

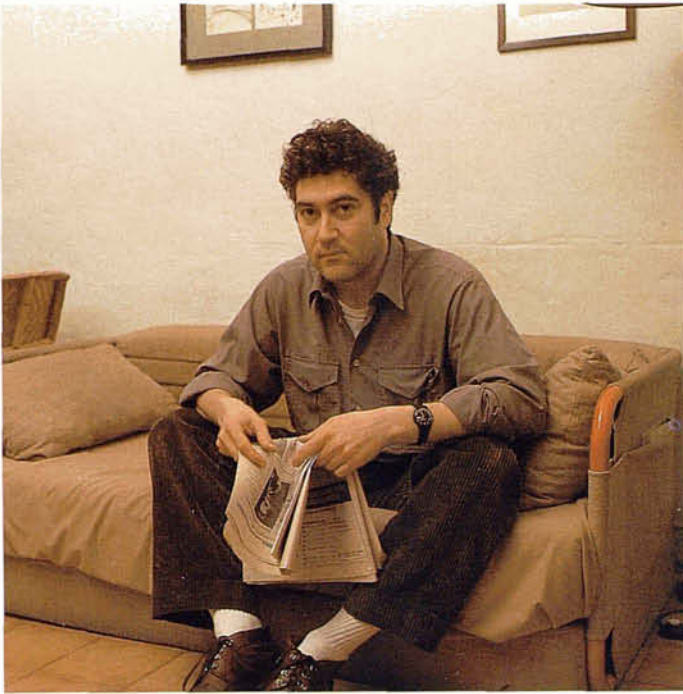
QUIM MONZÓ, FERRAN TORRENT, MARIA JAÉN. THE NEW CATALAN URBAN FICTION

AUTHORS WHOSE CHARACTERS AND SETTINGS BELONG TO THE CITY; INTENTIONALLY SIMPLE LANGUAGE THAT DOES AWAY WITH OUTDATED SYNTACTICAL APPLIANCES. AND A WISH TO REFLECT CONTEMPORARY LIFE THROUGH THEIR CHARACTERS AND SITUATIONS.

AGUSTÍ PONS JOURNALIST



© ELOI BONJOCH



© ELOI BONJOCH



For a foreigner, even one whose interest in Hispanics goes beyond sun and *flamenco*, it is difficult to get first hand information on Catalan literature. The language poses an unsurmountable barrier. Music and art have a universal language, which may be why it is easier to identify and lay claim to the Catalans Pau Casals, Montserrat Caballé, Joan Miró and Antoni Tàpies than Mercè Rodoreda, Pere Calders or Salvador Espriu, to name just three of the most important contemporary Catalan writers, who can be perfectly well equated with the best writers of other literatures. But the transformation that Catalan fiction is going through makes it worthwhile extending people's awareness of it beyond linguistic borders and beyond strictly literary circles. This renovation's most outstanding names are those of three authors and two publishers: Quim Monzó, Ferran Torrent

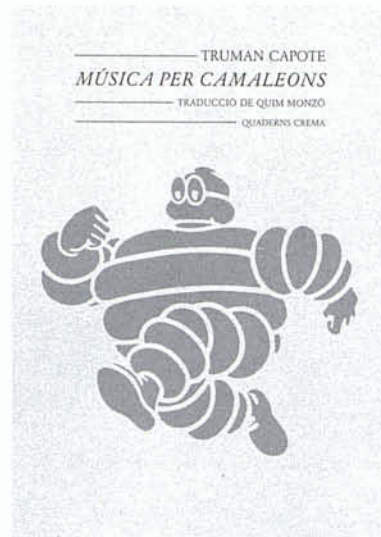
and Maria Jaén are the former, "Quaderns Crema" and "Columna Edicions", the latter. What common characteristics do the three authors present? Characters and settings that belong to the city; intentionally simple language that does away with outdated syntactical appliances, and a wish to reflect contemporary life through their characters and situations.

Quim Monzó (b. Barcelona, 1952) is one of the most successful writers on the Catalan market. Some of his books, like *Uf, va dir ell*, have sold more than a hundred thousand copies, a very high figure, considering the size of the Catalan market. So far, Quim Monzó has published six works of fiction and two collections of his journalism. He is also the author of *El tango de Don Joan*, a stage version of the Don Juan myth, which, directed by Jerome Savary, has had great success in Barcelona and Hamburg and has been

put on in several other cities, including New York.

After a series of relatively successful experiments — *L'udol del griso al caire de les clavaguères* (1976 Prudenci Bertrana Award) and *Self Service* (1977), in collaboration with Biel Mesquida—, he started to work with the publisher Jaume VallcorbaPlana, at the same time as the quality of his work improved and his success grew with the collections of short stories *Uf, va dir ell* (1978), ...*Olivetti, Moulineux, Chaffoteaux et Maury* (1980) and *L'illa de Maïans* (1985), the novel *Benzina* (1983) and the collections of articles *El dia del senyor* (1984) and *Zzzzzzzzz...* (1987).

