

Narrative work in Catalan, translations, awards, and honors

- 1975 *Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora* (*I Give You, Love, the Sea as Pledge*). Premi Recull-Francesc Puig i Llensa (1974)
- 1977 *Jo pos per testimoni les gavines* (*Let the Seagulls Be My Witness*). Both with Spanish versions by the author (1980). Translated into Greek (1981), Dutch (1988), Spanish (1991).
- 1980 *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* (*A Spring for Domenico Guarini*). Prudenci Bertrana Prize (1980). Translated into Spanish (1981), German (1995),
- 1981 *Epitelis tendríssims* (*Tender Epithelium*). Translated into German (1994), Dutch (1991), Spanish (2008).
- 1987 *Qüestió d'amor propi* (*A Matter of Self-Esteem and Other Stories*). Translated into Spanish (1988), German (1993),
- 1989 *Joc de miralls* (*Mirror Images*). Ramón Llull Prize (1989). Translated into Spanish (1989), German (1994),
- 1991 *Contra l'amor en companyia i altres relats* (*Against Love in Company and Other Stories*). Translated into Spanish (1991), German (1996)
- 1994 *Dins el darrer blau* (*In the last blue*). Josep Pla Novel Prize (1994). Premi Nacional de Narrativa del Ministerio de Cultura (1995). Premi Crexells (1995). Premi Lletra d'Or de la Crítica (1995). Premi Elio Vittorini (2000). Translated into Spanish (1995), Italian (1997), German (2000), Romanian (2003), Hebrew (2007), Portuguese (2008), Russian (2008).
- 1998 *Temps d'una espera* (*Waiting Time*). Translated into Spanish (1998), Portuguese (2002).
- 2000 *Cap al cel obert* (*To the Open Sky*). Premi Serra d'Or Prize (2001). National Culture Prize from the Catalanian Generalitat (2001). Translated into Spanish (2000), German (2002), Italian (2002), Receives the Creu de Sant Jordi from the Catalanian Generalitat.
- 2004 *La meitat de l'ànima* (*Half the Soul*). Sant Jordi Novel Prize (2003) Rosalía de Castro Prize from the PEN Club (2004). Premi Jaume Fuster Prize of the Association of Writers in the Catalan Language (2005). Translated into Romanian (2004), Spanish (2005), French (2006), Italian (2007), Turkish (2007).
- 2006 *L'estiu de l'anglès* (*The English Summer*). Translated into Spanish (2006), German (2007)

Carme Riera

Carme Riera: Seduction of the Word

Luisa Cotoner Cerdó

The literary work of the Majorcan Carme Riera (1948) is crisscrossed by thematic motifs and narrative methods that travel from one book to the other. Fiction writer, essayist, and professor of Spanish literature, as well as an avid reader, she is a master of technique that captures the reader from the first page, since she knows the exact dose of intrigue, lyricism and irony to pour into each situation to ensure that he or she will not abandon the story. She herself has declared on several occasions that literature is an exercise of seduction by whoever is writing, to make the reader enter into the game of mirrors and reflections, simulacra and maskings that is writing. The careful manipulation of the Catalan language--permeated with Majorcan word variants; the richness and precision of her vocabulary; the musicality of her syntax; the apparent spontaneity of her characters' colloquial register; and the intertextual winks with which she alludes to classic and modern works, inserting them in her own discourse--is the first focus of attention for anyone getting acquainted with her work and constitutes the common denominator by which all of it is sustained.

In the Rieran oeuvre three clearly differentiated formal patterns can be distinguished: an intimate style of marked confidential accent, ironic distance, and the immersion in the historical genre in the search for shared identity and the recuperation of personal and collective memory. This distinction, however, should not be interpreted in an exclusive way. On the contrary, Riera has combined these elements, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout all of her production, although refining them during her thirty years of creative writing.

