comfortable intertwining generic archetypes with realistic, distinctive and ultimately positive portrayals of Galicia present and past. Other genres, such as fantasy and horror, are perhaps less visible in the broader market, despite authors such as Ramón Caride Ogando being widely regarded as canonical.

It is what we might term literary fiction, however, that tends to attract most attention – perhaps because it is perceived as a sort of Holy Grail: commercially self-sustainable if accessible to a broad readership, while at the same time carrying prestige and providing fertile ground from which a contemporary Galician identity can grow. The last fifteen or so years have certainly seen a number of fine examples of such literary fiction – formally ambitious yet not impenetrable, engaging with key issues in Galicia’s past and present in ways that can appeal to non-Galicians – or, conversely, writing about universal preoccupations from a point of view that can be recognised as Galician. Women writers (Teresa Moure, Emma Pedreira, Iolanda Zúñiga, Susana Sánchez Arins, Berta Dávila) have had a very significant role here – which is remarkable, considering that until 2000 the number of women regularly publishing adult fiction in Galician could be counted on the fingers of one hand (including Helena Villar Janeiro and German-born Ursula Heinze, both still active). Other contributors include Antón Riveiro Coello, Isaac Xubín, Xavier López and the above-mentioned Xesús Fraga.

The pressures faced by authors to try and square this circle between prestige and broader appeal are strong, and can be seen, for example, in literary prizes, which are somewhat overrepresented in Galicia compared to similar literary scenes. Despite the successes above, this
has resulted in quite a lot of less-inspiring fiction, which has perhaps done little to convince Galicians to engage with Galician-language literature. Similarly, fiction that is less accessible (although not necessarily experimental) or less obviously relatable to issues considered current, such as that of Iván García Campos, Mario Caneiro, Manuel Darriba, Samuel Solleiro and Xavier Queipo, has sometimes been neglected by critics and readers. Interestingly, this was not necessarily the case twenty or twenty-five years ago, and the challenging fiction of Xurxo Borrazás and Xosé Cid Cabido, both prominent in the nineties and noughties, is still held in high esteem.

Poetry, on the other hand, is often regarded in Galician literary circles as a more established genre. Sheltered from the pressures of the market to a greater extent than prose, and drawing upon Galicia’s significant poetic tradition, contemporary Galician poetry is a diverse, thriving mosaic with appreciable international recognition that ranges from well-defined poetic voices articulated around key themes such as the body (Yolanda Castaño, Lupe Gómez), place (Martín Veiga, Olga Novo) or political-social matters (Daniel Salgado, Oriana Méndez, Carlos Solla), to deeply unique projects touching upon a number of axes, including the questioning of the boundaries of language (Chus Pato, Pilar Pallarés, María do Cebreiro).

Eva Moreda
Memoirs of a Village Boy is Galician literature’s bestselling book – more than 700,000 copies have been sold since its first publication in 1961. It is widely considered one of the three great works in the language, beside The Carpenter’s Pencil by Manuel Rivas and Winter Letters by Agustín Fernández Paz. This first English-language edition, interspersed with simple but striking illustrations by Isaac Díaz Pardo, makes this captivating read available to a new audience. An intimate tale of a boy and village life, it is also a portrait of a long-gone time and place, yet resounds with universal and modern themes.

As a Galician peasant boy, Balbino is growing up dirt poor in rural northern Spain during the dictator Franco’s reign. Like his contemporaries, and generations before him, Balbino is a nobody. The people of influence in his life tell him this, his family accept it and the gentry and the Church reinforce it. Mid-twentieth century Galicia is still a feudal society, much as it has been for centuries. Balbino’s family are of the lowest rank. But Balbino has dreams beyond the life of a labourer laid out for him. He wants to see the world. He keeps a journal but he doesn’t fully understand his urge to write – it’s not the done thing, and he feels ashamed as he reflects on local life, records events and questions his role in the village.

His first teacher is cruel, and only when he is replaced by a young woman does Balbino enjoy school. She encourages his academic abilities, but Balbino learns far more from the outcast on the edge of the village, a free-thinker despised by the locals. Life for Balbino seems generally unfair. When he is drawn into a fight with the squire’s son and defends himself, the boy is injured. The squire insists Balbino is punished at his own father’s hand, and threatens the family with eviction too.

This is a coming-of-age tale about a boy learning the harsh lessons of life, becoming his own man and even falling in love. But it is also a portrait of a decaying society, rotten at its core, a world as
yet untouched by technological change and the national and international identities that come with being European. It’s not just a portrait of Galicia, though; this is a universal tale about how feudal societies die, and class awakening engenders change, and as such it is an important social record. In fact, it’s remarkable that this book was able to be published during Franco’s rule in Spain, as it attacks the outdated societal values and the Catholic Church that underpinned the fascist regime.

With clipped language, reflecting the boy’s thoughts, and gaining power from its simplicity, this is an emotionally engaging novel that invokes our sense of justice, our own memories of youth and our passion for life. It is also a manifesto for inquisitive youth, and will appeal now in difficult but very different times. A truly memorable read.

Paul Burke
Born in the lightly fictionalised Galician village of Veiga, Gelo moves to London in his late thirties to make a new start following his wife’s death. He finds a job in Croydon, while his social life centres around a bar, ‘our bar’, on Portobello Road. In the novel, Portobello Road functions as something of a proxy for the London Galician community of the late sixties/early seventies: ‘Of all the people I knew from Portobello Road, you were the one who best spoke English.’

The ‘you’ here is Elisa, around ten years younger than Gelo, also from Veiga, and the person to whom the narrative is addressed. We watch Gelo and Elisa’s lives take very different paths, and the dynamic between them provides much of the novel’s forward momentum. Elisa, or ‘Liz’ as she comes to be known, takes quickly to the language, finds herself a job at Marks & Spencer on Oxford Street and later marries the resolutely English deputy HR manager Jim.

For Gelo, on the other hand, English is ‘an immense, dizzying language […] at times like a tide beyond control.’ Though we are left in little doubt about his feelings for Elisa, he marries Rita, another Galician from A Coruña, and a denizen of the bar on Portobello Road. And the more Gelo insists, mantra-like, that ‘Veiga is like a different time’, the more power it seems to exert over his present. Veiga is his constant referent, and the yardstick by which he measures the growing distance between him and Elisa: ‘an Elisa who was breaking away more and more from the Elisa from Veiga … at times you seemed too much like [London].’

It is possible to read Home Is Like a Different Time as an account of Gelo’s struggle to come to terms with the cultural barrier emerging.
between him and Elisa as she throws herself into London life. Certainly, it is partly about two people’s attempts to reckon, in their own ways, with a city, a society, that responds to their presence with a mixture of indifference and hostility.

But that’s not the whole story. When Gelo first decides to go out with Rita, he tells us, ‘I decided myself to choose the girl I least disliked’. This is indicative of a generalised apathy that pervades his time in London. This, more than any failure to adapt or integrate – whatever that might mean – seems to be the true cause of Gelo’s failure to build a fulfilling life there. When he tells us that ‘in London things matter less,’ this feels as much an admission of his own melancholy as it does a socio-cultural observation.

At times, Gelo’s gently blinkered perspective, his reluctance to engage with the world around him, makes him a frustrating conduit. Elisa, however, does plenty to pick up the slack, especially in the latter half of the novel. After divorcing her husband and leaving her job at Marks & Spencer, she moves to Bethnal Green and starts working as a night cleaner. She soon becomes involved in a unionising drive, and through this, experiences a political awakening. This, in turn, leads her to the Women’s Liberation movement. In her introduction to the English translation, Eva Moreda notes that the generation of Galician emigrants she describes in her novel have frequently been characterised as having ‘limited political and social awareness’. Elisa could not be further from this stereotype. From fighting for improved conditions for her fellow cleaners to providing women with information about, and access to, birth control, through her activism she finds not only cause, but community: ‘We are a women’s union. We are sisters.’

If Gelo’s company can be a little hard work at times, Elisa is a force of nature, she keeps the pages turning. This, despite the simultaneous scepticism/idealisation that colours Gelo’s account of her. It is not easy to render a character so vivid, so engaging, when they appear only through warped glass, and for me this is among the novel’s greatest achievements.

As its title suggests, Home Is Like a Different Time is as much about time, and our relationship to it, as anything else. While Gelo clings to the vestiges of his own past – in his vision of Elisa and of Veiga itself – Elisa sets her sights on the future. Reading this book some five decades into that future, London is once again in the midst of a wave of strikes, many in sectors – nursing, transport, higher education – employing significant numbers of immigrants. As the novel drew to a close, Elisa’s story ending on a painful note, I couldn’t help but think of the people on those picket lines, another generation of London Galicians likely among them. I only hope for them, things will turn out differently.

Robin Munby
Galicia is proud of its Celtic connections to Cornwall, Brittany and Ireland. I’ve seen gallego musicians play historic bagpipes at festivals in France and Ireland, so it was no surprise that The Last Days of Terranova veers on the surreal, playful and otherworldly, in the tradition of Irish writers who write about the coast, like Flann O’Brien or Kevin Barry.

The novel begins in the autumn of 2014, with Vicenzo Fontana putting up a sign in the window of the longstanding Terranova Bookstore, announcing the ‘total liquidation of all inventory due to imminent closure’. The choice of the term ‘liquidation’ isn’t accidental – he feels the closing of the family bookstore is like an assassination, not just of the shop and its precious books but of his father and uncle, who previously ran it. The threatened closure is due to the landlords’ greed, and Fontana believes he must fight the decision, just as others fought against the suppression of the Galician language in Franco’s time.

‘My mind wanders sometimes,’ Fontana confesses early on in the novel, and it is a meandering work, jumping across decades. Chapters range from the rise of fascism and the Civil War in the 1930s to Fontana’s boyhood polio in the 1950s to the post-Franco Galicia of the 1970s, to the present. As such the novel is best read as a series of vignettes, basking in the joy of the poetical language. Favourite stories include Fontana’s experience of being treated for polio in an iron lung to help him breathe. In the next ward are a group of teenage girls who are tied to their beds for months in an attempt to cure them of their spinal scoliosis. Despite his reputation as a hospital snitch, the young Fontana does not divulge to the nurses how the girls undo their straps and escape in the middle of the night.
Recovered, but left with a limp, Fontana is eager to leave the small town and the bookshop. He describes his salad days as a pill-popping, Bowie-worshipping rock fan and antifascist activist in 1970s Madrid. His uncle, Eliseo, is a closeted gay man in a time when homosexuals were sent to asylums to keep them from prison. His father, Amaro, becomes ‘the biggest banned book provider in all of Galicia’ through Eliseo, who along with other smugglers, travels round the world with ‘false backs to their suitcases’ in order to carry the works of ‘anti-Franco publishing houses’. Especially poignant is the story of the dissident girl, Garúa, who hides from the agents of the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance in the back rooms of the shop.

Vicenzo Fontana is a bookstore owner who likes to know what he’s selling and reads the titles on his shelves; in fact characters’ reading is an essential part of the book – the *Odyssey*, Julius Fučík, Graciliano Ramos, Ryszard Kapuściński, and Francis Jammes all come up in conversation. And even though a brief appearance by Jorge Luis Borges is entertaining, sadly for me, the lists of unfamiliar authors and book titles alienate rather than illuminate.

The Terranova bookshop is like the novel itself – full of rich stories, maverick characters and people who find comfort in reading. It’s a testament to the written word, a story about how books preserve history and instigate and drive social change.

*Dymphna Flynn*
Widely recognised as one of the most singular voices of contemporary Galician literature, Berta Dávila is also an author who’s always pushing the boundaries of her writing. In that sense, Disappointment Island is without a doubt her most structurally innovative novel, although strictly speaking, it would be more accurate to describe it as two novels. After her narrator has completed a first novel, Certain Homes, shortly before the global pandemic that found all of Spain’s residents confined to their homes, she begins annotating loose thoughts and ideas with relevance to the novel that she had, not long before, felt was finished. The result is a second novel, Disappointment Island, written ‘into the seams’ of the first, not necessary to its plot but adding endless thematic depth and acting as a sort of in-between space where the narrator can comment on her own work and thought processes. Much of the brilliance of this book comes from the elegant, deceptive simplicity of Dávila’s writing, but no less fascinating are her passages through simulated reality in a video game reminiscent of Animal Crossing in Disappointment Island, and the wild, unlikely friendship the narrator establishes with the Frenchwoman living in her childhood apartment in Certain Homes.

BERTA DÁVILA
From DISAPPOINTMENT ISLAND
Editorial Galaxia, 2020
Translated and introduced by Jacob Rogers

I dreamt that I lost my home.

And in the dream, my home wasn’t the place where I currently live, but a realm of my own. I referred to it just like that, as ‘my home,’ and it truly was mine. In the dream, I hadn’t lost my home to a fire, or because I’d been evicted; it just wasn’t where it was supposed to be, as if you could lose a home as easily as you might a book behind a piece of furniture or a sock between your sheets. I’m picking out each word carefully, like they’re cherries at the supermarket, grabbing hold of only the words that seem ripe: place, realm, home.

I woke up to find my son in bed with me. We spent the first few hours of the morning together clearing away the scattered refuse of our dreamlife. By that night, I had lost almost all memory of what went on in the dream, but the sense of strangeness persisted. I started to write some notes that I thought might help me conjure up that exact feeling in the
future, then gave my youngest sister a call and told her we should visit our childhood home.

Our childhood home was a small, old apartment on a side street in the city’s historic district. My parents rented it a couple years after I was born. My sister reminded me that people probably lived there and that it had been over twenty years since we’d moved out of the apartment, so there was almost no chance of it being the same as it had been. She also said it would be hard to explain the reason for our intrusion to total strangers. ‘Please? I really want you to come with me,’ I begged. She gave in.

I wanted my sister there, I think, because it would be like seeing the apartment with one of the pieces of furniture that still inhabited it in my memory. My sister is a part of that apartment; if she was there, it might look more the way I remembered it.

Like dreams, memory has the generic look of a theme park, a hodgepodge of simplified models from an ideal universe. I remember every single theme park I’ve ever been to – the scaleless maps, the streets named after made-up people; the Ferris wheel and merry-go-round at the Prater in Vienna; the stickers that give you unlimited rides at every part of the Parque de Atracciones in Madrid.

Right now, as I’m writing, I can hear, from the living room, the opening notes to the soundtrack of Annie Hall, which is on TV tonight. The father of my son once told me that it’s my movie, and that I could be Annie. But I feel more like Alvy Singer, Woody Allen’s character, forever tormented by trivial things. I had forgotten about the scene where Alvy talks about how he lived under the roller coaster at Coney Island as a kid, and how it was one of the most beautiful places you could be. My childhood, too, was stirred by the tremors of a roller coaster.

Theme parks calm me because they fit neatly into their designated spaces, and, by nature, have strict, often arbitrary rules. A theme park is an enclosed capsule where you can do everything if you’re organised enough. It becomes possible to conceive of a finite universe when you’re there.

There are always lost children sobbing at theme parks. I can see now that I move through the world trying to find the places I’ve lost, which is why I have this burning desire to go back to my childhood home. I’m not afraid of what I might find there, yet I continue to postpone the visit. I do the same with the books I lack
I write: as soon as I’ve got a detailed conception of their shape and their needs, I set them aside for a long time. That way, I can incubate them like still-growing eggs that occasionally get lost. I should live on an island. Maybe there, my ideas wouldn’t get lost, or if they did, they’d fall into the ocean.

Lacking an outlet, my overbearing urge to visit my childhood home begins to dissipate as other ideas and urgent needs crop up. I have to move out of my place and find another. I dedicate all my hours to apartment-hunting. As soon as I’ve found one that seems suitable, I contact the cheapest moving company in the city to arrange to have my things moved. It takes an entire weekend to pack everything into cardboard boxes, and like so many other times, I tell myself I’m going to get rid of things that I don’t end up getting rid of.

The movers arrive punctually on a Tuesday morning and load my furniture and boxes into a van parked on the kerb. They stack the boxes in rows and columns of five in the smallest room in the apartment, erecting a cardboard shrine. The lightest boxes are less than a foot from the ceiling, so the crown of the pyramid holds the rugs, couch cushions, bedsheets, and my son’s baby clothes, along with the tablecloths my grandmother sewed for me a long time ago. The heaviest boxes are on are on the floor, so my French dictionaries and all of my books form the base of the pyramid. In the moving process, some of the boxes lost their labels, on which I’d written what was in them. I’m surprised at all the space my belongings take up.

Berta Dávila
Translated by Jacob Rogers
With some frequency, we hear readers ask authors how much of their novels they’ve pulled from their own lives, assuming that some if not most of the content must be autobiographical. One of the fascinating things about this memoir by Xesús Fraga is that readers ask the same thing, because it seems simply impossible that this magnificent work of literature could possibly be anything but a novel. In part, I’m sure this has to do with his portrayal of his grandmother, a larger-than-life force of nature, who he gives such depth, pathos, hilarity and personality that readers must assume he’s made her up. But what makes Virtues (and Mysteries) – the title is a play on his grandmother’s name, Virtudes, (‘virtues’) – so uniquely brilliant is how it takes the raw material of an utterly commonplace story – Galician poverty, emigration, and in many cases, disappearance – and moulds it into a universal tale of struggle and sacrifice. Very few Galician-language books have won Spain’s National Narrative Prize; it comes as no surprise that this did just that in 2021.

Anytime my grandmother got angry, her eyes would flash with a feral gleam, and she would clench her teeth in a grim rictus, lips pursed, jaw quaking. She reminded me, in these moments, of a bulldog sniffing out your slightest weakness, your slightest misstep. She would crouch into a squat and eye you from this low vantage point, which, rather than undermine her authority, was a clear sign she was primed to attack. When my grandmother got angry with me specifically, it was almost always because I’d either questioned her infallible opinions, or because some problem had arisen which (according to her) was my fault, but which (from my perspective) was purely a misunderstanding. She didn’t care what I had to say, batting away my defences with an unmatchable argument: ‘Estás wrong!’

The angriest she’s ever been with me, the nearest I’ve ever felt the bulldog’s fangs to my face, was one morning outside her flat in London. We were on our way to the airport to catch a flight to Galicia and had lugger our suitcases down to the vestibule. ‘I’m going to see if I can find a taxi at High Street Kensington. You stay here with our things,’ she had ordained, before opening the door and descending the steps down to the
pavement, still deserted and lit by the feeble yellow of the street-lamps at these early hours of the morning. Watching her walk in the direction of the faint murmur of traffic from the main road, I felt a sudden, irrepressible urge to follow her. To this day, I still don’t know why I acted on it; maybe it was an impulsive, childish fear of being left alone. Whatever the case, I rushed down the five steps separating the pavement from her front door, which I’d made sure to shut, I guess out of some instinct not to leave our belongings unattended.

‘Wait, I’m coming with you!’

My grandmother had already set off walking and didn’t hear me. I nearly had to run to catch up. She couldn’t have been more incredulous when she saw me.

‘What are you doing here? What if someone shuts the door? Didn’t you see I left my keys back with my purse?’