Quim Monzó's narrative style seems to owe something to the immensely rich American tradition, which he knows only too well through his reading and his stay in New York on a grant from the *Fundació del Congrés de Cultura Catalana*, as



well as to those modern Catalan authors most closely tied to a certain ironic tradition: Francesc Trabal (b. Sabadell, 1899, d. Santiago de Chile, 1957), Pere Calders (b. Barcelona, 1912) and Jordi Sarsanedas (b. Barcelona, 1924). His work has been translated into French and English, and Oliver Conant, of The New York Times, thought he saw "perverse and hostile figures" in his stories and declared that "Monzó has read Kafka... and also drinks from the rich tradition of Spanish surrealism". For its own part, the French newspaper *Liberation* declared that "Monzó proves that Catalan has not been forced to remain a prisoner of the pomp and ceremony of Latin Philology".

His popularity with the Catalan generation of May 68—the one that most actively protested against General Franco—is due to Monzó's capacity to reflect on the everyday problems of his eminently urban characters, using a style of prose that is simple and energetic. In this respect, it is no coincidence that one of

his best-known books should be called *L'illa de Maïans*, an allusion to an island formerly situated off Barcelona, but which for centuries has formed part of the urban landscape, due to the alluvial action of the rivers that surround the city. Neither should we forget that, after New York, Barcelona is the city where Woody Allen's films are most appreciated, and that while in the twenties it was known as "little Paris", it now has its sights set on volcanic New York.

Ferran Torrent (b. Valencia, 1951) has achieved public success and the recognition of the critics for his last three novels, *No emprenyeu el comissari* (1984), *Penja els guants* (1985) and *Un negre amb un saxo* (1987), which all have the same central characters. Torrent has successfully portrayed the shadier districts of the city of Valencia, where sex and drugs play an important part. His characters are normally heavily ironic down-and-outs, with an approach to life which might strike an Anglo-Saxon as being typically Mediter-

ranean, who find themselves involved—often quite unwillingly—in the intrigues of the all-powerful mafia, of white collar crime, and who emerge from their skirmishes with the same impunity with which they originate them. A journalist by profession, Ferran Torrent presents a gallery of characters who are perfectly moral in their aparent immorality.

Maria Jaén (b. Sevilla, 1962) achieved enormous commercial success—thirty thousand copies sold in Catalan and twenty thousand in Castilian—with her first novel *Amorrada al piló* (1986), a piece of erotic fiction centred around a woman journalist who works for a radio station and who—if we are to believe the publicity slogan—uses her lovers as though they were Kleenex. The commercial success of the various editions was overwhelming, possibly because Catalan readers wanted to read in their own language what was no novelty to other literatures. Although there had already been an attempt to cultivate erotic litera-



ture in Catalan before the Spanish Civil War, the long Franco dictatorship prevented Catalan literature from increasing its points of reference. This explains the success of *Amorrada al piló*, as well as that of *Deu pometes té el pomer* (1980), a collection of erotic short stories written by a group of writers under the collective pseudonym of Ofèlia Draes. Maria Jaén's book had a mixed reception from the critics, who found it rather superficial. Nevertheless, its success was so spectacular that French and Castilian editions appeared, as well as the film *L'escot*, a great success in both its Catalan and Castilian versions, shown all over Spain. Inspired by the success of her first work of fiction and determined to show her worth as a novelist, Maria Jaén has published a second book, *Sauna* (1988), which rather brings to mind the stuffy atmosphere of Henry Miller's *Quiet days in Clichy*, in which the outrageous eroticism of *Amorrada al piló* gives way to a more orderly type of relationship, though a certain

sense of moral corruption is not lacking. Two final notes on the publishers of this new fiction. Jaume VallcorbaPlana (b. Tarragona, 1949) —Quim Monzó and Ferran Torrent's publisher— is a university lecturer who in 1979 founded *Edicions dels Quaderns Crema*, who are bringing out a critical edition of the work of J.V. Foix (Barcelona, 1898-1987), one of the greatest Catalan poets of all time, and who has combined the publication of learned works with his support of Monzó, Torrent and other young writers like Sergi Pàmies. VallcorbaPlana rejects being labelled as "modern" and says that "it's a question of creating a style. The thing is that, within this style, some writers, like Monzó, have created a fashion". On the other hand, Miquel Alzueta (b. Barcelona, 1956), has no objection to being called modern. Together with the poet Àlex Susanna and the teacher and translator Alfred Sargatal, he set up a small publisher's, *Columna*, in 1984, which has retrieved some of the

oldest living Catalan poets —Marià Manent, Tomàs Garcés, etc.— and, at the same time, has put some of the most successful writers of English fiction on the Catalan market: Patricia Highsmith, Tom Sharpe, Jay McInerney, David Leavitt, etc. Miquel Alzueta, who publishes Maria Jaén and other young writers like Toni Cucarella, puts his money squarely on modernity, especially if he can use this modernity to shake up the Catalan publishing world and as a bait by which to sell more books. These two men, Jaume VallcorbaPlana and Miquel Alzueta, friends and rivals, represent the new batch of Catalan publishers who are prepared to take over from the old names who resisted heroically under Franco. Prepared also to carry on and extend the job of winning over the Catalan reader of today; not an easy task, due to the uninterrupted siege maintained by television and radio and the presence of the "other" culture, which —let us not forget— represents the hegemony of the state. ■