The public became acquainted with Carme Riera with the publication of two stories, found in collections of the same names, *Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora* (*I Give You, Love, the Sea as Pledge*, 1975), which was a spectacular success for the then completely unknown author, and *Jo pos per testimoni les gavines* (*Let the Seagulls Be My Witness*, 1977). In both of them, the facts of the story are the same, but the difference of focus among the two leaves the reader to choose between the first or second versions, thus ushering in one of the constants of her fiction: plurality of perspectives, based on polyphonic discourse. In both, likewise, the authorial voice and fictional voice are superimposed, and she uses a confidential tone through the medium of the letter. In *Qüestió d'amor propi* (*A Matter of Self-Esteem*, 1988) considered a masterpiece of the epistolary genre, the entire plot is also contained in the long missive that the writer-protagonist directs to her friend to ask her for help in taking revenge against a Don Juan. The lyricism of the first books is substituted here for lucid and wounding sarcasm. The presence of an internal conversation and the use of dates that coincide in reality and fiction accentuate the suspicion that the author is revealing an episode of her own life and, in consequence, the reader also feels like a keeper of the secret.

Experimentation with new narrative forms is found primarily in her first novel, *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* (*A Spring for Domenico Guarini*, 1980), where the foreign

travel of the main character functions as a counterpoint to the voyage that she undertakes, in parallel, towards the discovery of herself. Thus, generic confusion, the fracturing of temporal linearity, alternating narrative voices, the mixture of journalistic chronicles, letters, and academic dissertations, and the superposition of plots are metonymic resources for the interior instability of the protagonist, until she is able to come out of the dark tunnel. In the following novel, *Joc de miralls* (*Mirror Images*, 1989), Riera returns to the search for identity, taking the doubling theme as a starting point, with a dictatorial regime as background.

Between these novels came another collection of stories, *Epitelis tendríssims* (*Tender Epithelium*, 1981), in which Riera destroys certain taboos of the erotic genre, traditionally off-limits for female writers, using an ironic, fun, and fresh focus. We find this tone again in the stories of *Contra l'amor en companyia* (1991), although here her aim is the literary world and some folkloric stereotypes. In *L'estiu de l'anglès* (*The Summer of the Englishman*, 2006), humor is also key to a gothic intrigue, whose central character is an employee who travels to England to learn English. The tragicomic vicissitudes that surround her will give a definitive about-face to her life.

The search for shared identity and the recuperation of collective memory is the common thread among Riera's three historical novels, in which actual events are seamlessly melded with fictional plots, and real people with invented characters, made to measure out of authentic experiences. *Dins el darrer blau* (*In the Last Blue*, 1994) narrates events that took place in Palma, Majorca, between 1688 and 1691, when a group of crypto-Jews who wanted to flee the island in order to live without oppression or coercion were judged and condemned to be burned at the stake by the Inquisition. This is a choral novel, written in the third person, in which the complex interior world of the characters conquer the soul of the readers, ensuring that they feel emotionally invested in their doubts, anguish, and suffering. In *Cap al cel obert* (*To the Open Sky*, 2000) the story of the descendants of the Jews burned by the Holy Office continues, to a certain extent; they have now become, paradoxically, proud owners of slaves. Riera again uses the omniscient point of view and, following the handbook of nineteenth-century melodrama, the author recreates Cuba's colonial conflict in the second half of the nineteenth century, leading to political reflection about the national question. Lastly, in *La meitat de l'ànima* (*Half the Soul*, 2004), the reconstruction of Barcelona's Franquist post-war environment, the situation of the exiled Republicans, and focus on the anarchists are the historical framework upon which Riera weaves the search for identity by a writer-protagonist who, for her part, speaks directly to the reader, involving him or her in her investigation.

With these three novels, which as of today constitute the peak of Rieran fiction, the writer constructs an authentic *trompe-l'oeil* to give life to her characters, and uses polyphonic discourse to construct a reality that is impossible to see from just one point of view. The methods used to express this destabilizing vision vary from one book to another, but the final result is the same: to transmit a *Weltanschauung* in which there is no room for absolute truths, but rather a permanent dialectic contrast with what is farthest from ourselves.

Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora (I Give You, Love, the Sea as Pledge, 1975)

Carme Riera's world of a lived dream, most imaginative and personal, with its victims chosen among delirious pain and disorder, is often shaped with convincing vigor out of the disquieting poetry of inexplicable realities. It is an "initial" world, a sketch, still wavering, that we should allow to harden, rise above, and stand out.

(Joan Triadó, «Panorama de narració breu. Les veus solitàries d'una forma lliure» [Panorama of Short Narratives: The Solitary Voices of a Free Form], *Serra d'Or*, 193, 1975).