I confessed that the door had already been shut, though I neglected to mention that I was the culprit. Predictably, her incredulity turned to rage, followed by a litany of vehement curses, which I immediately set to work repressing. Any attempt to reproduce them here would be an exercise in memory, and exercises in memory are always more of a reinvention than a retelling, and anyway, I’d never be able to do the experience justice. Things weren’t looking good for us, stuck outside my grandmother’s building at four in the morning with no key and all our bags inside. The only bright spot was that, thanks to my grandmother’s perennial insistence on arriving three or four hours before take-off, we still had loads of time.

As was her custom, as soon as my grandmother had finished discharging her anger, she solved the problem. She rang the bell for the housekeeper, as she called the housekeeper who lived in the street-level flat. After a few minutes, he finally peeked his black face grumpily out from behind the curtains. He was even grumpier when he came out and opened the front door, returning us to the security of the vestibule and the relieving sight of our luggage; I let out a silent sigh of relief while my grandmother placated him with a self-interested (albeit accurate) version of events:

‘My grandson! He go outside with no keys! And closed the door! He is stupid! Crazy! Stupid!’

Have I mentioned yet that this is an exercise in memory?

These castigations were but one of the many and varied manifestations of my grandmother’s famous temper. If you showed any signs of lollygagging, or simply couldn’t keep up with her, she would unleash the full force of her wrath upon you, no exceptions.
‘Chop, chop, María Isabel!’ she once shouted at my mother, who had fallen behind with the heavy shopping bags, and this teasing command even made its way into our family lexicon. We found it funny to see these rare displays of maternalism in my grandmother – hidden by her living abroad and by the inflexible, impatient shell the self-sacrificial tend to armour themselves with – and it was undeniably tickling to see my mother briefly turned into the docile child she hadn’t been for a long time, ever since circumstances had forced her to become a mother not just to herself, but also to her two young sisters. Of course, that was long before I was born.

Another part of the humour, for us, was in how odd her expressions sounded to our young ears; having grown up in a predominantly Spanish-speaking milieu, we couldn’t help but be simultaneously fascinated and amused by her old-fashioned-sounding Galician.

‘These nuts are balorecidas,’ she once said, for example. My cousins and I, who had never in our lives heard the word balorecidas used to indicate mouldiness, burst into peals of laughter.

And then there was her repertoire of composite words. Between her vehemence and our never having heard these words before, we always assumed she’d simply made them up.

‘You’ve got to esmachucalo,’ she would say, doubling the impact that the Galician ‘esmagar’ or the Spanish ‘machucar’ (to crush, in both cases) would have had on their own.

Not to mention the ferocious refrains that left us equally tittering and terrified:

‘God knows what came over that woman, walking around like a whore at Lent!’

Twenty-five years in London – which she was already well into by the time we were kids– hadn’t stopped a certain understratum of her formerly rural life from cropping up occasionally in her speech, and she still used old phrases from back then (‘It’s like Korea out here!’ she would say as a catchall for a negative sort of surprise), which reinforced her natural expressiveness. Her phonetic adaptations of place names in the British capital – Édua (Edgware) Road, or Jaimesmí (Hammersmith) – also coloured her British Galician, but nothing was as liable to send us into an uncontrollable fit of laughter as her awe-inspiring, high-powered collision of curse words:

‘Fockin’ merda!’
The Riveter

Extracts

The first adjective that comes to mind to describe Cabaleiro’s debut novel, or at least its anti-heroine protagonist, Mona Otero, is bitter. And Mona has plenty to be bitter about, as someone who left her tiny town in Galicia with grand artistic and professional hopes only to see them dashed by the ongoing job- and life-precarity caused by the 2008 economic crisis. Cabaleiro infuses the close-third-person narration with a wicked, caustic sense of humour so we can’t help but be taken with Mona even as she flails spectacularly, losing her driver’s licence, her husband, and in some cases her dignity. That lack of a driver’s licence also gives The Ramonas its simple, effective structure: each chapter finds Mona shuttling between her rural hometown of Saídres and Galicia’s capital over the course of a couple years, as she tries to claw her way out of the wedding photography circuit and back to artistic relevance. Underlying it all is a one-of-a-kind vision of rural Galicia that effortlessly counters the popular notion of ‘empty Spain’.

ANA CABALEIRO

From LAS RAMONAS (‘The Ramonas’)
Editorial Galaxia, 2018
Translated and introduced by Jacob Rogers

My husband is sleeping with this hopeless airhead, Mona Otero finds herself thinking again. It’s the third, or maybe fourth time she’s thought it since she got into the car, and she’s already feeling exasperated because they’ve been on the road for maybe all of three minutes. They’ve only made it as far as the chicken coop crossroads, which is called that despite the fact it’s not actually a crossroads, nor is there a chicken coop anywhere in sight – nothing but the Novos family’s hatchery, which has been a part of the area’s historical landscape for as long as Mona can remember. Still, this intersection is more than a simple junction between one road and another, and has always acted as the boundary line for Saídres, Mona’s home parish, the point of the departure between Saídres and everywhere else, whether that else is one of the bigger towns right off the highway, like Silleda or Lalín, or a city like Pontevedra or Santiago de Compostela, which you always have to venture to at one point or another, whether for a trip to the shops, to the doctor, or to obtain an official document. And there’s that thought again, the thought about this woman falling for her husband. She’s already had the thought several times since she stepped into the car, not to mention the twenty or thirty times it

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crossed her mind during the wedding on Saturday. Every time it pops into her head, she thinks about how it’s just her fucking luck she has to share a car with this idiotic chatterbox.

But it’s not Saturday now; it’s Monday, and Mona Otero’s body is in an absolute Monday slump, soured and heavy. And to make matters worse, after being wrecked by a weekend so bad it felt like a never-ending succession of nightmares, she’s now stuck in a car with the very woman she’s positive is her husband’s lover. But Mona smiles. She’s not going to be the loser here. Nope, they’ve been married fifteen years, and she hasn’t lost a battle yet.

‘By the way, I was so happy to see they’d hired you for Saturday. You’re the only photographer I know who can make anyone look pretty.’

Ra Meixide, Mona’s driver, and the lover to her husband, chooses to strike up the conversation by bringing up the most horrid part of the wedding. Because if there’s one thing that kills Mona Otero’s professional spirit, it’s the godforsaken phrase, ‘Make me look the prettiest!’ Ra is perfectly aware of that; it’s what caused their spat on Saturday. But Mona can’t tell if she’s poking the wound out of boldness, or because she has the memory of a goldfish.

‘It was kind of the same for you, right? On the one hand, we had to work, but on the other, we were also invited as guests, and it’s just impossible to do both. You spend so much time focusing on work that you end up having no fun. Am I right?’

Ra seems eager to talk about the wedding. Too fucking eager, Mona thinks, and she starts to worry in spite of herself. She has no choice but to play Ra’s game.

‘It was your first wedding, right? I mean, you haven’t been a minister for very long...’

‘Yes, yes! It was so exciting, you know, because they specifically asked for me, too!’

Mona feels a stab of pity as she listens. More than just an airhead, Ra Meixide strikes her as a dyed-in-the-wool narcissist. Mona can tell that the brand-spanking-new Minister of Tourism and Civic Engagement is rehearsing her pose as the humble politician always out to remind us she’s still one of the common people. Look at her now: putting her personal car at the services of others – at Mona’s service, in this case – by

She’s a politician of her time, the kind who will make proper use of public funds, who will contribute to environmental conservation efforts, and blah, blah, blah, what an angel!
signing up to provide rideshares through Blablacar. She’s a politician of her time, the kind who will make proper use of public funds, who will contribute to environmental conservation efforts, and blah, blah, blah, what an angel! Mona has met so many like her.

Unfortunately, they’ve only gotten as far as the shortcut that crosses the Negreiros parish out towards National Highway 525, just before the straightaway that takes you past the Rolán Auto Warehouse. To think she’ll be in this car for at least another forty kilometres ...

*Ana Cabaleiro*
*Translated by Jacob Rogers*
Finding queer literature in today’s Spain is as easy as it is in many other countries around the world. It’s heartening to see this literature in mainstream bookshops, read reviews of it in mainstream newspapers and see queer writers taking part in TV debates and winning established literature prizes. And it’s all the more impressive when we consider where we have come from in terms of queer visibility.

Over the last thirty years, Spain has made huge leaps forward in terms of LGBTQI+ rights. In 2005 same-sex marriage was legalised, making Spain the third country in the world to give this right to queer couples. And more recently, in December 2022, a transgender rights bill was approved. These bills, along with the debates they have sparked, and despite continuing prejudice, have helped make today’s Spanish society a more accepting and respectful one than it has been in the past.

Queer literature, in its modern form, first emerged in Spain in the 1990s. The decade saw Berkana, the first bookshop dedicated exclusively to LGBTQI+ work, opening its doors in Madrid. A few years later Berkana’s founders launched Egales Press, a pioneer in Spain because it only published queer literature – a mission to which it still adheres.

Now, in 2023, queer writing in Spain has reached a point where it’s being exported to other countries. The Festival of Queer Spanish Literature in London, organised by the bookshop I run, Romancero Books, with support from the Office for Cultural and Scientific Affairs of the Spanish Embassy in London, and other organisations, has been celebrated annually since November 2021.
When asked what the main reasons are for organising this festival, I always say that we generally only see one or two events dedicated to LGBTQI+ literature in the programmes of the mainstream festivals, so I felt it was time for queer Spanish literature to have a room of its own. But I want that room to be as inclusive as possible, so I have tried to curate programmes as diverse as queer society. I don’t want to say I choose a writer, a book or a publisher for every letter of the LGBTQI+ acronym, but it is important for me at least to use the festival as a manifesto for global queer representation. I believe that when you curate, programme or select a list of names for any festival, you have a social responsibility to include as many different voices as possible; that way you can be a facilitator for change.

Each year, the festival invites important queer writers and activists from Spanish-speaking countries to take part in its programme. Each edition of the festival has a different set of objectives around which the festival events are curated. For the most recent edition, we wanted to use the festival as a platform where we could discuss the roots of queer writing and support writers who have been subject to censorship and suppression. We invited the festival curator, Joaquín García Martín, to give a lecture about the queer Madrid of 1920, and programmed two podcast episodes featuring work by Terenci Moix and Manuel Puig.

In a bid to build connections between British readers and queer literature written in Spanish and Catalan, and to promote the translation into English of this work, we invited editors from UK-based publishing houses to take part. And we also talked about queer Spanish books already translated into English, including the short-story collection *Here Be Icebergs* by Katya Adaui, published by Charco Press, or *Boulder*, the second book of Eva Baltasar’s trilogy, published by And Other Stories.

Most of us queer people grew up without the possibility of reading queer literature. We had very limited access to books that talked about our feelings, our ways of thinking, our stories, and our experience. So it is crucial that we keep writing, reading, discussing and promoting the books that tell our stories; those that convey our emotions and recount our everyday lives. And it is also crucial to ensure that new generations are never without those referents we once needed.

Queer literature can help us create a more accepting and loving society. But it cannot do so without the support of institutions. With their help we can make a diverse and pluralist society a reality.

*Jorge Garriz*
Jorge Garriz: Iván and Txema, your project, Odd Kiosk, which is based in Barcelona, exclusively sells and promotes queer literature. How did this idea come about and why the name Odd Kiosk?

Odd Kiosk: We’re two guys who grew up and live in Barcelona. Iván is a graphic designer, and Txema is an architect and interior designer, and we’ve been friends since we were sixteen. Back in May 2020, we were chatting and started fantasising about what we could do when the lockdown ended; we both wanted to do something different, make a change in our lives. Through newspaper articles, we were aware of the ‘kiosk crisis’ in Barcelona – whereby more than eighty newspaper and magazine kiosks had closed; and the local authorities had been trying to revive them in recent years, but unsuccessfully. Also, Iván has always been a lover of independent magazines and had his own magazine, Agapornis, which was distributed all over the world.

Bringing all of this together, we decided the essence of these kiosks should be maintained. Not all publications should be digital – there are independent magazines created with impressive editing, paper and content, and people should hold this valuable art in their hands. Art is culture and culture must be lived. It was very important for us that the project represented us. Both Iván and I are part of the LGTBIQ+ community, so we are very aware of the importance of visibility and moving towards a queer world that respects everyone. We thought it would be incredible for a business model that was formerly quite macho, with the kiosks being visited mostly by older, cis-heterosexual men, to take on this new idea and bring different generations together.

Regarding the name, we first thought of Odd Queer Kiosk, but we decided that being odd already had a lot of strength and represents much of what we want to convey. A business, a lifestyle, a way of acting, being, is not defined because you incorporate a word – ‘queer’ in this case – but because the space, the products, the philosophy, etc. breathe those values.

At the kiosk you not only sell literature but also illustrations and fanzines, and you also organise talks and exhibitions. Odd Kiosk works as a space for LGTBIQ+ culture. Was this always your intention?

The project has developed over time. I think this is a result of several factors, but mainly because we are on the street, and we talk a lot with people who come to the kiosk; we share our ideas and concerns, and they share their thoughts with us. We have also received suggestions via social media.

Iván and I are curious people, and we love to experiment, find new ways of communicating and expressing ourselves. Book signings, collective exhibitions, stands at several LGTBIQ+ fairs, and talks all are part of Odd. The group exhibition we held for the second anniversary left us in shock; the amount of love we received was great, and we never expected the huge crowd of people who came and the impact it created.

What has been the public response to Odd Kiosk, both from those who were already interested in queer culture and those whose first contact with this type of literature has been thanks to you?
The response has been rewarding from the beginning. We already knew some publishers, but the public has been telling us about other artists and publications. The content we sell changes all the time. And the response of people coming to the kiosk for the first time is wonderful; they come and ask about new queer terms and certain expressions or ask us to explain gender – sometimes we’ve had to explain what ‘queer’ means. At the same time, there’s the usual crowd: the older, cis straight man who comes looking for right-wing press, or the lady who buys gossip magazines. But when they arrive and find themselves in conversations that they don’t understand, they are often open to listening and learning. We are conscious we are not giving a lecture, but we know that what is being generated and discussed is very important, because it is creates understanding.

The first gay pride demonstration in Barcelona dates back to 1977 and was the first major LGBT event in Spain. The city has always been the most modern or cosmopolitan in the country. Do you think your project would be possible today in other Spanish cities?

We do think Odd Kiosk could exist in cities like Madrid or Bilbao, and also abroad – London or Paris. However, we still have a long way to go as a society – respect also needs to be found at smaller, more individual levels. And the reality is that in certain countries our lives are punishable – we can be imprisoned or killed. I am sure some of those feelings of repression can be felt today in towns just fifty kilometres from Madrid or Barcelona.

What projects do you have coming up in the future?

We are preparing a new exhibition in collaboration with another space, and we will have book signings in the coming months. And we will also be present at the Fire festival, an LGTBQI+ film festival in Barcelona. As well as this we are working on new merchandising, and a few other things that we can’t share with you right now ...
Madrid Will be Their Tomb takes place in two occupied buildings in Madrid: one the former headquarters of the NO-DO (a news organisation that produced propaganda during the Franco era), conquered by a small fascist group, and the other the ruins of an abandoned film studio, converted into the barracks of a Marxist-Leninist cell. The main premise of the novel is a love story between militants from each side, Santiago and Ramiro, but Duval does much more than this. We read of attacks on mosques, demonstrations and the use of internet forums as weapons of mass destruction. The future of the city, where naivety has been eradicated and love has become a privilege, is linked to the fate of these fringe political groups. At once discursive and devastating, Duval’s debut is imbued with the same traits as the era she portrays: it is sad, passionate and comes loaded with dire images.

Elizabeth Duval

From MADRID WILL BE THEIR TOMB
Forthcoming from Fum d’Estampa Press, September 2023
Translated by Alice Banks

Something grows in Madrid like a parasite, swelling its arteries with cement and burning in the air; beneath the plastic metro tunnels, the metro of colours, a poison meets another poison. They call the building that contains a world on the brink of explosion the Castillo. In the entrance there’s a food bank and a cloakroom; on the spacious second floor, a multitude of bedrooms and rooms; the third is divided into the meeting room, the library, the living room and the kitchen; on the fourth are more bedrooms and a mezzanine from which the whole territory can be gazed upon with a belligerent spirit. From the rooftop, the map stops and starts. Madrid is a filthy city bent on self-destruction: it contemplates itself in the mirrors of Sol’s metro station entrance – whale-like and almost cubist – and cracks its knuckles. The distribution of roofs is chaotic, the joints are dirty, and in each tiny fragment one can make out as many copper tones as the elements have been able to establish as they scorch existence, now burnt to a crisp. In its centre everything is compressed and squeezed between small houses – it’s a Manchego pueblo suffering from acromegaly – while in the north, where the four towers are, everything becomes something else. The rich districts of the city are those into which parallel worlds do not venture and, although the border between them is delicate, these flows between districts are but an illusion. All public spaces
There are bridges and streets that no one should have to travel at night; Madrid is a city of more than a million corpses slowly rotting as no one questions it, because whoever brings up the question sacrifices their own conscience.

are under threat of invasion, and none can escape its clutches. It is not as magnified as in Las Lomas, nor does it languish like on the great Parisian boulevards, but misery and opulence sometimes come to share a corner, with each being fully aware of the other's will to put an end to them. Every good Madrileño always thinks of the extermination of the social class to which they do not belong, with this thought being precisely that which distinguishes them. There are large, bona fide wastelands: territories that belong to some – for use – to later be bought by others – for money – but on which nothing has yet been built. They are ideal spaces for conspiracy. The Mercado de la Cebada has not yet been refurbished, nor has it been invaded by the kitsch and colourful winds declared by the movement of the clouds, lanterns and garlands. The people drink their cans of Mahou beer and drink, wait, live on, and then drink until they die. Crossing two streets and heading down the hill some metres, you reach Glorieta de Embajadores. Scattered in a spiral, here the abandoned wait for a car that will drag them away and deposit them; they wait for an act of kindness or a miracle. This neighbourhood still believes that the world is on the verge of change, but its hopes grow smaller day by day. There are those that have never even thought about it: those that enter and leave the Casa de Baños public baths with sores in their mouths and blood on their hands. They don’t have time to think, so they don’t; they don’t have enough money to live on, so they don’t. They hold up, as best as they can, and resist; they don’t dream. If they so wish, they enter the Casa de Baños and their whims are limited to the choice between hot or cold water, better facilities, or a little warmth. They didn’t vote in the last elections, and they face the next ones with indifference. They get involved in politics in the only way possible: by shutting up. Politics, like everything, consists of managing spaces in specific ways: an administration of the world and of the people. National governments can distance themselves from the specific and proceed thanks to abstraction while local management cannot afford such disconnections. Politics is the management of human loneliness and there are individuals who cling to political groups in order to find a cure for this
loneliness, like an addict or waster who needs another fix. The greater the feeling of doing something good for the surrounding community, the more importance the addict is filled with, and the more consistency and commitment they require. In Madrid, while the city turns on itself, some cultivate conspiracies of new, distinct worlds in their hearts: it is like this in the north of the city that plunders and is the same in the south that doubles over and grinds, even more so where both trenches meet. At half past four in the morning the doorways of Calle del Oso fill up with aluminium and heroin while the starry-eyed yearn. There are streets in Madrid that are full of shame, but none stoop lower than Gran Vía; death is ready to be received between the cars, and the boina of smog swells and gains strength. There are bridges and streets that no one should have to travel at night; Madrid is a city of more than a million corpses slowly rotting as no one questions it, because whoever brings up the question sacrifices their own conscience. But Madrid’s memory is more vibrant than arid and devastating: its malice is forgotten with the night, as crimes that no one wants to remember are forgotten. In Madrid, the century educates its youth in the greatest generational shame, instilling even its victories with nihilistic spirits; things are not, nor will be, nor could be otherwise, and when the sun sets on their anger, everything will continue to be in the hands of the same men, consumed by the same teeth.

