

The Spanish Author Who Doesn't Believe in Spanish Literature

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“Important as it is, the language in which you write is secondary,” says Javier Marías, whose new novel is “Berta Isla.” “I myself feel much closer to many foreign authors than to many of my compatriots.”

What books are on your nightstand?

“Say Nothing,” by Patrick Radden Keefe. A new edition of “Moonfleet,” by John Meade Falkner, an adventurous novel I loved in my early youth and want to reread. “Lincoln in the Bardo,” by George Saunders, which I anticipate with curiosity and a bit of diffidence (critical acclaim makes me diffident nowadays). “Viaggio in Europa,” by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. His novel “The Leopard” is one of my favorite books, so I read any scrap that he left. Montaigne’s “Essays,” which I am slowly rereading from beginning to end.

What’s the last great book you read?

I have not finished it yet, but “Say Nothing” seems to be a great book indeed. I am reading it as passionately as I am horrified at times, even if “Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland” are rather similar to murder and memory in the Basque Country. We suffered ETA terrorism for over 40 years in Spain.

[When Javier Marías learned Franco had died, he felt “relief and great, great joy.”]

Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time?

It is not a novel, but I had never read “Mémoires d’outre-tombe,” by Chateaubriand. An absolute masterpiece, dazzling.

What’s your favorite book no one else has heard of?

To say “no one else” is excessive, but “A High Wind in Jamaica,” by Richard Hughes, is not well known, or considered as the best Conradian novel after Conrad’s death. Not many do read (*pace* W. G. Sebald in his days) “Hydriotaphia, or Urn Burial,” by Sir Thomas Browne. Many years ago I translated it into Spanish, and it contains, in my opinion, some of the most beautiful pages ever written in English (especially Chapter 5).

What book should everybody read before the age of 21?

Many, that probably after that age are a bit disappointing: “The Great Gatsby,” “The Sea-Wolf.” “The Catcher in the Rye.” Though the latter is not disappointing at 30 or 40, I think.

What book should nobody read until the age of 40?

Someone once said about “Don Quixote”: “Children are bored by it; young people are amused and laugh with it; old people understand it.” It is probably true. Also “The Leopard,” as it is not quite a political novel, but a novel on the slow acceptance of death, or of endings.

Which writers — novelists, playwrights, critics, journalists, poets — working today do you admire most?

I don’t often read my contemporaries. For decades I tried to be “updated,” and you waste most of your limited time. But I admire the poets Charles Simic and Adam Zagajewski. I admire Alice Munro so very much. I admire the novelists Patrick Modiano (who was first published in Spain at my recommendation, in the 1980s) and Julian Barnes. I admire the historian Antony Beevor. And many others I can’t recall now.

What do you read when you’re working on a book? And what kind of reading do you avoid while writing?

I read things having to do with what I am writing. Not so much research material (though a bit of that), but poetry related to the subject or “spirit” of my novel. From Shakespeare to Keats, from Eliot to Wilfred Owen, from Lope de Vega to Machado. I tend to avoid novels by contemporary authors, not because they bother me but because when you’re concentrating on your own novel, it is advisable for a while to have the foolish idea that yours is the only book on earth. Extremely foolish indeed, and generally impossible to maintain.

What’s the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently?

That we trust too much in will. That we trust too much in gratitude. Nothing should be expected from any of those things. I learned this while rereading “The Fall of Constantinople 1453,” by Steven Runciman, which I published as one of the two titles per year in my small imprint, Reino de Redonda.

What books would you recommend to somebody who wants to learn more about Spanish literature?

I do not much believe in national literatures. Important as it is, the language in which you write is secondary. There is no such thing as “Spanish literature.” In Spain there are great single authors, from Cervantes to Juan Benet, from Quevedo to García Lorca,

from Jorge Manrique to Antonio Machado, from Lazarillo de Tormes to Valle-Inclán. But each is very different from the others. I myself feel much closer to many foreign authors than to many of my compatriots.

What moves you most in a work of literature?

Recognition. When I must stop my reading and say to myself: “Yes, this is true, it is just like this. I knew, but I did not know that I knew until I read it here.”

Which genres do you especially enjoy reading? And which do you avoid?

I still enjoy fiction, and ghost stories are an old weakness. I enjoy history, essays, poetry, sometimes philosophy (though not much proper philosophy nowadays). I generally avoid reading drama, which has too much dialogue to read silently. I tend to avoid memoirs and diaries ever since they became a mere vehicle for grievances and banalities. Too many people wondering how on earth they can be seen as victims.

How do you organize your books?

By language or country (it depends), and in a strict chronological order of the authors' births. Therefore, not by genre. In the British section, for instance, A. W. Kinglake (a historian of the Crimean War) precedes Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens; and Capt. Richard F. Burton precedes Wilkie Collins. This way, at a glance, I see who was contemporary to whom, no matter if they are novelists, poets, scientists or essayists.

American authors have their own shelves, by the way.

What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?

Enid Blyton's books? P. G. Wodehouse's? Some books on soccer? I am a very eclectic, open reader.

What's the best book you've ever received as a gift?

An edition of Joseph Conrad's “The Rover” signed by him, and with a handwritten letter by him inside. The letter concludes: “I daresay, you will find me a reasonable person to talk to.” I love that. I also like the idea that the book was in his hands for a few seconds.

What kind of reader were you as a child? Which childhood books and authors stick with you most?

I read what most children of my time did: adventure novels by Verne, Stevenson, Salgari, Dumas. Richmal Crompton's “Just William” stories, which somehow prompted me to become a writer. Enid Blyton's too. And surely many comic books. “Rip Kirby” was one of my favorites.

You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

The last thing I would like to do is talk about literature. So they should be nice, amusing, witty people. Say, Isak Dinesen or Karen Blixen; Mark Twain; Laurence Sterne. All dead, I am afraid.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn't? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

Joyce's "Ulysses." In my opinion it is the summit of old realism, and not really a new thing in its time. Very good at times, indeed, but overrated all in all. I much prefer "Dubliners."

I read 300 pages of Knausgaard's first volume. Not many, considering the length of the total series. But still, 300 pages. I am sorry to say I felt unable to go on. I would rather use my time with Proust again.

Whom would you want to write your life story?

No one, if possible. I would never do that myself. I see no point, no interest at all. Only very uncommon, striking lives are interesting to read. Your own life is most important to you only. To others, it is usually a terrible bore that you listen to (if you can't help it) with polite disinterest.

What books do you find yourself returning to again and again?

Shakespeare's plays. Far from discouraging me, they encourage me to write a little more. Eliot's and Rilke's poetry. Conrad and Henry James are never disappointing, nor is Proust. Lampedusa's only novel.

What books are you embarrassed not to have read yet?

Too many. Not yet Titus Livy. Not yet Kant. Not yet Primo Levi. Not yet "Orlando." (I am not sure that I should.) Not much by Dostoyevsky. I find him a bit deliberately pathetic, sometimes.

What do you plan to read next?

To tell the truth, I never make any plans. Not in my reading, not in my writing, not in my life.

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