Jo pos per testimoni les gavines (Let the Seagulls Be My Witness, 1977)

Inherent in this work, even more than its testimonial, subversive, or denunciative value, is an underlying poetic quality that reclaims it for literature, understood in the strictest sense. C. Riera has a very clear idea of what literature is and how it has to be made (a certain idea of literature and how to practice a genre). Because of this, and an attentive and refined sensibility, the writing of C. Riera obtains sure affective modulations in readers with literary educations in the canons of poetic prose, and sentimental educations in the oppressive bourgeois morals of our sad post-war. Thus, stylistic creation is undoubtedly an effective medium to treat minimal subjects, barely perceptible emotions or movements, and obsessions that verge on madness or the marvelous.

(Enric Sullà, *Els Marges*, 11 September 1977)

Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini (A Spring for Domenico Guarini, 1980)

The novel departs, one might say, from fiction understood as an experience of culture and, in the manner of some French and English novelists of the twenties and thirties, as pleasure and exercise of intelligence. Which does not mean that the book is far from lived experience, but that it is situated in a more elevated plane of comprehension. There is found, justly, the fundamental interest of the novel; a work of transition that tells about a transition, a "modification," completed through a voyage, ostensibly geographic (significantly, by train, and the text itself gives the "Butorian" clue), that has journalistic aims and ends up as an interior voyage of the soul: that of the journalist who is the novel's main character. The initial quote of Racionero already gives us a hint: "I will speak of the voyages of the self through its inevitable masks [...] because, where is worth going, if not toward oneself?"

(Maria Campillo, «Carme Riera, l'art com a revelació» [Carme Riera, Art as Revelation], *Serra d'Or*, 265, 1981).

Epitelis tendríssims (Tender Epithelium, 1981)

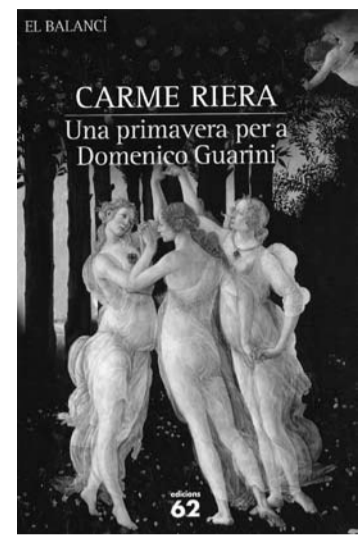
The new and, at the moment, most recent step is that of the stories of *Epitelis tendríssims*, a book in which the writer, like so many creators worried about the process and about their own endeavor, presents the eternal theme of literature within literature. In effect, by way of a creature of her invention, Aina Maria Sureda, she confronts the problematic of erotic literature written, precisely, by a woman.

(Josep Faulí, «Nuevas exploraciones de Carme Riera» [New Explorations of Carme Riera], *La Vanguardia*, 7 January 1982).

Qüestió d'amor propi (A Matter of Self-Love, 1988)

Carme Riera, in *Qüestió d'amor propi*, makes use of the simple and traditional narrative form of the epistolary genre. Through a letter, the writer unwinds the threads of her story with deliberation and adroitness. I say adroitness for the control of the rhythm and the different states of narration. The letter to a faraway friend, in a process of studied metamorphosis, becomes a winding, sinuous road, with the intention of surprising the reader who, before every turn in the road, expects the comfort of a smooth highway leading straight to the horizon. A surprising four-season voyage to explain, after the introductory stage, a love story, its sordid background and the planning of an exemplary revenge.

(Isidor Cònsul, *Serra d'Or*, 341, 1988).



Joc de miralls (Mirror Images, 1989)

Carme Riera knows how to turn the tables on the opponent using a skillful game; and there are no lack of games and mirrors. The work is situated in an imaginary South American country—with many particulars belonging to Argentina—and this fact becomes another game inside a game, because the country described in the novel "The Reveal," supposedly written by Corbalán, is also imaginary. A similar reflective parallelism between the description of love scenes and the description of torture is present in the first chapter of part one. Teresa Mascaró is also a reflection of Bettina Brentano. Otherwise, the feminine characters do not have a central role in the work. Even Blanca Alvarado de Paz, who in the beginning seems to be a key protagonist of the novel, is in the end the least clear character, although she is evidently the starting impulse of the work. However, her existence is a simple excuse to speak of the battle between Corbalán and Gallego, a battle expressed easily by the author, in which there are no winners, only losers. Carme Riera, without renouncing the careful language that we always find in the whole of her literary work, seems to leave behind the lyric features of her stories to deepen the narrative resources of the best novels.