Elizabeth Duval
Translated by Alice Banks
Pol Guasch: I always say that I didn’t decide to write this book: I found myself doing it, without having planned it ... Over time, I have realised that the difficult thing was to continue writing, to sustain a commitment to the words that made up the story. Getting there is not complicated, the difficult thing is to keep creating, to not give up.

The novel was written in Catalan because this is the language you speak in your daily life. It won the Premi Llibres Anagrama de Novel·la award, then it was translated into Spanish by Rita Da Costa, and this was a great success. You have participated in countless presentations throughout the peninsula, and the book has also been published in French. In 2024 it will be translated into Italian, German, Slovenian and will be published by Faber in English. *Napalm* has had and continues to have momentum, how about the fact that the novel is going to reach an even wider audience: British and North American readers?

I feel very lucky. When I write, I don’t think about readers. I discover them later, once the novel has been published. The fact that the number of readers is continually growing will never stop moving me. It is the most beautiful way to show that novels never grow old, and you can never ever be too late for a book.

How was the experience of winning an award?

It was how I got my name out there. Being published with Anagrama is probably a fundamental part: they are a great team that trusts you and your writing. They dedicate themselves to helping you promote the book, travelling beyond the typical cultural centres and hegemonic cultural spaces. It’s all about understanding that a book is not finished when you finish writing it, and that what you decide to do once it has been published is also a big part of what it means to write.

*Napalm al cor* is written in the first person, and is a collection of stories – each individually titled. We read letters written by the narrator to Boris, his lover, we see graphs where the days that pass are counted, we discover photographs or poems and we also read the narrator’s reflections. All of these elements intertwine to tell us a dystopian, science-fiction story that is not based on the present, but neither the past nor future. It is almost as if your novel is floating in time ...

I wanted to multiply the mediums of expression I used in the novel to multiply what could be said. There are places that words cannot reach, but photographs, for example, can. In relation to the question of time, it is true that I fled from the tyranny of the present, the nostalgic tendency of the past and the divinatory predictions of the future. I wanted the writing to have its own time and rhythm. I wanted the words to build a unique dimension that was self-referential, a world that each reader could complete with their own story.
I’d like to talk about the concept of escape, both physical and metaphorical, that you talk about in the book.

Escape deals with how the world shrinks when the language of the protagonists is lost. To be dispossessed of one’s language is to be dispossessed of one’s own world. There is a key moment in the novel that causes the characters to flee. After this it is necessary for the characters to recover their world, a world which they seem to have lost.

In the book you talk about repression, and create repressive atmospheres where language is despised, the dead are not buried, books are destroyed, men with shaved heads keep watch, and people paint the facades of houses with insults.

It has been said that the novel is an allegory for contemporary repressive acts. It is impossible for me to write today and ignore the extent to which existing is inevitably violent and difficult. I cannot write without taking into account that living is still, for most people in the world, a daily battle.

Nature is a key character in your novel; it is not only a space where the stories take place, but a poetic entity that helps the novel advance. Nature plays an important role for a whole new generation of Catalan writers. In your case, the mountain is a magical and also terrifying place, where atrocious deaths occur, bodies are devoured by birds, etc. Then, in the second part of the book, the sea represents dreams and longing.

There is the human animal and there is the non-human animal, and in addition everything that we consider inert landscape is, in reality, life. I was not interested in exploring what is human in the animal or what is animal in the human, because for me this difference does not exist. When I was writing the novel, I wondered what the difference was between the family that lived in a neighbourhood in the middle of nowhere and the pack of wolves that lived in the mountains. I wanted to explore relationships, coexistence, the complexity of life. I wanted to explore the idea that living in a community is always desirable, but at the same time it can bring conflict. I wanted to ask myself to what extent this existence is powerful precisely because it is conflictive.

Let’s talk about memory and legacy; Boris, one of the characters in the book, is a photographer and uses photos to explain what he cannot explain with words. Taking photographs allows him to keep the world in his pocket, so that people, events and places are not forgotten.

I was very interested in the question of inheritance. I wanted to make various types of inheritance coexist in the same story: the symbolic burden of all the things that have happened and that remain, silently, with us; the inheritance that runs through our blood; the inheritance of a language or a destroyed space. In what ways can we subvert the idea of inheritance and the place that one occupies in the world? The novel questions if it is possible to break the chain of inheritance. There are moments of liberation, there are moments of rupture, but also moments of union that are impossible to untie. Heredity is a fabric that is constantly being undone and rebuilt.

What is the significance of the title, *Napalm al cor* – ‘Napalm in Our Hearts’?

It brings together the Manichaean duality of passion and destruction. The explosion of love can save you, yes, but it can also destroy you. I think that the protagonist’s story deals with a slow and painful understanding of the double-edged sword of love and desire.
The 1978 Spanish Constitution has arguably been a turning point in recent history, as it granted official status to Basque, Catalan and Galician after the attempted imposition of Castilian monolingualism during Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975). This paved the way for the explicit support for these now official languages and their literary traditions – to a greater or lesser degree – by regional governments with devolved powers regarding culture and language policy. It cannot be ignored, however, that a few other languages (Amazige, Aragonese or Asturian, among others) still lack official recognition today.

Regardless of these efforts at a regional level, it was not until quite recently that the central Spanish government took, somewhat timidly, multilingualism as an inherent characteristic of Spain as a whole, and not just in relation to officially bilingual territories. In this regard, the participation of Spain as Guest of Honour 2022 at the strategically important Frankfurt Book Fair was seen by the Spanish government as a crucial opportunity to display Spain’s multilingualism and diverse literary heritage, leaving behind the monolithic portrait of the country offered three decades earlier, in Spain’s first Guest of Honour appearance in 1991. Indeed, ‘Bibliodiversity and Linguistic Plurality’ was one of the five strategic pillars of the Spanish Guest of Honour 2022 project, Spilling Creativity, highlighting that ‘Spain is synonymous with diversity. In the Spanish territory there are a variety of cultures and languages that enrich the literary offer’. A similar message was disseminated in the video campaign #CaminoAFrankfurt (literally, ‘#OnOurWayToFrankfurt’), which explicitly mentions that 24% of the Spanish literary publishing industry and 25% of the Spanish authors write in languages other than Spanish.
As a translation-studies scholar with expertise in publishing and translation in non-hegemonic cultures, I became interested in how multilingualism may shape Spain’s cultural diplomacy strategies, broadly understood as a government’s international outreach programme. In other words, given the significant role that literary translation plays in the internationalisation of cultural and publishing markets, I wanted to find out how multilingualism was being branded and promoted internationally to broaden the understanding of Spain’s linguistic and literary diversity abroad, not only reaching new audiences but also enabling new trading opportunities, especially with British publishers.

This is precisely the aim of my research project, Changing the Translation Landscape from Multilingual Spain: Cultural Diplomacy and the UK Publishing Industry, funded by the University of Warwick Arts and Humanities Impact Fund. More specifically, the project seeks to explore how multilingualism is materialised – and to what extent it is achieved – in recent cultural diplomacy strategies implemented by the Spanish Directorate-General of Books and Promotion of Reading at the Ministry of Culture, my main non-academic partner. My focus is on the internationalisation of the less-translated literatures of Spain, analysing how literary projects in languages other than Spanish are reflected in initiatives put in place in preparation for, during, and in the aftermath of the Frankfurt Book Fair 2022.

In my previous project, Stateless Cultures in Translation: the case of 21st-century Basque, Catalan and Galician literature in the UK, funded by the British Academy (2018–2021), I had examined patterns of creation, circulation and reception of these literatures in English translation between 2000 and 2018, engaging with regional publishers’ associations and policy-making institutions, namely the Institut Ramon Llull, Etxepare Institute, Xunta de Galicia and Generalitat Valenciana (the final workshop is available online). I found that foreign publishers interested in applying for grants to translate Basque, Catalan and Galician literature engaged almost exclusively with regional institutions, despite the Spanish Ministry of Culture’s explicit inclusion of all official languages in their yearly call for translation grants (for more information, see Castro and Linares 2022).¹

Expanding on that previous work, in my current study I have found that the same trend persists up to 2022, not only regarding the annual Ministry of Culture
translation grants scheme, but also when analysing the newly open calls for translation grants introduced in 2019, 2020 and 2021 by the public agency Acción Cultural Española (AC/E), aimed at orchestrating the promotion and internationalisation of Spain’s rich and plural artistic legacy. These three calls were part of an ambitious programme to increase the number of literary works from Spain available in English, German, French, Dutch and Italian translation before Frankfurt 2022. The approximately three million euros devoted to these translation support programmes made it possible to sell the translation rights for more than four hundred titles from Spain. With very few exceptions, however, it was mainly books, samples, illustration and anthologies originally published in Spanish that were put forward by foreign publishers and ultimately subsidised by AC/E. Despite the efforts to provide generous grants for the translation of minority languages, unfortunately, there were few Catalan, and even fewer Basque and Galician titles in the online translation rights catalogue, Books from Spain, hosted at the Frankfurt Rights website.

Having identified that more needs to be done to match the mission to increase the number of books from minority Spanish languages with its practical outcomes, my Changing the Translation Landscape from Multilingual Spain project has a crucial impact and public engagement component. Through a number of activities involving different stakeholders, my aim is three-fold: first, to influence Spanish government translation policy-making so that positive action initiatives are introduced to internationalise the 24% of the literary works published in languages other than Spanish, ultimately allowing government to better operationalise their cultural diplomacy strategy; second, to build capacity in the UK publishing industry, responding to their need to diversify the literatures made available to British readers; and last but not least, to improve British readers’ understandings of cultural and linguistic diversity in contemporary multilingual Spain. After all, readers deserve better. Stay tuned for further developments!

Olga Castro

TRANSLATING ASTURIAN

by ROBIN MUNBY

‘Escribo nuna lingerua que mui pocos falen, que munchos menos llen.’
‘I write in a language that few speak, and even fewer read.’
Xuan Bello, Hestoria Universal de Paniceiros

A few months ago, I was getting ready to pitch a novel in translation. It was a great book, and as soon as I finished it, I knew I wanted to try to get it published in English. So I prepared a sample, workshopped it, wrote up some other pitching materials, identified a few publishers I thought might be a good fit. I felt like I was making good progress. Next on my list was to see what grants might be available to support the cost of translation. For smaller, independent publishers – the kind of publishers most likely to publish a translation from a minorised language – grants are often a dealbreaker.

There was one in particular I had in mind: the translation grant from Acción Cultural Española, a Spanish state agency that supports cultural initiatives. The AC/E grant aims to help promote literature from Spain around the world. I knew it was open to work written in Spanish, Catalan, Galician, Basque. The novel was written in Asturian, so surely it would fit the bill. Asturias is in Spain, after all. I wrote to them to ask if a novel written in Asturian would be eligible for the grant. The answer was regrettably no.

In the grand scheme of things, this anecdote might seem a little trivial. It’s possible that the issue of Asturian’s eligibility had never even arisen before. But as I’ve learned in the relatively brief time I’ve spent exploring writing from the region, this is just one small example of a much wider set of barriers facing Asturian literature and the Asturian language in general.

Asturias is a small place, about a third the size of neighbouring Galicia, with just over a third of its population. As well as Spanish, Asturias is home to two regional languages, Asturian (asturianu) and Galician-Asturian, which is spoken in the west. Given that these languages exist in a complex state of diglossia with Spanish, precise figures for the number of speakers vary, but a 2017 study from the University of the Basque Country reported that around 25% of people in Asturias over the age of sixteen self-reported speaking the Asturian language.
as being able to understand, speak, read and write in Asturian. Xuan Bello isn’t wrong to say it’s a language with few speakers.

However, it’s not just the relatively smaller size of the Asturian language that sets it apart from Spain’s better-known minoritised languages. Asturian also has a different legal status. Spain’s 1978 constitution stated that the country’s regional languages could be recognised as co-official, alongside Spanish, in their respective autonomous communities. Galician, Basque and Catalan all have this co-official status. Asturian does not.

This accident of history – due partly to the stigma attached to it as a language spoken predominantly among poorer, rural communities – means that Asturian has not received anything like the same institutional support as these other languages. This has significant implications for Asturian-language education, and the ability of Asturian speakers to use the language in daily life. It also has its repercussions for Asturian literature.

When Xaime Martínez, winner of Spain’s 2019 Premio Nacional de Poesía Joven, made the decision not to write in Spanish anymore, only Asturian, he was well aware of what this would mean in practical terms. Not only would his potential readership be dramatically reduced, but his work would no longer be eligible for many national awards, including the prize he had just won. Nevertheless, Martínez, along with many others, writes in Asturian anyway.

These writers are at the forefront of the battle to keep the language alive, and many are actively involved in the growing campaign for it to be granted the official status it has missed out on for the last half-century. In the meantime, and despite all the obstacles they face, they are at the heart of a thriving literary scene.

As for me, I should mention that I live in Madrid, not Asturias. My exposure to Asturian has been, overwhelmingly, through literature. At first, a few poems and short stories, which I stumbled through with the help of an online dictionary during the fog of lockdown. This was enough to spark a serious desire to learn more.

Soon I was ordering book after book from publishers such as Trabe, Impronta, Radagast and Hoja de Lata. These are among the growing number publishing original work in Asturian in just about every genre you can think of, from poetry to detective novels, fantasy to literary fiction. Meanwhile, through Asturian-language journals like Formientu, I have discovered a generation of younger Asturian writers. As a reader, it was a thrill to discover a world of writing to which so few English speakers – in fact, few readers at all outside of Asturias – have access. As a literary translator, ditto.

When it comes to translating Asturian literature, I’m an absolute newcomer. Asturias, however, has
no shortage of translators. In 2021, the regional culture ministry set up the Casina de la Traducción in Cadavéu, a space to promote translation to and from Asturian, while the first Congress of Audiovisual Translation into Asturian was held at the end of last year in Łluarca. Not to mention the fact that many Asturian writers are themselves translators, helping to bring literature from around the world into their language.

Among them, a smaller number have also begun translating Asturian writing into English. *AsturPoetry*, for example, a project started by the poets Laura Marcos and Daniel García Granda, in collaboration with Fulbright Scholar Carinna Nikkel and a group of other native English speakers, aims to translate the work of fifty Asturian poets into English. Their recent pamphlet, published independently in a run of just thirty copies, and titled *AsturPoetry: a whimsical anthology of Asturian poetry in translation*, offers a wonderful introduction to several generations of Asturian poetry. This mini-anthology was one of many works exhibited at the Asturias stand at the 2022 Frankfurt Book Fair, the first time Asturian-language writing has been represented at the event.

Even from my peripheral position here in the Spanish capital, where our regional government would prefer to imagine that Madrid is Spain, and that languages like Basque, Catalan and Galician, let alone Asturian, don’t exist, I can sense that Asturian literature is on the cusp of something. It may be some time before Asturian achieves official status, but for now, writers like Xuan Bello, Laura Marcos, Xaime Martínez, Berta Piñán, Nicolás Bardio, Blanca Fernández Quintana, Francisco Álvarez, Vanessa Gutiérrez, Pablo Texón and Raquel Menéndez, and plenty more, keep writing books that are well worth reading. And for a translator like me, that’s what really matters.

*Robin Munby*
Asturian has some beautiful words: perguapes: fesoria, llambiotada, migayes ...

Don’t say in Spanish that the stars brillen, that birds vuelen, that you want to go de marcha; the stars rescamplen, birds esnalen and you’re off out de folixa, or a correla if you like.
If your stomach’s rumbling, don’t eat bogavante, almejes or rape, dine on bugre, amasueles pixín, you know how it is.
‘If you’re going outside, garra your zamarra!’ your nan’ll shout, always fretting over cold and frost.
Go to a chigre, drink sidra, freshly poured, or a fervinchu if you’re feeling off.
Argue with football fans,
Sporting or Uviéu,
doesn’t matter which,
there’s nothing can’t be sorted
over a few cachaes
and a game of tute.
Don’t run, go at tou meter
Don’t jump, blinca
take the easy route pelo segao
eat a bollu
at your xira
celebrate the amagüestu
or dance the xiringüelu...
But, above all, be at home in your llingua,
feel it,
immerse yourself in it
but, above all, speak it,
but, above all, fálala.
It’s divided into three songs: ‘The Killing’; ‘The Worms’; and ‘The He-Goat’. The main outline of the story concerns Marcellino, a subsistence farmer whose brother has cheated him out of his holding. In a rage, Marcellino strikes his brother and then goes on the run when he realises he has killed him. For a while he lives as an outlaw, hiding in the forest and deserted buildings, unwittingly becoming near-venerated as a holy figure, attracting media attention and teenage fans before ultimately being arrested. Beginning with Marcellino, the story ends with his mother, telling him how she met his father. In between this are numerous other stories, verses and comments from the narrators. As the words swoop backwards and forwards in time, we gradually learn about Marcellino’s childhood, his mother, who had magical powers, his father and brother, both unpleasant characters about whom less said the better, and the lives and happenings of the village and surrounding area, and the sun, the moon, relics, and plagues of worms. Structurally, it’s fascinating: one narrative thread is picked up, and then another, then another, and so on, before going back to the first thread and carrying on with it, rather like a braid with added coloured ribbons.

There are many elements to this novel that feel timeless – with most of the characters apparently living in fairly traditional ways, and many of the stories having a legend-like feel to them, it is easy to believe that you’re reading about things that happened long, long ago. But then, just as you start to imagine an
incident was set in the distant past, along comes a very specific reference that brings you to much more recent times: references to the Civil War, to Hitler, Princess Diana, and so on. A story about a plague of white worms dispelled by witchcraft sounds medieval – until there is a mention of the mayor calling SEPRONA, the nature protection service. One of the villagers declares Marcellino is a saint – on television. This is reflected by the translation too: linguistically, the text in Claire Wadie’s translation does an impressive balancing act between the language of fairy tales and legends and laconic modern prose, not to mention snatches of verse.

In some ways, *Of Saints and Miracles* feels like a song to the past. Marcellino is the last in a line of farmers, and it is clear that farming on a small scale has long ceased to be viable. Many of the characters are elderly, dwelling on the past. Meanwhile, young people have moved to the cities, and while the many empty buildings offer useful hiding places for a fugitive, they are a clear sign of a vanished way of life. The words, however, live on.

