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Conversation with Carme Riera
Kathleen M. Glenn

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CONVERSATION WITH CARMÉ RIERA*

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Carmé Riera, professor of Spanish literature at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, is the author of several volumes of short stories — *Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora* (1975), a best seller that is now in its thirty-second edition, *Jo pos per testimoni les gavines* (1977), *Palabra de mujer* (1980), which is the Castilian version of the first two books, *Epítelis tendríssims* (1981), and *Contra l'amor en companyia i altres relats* (1991)— and of three novels, all of which have been translated into Castilian: *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* (1981, Prudenci Bertrana Prize), *Qüestió d'amor propi* (1987), and *Joc de miralls* (1989, Ramon Llull Prize). In 1988 her *La Escuela de Barcelona* was awarded the Anagrama Essay Prize. I interviewed Riera at her home in Barcelona in May, 1990.¹

KG: One of the characteristics of your fiction is the use of letters. What is the reason for your sustained interest in the letter as a literary form?

CR: It may be due to my studies with nuns of the Sacred Heart Order, the Order responsible for the education of the female characters of Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. We had to compose letters constantly, as literary exercises, and so I had a great deal of practice in school and that, at least initially, undoubtedly influenced me. Furthermore, I enjoy writing letters. Now I don't do so because of a lack of time, but when I was an adolescent I wrote to my girlfriends during vacations and later I corresponded with boyfriends. I have always been separated geographically from people who were important to me, and letters were a good means of communication. That may be why the opening story in my first book of short fiction is a letter, a fictitious letter that is a deferred dialogue. In the case of *Qüestió d'amor propi*, it seemed to me that a letter was the appropriate form for allowing the protagonist, Àngela, to tell her story from her point of view without being interrupted or challenged. If the story had been written as a dialogue, her friend would have asked her questions, Àngela would have lost narrative control, and it would have been more evident that her version of events is just that, one version.

KG: Letters also play an important role in «Jo pos per testimoni les gavines».

* This conversation is a companion piece to the article *Reading and Writing the Other Side of the Story in Two Narratives by Carmé Riera*, which was published in «Catalan Review», VII: 1 (1993).

¹ The interview was conducted in Spanish. The translation is mine.

CR: Yes, something very interesting happened there. I write in Catalan and many readers, perhaps because this is such a small community, identify with my characters and write to me saying that what I have narrated has happened to them. With that in mind I composed two fictitious letters, one addressed to Editorial Laia, publisher of my first book, and another addressed to me by a woman who is convinced that I portrayed her in «Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora». Thus my schooling and the fact that I have received many letters have influenced me, and I like the confidential tone that is typical of much correspondence. I suppose that I as a woman—and this may well be a characteristic of literature by women—believe that a confiding, complicitous tone is the best way of reaching others. The primary objective of an epistle is to make its reader an accomplice, a confidant. Obviously it is not always possible to employ the epistolary mode. *War and Peace* could not have been written in that fashion. But there are certain subjects, such as those dealing with intimate private life and psychology, which lend themselves to being developed through letters. I have employed this technique in all my novels because of its efficacy as a means of creating a relationship of complicity with the reader.

KG: When critics discuss fiction written by women, they repeatedly mention the use of first-person narration, the importance of memory, the reliance upon autobiographical material, and the tone of intimacy. Do these characteristics apply to your work?

CR: Not particularly. I believe, however, that everything has an autobiographical basis. By this I mean that you constantly put yourself «in the shoes of» someone else, figuratively speaking. For example, it seems to me that many of the things that happen to the principal male character of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* are things that could have happened to García Márquez in similar circumstances. With respect to my most recent novel, I have not avidly pursued a writer, but if I had done so, I would have done it in the same way that my protagonist does. There is much of me in her, but I am not that girl who goes to Itálica, an invented place, to meet the real Corbalán. Sensations and details of landscapes that have impressed me appear subsequently in my texts, but I would not say that my work is autobiographical in the sense that I constantly speak of myself. No, rather it is a question of my standing «in the shoes of» my characters.

KG: Do you think that women writers make greater use of autobiographical elements than do men?

CR: No, I think the difference is an individual one. When Proust, for instance, writes *Remembrance of Things Past*, he employs many

details of his own life but he is not the character Marcel. I believe that the degree to which autobiographical material is used depends more on who writes than on whether that person is a man or a woman.

