For Javier Marías, Spy Fiction Was a Means to Study Humanity

"Tomás Nevinson," the final novel by the late Spanish writer, sends a washed-up agent in search of a terrorist.

By Benjamin Markovits
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TOMÁS NEVINSON, by Javier Marías. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa.

Early in "Tomás Nevinson," Javier Marías's final novel, the eponymous narrator quotes an unnamed "Spanish general" from an interview: "In the struggle against terrorism, there are some things that should not be done. If they are done, then they should not be spoken about. If they are spoken about, they must be denied."

It's a classic Marías line, both exhaustive and self-contradictory while suggesting some core of consistent purpose. And part of what makes the line work is that we can't quite tell if the Spanish general is real and the quote accurate or if the whole thing is just another Marías invention. A few hundred pages later, Nevinson identifies the speaker as the real-life "ex-General Sáenz de Santamaría" and adds, by way of context, some statements from another interview: "Democracy is all well and good, but we can't take it to its logical conclusion, because if we did, we'd be putting ourselves in the hands of the terrorists."

Marías (1951-2022) long made use of the language of counterintelligence, even when he wasn't writing about spies. In his work, ordinary relationships, between parents and children, between friends, between lovers, depend on the kind of coded interactions you might find in a John le Carré novel, where part of what interests two people in each other is their professional ability to keep secrets. (This is also what drew him to a certain strand of Brahmin English culture, at least the way it's presented in novels and TV shows like "Masterpiece Theater": the idea of an Oxford where you never say what you mean, because anything you do say exposes you to a series of private judgments.)

It was a natural evolution for him to apply this technique to spy stories, even if those stories never really try to persuade you of his firsthand experience of the worlds they inhabit. He's more interested in the tropes of the genre, like a writer of westerns using the frontier as the setting for a morality tale.

"Tomás Nevinson" explores many of those tropes. In his acknowledgments, Marías

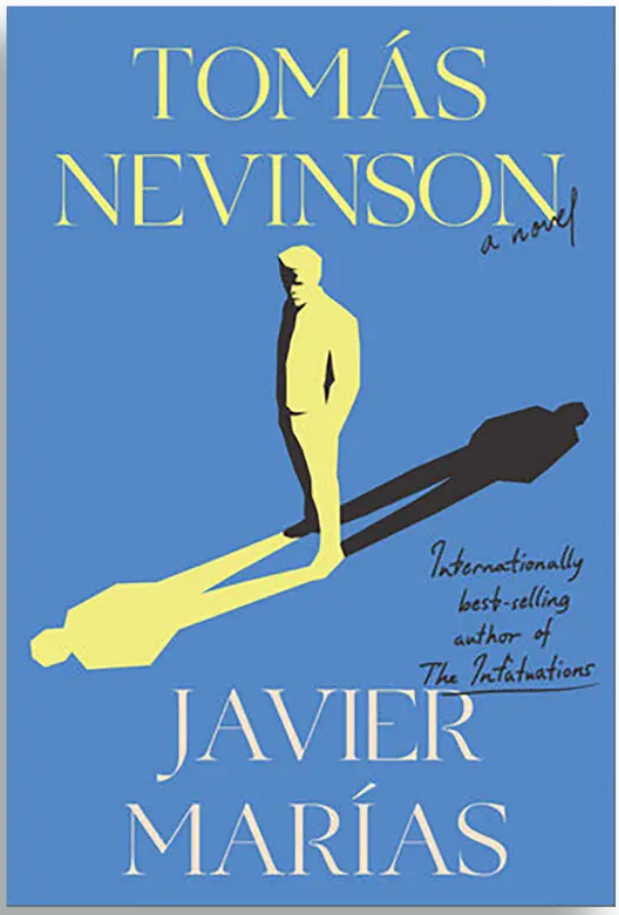
even admits to making use of a “sliver of an idea which comes, I believe, from John le Carré.” Nevinson is a washed-up old spy, dragging out his days in Madrid, largely estranged from his children, though he maintains a subsistence-level relationship with his wife, Berta. (The history of their marriage is the subject of Marías’s previous novel, “Berta Isla,” which Marías calls a “companion piece” to the current book.)