*Darcy Hurford*
Despite Texas having one of the largest African American populations in the US, people often felt, as Desirée Bela-Lobedde (Barcelona) writes in *Ser mujer negra en España*, ‘the need to dig down into my family tree’. Living in Spain these past eight years has afforded me the privilege of feeling foreign on my own terms, and I moved here in 2014 with the comfortable, naive notion that I might trail the likes of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and Audre Lorde across Europe. Who gets to be a Spanish writer? As a writer living in Spain, I also know that citizenship and nationality and cultural affinity are fluid categories, and many people are not afforded legal status despite being born or naturalised or choosing to live in a country. It’s helpful for me to notice writers who were born in Spain sharing the frustration I felt back home at not aligning with a narrow idea of Spain and its national literature. In engaging with Spain’s literary landscape, writers who occupy multiple identities are consistently denied recognition as Spanish. Yet Spain’s geographic proximity to the African continent (visible on a clear day from various points on Spain’s mainland) and colonial legacy means its multiplicity extends back hundreds and hundreds of years. Cervantes compared Seville to a chess board because of its racial diversity, and Spain’s connection to Equatorial Guinea (which
became independent in 1968) is often ignored. Bela-Lobedde elaborates: ‘even my grandparents were Spanish. And my great grandparents. And if we go all the way back to 1778 in my family’s lineage, all my ancestors were Spanish. This is what happens when a family is from Equatorial Guinea.’

In 2015, I began actively searching for more diversity in Spain’s literary scene. I first encountered the afro-centric bookshop United Minds as a booth at the Eat My Soul festival in Alicante, dedicated to ‘música afroamericana’. At the time, I didn’t know it was the first shop of its kind in Spain, but I spoke to co-founder Ken Province the next time I encountered them at the Afroconciencia festival in Madrid in 2016. I told him I was a translator looking for Black Spanish poets and writers. For that festival, they didn’t have poetry, but he recommended I start with España y los negros africanos by Inongo-vi-Makomè. I then read Visión del mundo de un africano desde ¿El Edén? where Makomè remembers his Madrid university requesting a translation of his academic records from Equatorial Guinea, despite the fact that they were already in Spanish. When asked about why I had so much trouble finding translations into English and books by Black Spanish writers, he noted that ‘Spain and Africa almost kissed, and yet...’

At the United Minds bookstore in Valencia, co-founder Deborah Ekoka spoke about the huge influence of English-language writing in translation here. In general, readers in Spain have greater access to writers like Ijeoma Oluo, Hanif Abdurraqib and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Especially for writers of colour, racialised writers from the US were often their first non-white points of reference. When Mbomío Rubio was in school, she says there was nobody, absolutely no one who looked like her, represented in Spanish literature classes. Nearly fifteen years later, Paloma Chen (Alicante), winner of the Premio Nacional de Poesía Viva, experienced the same lack of representation in her school in Valencia. When I spoke to Chen, she said although she initially recognised her story in writers from the US like Ocean Vuong, finding the graphic novel Gazpacho agridulce by Quan Zhou (Algeciras) was a huge turning point, and that the internet has made it possible for writers of colour in Spain to gain readership leading to more mainstream publication. While I’ve found more books published in the last five years, recent internet searches have shown it’s nearly impossible to find books in translation; when compiling recommendation lists for BookRiot, Leah Rachel von Essen wrote: ‘I should note that I attempted to make my list inclusive of authors of colour but struggled to find translated non-white authors writing in Spain.’ And: ‘I found it
difficult to find translated, available works by authors of colour’ in 2020 and 2021.

Here I should clarify some terminology between Spanish and English(es) as there are a range of preferences and fluid cultural contexts. Because of my own background as a mixed-race person with African heritage, I was initially interested in learning more about Black writers. I’ve since become interested in writers who identify as personas racializadas, who might be called writers of colo(u)r, BIPOC in the USA, and BAME in the UK. In Spain there are several young writers from the Chinese diaspora, many whose parents moved to Spain in the eighties and nineties. Chen produced a series of video interviews called Crecer en ‘un Chino’ in conversation with many creatives whose parents ran restaurants and shops, like Chenta Tsai Tseng, who wrote the memoir Arroz tres delicias: sexo, raza y género. Tseng developed his musical career under the stage name Putochinomaricón, taken from racist and homophobic slurs he endured growing up around Madrid.

I’ve struggled to articulate and understand the changes I’ve seen. Part of my timidity stems from arriving the very same year as places like United Minds and publishing house Ediciones Wanafrica (founded in Barcelona and specialising in African literature and African diaspora in Spain) came into existence. Granta en Español editor Valerie Miles spoke of demographic shifts in Granta’s new Best of Young Spanish-Language Novelists issue between the first list in 2010 and the new one in 2022, which moved from representing eight countries to thirteen countries and included representation from Africa for the first time (Estanislao Medina Huesca from Equatorial Guinea). Since my move, there’s been the festival Black Barcelona, stared in 2015, Afroconciencia in Madrid in 2016, and the inaugural Festival de Poesía Decolonial, which took place the first week of December 2022 in Bilbao. Chen organised the first Encuentro de la Diáspora China en España in 2019 and has since been asked to visit schools across the country. While it can often be reductive to speak in terms of literary booms, there is a brightness in the air that sparks of revival.

Layla Benitez-James
One afternoon, I had stayed at the furniture store. I went out for a while to play in front of the door. I played alone in front of the store, as it wasn’t my own familiar little village, and I had almost no friends. What’s more, the store had moved to another part of town, as it had expanded and needed a larger space, and, in that area, I hadn’t yet had time to make friends. A couple of kids passed by and yelled, ‘Black!’ at me. I froze. Now, when I think about it, it brings to mind the poem ‘Me gritaron negra’² by Victoria Santa Cruz. I have the feeling that many of the black children who have grown up in Spain like me have had the same feeling, as the poem recounts:

What is it to be black?
Black!
And I didn’t know the sad truth it hid.

I went into the store and told my mother that some kids had called me black. I’m unable to remember exactly what she told me, but I know she dismissed its importance, and made me feel misunderstood. I know she did this to keep it from hurting me, but to downplay its importance didn’t prevent me from being bothered by being called black the way they did. The feeling of discomfort...
The Riveter did not disappear. After that time, there were other instances. My reaction was always the same. It paralysed me. I didn’t know what to say. In fact, was there anything to say? And, if there was something to say, what was it? I didn’t know, so I didn’t react. What is it to be black?

Whatever it was, I felt bad. Now, when I reflect on it, I don’t know if it was the fact that they called me black that bothered me, or how they laughed at me as they said it. Or maybe the explosive mixture of both. Yes, definitely, that’s what was bothering me. Fucking awesome combo!

What should it be? How bad could it be for them to say it and laugh? ‘Black!’ They were mocking me. They were laughing at me.

I remember another situation like that. We’d left school for a cultural outing with the class. We were there, on the street, waiting. I think it was a theatrical performance, and there were many boys and girls from other schools in the city. Then, a voice, quickly joined by others, began to sing:

*I’m that little black boy from Africa tropical,*
*who sings, while he is farming, the song of Colacao.*

They stared at me while singing. They looked at me and laughed. And there I was, motionless. Just like the first time they called me ‘black’. Suddenly, my little classmates became my shield. They stepped in front of me, protecting me behind them, and began scolding the kids making fun of me. I don’t know what they shouted. I don’t even remember. I know that I remained paralysed, ashamed and humiliated. Of course, they were laughing at me, how else I was going to feel?

After that, my girlfriends continued to kick back those kids who insulted me whenever it happened again. A stream of shouted insults spurted from the girls’ mouths and never stopped until the aggressors stopped and backed off. Then they’d turn to me and say comforting words: ‘Don’t worry, Desi; we’ll defend you. We’ll defend you.’ And they always defended me. Always. In any outing with my class, at whatever shouting of ‘Black!’ that could be heard, my classmates jumped to my defence. Like a spring. Immediately and without hesitation.

Remembering it now and knowing what little girls we were, it seems to me a wonderful and moving display of sorority. It was my first experience of ‘if they mess with one of us, they mess with all of us’. They always materialised. They never kept quiet. They absolutely always responded to verbal aggressions. Always. *Sisterhood.*

Desirée Bela-Lobbede
Translated by Layla Benitez-James
Desencajada is the story of Daria Kovalenko Petrova, who was born in Ukraine in 1992 but moved to Spain with her family as a young girl. It is the reconstruction of a family story marked by migration and economic difficulties, and is the testimony of a generation in a permanent state of crisis. At the same time, Daria’s story houses the tale of two disappointments: that of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century and that of Western society in the twenty-first.

MARGARYTA YAKOYVENKO

From DESENCAJADA (‘Dislocated’) Penguin Random House, 2020
Introduced and translated by Robin Munby

‘It is an open secret among pilgrims and other theoreticians of this travelling life that you become addicted to the horizon’
Anne Carson, ‘Types of Water’

Her nails are pink. By my estimation, the thick layer of varnish starts about three millimetres from her cuticles. That means it’s at least two weeks since she last did them. Now the varnish is like a hardened sticker I feel like scraping off. ‘First. That by resolution of the General Directorate for Registries and Notary Affairs, dated twenty-second of the second, two thousand and nineteen, you are hereby granted Spanish citizenship by residence …’ I carry on staring at her nails as she holds the document between her face and mine to avoid looking at me. The skin on her hands is tanned and freckled, registering her body’s decay. Her voice is on autopilot. ‘Second. That for this citizenship to take effect and in accordance with article twenty-three of the Civil Code and article sixty-four of the Civil Registry Law, you swear allegiance to the King and obedience to the Constitution and laws of Spain …’ All I want is to scrape the varnish off with a spatula. Watch it crumple and flake away. Scratch the surface of her nail, turn it white. She lowers the document and narrows her brown eyes, enveloped in wrinkles. She has the eyes of a seagull. An angry seagull. ‘Yes, I swear.’ She purses her lips until two vertical lines appear in the skin between her nose and mouth. She holds the document in front of my face again and continues: ‘Third. That you hereby renounce your Ukrainian citizenship, pursuant to the provisions of article twenty-three “b” of the Civil Code.’ She stops speaking but doesn’t lower the sheet of paper. ‘Yes, I do,’ I say, staring
at the sheet. ‘Four. That with regard to your forename and surnames, you are to be registered as Daria Kovalenko Petrova.’ I’m caught completely off guard. In all my twenty-seven years I’ve only ever been Daria Kovalenko. My father is a Kovalenko. My mother has been a Kovalenko ever since she married him. Petrova isn’t a name I’ve ever associated with myself. The Spanish legal system has dredged through my family history to recover my mother’s maiden name – the name she abandoned in a Soviet registry office aged eighteen – and now it’s right here in my passport. ‘Yes,’ I manage to reply, before she hands me the document. ‘Sign.’ She taps twice on a blank space on the page with her thickly varnished nail. The pen is short of ink and leaves white gaps in the blue signature. I haven’t even finished signing when she slides her hand across the table and snatches the sheet from me. She gets up and walks over to the photocopier, returning a few moments later with a copy. Her lips still pursed. Still avoiding eye contact. She tosses the sheet down on the table. ‘That’s it,’ she says. ‘That’s it?’ Now her eyes focus on me. She looks at me like I’m an idiot and repeats: ‘T-h-a-t-s-i-t.’ ‘You mean, I’m Spanish now?’ I ask. ‘That’s what it says there.’ I sense from her expression that she begs to differ: Kovalenko Petrova? Who are you kidding? Citizen by residence my arse. More like sham Spanish. I take the sheet after glancing at my entry in the registry. Legally speaking, a Ukrainian has died and a Spaniard has been born in her place, complete with the two surnames. This time my birth comes with behavioural instructions. It’s a reward. I’ve sworn an oath. I’m loyal to the crown. I’ve shed my old nationality, completed my metamorphosis. ‘Okay, thanks,’ I answer. When I get up from my seat, she’s looking at her nails, tapping the varnish to see if it’s still as firm as her indifference. When she joined the civil service thirty years ago, she probably didn’t see herself ending up in a provincial registry office doling out citizenship to new Spaniards. I slip her contempt into the plastic wallet along with the document certifying my new identity. Daria Kovalenko Petrova. Born on the fifteenth of June nineteen ninety-two in Mariupol. Nationality: Spanish. I’ve lived in Spain for twenty years, but this civil servant with her disgusting nails doesn’t think I deserve her status. Not that I was expecting a congratulations or a you’ve done it! Now you can apply for this bullshit job too. All the same, I linger there a little longer by the table, hoping my inertia might coax out a drop of kindness. She notices and moves her hand even closer to her face to inspect her nails. She squints her shit-eating seagull eyes. Then her lips, loosening their death grip, begin to part. ‘Close the door on your way out.’
THE RIVETER
SPANISH POETRY

A SNAPSHOT OF POETRY IN SPAIN
by LAWRENCE SCHIMEL

It is far easier to introduce and review Spanish poetry already published in English translation, as my colleague Anna Blasiak is doing, than to try and cover everything not yet in English translation produced by a country with long histories and vibrant poetry scenes in multiple languages – and especially to do so in just a few pages. This impossible (or at least Herculean) task is further compounded by my own limitations – both in terms of which of the languages of Spain I can read and otherwise keep up with, and also in terms of which poets or books are actually available in translation (or whose publication is in the works) without my being aware of them.

So, rather than pretending to be comprehensive, I will instead provide a run-down of poetry anthologies, recent poetry awards, and finally poetry publishers – aiming for highlights that might make interesting points of discovery for those looking to explore more.

Anthologies

• La cuarta persona del plural, edited by Vicente Luis Mora (Vaso Roto) collects the work of twenty-two Spanish poets born between 1960 and 1980, covering a broad array of aesthetics and styles.
• 13, antología da poesía gallega próxima, edited by María Xesús Nogueira Pereira (Chán de Pólvora/ Papeles Mínimos) is a bilingual Galician/Castilian anthology of new voices in Galician poetry.
• For Basque, one might look to the online anthology (available in Basque with translations into various languages, including English): https://basquepoetry.eus/.
• The majority of recent anthologies of Catalan poetry have been thematic (a volume of women poets writing about trees, for instance), rather than overviews like the above-mentioned. But of particular note is Amors sense casa, edited by Sebastià Portell i Clar (Angle Editorial), an anthology of Catalan LGBTQ poetry.
• *Campo de plumas*, edited by Jesús Castro Yáñez (Sushi Books) is an anthology of LGBTQ poetry in Galician from antiquity to today, from Sappho to Mary Jean Chan, although the majority of the poets are in translation.

**Awards**

• The National Poetry Prize, awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Culture, has been won by women poets over the past five years: Aurora Luque in 2022 for *Un número finito de veranos* (Castilian), Miren Agur Meabe in 2021 for *Nola gorde erratu-sak kolkoan* (Basque), Olga Novo in 2020 for *Feliz Idade* (Galician), Pilar Pallarès in 2019 for *Tempo fósil* (Castilian), and Antònia Vicens in 2018 for *Tots els cavalls* (Catalan).

• Ismael Ramos won the Miguel Hernández National Prize for Young Poets for his work *Lixeiro* (Galician).

• The Premio Adonáis, founded in 1943, for poets under thirty-five, was won in 2022 by Luis Escavy, with Lola Tórtola and Irene Domínguez as the runners-up. In 2021 the winner was Nuria Ortega Riba, with Andrés María García Cuevas and Félix Moyano Casiano as the runners-up.

• Non-binary poet Ángelo Néstore (who long-time readers might remember from *The Queer Riveter*) won the fifth Espasa Poetry Prize for their collection *Deseo de ser árbol* (Castillian).

**Publishing**

The veteran houses, such as Visor, Hiperión, Pre-Textos and Tusquets, continue to publish regularly, even if usually only prize-winners (often subsidised by an external funder) or established poets, especially volumes of their selected or collected poems. There are also established mid-sized houses, such as Renacimiento, Valparaíso, La Bella Varsovia, Huerga y Fierro and Isla de Silitolá, with active poetry catalogues of new volumes by new and mid-list voices.

Vaso Roto is one of these mid-sized publishing projects, founded in 2005 in Barcelona, although now based in Madrid, with a strong catalogue of poetry written in Spanish (from Spain as well as Latin America) as well as works in translation (Anne Carson, Elizabeth Bishop, Charles Simic, etc.). Their Spanish poets include Julieta Varela, Clara Janés, Chantal Maillard, and María Ángeles Pérez López, who is included in this magazine.

Performance poetry is the bailiwick of Ya lo dijo Casimiro Parker and sister publishing house Harpo Libros, and also of Arrebato Libros, which in addition to publishing is also a bookstore and organises an annual poetry festival, Poetas, which is part of the Versopolis European Poetry Festival platform.

Letraversal is a young project, headed by the poets Ángelo Néstore and María Eloy-García, with a strong focus on marginalised (queer, racialised, etc.) and experimental voices, primarily in Spanish, although with a few recent
translations of work by poets like Billy-Ray Belcourt, Matilda Södergran and Giovanna Cristina Vivinetto. Their Spanish poets include Paloma Chen, Cristian Alcaraz and Elizabeth Duval.

Bala Perdida publishes poetry, fiction and essays. They publish both anthologies (including an annual series of poets from across the Mediterranean) and individual collections from a mix of new voices, like Be Gómez, to established poets, like Esther Ramón or José Manuel Lucía Megías, as well as an Iraqi poet writing in Castilian, Abdul Hadi Sadoun, included here.

Sonámbulos is another newish house, based in Granada, devoted to works of poetry and art/photography. Their Spanish poets include Javier Bozalongo, Rosa Ortega Sánchez, and Dalia Alonso.

Torremozas is a publishing house founded in 1982 devoted to women writers, now with over a thousand titles published, the vast majority of which are poetry (or prose by/related to women poets).

EME (Escritura de Mujeres en Español) is a more-recent imprint, founded in 2019 and edited by the poet Nuria Ruiz de Viñaspre, which publishes women poets.

Most of the Galician imprints of the major commercial publishers, like Galaxia and Xerais, have poetry collections. Independent Espiral Maior, founded in 1991, is not exclusively devoted to poetry but is best-known for its poetry collections and publishes many of the prize-winners of various poetry competitions sponsored by Galician associations or town councils.

Positivas, founded thirty-three years ago, is another well-established independent, whose imprint Diversos offers a strong catalogue of Galician poets (Suso Díaz, María Reimóndez, Paula Carballeira) and international poets in Galician translation (Wisława Szymborska, Walt Whitman).

Chan de Pólvora is a young Galician publisher founded in 2016, publishing poets like veterans María do Cebreiro and Fran Alonso, as well as new voices.

I believe Asturian, Basque and Catalan publishing are being covered in greater depth elsewhere within this issue, so I’ll just briefly mention a few Catalan publishers (large and small) with poetry lists: Proa, 3 i 4, Quaderns Crema, Eumo, Viena, Labreu, Grup62, Godall/Cadup, SD Edicions, Bromera and Cossetania.
Come alone

silent thirst

offer me
your bitter wealth of flesh
I am the animal you hush

Beatriz Miralles de Imperial
Translated by Layla Benitez-James
We would play word chain
PRETEND-ENDING
to make long trips short
PILOT-LOWER
to brighten dull evenings
OPEN-PENCIL
the previous syllable must begin the new word
DELIGHT-LIGHTNING
it’s quite simple
BEFORE-FOREST
and I find a shortcut
WATER-TERRAIN
a vestige of eternity
URGENT-GENTLE
repeating to yourself
MAMA-MAMA
an echoing syllable
MAMA-MAMA
forever returning
MAMA-MAMA
As if nothing happened since then.