KG: It is a literary commonplace that all writers have their own obsessions. What are yours?

CR: One obsessive theme is that of human relations. I am especially interested in friendship and love, since we often find that the other person involved does not share our emotions and we are prone to fantasize about matters that have to do with our feelings. These are the types of questions that interest me. Above all I am concerned that literature serve, at least in part to explain our situation in the world, but I do not expect it to perform miracles. It may be that I write for the same reason that I would like to be read, because writing facilitates my understanding of the world. I want to emphasize that I do not think that the artist is the one who says what the world is like, absolutely not. I do not possess the truth nor do I even know how one goes about searching for it, but the act of reflecting on paper helps me to find my own small portion of truth.

KG: In your interview with Geraldine Nichols, she spoke of the Catalan woman writer as a doubly marginalized being, inasmuch as she is a woman and she writes in a «minority» languages.² Do you feel marginalized?

CR: No. When Virginia Woolf spoke of the anger that drives the woman writer, in reality she was not referring to herself but to writers of former eras. I believe that being a woman also has its advantages. Being a Catalan woman and writing in Catalan is, however, a disadvantage for a variety of reasons. It so happens that tomorrow I'm going to a conference on minority writing that will bring together Galicians, Basques, and Catalans. Let me explain something. Castilian is a completely formed literary language, and in the nineteenth century Galdós incorporated colloquial language into the novel, as did Pardo Bazán. Mercè Rodoreda has done this very recently in Catalan, but she has heeded the norms established by Pompeu Fabra in the *Diccionari General de la Llengua Catalana*, the dictionary that explains what words can and what words ought not be used. Here in Catalonia we have the problem of words that are Castilianisms and that a writer should not employ, even though the voice he wants to record is that of a person who uses such barbarisms. We have a lan-

² See Geraldine C. NICHOLS, *Escribir, espacio propio: Laforet, Matute, Moix, Tusquets, Riera y Roig por sí mismas* (Mineapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literatures, 1989).

guage that we do not as yet totally control. We have not been educated in Catalan but in Castilian. And our literature is «stateless»; the state, the central government, employs Castilian. This creates serious problems. People in Europe or America think that the language of Spain is Castilian or Spanish, and nothing else. There are few who are aware that both Galician and Catalan, and Basque to a lesser extent, have an important literary tradition.

KG: Are there considerable differences between Majorcan and Catalan?

CR: Yes, in my case the problem is even greater, because I use the dialectal variant Majorcan. We say «mos», for example, rather than «gat». There are many words that are different and that have remained purer in our language, because until recently it was more isolated. There are also phonetic differences, and Catalans say that if they do not make a special effort, they cannot understand us. It's curious. My mother is from Barcelona and my father is Majorcan. The two met at the university and they spoke Castilian so as to understand one another..

KG: And there is also a disadvantage in that your reading public, in Catalan, is smaller.

CR: Yes, but only in one sense. Catalans are avid readers, and the editions of our books are large. I, at least, have been very fortunate in that my books have gone through many editions. Now then, in 1989 I won the Ramon Llull Prize, which is awarded by José Manuel Lara, the head of Planeta, for works in Catalan and has a value of three million pesetas. The Planeta Prize, given to works written in Castilian, carries an award of twenty million pesetas. The difference is glaring and easily explained, because with a good advertising campaign the number of potential Castilian-speaking readers is huge, whereas even with extensive publicity it is much smaller in Catalan, and many of the people reached by that publicity are ones who already follow your work.

KG: Does your being Catalan inspire prejudice or curiosity in a reader from Madrid?

CR: An enormous amount of prejudice and disinterest. Castilian-speaking readers, whether they are from Madrid or from the provinces, would rather read a translation of something written in English than of something composed in Catalan.

KG: Why is that?

CR: I can't explain it, but I can say that there is a considerable measure of scorn for the minority languages and a great lack of interest in them. I suppose people think that we could have written in Castilian and should have done so, in order to attract more readers.

And that we, from our autonomous region, cannot possibly tell them anything they don't already know. In contrast, English-language authors, particularly if they are American, write about New York, and cultivate «dirty realism», have a great appeal.