(Neus Aguado, «Carme Riera en clave de seducció» [Carme Riera in Seduction Code], *La Vanguardia*, 9 June, 1989).

Contra l'amor en companyia i altres relats (Against Love in Company and Other Stories, 1991)

Whatever the tone she employs, Carme Riera's energetic voice winds throughout her stories with a profound narrative wisdom and a full command of the most fine-drawn nuances. For, despite the satiric tone as the main character, *Contra l'amor en companyia* does not lack for small incursions into the fantastic (like the poetic image of the bleeding unicorn in "La dame à la licorne") or subtle lyric touches with melancholy facets. The quality of Carme Riera's prose is made of many ingredients; in the delicate balance between expressive will and the requirement—self-requirement—for synthesis, she skillfully composes small masterpieces that cleanly stand out with the solidity of finished works and with a charm of a compositional neatness that can harmoniously interlock the subtle mixture of its elements.

(Neus Torres, *Revista de Catalunya*, 58, 1991).

Dins el darrer blau (In the Last Blue, 1994)

Dins el darrer blau is a choral novel, told in third person by an omniscient narrator, with a classic structure of introduction, conflict, and denouement. In the "final note," the author explains that the action is based on real events that occurred in Palma, between 1687 and 1691, when a group of converted Majorcan Jews, upon trying to flee to Livorno, were detained and condemned to be burned at the stake by the Inquisition. But although Carme Riera starts from historical facts, she manipulates the materials at her convenience to create fiction. Thus, she changes names and nicknames, invents characters and episodes, pulls others from literary tradition (the tale that the captain tells, which begins the novel, comes from a María de Zayas story;

the fake friar's confession from Castillo Solórzano), and compresses the action so that it gains in intensity. To these should be added two more smart choices: the achievement of the right tone, using language that, without being archaic, possesses the flavor of the era (not for nothing is the author a specialist in *Siglo de Oro* literature); and the exact recreation of a world, in which the minutest details and description of customs enrich the characters' wanderings. [...] This novel is, above all, a declaration against intolerance, against racism, against all those who condemn those who are different, but also a defense of the human condition, of love that rises above beliefs and ideas. [...]

(Fernando Valls, «Los años de la bestia» [The Years of the Beast], *El Mundo*, 16 March 1996).

Cap al cel obert (To the Open Sky, 2000)

Cap al cel obert is one of those novels that seduce, full of episodes belonging to the family scheme and Cuban society: personal envy, political betrayals and public repressions, no holds barred in the quest for financial power that converts the island into a bargaining chip, and a tempting mosaic for the detailed narrative, for the description of atmospheres, landscapes, and character portraits. Riera moves with the wisdom belonging to the great novelist that she is, with continuous allusions and tributes to the novelistic tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The use of ellipsis stands out, which advances the action and the irony characteristic of current narrative, whether via clever character names (like that of the so-called Dorothy Parker) or with hidden references to the narrator's position. Identity, mask, and imposture make a braid that destiny insists on disarranging for each character, again and again.

(Lluïsa Julià, *Serra d'Or*, 494, 2001).

La meitat de l'ànima (Half the Soul, 2004)

This novel is about a voyage, a complex search, that is translated, in terms of plot, into intrigue, a kind of thriller, with that dose of mystery and suspense that so attract readers, seducing them into continued reading. This double voyage is essential in *La meitat de l'ànima*. But there are other thematic and structural aspects characteristic of her work that are also present: letters, which is to say the importance of the epistolary novel, championed by the author, letters that presuppose a receiver who must be attracted—something very clear in *Cap al cel obert*—and, in this work, these are the letters of the main character's mother to her lover. In fact, seduction is one of the other important themes for Carme Riera, fleshed out in *Joc de miralls* as the figure of a greatly appealing fictitious writer, Corbalán, and in *La meitat de l'ànima* as Albert Camus, a pivotal writer for Riera's generation, whose thought is perpetually modern, presented as a screen actor, appealing to women, with multiple lovers, a kind of Humphrey Bogart, who with his classic trench coat and cigarette has become one of the icons of the twentieth century. The main character's mother also comes close to this category. [...]

(Carme Arnau, «La meitat de l'ànima: un segle laberíntic» [La meitat de l'ànima: A Labyrinthine Century], *AVUI*, 17 June 2004)