As if I saw you centuries ago when you were not so small and things so large. As if we had found one another in another life, playing at searching among the exchange markets of intuition. As if one greets the other affectionately, the other to the one also endearingly. As if you were I, and I you, eternally. As if nothing happened, and everything suddenly happens. And as if I applaud from afar. And you point out to me the same game as always. As if nothing happened since then.

As if everything arose from an idea, from a purified, inescapable idea, and you expand, before my dazzling eyes. Now you are not just another story, but here I am with all the enthusiasm of the body, I come to cast a glance from which you hide in the lineage of your root, searching for memories which the earth exalts in the shortcuts of the journey.

Your eyes yearned for ancient adventures, while I feel as if your landscapes will slowly be foreseen, the colourless illusions beneath my blocked and clouded gaze.

You
a secret idea of a secret tree;
a secret tree from a seed of a not-secret idea;
You
an image
elongated
and my tongue
a cord
resting
on
your air
of
signs.

Abdul Hadi Sadoun
Translated by Lawrence Schimel

Poem from his first collection written in Spanish, Todos escriben sobre el amor menos tú (Bala Perdida). Unpublished. Printed by permission of author and translator.
I linger, now,
before the mirror,
searching for the traces of your hands,
the paths that, so often,
Your fingers have travelled.

I linger, now,
before the mirror
and I know that,
in silence,
you await me.

I am shadow then,
but there is no breeze,
and on my lips the winters accumulate.

I am shadow then,
about to shout.

Agnès Agboton
Translated by Lawrence Schimel

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I’ve always appreciated the chlorine smell of pools. There might be pleasanter scents, I admit, but for me no better exists.

Technical, precise, spotless, bitter. Blue, chemical, penetrating.

When I say I like the smell of chlorine everyone thinks I’m crazy, not you.

We’ve both realised it, our bodies naked and wet, the paradisiacal smell of chlorine on our tight swim trunks (not so naked, then). It’s wrapped in damp cloth of delights, upon our shivering flesh, the chloride blue of the pool.

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Rikardo Arregi
Translated by Angel Erro and Lawrence Schimel

In 2022, Arregi and Erro were the winners of the Vitoria-Gasteiz Prize for the best translation into Basque of a children’s book for their joint translation of Pintxo eta pitxitxi by Lawrence Schimel. Unpublished. Published by permission of author & translators.
Straps that hold suspended words
to the inflexible wheel of the mouth,
 fetters of saying and not saying.

Rust violates the gums, the dark vaults of thirst.
In their terror the vowels sicken.
There is dirty light in the apron of time,
flies buzzing around the bazaars of rage,
lumps of neglect in each litre of milk
in freezers where the poverty line creeps up.

Forms of purification, heart-hardeners,
butchers’ hooks that bleed rosy lunged animals dry
—one is Eastern and the other Western—.
Each animal meets its suffering,
ever innocent in its suffering.
And with their dense and sticky drop
the earth fertilises the apple trees,
the fruit that is equally innocent.

Nonetheless, when chewing and writing
letters of air on its gravely wounded body,
the mouth leaves behind a trail of seeds.
Omnivorous and feverish, it chooses
also to beg compassion from the metals,
to ask the fetters to liberate
their prey with a slash of the dagger
that flashes like an unexpected sun.
May the straps set loose the words.
May the metals have compassion.
Miren Agur Meabe writes books for adults and children, and is the only writer from the Basque Country to be awarded Spain’s national poetry prize. With several poetry collections, a novel and short stories under her belt, her latest and fifth poetry collection is part of a triptych with the novel A Glass Eye and the short-story collection Burning Bones (both published in English by Parthian). The short stories can definitely be read as prose poems – the heartbeat of a poet is quite evident here.

Among seemingly simple, descriptive sentences, every now and then something quite different shimmers and draws the attention: ‘It’s almost as if rats shape-shift their bodies into smoke when they smell food.’ Or: ‘Taking the palm tree from the house or a crown from a saint amounts to the same thing.’

Miren Agur Meabe writes about quiet worlds with tenderness and attention to detail, in a very sensual, almost synaesthetic way. She describes houses with iron gates, ceramic tiles decorated with geometric patterns, sandstone, wooden balustrades, brass basins, navy pinafores and white socks, crumbling wells and old palm trees whose roots are wreaking havoc on the house next to them. At times, Meabe turns the volume up and suddenly attacks the reader, as when rats and their blood explode from the crown of the palm tree being trimmed or when the swamp-smelling gardener with missing teeth abuses the young protagonist by the well.

The stories are not told in chronological order, they are more like a cubist painting, showing an object simultaneously from different perspectives. But together they form a consistent narrative about the universe of the protagonist, about her relationships with others, about the past and the present.

Anna Blasiak
Poetry often means experimenting, with the language itself, with its textures, its structure and building blocks. Mario Martín Gijón does exactly this in his highly inventive and very playful work. He takes the language apart, separating it into its most fundamental elements and then reassembling it, both in straightforward and not-so-straightforward ways, creating mirrors, duplications, adding strata with slightly changed tinges, or sometimes with a strong contrast, and reassembling broken words. Just read/listen to this:

\[ I \text{ sense / the world (t/b)urn /(w)r(i/ot)ting.} \]

The name of the game is simultaneity and ambiguity. It’s about unpicking, getting the layers out in the open, about seeing. This intricate mosaic is created and re-created through the use of brackets, slashes, dashes and other punctuation marks – their role being to point to the cracks and ruptures, to deepen them, to make them more visible, but also to heal them, to join and re-join, like a strong render. A bit like the Japanese art of kintsugi. The old and the new meet and coexist. The puzzle is constructed in the process, but it’s the reader’s choice what they actually see in the final image. As with all good poetry – it’s very much up to the reader ...

As I was reading this ingenious translation, I kept kicking myself for not being able to penetrate the original Spanish. I kept asking myself how closely the English versions reflected the originals. The translator, Terence Dooley, explains his process in the introduction to the collection. He admits that he made a decision to remain faithful to the meanings created by the poet while ‘completely displacing and reconstructing his effects’. Words had to ‘be found in English (often elsewhere in the poem) capable of the dislocations and relocations, the Russian doll/Rubik cube effect, his method demands’. I think the end result in English is not only skilful, but truly gifted.

One more thing is bugging me, though – how do you read such poetry at live events? How does Gijón read his poetry in Spanish?
and Dooley his translations in English? How do they mark the simultaneity and ambiguity so strongly built into the verse?

As a reader of poetry, and as someone who can’t read Spanish, I can’t wait to see and hear more of Gijón’s poetry translated into English. And if Terence Dooley is the translator, that’s even better.

Anna Blasiak

MANUEL VILAS
HEAVEN

TRANSLATED BY JAMES WOMACK
CARCANET, 2020

REVIEWED BY ANNA BLASIAK

Manuel Vilas writes in long, sweeping phrases. Whether each piece is technically speaking a poem or a short story – the book contains both forms, and the main difference seems to be the presence or absence of line breaks – he uses the same cadence, the same width of breath, the same surging sentences, which often burst through the limit of a single line. It can be almost lulling – almost, because every now and then Vilas breaks the rolling rhythm and pinches the reader (or just this reader), grabbing your attention. He does it by suddenly becoming literal and turning things inside out. For example:

life itself lost the will to live, and is sick, / bedridden in a nursing home.

Storytelling runs in Vilas’s veins. His stories display attention to detail. He writes about various places (Paris, Biarritz, Costa Daurada, Lourdes, Mallorca, Cadaqués, Zaragoza, Barcelona – in one of the poems the protagonist calls himself the ‘gentleman of the peninsula’), about hotels and travelling, about sex on the boat or on the beach, about death, about food and drink (a lot!), about breathalysers and suicide, about climate change and cremation. His verse is frequented by the likes of Robert Graves and Chopin (‘and his slut of a girlfriend’), Pablo Neruda and Delacroix, Goya and Dostoyevsky, Aristotle and Ivan the Terrible. There is an occasional spark of humour too:

I have seen the spiritual essence of man’s life
dragging itself like an old cripple

www.eurolitnetwork.com/the-riveter/
down the street
in hope’s very own Chinatown

It’s always summer in the
golden world he describes/creates,
it’s either July or August, ‘the
everal cloud of summer’. It’s a
world seen through the eyes of a
lone, restless, conflicted man,
always on the lookout for some kind
of connection. Everything that Vilas
describes the reader can see, smell,
touch, taste. That’s quite a skill. And
although I tend to feel more
comfortable with poetry that is
more concise, more ‘stingy’ with its
words, I have to say that I did allow
myself to be taken away by Vilas, I
believed his world. For most of the
time.

I went out to the city, wet and
sad and in love with nothing.
I went through streets and bars,
shops and promenades.
In love with nobody, damp,
suddenly sober.
The light was arrogant, like a
diva in the sky.

Anna Blasiak

SPANISH POETRY
ANTHOLOGIES

REVIEWED BY ANNA BLASIAK

While exploring recently published English translations of poetry from Spain –
of which there are a fair amount, both in the UK and on the other side of the
Atlantic – I was struck by the great number of anthologies published this side
of the millennium. It was a delicious surprise made even better by the number
translated from minority languages (Catalan, Basque and Galician). There’s also
an anthology of female poets, and one of LGBT poets. All – or at least quite a few
– important boxes nicely ticked. Admittedly some of those books are not very
recent, but luckily poetry doesn’t age fast (even if poets themselves do).

The variety of themes, voices and
forms in the five anthologies dis-
cussed here is dizzying. And exciting.
Reading an anthology is a very
different experience from reading
a collection by one poet, so the
variety and polytonality I enjoyed
when reading for this review was
multiplied by five.

The question I asked myself
before reading all five anthologies
was this: will there be a unifying
thread visible in each book? Will there be something the poets included in each volume have in common?

The answer is: yes and no. Of course LGBT poets write about the LGBT experience, about queer love (and sex), and the social context for it, but they go far beyond that. Lawrence Schimel writes: ‘Everything I know about cooking I learned from a friend / who told me: the secret to cooking is to never let / the food smell your fear.’ While Maria Castrejón declares, tongue in cheek, that: ‘Women can read this poem for free, / and it will be half-priced for men / if they read it with a woman, / even on Saturdays and Sundays, / also in afternoon hours.’

The theme of a/the woman’s experience is, of course, also strongly present in the Ten Contemporary Spanish Women Poets. Pilar Adón writes about a mother-daughter relationship and describes her own grandmother, starting with (unsentimental) tenderness, progressing to the harsh reality of ageing, and ending on a shocking (though climactic) note:

we tied her to a chair
so she wouldn’t throw herself on the floor and crawl outside, away from the old people lying on tables, with only old age in common. Lounging on fake sofas, swaddled in ersatz blankets, and false smiles, with nails like claws, mouths shut like traps, surrounded by blue and sugary familiar voices bringing breakfast in the morning. [...] She loved her house, my grandma. It’s yours for 30,000 euros

Adón’s poems also include difficult themes such as suicide; while Graciela Baquero creates a surreal story of sisterhood, Mercedes Cebrián ventures into the political and María Eloy-García into the scientific. Elena Medel says that she belongs ‘to a race of women with biodegradable / hearts’. And that ‘every woman / marries her house’. And Miriam Reyes advocates that ‘prepositions don’t always fit / they should have elast-icated corners / like undersheets / to stay in place / beneath the body’s paroxysms’.

Similarly, for the minority languages collections, there are themes specific to those groups and languages and their histories and political situations, but there is a lot more too. Gemma Gorga writes in Catalan:

A woman is ironing, making the most of the last of the light from the window. She gathers the garments on the ironing-board, dips her fingers lightly in cold water, sprinkles the clothes,
pressing them with the triangle of steam, 
and her eyelashes fill with vapour.  

[...] 
In the night, in the darkness, she 
goes on ironing, 
she irons the flowers, the tiles in 
the house, 
the eyelids that don’t know how to close, 
this daily fear of ours.

And Miren Agur Meabe, 
reviewed in this Riveter, creates 
strong images using a very simple 
language, and often writes about 
sex as experienced by a woman – 
not a specifically Basque 
experience, you’ll agree. In fact, this 
theme creates a strong bridge to the 
other anthologies discussed here, especially the anthologies of women poets and of LGBT poets.

If pushed to name something that unifies all five anthologies, 
I would say it’s the diversity and the 
variety, the one-of-it’s-ownness of each voice, who at the same time 
belong to a shared space. And I’d 
also point to the good sprinkling of humour the anthologies share, as 
well as the richness of the cultural references (from the Bible and 
myths to other European poetic traditions and philosophies). I hope 
to see more of this wonderful wealth of poetry coming from Spain 
into English translation.

Anna Blasiak

Ten Contemporary Spanish Women Poets, translated from Spanish and edited by Terence Dooley, Shearsman Books, 2020
Correspondences: An Anthology of Contemporary Spanish LGBT Poetry, translated from Spanish by Lawrence Schimel, Egales/Desatada, 2017
The Cádiz coast, southern Spain. As I write these lines, the winter solstice is just a few hours away. Mist hangs around throughout the morning, but by midday there is warm and comfortable sunshine, the heat that cats and the elderly go out in search of, life-giving. The Atlantic Ocean is a tapestry, a veneer over which longitudinal waves roll, breaking left to right over the reef, smooth and tempting for surfers. With the summer tourists gone, the hotels and restaurants closed for the season, the beach is a prize. I feel a prick of selfishness, of territoriality, no one else must know about this place; for the cold months, at least, let it be our refuge. The white light, the open shore, just a few travellers stretching inside their campers. There’s a military base not far from here, and a bit beyond that, the mouth of a harbour where cargo ships arrive ad infinitum. The beach, this dehumanised place, is an exception, a sliver that lets you pretend that the rest doesn’t matter, that it barely exists.
The conquest of Mexico is over, and Juan de Toñanes is just one of the many inglorious soldiers living a small existence on the land he helped conquer. When he receives one last mission, to hunt down a renegade Indian who’s called the Padre and who preaches a dangerous heresy, he realises it may be his last chance to create the future he’s always dreamed of. But as he moves deep into the unexplored northern territory, hot on the Padre’s trail, Juan discovers the traces of a man who appears to be, in fact, a prophet destined to transform his own time and even eras to come. Not Even the Dead is the story of a pursuit that transcends territories and centuries on a hallucinatory journey from 1500s colonial Mexico to Trump’s Border Wall.

JUAN GÓMEZ BáRCENA

From NOT EVEN THE DEAD
Forthcoming from Open Letter Books, July 2023
Translated by Katie Whittemore

The settlement lies a half day’s ride away, at the base of a rock formation Juan has the sense of having camped beneath just days before. He looks at the stony stretches of land glittering in the sun and the craggy cliffs that rising in precarious balancing acts against the horizon and the rocky spires that look like scales on a gigantic dragon, if one believed in such things, and he feels that each image touches him intimately, in the way we are touched by the features of a face we have already contemplated. And yet, he’s never been here before: how could he have been, and not seen the hundred or two hundred huts scattered across the slope. A pack of children scamper around him, laughing and shoving. Every so often, they pluck up the courage to come close enough to the stranger to touch a fold of his chamois cape, or one of his extraordinarily white hands, only to run off again, laughing and howling like coyote pups.

In the shade of the huts, young girls naked to the waist mend fabric or conscientiously chew mesquite pods. They glance up from their labour shyly, as if they hadn’t intended to. Juan slows in order to observe their faces, their breasts bathed in sunlight. He is surprised to find beautiful women and common women and ugly women, too, just like in all regions of the world.

‘All virgins. All María,’ murmurs one of the old men who accompanies him, pride and reverence in his voice.

Then they lead him inside one of the huts and offer him mouthfuls of strange and not entirely unpleasant delicacies.

‘You lots of bread, lots of wine. Lots of bread, wine, bread, wine, bread, wine, bread...’
One by one they point to all the bowls, the unfired clay pitchers. They call all the liquid concoctions wine and all the solids bread, whether referring to red beans, venison steaks, or boiled prickly pear. And so Juan eats bread of many shapes and flavours and drinks a warm, thick wine.

‘Lots of bread, lots of wine ... Good bread and wine ...’

The Indians know the words bread and wine and good. Now and again Juan hears these words surface in their chatter, the words almost unrecognisable in their mouths, intermixed with many more unfamiliar words, words that sound less human and more like the bellowing of beasts. He attempts to follow the flow of their conversation, skipping from one Spanish word to another, like the individual stones that permit the crossing of a river. He’s not certain of having managed. He hears or believes he hears the word Hell, and Heaven and kingdom and God. The word love. The word Christian. That word, above all. Because they are Christians, they say or seem to say, and they repeat it three times, beating their chests with open palms. Christians, not savages.

Savage, for some reason, is the word they pronounce best.

‘Who taught you all this?’

‘Padre ... Padre teaches.’

But they have questions, too. They speak clumsily, like birds attempting to reproduce the human voice, and their hands are always poised to bolster their meaning, at a slight delay after their words. They want to know where he has come from, and to indicate where they pretend to scan the horizon in all directions. They want to know if he too is a disciple of their Padre, and with the word disciple they remain standing and with Padre, they kneel. They want to know his name, the name his mother chose for him, and to accompany mother, they mime breasts and briefly cradle the air. And when Juan finally replies, when they hear Juan say the name Juan, they bend docilely once more to kiss his hands, his shirttails, the tips of his boots.

‘Padre, Padre,’ they repeat.

Juan gently moves them off with a light shake of his hand. Yes: he is also named Juan. And he is there to find their Padre, at any cost. Can they help him? Might they be able to tell him where he is hiding?

They are silent for a moment, as if weighing his words. Finally, an old man, his body covered in shell and piercings, steps forward. He points north.

‘House,’ he says. ‘House of God.’

‘Take me there.’

Juan Gómez Bárcena
Translated by Katie Whittemore
The Riveter

The Latam Boom

The Riveter Features

Uriz’s List: Spain and the Latam Boom

by Juan Cruz

Zaragoza, Spain, was the location of the recent passing of Francisco (Paco) Uriz, a great Spanish-language poet and implacable observer of the contributions made by Spanish and Hispanic American writers to twentieth-century and twenty-first-century world literature. He lived in Sweden for three decades and, from Stockholm, bore witness to the Swedish Academy’s growing interest in Hispanic literatures after Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude burst onto the global literary scene.