KG: You have compared writing with making love and your texts, especially *Qüestió d'amor propi*, are filled with seductions.

CR: I always say that the first thing a writer has to do is seduce the reader, because without this seduction the reader will not continue reading. As far as I am concerned, writers must seduce their readers and then open windows for them and excite their imagination so that they will finish the book they hold in their hands.

KG: One could employ the word «seduction» to describe the way you deceive readers of «Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora» and seduce them into thinking the letter is being written to a man.

CR: Yes, I have used that technique, I do not lie, but I do attempt to seduce. The author must organize a world that is filled with expectation, mystery —without mystery seduction is not possible— and secrecy.

KG: The desire to transgress norms is evident in *Epitelis tendríssims*, where all the loves depicted are strange, forbidden, perverse.

CR: Yes, everything is abnormal, deliberately so. It is deliberate because the book is a game of love and eroticism and I did not want to speak of what is normal, run-of-the-mill. Eroticism in the sense of healthy sexuality need not be treated ironically, but that is not the situation in *Epitelis tendríssims*, where everything is out of the ordinary. One character is enamored of an exquisite head of cauliflower, another of a dog, and yet another of an air-conditioning unit.

KG: What has been the reaction to this book, especially on the part of male critics?

CR: They have not liked it at all.

KG: Because they think that a woman should not write about eroticism and that it is a subject that should not be treated humorously?

CR: I'm not sure, but they didn't like it one bit. They said that it was my poorest work, that it was a shame that I had written it. My other books were translated almost immediately, but not a single publisher has shown an interest in translating this one. I found the book amusing. I don't know if it is good or bad, but I enjoyed writing it. I remember that the public presentation was entertaining. The invitations were issued in the name of the characters, who all appeared in person, even the dog.

KG: When you write, what interests you more, the characters or the creation of a fictive world?

CR: I tend to think that the second is more difficult. It is hard to make what you write cohesive and versimilar, but within this world, the characters are fundamental. I don't know which is more important.

KG: In the case of *Palabra de mujer* I was surprised by the difference between the Castilian translation and the Catalan original of «Jopos per testimoni les gavines».

CR: Two things happened. There were copyright problems and so, basically, I had to rewrite the story. Secondly, I write in Catalan but I teach Spanish literature and I'm completely bilingual. When I translate something I have written, I often find that the text does not «work» in Castilian and so rather than translate I write a new version. *Por persona interpuesta*, for instance, is not exactly the same as the Catalan original, *Joc de miralls*.

KG: In recent years there has been a veritable explosion in Catalonia of literature written by women. How do you explain this «boom»?

CR: But this has also happened in the rest of Spain.

KG: Yes, but here there is a nucleus of very important writers. Paraphrasing Josep M. Castellet's «the time of the reader», is this «the time of the woman writer»?

CR: I believe it is. We have discussed this at various conferences, and I think that what has happened is that we are the second generation of university students, after our mothers. We could be Carmen Laforet's daughters. We are not isolated cases, as were our mothers. There may be an exception or two, but I think all of us have attended the university.

KG: Do you regard yourselves as the heirs of Mercè Rodoreda and Laforet?

CR: I don't know if we are their heirs, but I consider *Nada* to be a fundamental work. I have great respect for Laforet and for this novel in particular.

KG: As an author, do you prefer the short story or the novel?

CR: It's not a question of preference. I'm overwhelmed with work and am lucky if I can find a couple of hours a week to devote to writing a story. A novel requires much more concentration and time.

KG: The final question. Why are there so many madwomen in your work?

CR: There were more strange women in my first stories, perhaps because of the Sacred Heart nuns. When I studied with them, Spanish society was already beginning to change, but they did not. We still bowed before the mother superior, and we wore white gloves when we entered the chapel and long veils when the bishop visited. It was

another would, that was out of tune with the second half of the twentieth century. And there was someone who was very important in my life, my grandmother. Without her I would not have been a writer. She belonged not to the nineteenth century but to the eighteenth. She was very intelligent but somewhat peculiar. I suppose that as a result when I began to write my characters too were rather strange. My education was not the customary one for girls of my age or class. Perhaps the protagonists of my later works are more normal, although now that I think about it I realize you cannot say that about Àngela, of *Qüestió d'amor propi*.

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