Then his old boss from London, Bertie Tupra, gets in touch to lure Nevinson back for one last job. It’s 1997 and the Basque separatist group ETA is still carrying out violent attacks in Spain. Intelligence services have managed to track down an Irish-Spanish terrorist — responsible for two of the most terrible ETA attacks of the 1980s — in a small northwestern city, fictionally referred to as Ruán.

The trouble is, they can’t determine which of three possible women, all of whom settled in the town about 10 years ago, the terrorist might be. So Nevinson cuts himself off from his wife and children again and takes a job in Ruán as a schoolteacher, to worm his way into the women’s lives and work out who is the guilty party.

The suspects seem to have been chosen as much for their variety as their plausibility. One is the lanky, promiscuous owner of a popular restaurant, with whom Nevinson quickly begins a halfhearted affair; the second is a cheerful colleague at the school (married to a bit of a crook); and the third is the elegant, long-suffering, socialite wife of a local aristocrat.

Tupra’s men have managed to plant hidden cameras in the houses of the last two, so when Nevinson is home alone he can watch his targets eat or read or have sex or argue with their husbands. It’s an ingenious premise, not because it sets up any particularly clever display of spycraft (as Tupra eventually complains, Nevinson has lost his touch), but rather because it allows Marías to ask some of his favorite questions. How much can we learn about people from their daily lives? To what extent do they bear the scars of their past actions? How certain do you need to be about those actions before you condemn or intervene?



In his 1992 novel “A Heart So White,” which won the prestigious IMPAC award, Marías argues that the things you do or that happen to you aren’t much more real than the things you didn’t do (which you maybe imagined) or that didn’t happen (but might have). You end up living with both, and forget both eventually, so that the difference between them seems increasingly arbitrary as the years go on.

Nevinson, at this stage in his career, feels something similar, but the pressure on him intensifies after ETA terrorists kidnap and kill Miguel Blanco, a councilor from another small town, setting off weeks of nationwide protests against the terrorist group. The danger seems suddenly real that the woman he’s investigating might strike again. Blanco, like the ex-general, is a historical figure, and Marías plays deliberately and unsettlingly with the appearance of real and terrible events in the middle of a novel that owes such an obvious debt to the pleasures of genre.

To set the stage, Nevinson begins the story contemplating just how hard it is to take a life, even a monstrous one. He offers several accounts, both fictional and factual, of people who might have killed Hitler before the Holocaust. These include a British hunter in a Fritz Lang film who has the Führer in his rifle sights in Berchtesgaden in

1939 but fails to shoot, because his ambush is only a "sporting stalk": The fact that he *could* have hit the target is all that matters.

The narrator also cites the real-life memoir of Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen, a Nazi-hating doctor and writer who ran into Hitler at a restaurant in Bavaria in 1932. Reck-Malleczewen always carried a loaded revolver with him and might have prevented enormous human suffering by killing Hitler seven years before World War II, except that "I took him for a character out of a comic strip, and did not shoot." By the end of the novel, Nevinson finds himself in a similar position, with nothing to guide him except the stories he has told his boss about the three women.

In other words, he's caught in the dilemma identified by that ex-general. It's really just another version of a tension you can feel throughout Marías's work: between the need to fictionalize the world so you can bear it, and the need to realize what's going on so you can act.

This novel makes frequent sly references to some of the writers who have meant something to him: Berta teaches a class on Henry James; Tupra and Nevinson swap quotes from "Macbeth." But the style, rendered in Margaret Jull Costa's translation, is always recognizably Marías's: both mannered and informal, and somehow both breathless and endlessly self-revising.

In one of Nevinson's conversations with the socialite wife, they "agreed that really good authors — who, according to her, were getting fewer in number — managed 'magically' (her rather affected word) to make us believe their stories and passionately engage with them, even when they made it plain that the stories were false, the product of their imagination, pure invention, that they did not exist in the reality that both they and we inhabited." This, of course, is a very good description of Marías himself, who died last year from Covid complications. Which means that number has become even smaller.

Benjamin Markovits's most recent novel, "The Sidekick," about the complicated friendship between an NBA star and one of the reporters who covers him, is out now in paperback.

TOMÁS NEVINSON | By Javier Marías | Translated by Margaret Jull Costa | 641 pp. | Alfred A. Knopf | $32.50