When ‘Gabo’ won the Nobel, the prize had already been bestowed on one Latin American writer, who combined tradition with continental-style metaphor – the Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias. However, Pablo Neruda still hadn’t received his Nobel. By the early 1980s, a more cosmopolitan form of writing, which broke with tradition, had escaped its small circle of readers in Latin America and had begun to be accepted in locales far from the balmy lands discovered, in part, by Christopher Columbus. Of the writers Harss included in his prophetic book of interviews, García Márquez was the first to receive the Swedish Academy’s honour. Julio Cortázar,

One Hundred Years of Solitude shook the reading universe, and its avid reception prompted the Swedes to pay attention to what had already been called the ‘boom’ in Latin American literature when, in the mid-1960s, Luis Harss’s formidable book of interviews with Latin American writers, Los nuestros (literally, ‘our guys’) appeared in the United States as Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin American Writers. Harss’s collection of interviews rallied interest in such names as Julio Cortázar, Juan Carlos Onetti, Juan Rulfo, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes. (Lamentably, it wasn’t deemed necessary to include women on lists of authors at the time, an omission that was to be rectified in the future.) Eventually, this interest found its way to Stockholm and culminated in García Márquez’s 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature.
whose *Hopscotch* was a cult novel for Europeans, British, and Americans, never did receive such fortunate revindication, nor did Carlos Fuentes, who, when his friend Gabo received the award, already considered himself a winner.

As Harss predicted, the Boom only grew louder as Hispanic American literature produced more strong writers. This steady accumulation of talent prolonged the phenomenon (and prolongs it still) beyond that group of friends – the *cuates* – who were first brought together in *Los nuestros*. As I mentioned above, there were no women – none – on those early Boom lists, something that in contemporary life is seen as both an obvious and monumental mistake, but such was the world that omitted, until much, much later, writers like Gioconda Belli and Cristina Peri Rossi, along with many others to come as Hispanic American writing extended its global reach, among them: Isabel Allende, Margo Glantz, Selva Almada, Samanta Schweblin, Karina Sainz Borgo, Nona Fernández, Liliana Colanzi and Claudia Piñeiro. To this considerable list of names, I would like to add at least: Mariana Enríquez, Cristina Rivera Garza, Lina Meruane, Pilar Quintana and Mónica Ojeda.

Of course, in the 1960s, Harss’s list simply couldn’t have included writers of such decisive power as Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Héctor Abad Faciolince, Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Roberto Bolaño, Emiliano Monge, Rodrigo Fresán and Juan Villoro, because they were just children – but, alongside the plethora of female writers, they would become a familiar presence on the peninsula, with Spanish readers and writers alert to their great quality, making a list, in this case comprised of women and men, that would be a fair match for the team initially selected for Harss’s important book.

In Spain back in the 1980s, however, precisely when Gabo won the Nobel, the ongoing Boom, which was continuing to deliver Latin American greats, was beginning to be viewed by the locals as competition. And as a result there was the impression, corroborated by reality, that Spain was turning its back on *Los nuestros* and the imperious novelty of those literatures, by then no longer considered as a torrent of Latin American sighs and shouting. The bodies of writing from Hispanic America were unique literatures that really could not be lumped together, except by language, of course; yet the Spanish writers of the time couldn’t digest this competition and thus interest in Latin American writing reached an impasse that was never quite mean-spirited but rather, in my view, ignorant.

Several miracles put an end to that apathy. Among them, persistence in publishing Latin American writers on the part of the
Spanish publisher Alfaguara, and subsequently other presses, which convinced those of us living in Spain that our taste for the homegrown was excessive – and exclusionary. And while it had been difficult to bring Latin American writers together in Spain – and on the opposite side of the Atlantic – the festivals changed that. The Hay Festival, was particularly important in this regard, with its British roots and Hispanic American inclinations, thanks in great part to its current director, Cristina Fuentes, who is from the Canary Islands – in other words, mediohispanicamericanana. Hay drew Spanish and Hispanic American writers together and eventually turned what had been a utopian vision into a reality of trans-Atlantic exchanges, with the Spanish language now a common glue of Hispanic literatures.

The journalistic magnum opus in which Mario Vargas Llosa, the other Boom Nobel winner, collects everything he ever wrote about other writers (El fuego de la imaginación, Alfaguara), is today’s best reflection of the bounteousness first established in Los nuestros. Now ‘los nuestros’ are legion, and they come from all over; including Spain, where so many Latin Americans writers reside, their relationship to language and the imaginary by now fully hybrid, yet fortunately they are not indifferent to their own origins.

Conscious of the tendency to consider the Nobel Prizes awarded to Vargas Llosa and Gabo when evaluating the power the Boom might still exert on Swedish Academy members, I asked Paco Uriz some time ago about the potential candidacy of current Latin American names for that honour. ‘César Aira? Yes, but he isn’t that well known, I don’t think. Bolaño is dead. Fuentes wasn’t among the chosen and he died, too. The same with José Emilio Pacheco … There was a lot of talk about Bolaño, but, look, he died.’

Our friend Uriz, so insightful, so full of wisdom until the end, concluded his list with this sentence: ‘Now, don’t hold me to it, but I don’t think there is a writer or novelist on here – if we consider Vargas Llosa the benchmark – that could win the Nobel.’

But the Nobel isn’t awarded, generally speaking, before rank is consolidated. And if one regards the current talent pool, then we must recognise that the original Boom has some formidable heirs. The Boom, friends, is again among us, although the names, and the ages, have changed.

Juan Cruz
The Colombian film director, Sergio Cabrera, is in Barcelona for a retrospective of his work. It’s a hard time for him: his father, famous actor Fausto Cabrera, has just died; his marriage is in crisis; and his home country has rejected peace agreements that might have ended more than fifty years of war. In the course of a few intense days, as his films are on exhibit, Sergio recalls the events that marked his family’s unusual and dramatic lives: especially his father’s, his sister Marianella’s and his own.

JUAN GABRIEL VÁSQUEZ

From RETROSPETIVE
Maclehose Press, 2020
Translated by Anne McLean

According to what he told me himself, Sergio Cabrera had been in Lisbon for three days when he got the phone call telling him of his father’s accident. The call reached him in the Praça do Império Gardens, a park with wide paved paths where his daughter Amalia, who was then five years old, was trying to tame the rebellious bicycle she’d just been given. Sergio was sitting beside Silvia on a stone bench, but at that moment he had to walk over to the park gates, as if the proximity of another person would prevent him from concentrating on the details of what had happened. Apparently, Fausto Cabrera had been in his apartment in Bogotá, reading the newspaper on the sofa in the living room, when it occurred to him that the door might not be locked properly, and he stood up suddenly and fainted. Nayibe, his second wife, who had followed him to ask him to sit back down and not to worry, the door was locked and bolted, caught Fausto in her arms before he hit the floor. She immediately called their daughter Lina, who was spending a few days in Madrid, and it was Lina who was now giving Sergio the news.

‘She says the ambulance is on its way,’ she told him. ‘What should we do?’

‘Wait,’ Sergio said. ‘Everything’s going to be alright.’

But he didn’t really believe it. Although Fausto had always enjoyed enviable good health and the strength of someone twenty years younger, it was also true that he’d recently turned ninety-two, and at that age everything is more serious: illnesses are more threatening and accidents more harmful. He was still getting up at five in the morning for his sessions of t’ai chi ch’uan, but with ever dwindling energy, making increasingly
noticeable concessions to the erosion of his own body. Since he hadn’t lost a sliver of his lucidity, that irritated him enormously. Living with him, from the little Sergio knew, had become tense and difficult, so nobody had objected when he announced that he was going on a trip to Beijing and Shanghai. It was a three-month visit to places where he’d always been happy, and on which his old students from the Foreign Languages Institute would pay him a series of homages: what could go wrong? Yes, taking such a long trip at such an advanced age might not seem like the most prudent idea, but nobody had ever convinced Fausto Cabrera not to do something he’d already set his mind on. So he went to China, received the homages and came back to Colombia in time to celebrate his birthday. And now, a few weeks after returning from the other side of the world, he’d had a fall in the space between the sofa and the front door of his own home, and was clinging to life.

It was not just any life, it has to be said. Fausto Cabrera was a renowned figure of whom theatre people (but also television and cinema people) spoke with the respect due to pioneers, in spite of being always surrounded by controversy and as many enemies as friends. He’d been the first to use the Stanislavsky method to interpret poems, not just to perform dramatic characters; he had founded experimental theatre schools in Medellín and Bogotá, and once dared to turn the Santamaría bullring into a stage for a Molière play. At the end of the 1940s he made radio programmes that changed the way people understood poetry, and then, when television arrived in Colombia, he was one of the first directors of television drama and one of its most acclaimed actors. Later, in more agitated times, he used his reputation in the dramatic arts as a cover for his engagement in Colombian communism, and that earned him the hatred of many until those years began to be forgotten. Younger generations remembered him mostly for a role he’d played in a film: *The Strategy of the Snail*, Sergio’s best-known film, and perhaps the one that had brought him the most satisfaction, in which Fausto played Jacinto, a Spanish anarchist who leads a small popular revolution in the heart of Bogotá. He embodied him with such naturalness, and seemed so comfortable
in the skin of his character, that Sergio, when talking about his father’s role in the film, usually summed it up this way:

‘He was just playing himself.’

Now, coming out of the park with Silvia at his side, walking between the Jerónimos Monastery and the waters of the Tagus, watching Amalia who, up ahead, was struggling with the handlebars of her bicycle, Sergio wondered if he shouldn’t have made more of an effort to visit him more frequently. It wouldn’t have been easy, in any case, since in his own life two things were happening that consumed his time and attention, and barely left him space for other preoccupations. On the one hand, there was a television series; on the other, the attempt to save his marriage. The series told the story of the journalist Jaime Garzón, his friend and accomplice, whose brilliant political satire programmes ended in 1999, the morning he was shot dead by right-wing hit men while waiting for a traffic light to change to green. The marriage, for its part, was going off the rails, and the reasons were not clear to either Sergio or his wife. Silvia was Portuguese and twenty-six years younger than him; they’d met in 2007, in Madrid, and they’d managed to live happily together for several years in Bogotá, until something stopped working the way it should. But what was it? Although they hadn’t figured it out with certainty, separation seemed the best possible option, or the least damaging, and Silvia travelled to Lisbon not as one returning to her country and her language, but as if she were coming home to shelter from a storm.

Juan Gabriel Vásquez
Translated by Anne McClean

Retrospective by Juan Gabriel Vásquez, translated from the Spanish by Anne McLean, is now out in hardback (MacLehose Press, £20).
OFF-HAND AND COMPULSIVE – THE ROBERTO BOLAÑO ENIGMA

by JONATHAN GIBBS

At the time of his death in Barcelona in July 2003, from liver failure, Roberto Bolaño had not seen a word of his work translated into English, though his stature in the Spanish-reading world was pretty much assured. The first English translation of his work – by Chris Andrews, of By Night in Chile – would come later that same year, but it was not until 2007, with the publication of The Savage Detectives, in a translation by Natasha Wimmer, that the anglophone world really woke up to him.

And when it woke up, it woke up with a bang. Over the next three years the number of Bolaño’s books available in English jumped from four to eleven. There were obvious standouts – The Savage Detectives itself, and the monumental 2666 – but these were carried in on a tidal wave of other titles, a mix of that previously published in Spanish and other work – retrieved, it seemed, from the writer’s bottom drawer. Now, that tide having receded, it feels safe to look again at this writer’s work.

Bolaño’s fiction is characterised by a defiantly anti-literary narrative style that seems both off-hand and compulsive. No fancy words, no careful shaping of the material, just the onward-rolling relation of a series of events that range from the mundane to the noirishly threatening. It rattles along, discarding much of what it invents as it proceeds. And when it ends, it often ends very abruptly. His characters are usually penniless poets, or feckless drifters, or both – it can be hard to tell the difference. Violence haunts the stories, either the political violence of the European and Latin American dictatorships, or the more localised violence of dangerous men – often, though not always, against women.

But where to start? Those two big books still demand reading. 2666 is a kind of masterpiece, but one to be approached with caution. Consider its nine hundred pages, and its five sections, which Bolaño wanted published separately (to maximise income for his wife and children) but that his family, rightly, kept together, and consider also how thinly and belatedly those sections are connected. It moves through literary satire, boredom, nervous tension, and Lynchian nightmare before arriving, after 350 pages, at its hellish centre: ‘The Part about the Crimes’ is a catalogue of murderous violence against women in the fictional Mexican border town of Santa Teresa, based on Ciudad Juárez, at one point the most violent city in

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the world. The reader who successfully makes their way through this seemingly endless expanse of horror finds a still more weird conclusion in an account of the life of a mysterious German novelist, Benno von Archimboldi, which begins in Nazi Germany and somehow ends up back in Santa Teresa. The book as a whole is baroque, phantasmagorical, relentlessly and sometimes pointlessly inventive, and not the best place for a new reader to start.

Why not start, then, as many of us did, with *The Savage Detectives*? Well, again, it’s long, at nearly six hundred pages, and, like *2666*, over-long – and deliberately so. But it showcases the author’s themes in a warmer light: his ironic-romantic view of the artistic life (all those randy young poets staying up all night talking about poetry before going home and having ridiculous sex all day), and his love-hate affair with Latin America: its political violence that breeds revolt, that revolt that breeds art, and that art that breeds joy. Bolaño himself said about the novel: ‘it reflects a kind of generational defeat, and the happiness of a generation.’ Hold on to that paradox as you read it, and the book still glows.

No other books by Bolaño reached the same lengths as this pair, and they certainly benefit from the cumulative effect of all that weirdness stacking up. Of his other, shorter books, the one that best achieves the same power is *By Night in Chile*, a dramatic monologue by a dying Chilean priest-cum-man-of-letters that slides from literary soirees to the terrors of Nazism and the Pinochet dictatorship, and shows how closely these things can be entwined. Its desperate, climactic statement – ‘This is how literature is made’ – will have you looking at the books on your shelves with unaccustomed disquiet.

The short stories are another way in. The *Last Evenings on Earth* collection admirably ticks most of Bolaño’s boxes. The title story is a brilliant, grimy tale of sex, alcohol and mounting dread that reads like it could slot perfectly into *2666*, while ‘Sensini’ showcases his dedication to the world of minor and marginal writers, and ‘Anne Moore’s Life’ his appetite for perpetual narrative motion. It’s all here, but parcelled out. The novels benefit from having all these elements thrown into the same, baggy mix.

The other titles available should probably be left for further exploration after you’ve tried these central works. Bolaño reworked and reused characters, themes and situations – as he didn’t consider himself a true novelist, you are free to interpret his literary blind spots and failings as either radical integrity, or frustrating and negligent. Thus *Amulet* successfully expands a section from *The Savage Detectives* to give a fuller account of Auxilio Lacouture, the ‘Mother of...
Mexican Poetry’, who hides out in a university-building bathroom in 1968 while outside student protestors face down the Mexican army. Likewise, Distant Star is based on an entry from Nazi Literature in the Americas, a Borgesian biographical dictionary of invented fascistic American writers.

The noirish prose poem-novella Antwerp is as fragmentary as 2666, but far more opaque, while the The Skating Rink, his first published novel, is a sometimes charmingly low-key murder mystery played out around a Costa Brava campsite. It’s fair to say that anyone choosing one of these books – or Monsieur Pain or The Third Reich – as their first experience of Bolaño would wonder what all the fuss was about. In response, Bolaño would probably offer a defiant shrug. He doesn’t make it easy, but taking up that challenge can make for a hugely rewarding reading experience.

Jonathan Gibbs

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By Night in Chile, translated by Chris Andrews, Vintage, 2009
The Savage Detectives, translated by Natasha Wimmer Picador, 2009
2666, translated by Natasha Wimmer, Picador, 2009
Nazi Literature in the Americas, translated by Natasha Wimmer, Picador, 2010
The Third Reich, translated by Natasha Wimmer, Picador, 2012
Look at the clock. Watch the big hand move until it reaches the twelve. Squeal because it’s time to go. Run to the family minivan and climb inside. Dodge your brothers’ punches. Ignore them saying fag, gay, queer boy, sailor boy, little fairy, big fairy, pillow biter, pretty boy, pansy, poof, nancy, sissy, pussy, wuss, dick licker, powder puff, homo, queenie until they get bored. Lift your head and feel the wind change, become purer, prettier. Smell the sea in the distance and smile. Dodge more punches. Listen once again to why are you like that, stand up for yourself like a man, what are you doing with your hand. Hug your grandmother. Eat dead fish so fresh its eyes are still gleaming. Run to the beach. Run like a dog. Run and run as fast as your legs will carry you. Dive into the water. Squeal with delight. Bathe in the foam. Sink into the deep. Hold your breath for so long that you feel like air is no longer necessary. Go down deeper and deeper. Touch the starfish, the coral, the sea turtles grazing like armoured cows. Beg for a little more time in the water. Give in. Dry off. Eat lunch. Take a nap. Wake up red from sun and heat. Visit the town market and the circus. Go into one of the tents and see the bigheaded kid for the first time. Scrunch your nose at the smell of shit. Cover your mouth with your handkerchief. Hold back the bile that pushes the undigested fish up into your chest and makes your eyes water. Look at the boy with the big head, get a good look. Be seen by him. Ask what’s wrong with that boy, why do they have that boy in there with the pigs and the pigs’ mess, where are that boy’s parents. Grip your mom’s hand in fear. Break the bigheaded boy’s gaze. Look back to see him crying, holding out his little arms to the people who stare at him. Repress a gag when a pig first sniffs the bigheaded boy and then shits on him. Shoo away the flies. Hear Mom say poor thing, and Dad say that’s brutal, and your brothers, fucking disgusting monster. Insist that someone has to help him, to call the police, to get him out of there. Shout. Understand that no one, none of the adults who stare at the bigheaded boy in disgust and hold their noses, are going to do anything. Hide your tears as you see that the bigheaded boy, after crying and wailing, is falling asleep with a filthy thumb stuck in his mouth. Feel fury over being
too small to wade through the muck to pick him up, give him a bath and then something to eat. Refuse to leave. Get punched on the shoulder by one of your brothers and pushed by the other. Listen again the whole way home to the string of insults that starts with fag. Have a dream in which the pigs eat the bigheaded kid, then the dead boy screams at you, asking why you didn’t do anything, chasing you down the beach, wobbling on ridiculously small legs compared to the size of his head, a crab-boy. Wake up drenched in sweat and trembling. Dodge your brothers’ punches as they ask if the little girl was scared by his nightmare. Watch them do an impression of what they think a scared little girl looks like. Remain silent. Help your grandmother make breakfast. Collect the eggs among swirls of feathers and angry clucking. Thank your grandmother for the coins she gives you. Eat breakfast studying your family members’ faces. Watch the bread vanish into your brothers’ jowls within seconds. See Dad’s forehead, always so wrinkled, behind the newspaper. See the sad way Mom holds her teacup. Exchange a look with your grandmother who knows, who understands, who says I love you without saying a word. Run to town. Find the drunk who guards the entrance to the circus. Drop your grandmother’s coins into his grimy palm. Recoil at his black-toothed, depraved smile, his tongue hanging out, his quick hand that tries to touch you. Enter the pigsty where the bigheaded boy sleeps. Shoo away the pigs, who shuffle off oinking. Pick him up in your arms. Feel surprised by how little he weighs. Hold him against your body. Smile. Run past the drunk, who shouts where are you taking the monster, if you want to do something to him you have to pay extra. Re-emerge in the sunshine with the bigheaded boy in your arms like a proud mother with her baby. Leave behind the circus and the drunk man shouting for someone to stop the little fag who’s stealing the bigheaded boy. Run to the cliff whispering that everything will be all right, that you’re both going to be all right, that it’s all over, all that horror, the pigs, the disgusted looks, the punches, the fear. Reach the edge with the circus people at your heels, shouting what are you doing, stupid fag. Look at the bigheaded boy smiling with his toothless mouth and his little gleaming fish eyes and without speaking he calls you brother, brother. Jump into the sea. Feel the fall as your legs entwine and merge into one, transforming, quickly and violently, into a tail that slaps the water, churning up an iridescent spume, blinding in its beauty. 

Maria Fernanda Ampuero
Translated by Frances Riddle
KRISTIN ADDIS is a copy editor and one of only a few translators who work directly from Basque into English. She has spent many years in the Basque Country and currently resides in Iowa with her family. Her latest translation is Mothers Don’t, by Katixa Agirre, published in 2022 by 3TimesRebel Press.

AGNÈS AGBOTON was born in Benin but has been living in Spain for over thirty years. She writes in her mother tongue, Gun, as well as in both Spanish and Catalan. Her collected poems, Voice of the Two Shores, translated into English by Lawrence Schimel, won a PEN Translates Award and is a Poetry Society Translation Selection.

KATIXA AGIRRE made her debut in Basque literature with the short-story collections Sua falta zaigu and Habitat. After publishing numerous works of children’s literature, she published her first novel, Atertu arte Itxaron, in 2015, followed in 2018 by Ameke ez dute (translated into English as Mother’s Don’t by Kristen Addis). Her latest novel, Berriz Zentauro was published in September 2022.

MIREN AGUR MEABE writes books for adults and children. In the course of her career she has received the Critics’ Prize twice for her poetry collections, and the Euskadi Prize for YA literature on three occasions. In 2020, she published her fifth poetry collection, Nola gorde errautsa kolkoan (Holding Ashes Close to the Heart) – which forms a triptych with A Glass Eye and Burning Bones. It won the 2021 Spanish National Poetry Award.

MANUEL ASTUR is a writer, poet and editor. He was editor of the Madrid cultural magazine Arto! and has published stories, a collection of poems and several novels and essays. In 2017 he was chosen as one of the ‘Ten most interesting new voices from the European continent’ within the framework of the Literary Europe Live project.

BERNARDO ATXAGA is a Basque author who, with his wife, Asun Garikano, usually translates his own work into Spanish. His novels, short stories, poems and songs have won him awards both at home and abroad, including the 2019 Premio Nacional de las Letras Españolas for his entire body of work. His books have been translated into thirty-two languages.

BORJA BAGUNYÀ is a Catalan writer and university professor. He wrote his first book of short stories, Apunts per al retrat d’una Ciutat in 2004, and in 2007 he won the Premi Mercè Rodoreda de contes i narracions for Defensa pròpia. In 2011 he published Plantes d’Interior and in 2021 Els angles morts, which won the 2022 Critics’ Award in the category of Catalan narrative.

EVA BALTASAR is a Catalan poet and novelist. She has written ten award-winning collections of poetry, and her first novel, Permafrost, was published in Catalan in 2018 and translated into English by Julia Sanches in 2021. Boulder was published in 2020, followed by Mamut, in 2022.
ALICE BANKS is a literary translator from Spanish and French based in Madrid. Alice’s most recent translation is Deranged As I Am, by Ali Zamir. She is currently working on a translation of Elizabeth Duval’s novel Madrid será la tumba, which will be published in autumn 2023.

ELIA BARCELÓ is a Spanish writer and academic working in Austria as a professor of Spanish literature. She writes science-fiction novels and works for children and has won a number of awards. Her novel Heart of Tango was published in an English translation in 2010.

SARA BARQUINERO is a Spanish writer whose first novel Terminal was published in 2020. She has won numerous prizes and her latest novel, Estaré sola y sin fiesta, was published in 2021. She is currently working on a project entitled Los escorpiones, which will be made up of five novels.

DESRÉE BELA-LOBBEDE is a Spanish writer, anti-racist activist, and feminist. She works as a columnist for Público and is the author of the book Ser mujer Negra en España. She defines herself as a promoter of Afro identity from an ‘experiential’ point of view and claims the empowerment of Afro women through personal image.

LAYLA BENITEZ-JAMES is the author of the prize-winning God Suspected My Heart Was a Geode, but He Had To Make Sure. A 2022 NEA fellow in translation and 2022/23 National Book Critics Circle Fellow, more of her work is published in Poetry Magazine, Black Femme Collective, and Poetry London.

AINA BESTARD is an author and illustrator from Mallorca. She is the creator of the series What is hidden, translated into more than fifteen languages. She has designed for brands like Camper, Women’s Secret, Vialis and Chispum. Her book Naixements Bestials won the Premio Crítica Serra d’Or.

LIAM BISHOP is a writer from the UK. His work has been published in the Irish Times, LA Review of Books, Asymptote and many more publications. He also interviews writers on the Rippling Pages podcast.


ROBERTO BOLAÑO was a Chilean novelist, short-story writer, poet and essayist. In 1999, Bolaño won the Premio Rómulo Gallegos for his novel Los detectives salvajes, and in 2008 he was posthumously awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction for his novel 2666. The New York Times described him as ‘the most significant Latin American literary voice of his generation’.

ARITZ BRANTON graduated in English and History from the University of Salford. He worked as a translator in the UK before moving to the Basque Country. He works in Basque and English as a translator and university lecturer.

PAUL BURKE writes reviews, interviews, articles and features for the eurolitnetwork.com, crimefictionlover.com and crimetime.co.uk. He is editor and presenter of the Crime Time FM podcast and is a judge for the CWA Historical Dagger.

PETER BUSH is an award-winning translator from Catalan, French, Spanish and Portuguese. He has translated a number of prominent Catalan writers into English including Josep Pla, Mercè Rodoreda and Joan Sales. He has won numerous awards for his translations from Catalan, including the Premi Ramon Llull and La Creu de Sant Jordi.

ANA CABALEIRO is a Galician journalist and writer. In 2017 she published her first book, Sapos e sereas, through which she draws attention to the absurdity of gender stereotypes. In 2018 she won the Premio García Barros and La Creu de Sant Jordi.

NICK CAISTOR is a translator, journalist and author. He has translated more than forty books of fiction from Spanish, Portuguese and French, including works by Paulo Coelho, Eduardo Mendoza and Juan Marsé. He has twice received the Valle-Inclán prize for translation from Spanish. He regularly contributes to the TLS and the Guardian.
WEST CAMEL is a writer, reviewer and editor. He edited Dalkey Archive’s Best European Fiction 2015 and is currently working for Orenda Books. He has written two novels, Attend and Fall. He is the editor of the Riveter magazine and the #RivetingReviews for the European Literature Network.

HARKAITZ CANO is a Basque poet, translator and writer of short stories, novels, poetry, chronicles and children’s and youth literature. He has won the Imajina Eza Euskadi award, the Donostia Hiria award and the Ignacio Aldecoa Award. He has won the Euskadi Literature Award twice: in 2005 for Belarraren ahoa and in 2012 for Tiwist.

OLGA CASTRO is Associate Professor in Translation Studies and Deputy Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Warwick. She is also programme director of the MA Translation and Cultures. Her main research areas include feminist translation studies, women writers in translation, and translation in minoritised and non-hegemonic cultures.

RAQUEL CATALINA studied fine arts in Madrid and a master’s in illustration in Valencia, where she currently lives. She has participated in several international exhibitions.

CAMILO JOSÉ CELA was born in Galicia and during the Spanish Civil War fought on the Nationalist side and briefly held a position as a Francoist censor. His debut novel, published in 1942, was chastised for its immorality, and his novel The Hive was banned in Spain. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1989.

JAVIER CERCAS is a Spanish writer, professor of Spanish literature and columnist for the newspaper El País. He has published twelve works of fiction, for which he has won many awards. His 2001 novel, Soldados de Salamina, has been translated into more than thirty languages and won eleven prizes, including The Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.

RAFAEL CHIRBES was born near Valencia. He wrote nine novels and received the National Prize for Literature and the Critics Prize for On the Edge. He was also a prolific critic and journalist, writing on literature, travel and food. He is considered one of Spain’s greatest writers of the twenty-first century.

JACKY COLLINS currently teaches Spanish and Latin American Studies at the University of Stirling. Her research, publications and teaching span Spanish cultures, queer popular culture, and international crime fictions. She is a member of the Editorial Board of Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture and is Director of the Newcastle Noir crime-fiction festival.

MELCÍOR COMES is a Catalan writer. After graduating in law, he published his first novel, L’aire i el món in 2003, which won the Ciudad de Elche prize. His next novel, L’estupor que us espera, won the Premi Documenta, and his fourth work, El llibre dels plaers immensos won the Premi Josep Pila.

RACHEL CORDASCO has a PhD in literary studies and founded the website SFínTranslation.com in 2016. She regularly writes reviews for World Literature Today and Strange Horizons, and translates Italian speculative fiction. Her book Out of This World was published by the University of Illinois Press.

ANNA CROWE is a poet and translator and the author of four poetry collections. She has translated three of Joan Margarit’s collections, Anna Aguilar-Amañ’s Música i escorbut and, with Iolanda Pelegrí, an anthology of Catalan poetry. She is co-founder of StAnza, the Scottish international poetry festival.

JUAN CRUZ is a Spanish journalist. In 1976 he co-founded El País and began to work as a correspondent in London. He was also editor-in-chief of culture, and opinion for the newspaper. In 1972 he wrote his first novel, Crónica de la nada hecha pedazos, which won the Premio Benito Pérez Armas. He has written over forty books.

BERTA DÁVILA is a Galician poet and novelist. She recently received the Premio Xerais de Novela prize for Os seres queridos, which 3TimesRebelPress will publish in 2023 as Loved Ones, translated by Jacob Rogers. Dávila runs the independent publishing house Rodolfo e Priscila.

SIMON DEEFHOLTS has translated literary works from Spanish into English across a range of genres with his wife, Kathryn Phillips-Miles. Previous publications include translations of Wolf Moon by Julio Llamazares, Inventing Love by José Ovejero and Nona’s Room by Cristina Fernández Cubas. For Dedalus they have edited and translated Take Six: Spanish Women Writers.
**AIXA DE LA CRUZ** is a Spanish writer of Basque origin. She is the author of the novels *Cuando fuimos los mejores* and *De música ligera*, both of which were shortlisted for the Premio Euskadi de Literatura. Cruz has also published a book of short stories and contributed to various fiction anthologies.

**TERENCE DOOLEY**’s *The why of it* came out recently with Argent Press. He is a prolific translator of contemporary Spanish poetry, most recently of two anthologies from Shearsman: *Ten Contemporary Spanish Women Poets and Streets Where to Walk Is to Embark*, edited by Eduardo Moga and featuring Spanish poets on London.

**KEVIN GERRY DUNN** is a Spanish/English literary translator and ghostwriter. His work has been published by the New Press, Columbia University Press, Amazon Crossing and Editorial RM, and in 2020 he received a PEN/Heim Grant and an English PEN Award for his translation of *Easy Reading* by Cristina Morales.

**JONATHAN DUNNE** is a translator of Galician literature. He studied Classical Philology at the University of Oxford and has published translations of books written in Bulgarian, Catalan, Galician and Spanish. He has translated authors such as Manuel Rivas, Carme Riera and Enrique Vila-Matas. He also runs the publishing house Small Stations Press.

**ELIZABETH DUVAL** debuted with her memoir, *Reina*, followed by the long poem *Exception* and the essay *Després de lo trans*. Her first fictional work, *Madrid serà la tumba*, has been praised by critics and readers alike and is forthcoming in English as *Madrid Will be Their Tomb* with Fum d’Estampa Press, translated by Alice Banks.

**MAX EASTERMAN** spent thirty-five years as a BBC broadcaster. He was a lecturer in journalism for seventeen years at Huddersfield University and is today a translator, media trainer with Sounds Right, jazz musician and reviewer.

**ROBERT ELMS** is a writer, broadcaster, and Sony-Award-winning radio show host for BBC London. He is a former columnist for *NME* and *The Face*, and author of *Spain: A Portrait after the General*, and of *The Way We Wore*, a book about fashion’s relationship with music and youth culture.

**ÁNGEL ERRO** is a translator, author and poet. He has translated collections of poems by Emily Dickinson and Rikardo Arregi, works by Grégoire Bouiller, and *Walden* by H.D. Thoreau. He writes a daily column for the newspaper *Berria*. Translations of his poetry have appeared in various English-language publications.

**ROSIE EYRE** is a literary translator working from French and Spanish. Her most recent translation is Julie Guinand’s *Survivor*. Her translation of Guillaume Musso’s *The Stranger in the Seine* is forthcoming with Orion Books. She has been collaborating with the European Literature Network since 2020 and coordinates the Stephen Spender Prize for poetry in translation.

**AGUSTÍN FERMÁNDEZ MALLO** is a qualified physicist. His *Nocilla Trilogy*, published between 2006 and 2009, brought about an important shift in contemporary Spanish writing and paved the way for the birth of a new generation of authors, known as the ‘Nocilla Generation’.

**DYMPHNA FLYNN** is development producer at Pier Productions and was a judge on the Costa Book Awards 2021. She reviews new fiction on Instagram @dymphnaflynn. Dymphna was a producer at BBC Arts for over twenty years.

**BARRY FORSHAW** is a writer, broadcaster and journalist specialising in crime writing. His books include *Euro Noir* and *Crime Fiction: A Reader’s Guide*. He reviews for many newspapers and magazines, edits *Crime Time*, and is a ‘talking head’ for the ITV Crime Thriller author profiles.

**XESÚS FRAGA** is a Galician journalist and writer. He studied journalism at the University of Salamanca, and is a journalist for *La Voz de Galicia*. He has published a number of books across various genres and in 2021 he received the Premio Nacional de Narrativa for his book *Virtudes (e misterios)*.

**MIRANDA FRANCE** is a writer and translator, and Consultant Editor for Spain, Portugal and Latin America at the *Times Literary Supplement*.

**AMAIA GABANTXO** is a literary translator, writer and reviewer. Her work has appeared in various journals and anthologies. She has been awarded a Wingate Scholarship, received the Jury’s Commendation in the BCLA Literary Translation Competition and been short-listed for the Asham Short Story Prize.
ANA GALVAÑ is a Spanish illustrator and comic artist. She has worked for publications such as El País, Público, The New Yorker, The New York Times and The Appeal. Her comics have been published by various national and international publishers.

JEREMY GARBER is a Pacific Northwest bookseller.

JORGE GARRIZ is the founding director of Romancero Books and director of the Festival of Queer Spanish Literature in London. He was a film programmer for Fringe! Queer Film & Arts Fest and a member of Strange Perfume, a queer collective of artists and thinkers who curated the Strange Perfume Queer Book Art Fair.

CLARE GAUNT is a translator of non-fiction children’s books including Majestic Mountains: Discover Earth’s Mighty Peaks and Majestic Oceans: Discover the World Beneath the Waves by Mia Cassany and illustrated by Marcos Navarro.

JONATHAN GIBBS is a writer, critic and academic. He has published two novels, Randall, or the Painted Grape, and The Large Door, Randall, or the Painted Grape was longlisted for the Desmond Elliot Prize and shortlisted for the Figaro Prix du Livre de Voyage Urbain.

MARIO MARTÍN GIJÓN’s essays have received a number of awards including the Gerardo Diego Prize for literary research, 2009, the Amado Alonso Prize for literary criticism, 2012, as well as the Arturo Barea Prize 2013.

ROOSIE GOLDSMITH is director and founder of the European Literature Network and editor-in-chief of The Riveter. She was a BBC broadcaster for twenty years and is today an arts journalist and presenter. She was chair of the judges for the EBRD Literature Prize 2018–2020.

JUAN GOYTISOLO was a Spanish poet, essayist, and novelist. He lived in Marrakesh from 1997 until his death in 2017. He was considered Spain’s greatest living writer at the beginning of the 21st century, yet he had lived abroad since the 1950s. In 2014 he was awarded the Cervantes Prize, the most prestigious literary award in the Spanish-speaking world.

FIONA GRAHAM lives in Flanders. Her translations include Elisabeth Asbrink’s 1947: When Now Begins (from the Swedish) and Thalia Verkade and Marco te Brömmelstroet’s Movement: How to Take Back Our Streets and Transform Our Lives (from the Dutch).

ALMUDENA GRANDES was a Spanish writer. Author of fourteen novels and three short-story collections, her work has been translated into twenty languages and frequently adapted for film. She won the Premio Nacional de Narrativa and the Prix Méditerranée, among other honours.

CHARLOTTE GRAVER currently works as a translation project manager and previously lived in Spain teaching English. She adores translating and researching children’s literature and this was the topic on which she centred her MA studies.

POL GUASCH’s novel Napalm al cor (2021) received the Premi Llibres Anagrama. They are also the author of two volumes of poems: Tanta gana, winner of the Premi Francesc Garriga Award, and La part del foc, winner of the Premi López-Picó.

PABLO GUTIÉRREZ is a Spanish writer. After leaving his career as a journalist he now works as a secondary and high school literature teacher in Cádiz. He has published seven works of fiction, for which he has been awarded several prizes, as well as a play.

ABDUL HADI SADOUN is an Iraqi author and translator, born in Baghdad and now living in Madrid. He writes in both Arabic and Spanish, and also translates in both directions. He has edited and translated into Spanish numerous anthologies of Iraqi poetry and has translated into Arabic authors such as Cervantes, Lorca, Borges, Vilamatas, and Marías.
DANIEL HAHN is a writer, editor and translator with eighty books to his name. His translations from Portuguese, Spanish and French include writers ranging from Portuguese Nobel laureate José Saramago to Brazilian footballer Pelé. He is a former chair of the Society of Authors and in 2021 was made an OBE for his services to literature.

DAVID HEBBLETHWAITE has reviewed European fiction for Strange Horizons, Shiny New Books, Splice and The Riveter. He is also a regular member of a ‘shadow panel’ of readers who read along with the International Booker Prize.

MIGUEL ÁNGEL HERNÁNDEZ is a Spanish writer best known for his fictional works, among them the novels Intento de escapade, which won the Premio Ciudad Alcalá de Narrativa and was translated in five languages, and El instante de peligro, which was a finalist for the Premio Herradura de Novela.

ANA CRISTINA HERREROS is a philologist and specialist in traditional literature, writer, editor, oral narrator and author. She began working at Ediciones Siruela in 1989 and in 2014 she founded the publishing house Libros de las Malas Compañías, where she continues to work as an editor.

WILL HOWARD’s essays, poems, and translations have appeared in a range of publications. A 2021–2022 Fulbright Fellow in Spain, he’s currently a graduate student in literary translation at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

SOPHIE HUGHES is the translator of over twenty books from Spanish, by Spanish and Latin American writers including Fernanda Melchor, Alía Trabucco Zerán, José Revueltas, and Enrique Vila-Matas. She has been nominated for the International Booker Prize four times, and in 2021 she was awarded the Queen Sofia Spanish Institute Translation Prize.

DARCY HURFORD is a translator from Estonian, Finnish, German and Swedish. Originally from England, she is now based in Belgium.

KARMELE JAIO is a Basque journalist, author and poet. She wrote her debut novel, Her Mother’s Hands, in Basque and translated it into Spanish. The novel won several prizes, including the 2006 Igartza Prize and the 2007 Beterriko Lifura. In 2013, it was adapted for the big screen, directed by Mireia Gabilondo.

IVÁN JIMÉNEZ is an art director and graphic designer. He has more than 10 years of experience in the graphic design sector and is passionate about the publishing world. He founded Agapornis Magazine and is currently teaching at various universities. He is the co-founder of Odd Kiosk in Barcelona.

MARTA JIMÉNEZ SERRANO is a writer from Madrid. Her book of poetry La edad ligera was a finalist for the Adonai Prize in 2020. Los nombres propios is her first novel and has been translated into Italian. Her latest book, a collection of short stories, was published in March of 2023.

MARGARET JULL COSTA has worked as a translator for over thirty years, translating the works of many Spanish and Portuguese writers, among them novelists Javier Marias, Bernardo Atxaga, José Saramago and Eça de Queiroz; and poets Fernando Pessoa, Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Mário de Sá-Carneiro and Ana Luisa Amaral.

KATIE KING is a journalist and literary translator. Her most recent translation, Someone Speaks Your Name by Luis García Montero, was published by Swan Isle Press in January 2023. She has lived and worked extensively in Spain and Latin America.

JON KORTAZAR is a Basque writer and literary critic. Since 1992 he has been Professor of Literature in Euskara at the University of the Basque Country. He has published an abundance of articles and books on Basque literary criticism, with a particular focus on poetry.

CARMEN LAFORET was a Spanish author who wrote in the period after the Spanish Civil War. Her first novel, Nada, continued the Spanish tremendismo literary style. She received the Premio Nadal in 1944. Nada is Laforet’s only novel to be translated into English, and was published in Edith Grossman’s translation in 2007.

MARA FAYE LETHEM is a writer and researcher. Winner of the inaugural 2022 Spain-USA Foundation Translation Award for Max Besora’s The Adventures and Misadventures of Joan Orpí, she was also recently awarded the 2022 Joan Baptiste Cendrós International Prize for her contributions to Catalan literature.

JONATHAN LEVI is an American writer and academic living in Rome. He co-founded Granta and writes short stories, essays, plays, opera libretti and novels, including A Guide for the Perplexed and Septimania.
LAURA LONSDALE is Associate Professor in Modern Spanish Literature at the University of Oxford. Her translation of Ana María Matute’s *The Island*, was published in 2020 by Penguin Books.

INMA LÓPEZ SILVA is a Galician writer, poet, translator, columnist and theatre critic. She has published many works of fiction, poetry, short stories, and nonfiction, and won several prizes. Her most recent publication is a work of auto-fiction: ¿Quién no tiene un abuelo fascista?

VIOLETA LOPIZ is a Spanish illustrator currently living in Peru. She has illustrated numerous books, including *The Forest* (a *New York Times* Best Illustrated Children’s Book of 2018), *The True Story of a Mouse Who Never Asked for It* (a *New York Times* Best Children’s Book of 2021), and *At the Drop of a Cat*.

FRAN P. LORENZO is a Galician journalist and novelist who writes for Galicia Hoxe and *O Correo Gallego*. He is also one of the founders of the *Dioivo* digital newspaper. In 2014 he won the Premio Blanco Amor for his novel *Cabalos e lobos*.

IONA MacINTYRE is a scholar and translator. Her and Fiona Macintosh’s co-translation of Gabriela Cabezón Cámara’s *The Adventures of China Iron* was shortlisted for the 2020 International Booker Prize. She was one of the translators into English of *Escape Goat*, the 2020 Portuguese Covid-inspired lockdown novel.

ELIZABETH MACKLIN is the author of *You’ve Just Been Told* and *A Woman Kneeling in the Big City* and the translator of Kirmen Uribe’s works, including his novel, *Bilbao—New York—Bilbao*. Her awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry and an Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, which she spent in Bilbao, Spain.

JAVIER MARÍAS was a Spanish author, translator, and columnist. Marias published fifteen novels, and as one of Spain’s most celebrated authors his books have been translated into forty-six languages. He received several awards for his work, and his most recent book, *Tomás Nevinson* was published in 2021, and translated in 2022 by Margaret Jull Costa.

ANA MARÍA MATUTE was an internationally acclaimed Spanish writer and member of the Real Academia Española. In 1959, she received the Premio Nadal for her novel *Primera memoria*. The third woman to receive the Cervantes Prize for her literary oeuvre, she is considered one of the foremost novelists of the *posguerra*.

ANDREA MAYO is one of the heteronyms of Flavia Company. She is the author of more than ten novels. While in Singapore and Borneo she encountered real carnivorous plants, and had a vision of what her novel *The Carnivorous Plant* (translated into English by Laura McGloughlin) would be.

JOHANNA McCALMONT is a Northern Irish translator and interpreter based in Brussels, where she works from French, German, Dutch, and Italian. She has published several translations for children with Blue Dot Kids Press and is co-editor of the blog at Project World Kid Lit.

ANNIE McDERMOTT’s translations include works by Selva Almada and Mario Levrero, and *The Wind Whistling in the Cranes* by Lidia Jorge (co-translated with Margaret Jull Costa). In 2023, she was awarded the Premio Valle-Inclán for her translation of *Wars of the Interior* by Joseph Zárate.

ANDREW McDOUGALL was born in Glasgow and studied Portuguese and English literature at the University of Edinburgh. He has also lived in Sussex, Lisbon, Coimbra, Logroño, Vitoria-Gasteiz and Norwich, where he completed an MA in Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia.

MEGAN McDOWELL is a Spanish translator. Her translations have been longlisted for the International Man Booker twice, and shortlisted once. In 2022 she won the National Book Award for Translated Literature for her translation of *Seven Empty Houses* by Samanta Schweblin.

ANNE McLEAN is a Spanish literary translator. In 2004 she won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize for her translation of *Soldiers of Salamis* by Javier Cercas, and again in 2009 for *The Armies* by Evelio Rosero. In 2014, her translation of Juan Gabriel Vásquez’s *The Sound of Things Falling* was awarded the International Dublin Literary Award.
CLAUDIA ELENA MÉNENDEZ FERNANDEZ is Associate Professor in Classical and Romance Studies at the University of Oviedo. She is co-director of the literary journal Formientu, and is currently vice-president of Iniciativa pol Asturianu, an organisation that fights for the linguistic rights of Asturians and the status of the Asturian language.

KATHLEEN MEREDITH is a translator and teacher based in Madrid. She has taught English and Drama classes in Spanish schools, and has participated in the Queen’s College Translation Exchange, designing and presenting a creative translation workshop for primary students.

SARA MESA is the author of ten works of fiction for which she has won numerous prizes. Her works have been translated into more than ten languages. Her latest work to appear in English is Bad Handwriting, a short-story collection translated by Katie Whittemore.

LILY MEYER is a writer, translator, and critic. Her translations include Claudia Ulloa Donoso’s story collections Little Bird and Ice for Martians. Her first novel, Short War, is forthcoming in 2024.

VALERIE MILES is a writer, editor, translator, and co-founding director of Spanish Granta. She has written for Granta, El País, La Nación, the New Yorker, the New York Times and the Paris Review. She teaches literary translation and creative writing at Barcelona’s Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

BEATRIZ MIRALLES DE IMPERIAL is the author of Oscura, deja la piel su sombra, Y todo es silencio, and El viento sopla donde quiere. Bea is founder and director of the micro press Ad Minimum. She has poems published in English translation in Copper Nickel, Poetry Magazine, and forthcoming in Poetry London.

ROSA MONTERO is a Spanish journalist and author of contemporary fiction. She began working for El País in 1976, and was the first woman to receive the Manuel del Arco award for her work. In 1979, she published her first novel, Crónica del desamor, and has continued writing since, publishing a large oeuvre of novels for which she has won several awards.

TXEAMA MONTERO is an architect and interior designer who has worked in a variety of companies. He was part of the creative team for an important music festival and is currently working for some renowned architectural studios. He is the co-founder of Odd Kiosk in Barcelona.

CRISTINA MORALES is the author of four novels and a collection of short stories. Easy Reading, her fourth novel, was awarded the Prémio Herralde and the Spanish National Book Award. In 2021, she was named a Granta Best Young Spanish-Language Novelist.

EVA MOREDA is a Galician-language novelist. Her novel Home is Like a Different Time won the Terra de Melide award and subsequently, a PEN Translates award. More recently, she has published the novel Para toda a vida, a short-story collection, and a hybrid essay on Galician traditional dance.

LARA MORENO lives in Madrid where she also works as an editor and teacher of creative writing. She is the author of volumes of poetry, essays, and short stories as well as two novels. In 2017, she was selected as the guest editor of the Penguin Random House imprint Caballo de Troya.

AROA MORENO DURÁN is a Spanish writer and journalist. She is the author of La hija del comunista, for which she was awarded the Premio Ojo Crítico in 2017. In 2022, she published La Bajamar, for which she won the Grand Continent Award.

ROBIN MUNBY is a literary translator from Liverpool, based in Madrid. His translations have appeared in publications including Wasafiri Magazine, Apofenie, Exchanges, World Literature Today and The Glasgow Review of Books. He works from Spanish, Russian and, more recently, Asturian into English.

SILVIA NANCLARES develops theatrical, audio-visual, literary, and artistic training projects, and is a screenwriter and newscaster. Nanclares runs a literary podcast called En Tu Feria Me Cóle and is a columnist for El Diario. She is the author of a story collection and the novel Quién Quiere Ser Madre.
XOSÉ NERIA VILAS left Spain in 1949 and spent much of his life in exile. His novel *Memoirs of a Village Boy* is the bestselling work in the Galician language. He was a member of the Royal Galician Academy and winner of several literary awards.

RAÚL NIETO GURIDI has created many books for children, including *The King of Nothing*, *A Drop of the Sea*, and *The Day I Became a Bird*. His works have been selected for special mention for the Bologna Ragazzi Award and for inclusion in the USBBY Outstanding International Books list.

DECLAN O’DRISCOLL regularly reviews translated fiction for *The Irish Times*. He has also written for TLS, Dublin Review of Books, and Music & Literature.

MAZAL OAKNÍN is Associate Professor at University College London. She is the co-editor of *Literatura política y política literaria en España: Del Desastre del 98 a Felipe VI*, and her work has appeared in various journals. Her book *Writing, Feminism and the Media in Spain* was published in 2019.

MÓNICA OJEDA is the author of the novels *La desfiguración Silva* which won the Premio Alba Narrativa, 2014, *Nefando*, and *Mandíbula*, as well as the poetry collections *El ciclo de las piedras*, and *Historia de la leche*. In 2019, she received the Prince Claus Next Generation Award in honour of her outstanding literary achievements.

KEITH PAYNE was the Ireland Chair of Poetry Bursary award winner for 2015–2016. His collection *Broken Hill*, was followed by *Six Galician Poets*, and *Museums, Bedrooms and Trees*. He is director of The La Malinche Readings Ireland/Galicia and the PoemaRia International Poetry Festival, Vigo.

MARÍA ÁNGELES PÉREZ LÓPEZ is a Spanish poet, editor and professor, who teaches at the Universidad de Salamanca. The author of over a dozen collections, she has won numerous prizes, including most recently the Premio de la Crítica de poesía en español in 2022.

FIONN PETCH is a Scottish translator. He has translated fiction, poetry, drama and children’s books including *A Straggly Smile* by Vanessa Saint Cyr, *The Distance Between Us* by Renato Cisneros and *Fireflies* by Luis Sagasti.

KATHRYN PHILLIPS-MILES is a Spanish translator, who, along with her husband has jointly translated literary works from Spanish into English across multiple genres. Their latest release is *SUR* by Antonio Soler, published by Peter Owen Publishers/Pushkin Press.

FRAN PINTADERA is a writer of poetry, short stories and novels. Both in his literature and in life, he believes in humour, in the possibilities of fantasy, and in the beauty of the everyday.

MARINA PORRAS MARTÍ is a literary critic, writer and academic. She collaborates as a cultural journalist in various media and works in a bookstore. Her essay ‘Envy’ appears in *The Seven Deadly Sins*, published by Fum d’Estampa in 2022.

CHAD W. POST is the publisher of Open Letter Books, a press at the University of Rochester. He is also the editorial director of Dalkey Archive Press, the author of *The Three Percent Problem: Rants and Responses on Publishing, Translation, and the Future of Reading*.

FRANCIS RIDDLE has translated numerous Spanish-language authors, including Isabel Allende, Claudia Piñeiro, Leila Guerriero, María Fernanda Ampuero, and Sara Gallardo. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Granta*, *Electric Literature*, and *The White Review*, among others.

CARME RIERA is a novelist and essayist. She has also written short stories, scripts for radio and television and literary criticism. Her best-known work is the historical novel *Dins el darrer blau*, winner of several prizes, and the first novel in Catalan to win the Premio Nacional de Narrativa.

MANUEL RIVAS was a founding member of Greenpeace Spain and has published nine anthologies of poetry, fourteen novels and several literature essays. His 1998 novel *O lapis do carpinteiro* has been published in nine countries and is the most widely translated work in the history of Galician literature.

MERCÈ RODOREDA is considered the most influential twentieth-century Catalan-language writer, and her works have been translated into more than thirty languages. Her novel *La plaça del diamant* has become the most popular Catalan novel to date.
JACOB ROGERS is a translator of Galician and Spanish. His translation of Manuel Rivas’s The Last Days of Terranova was published by Archipelago Books in autumn 2022, and his translation of Berta Dávila’s Loved Ones is forthcoming from 3TimesRebel Press in late 2023.

TONI SALA is a Catalan writer. His first book, Entomologia, won the Premi Documenta de narrativa, and his novel Rodalies won the Premi Sant Joan de narrativa de literatura catalana in 2004. He has also been awarded two prizes for general contributions to Catalan literature.

JENNIFER SARHA is a Finnish writer and scholar based in Luxembourg. She has an unmentionable day job, but her spare time is dedicated to literary and historical pursuits; reading voraciously in many languages and in translation.

CLAIRE STOREY is a translator from Spanish and German into English. She specialises in children’s literature and is co-editor of the blog at Project World Kid Lit. In 2021, she was granted funding from Arts Council England for a project focusing on translating Young Adult Literature from Latin America.

IRENE SOLÀ is a Catalan writer and an artist. In 2019, she was awarded the Premio Salambó for Canto jo i la muntanya balla. The same year, she also received the Premio Núvol, and the Premio Cálamo for the Spanish edition of the book. In 2020, she won the European Union Prize for Literature.

LIZZY SIDDAL is a British bibliophile and book blogger of sixteen years. She publishes her reviews at Lizzy’s Literary Life (Volume Two) where she co-hosts Reading Independent Publishers Month each February and German Literature Month each November.

Teresa Solana directed the National Translation Centre in Spain for seven years and now devotes her time to writing her own novels and translating them into Spanish. Her first novel won the Premio Brigada 21 in 2007 and her second was short-listed for the 2008 Premio Salambó. She is translated into several languages.

KELLEY D. SALAS is a freelance translator and editor specialising in children’s literature, memoir, and literary nonfiction. Her translations have been published by Street Noise Books, Words Without Borders and Literal Magazine, among others.

DOUGLAS SUTTLE is the founder of Fum d’Estampa Press. As well as writing for several newspapers and magazines, he translates to and from Catalan and English and has collaborated with various governmental agencies in the promotion of Catalan language. In 2021 his verse translation of Beowulf was published in Catalan.

MARTA SANZ is an award-winning novelist, poet, essayist and scholar, and one of Spain’s leading feminist writers. She has written more than fifteen novels and four collections of poetry. Her fiction and poetry have been translated into English, Italian and Hungarian.

IRIS SEMÉL is a British bibliophile and book blogger of sixteen years. She publishes her reviews at Lizzy’s Literary Life (Volume Two) where she co-hosts Reading Independent Publishers Month each February and German Literature Month each November.

LUCINA SCHELL is an international rights manager and a member of the Third Coast Translators Collective. Her translations include Daiana Henderson’s So That Something Remains Lit and Vision of the Children of Evil by Miguel Angel Bustos, as well as selections from authors including Erika Martínez, Graciela Cros and Àda Salas.

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KIRMEN URIBE is a Basque language writer. He won the National Prize for Literature in Spain for his first novel Bilbao-New York-Bilbao, which has been translated into more than fifteen languages. His poetry collection Meanwhile Take My Hand, translated into English by Elizabeth Macklin, was a finalist for the 2008 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation.

JUAN GABRIEL VÁSQUEZ is a Colombian writer, journalist and translator. He is the author of seven novels, two volumes of stories, two books of literary essays, and numerous articles of political commentary. His novel The Sound of Things Falling, won the Premio Alfaguara de Novela and the 2014 International Dublin Literary Award.

ENRIQUE VILA-MATAS is an award-winning Spanish author whose genre-mixing novels have won him branded as one of the most original and prominent writers in the Spanish language. His works have won numerous national and international prizes and have been translated into many languages.

ADRIAN NATHAN WEST is a writer and literary translator living in Spain. His criticism has appeared in the LRB, the TLS, and many other publications. He has translated books from German, Catalan and Spanish, including Jean Améry’s Charles Bovary, Country Doctor and Pere Gimferrer’s Pere Gimferrer: Selected Poems.

KATIE WHITEMORE is a literary translator from Spanish. Her most recent translations include Bad Handwriting by Sara Mesa, Mothers Don’t by Katixa Agirre and Wolfskin by Lara Moreno. She lives in Valencia, Spain.

CHARLOTTE WHITTLE’s work has appeared in the Literary Review, Los Angeles Times, Guernica, BOMB, the Paris Review, and elsewhere. Her translations include novels by Jorge Comensal, Elisa Victoria, and Norah Lange; her most recent translation is Papyrus, the international bestseller by Irene Vallejo.

JAMES WOMACK is a poet and a translator from Russian and Spanish. His most recent poetry collection, Homunculus, was published by Carcanet in 2020. His translations include Manuel Vilas’s Heaven and a collection of poetry by Vladimir Mayakovsky.


MARGARYTA YAKOVENKO was born in Tokmak, Ukraine and emigrated to Murcia in Spain with her parents at the age of seven. She is a journalist specialising in international politics and currently works for the Spanish newspaper El País. Her first novel, Desencajada was published in September 2020.

IBAN ZALDUA is a Basque writer. He has won the Premio Euskadi de Literatura three times: in 2006 for his novel Etorkizuna, in 2012 for his children’s book Azken garaipena, and in 2013 for his essay Ese idioma raro y poderoso. Zaldua writes in both Basque and Spanish.

LILIT ŽEKULIN THWAITES is an award-winning translator of contemporary Spanish literature, including Antonio Iturbe’s The Librarian of Auschwitz, and works by Rosa Montero. She is currently President of the Australian Association for Literary Translation, and received Spain’s Order of Civil Merit for her promotion of Spanish literatures and cultures.