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Javier Marías , Margaret Jull Costa (Translator)

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Victims of mistaken identity, sponging relatives, amateur sleuths, eavesdroppers, professional liars, assassins, and failed bodyguards populate the short stories in *When I Was Mortal*. Plots turn on curious exigencies—a woman about to star in her first porn film; a night doctor who adds new meaning to "specialist"; a ghost whose neglect is greatly resented. "In the space of ten or twenty pages," as the *Nouvel Observateur* remarked, "Marías contrives to write a novel." "The short story fits Marías like a glove," as *Le Point* noted, and these stories have been acclaimed as "dazzling" (*The London Times Literary Supplement*); "formidably intelligent" (*The London Review of Books*); and "startling" (*The New York Times Book Review*).

When I Was Mortal Details

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Kristin says

I personally did not really enjoy this book. I feel like Javier Marias jumped around a lot and the stories were not relevant to each other. One chapter could be talking about mistaken identity and the next could be about lairs. It just didn't make sense to me and the book wasn't all that interesting either. This book was made up of short stories with different "themes". For example, one of the chapters had a soccer theme. I think that the blurb of the book seemed more interesting than the book itself.

The book itself was also written in "older language" which I have to admit was impressive. However, the way Javier Marias formulated those words into stories was not impressive at all. Although his short stories may have meaning it did not appeal to me, maybe a more mature reader will appreciate his work.

In conclusion this book may be short with only 162 pages, I would not take the time to read it again. I was fairly disappointed because the cover art and the title itself is what caught my attention the most. I would not recommend this book to anyone else because half the time I could not comprehend what the plot was really about.

Joe says

Doce relatos escritos de forma magistral entre 1991 y 1995 y que van desde la crónica de costumbres contemporáneas a los cuentos de fantasmas.

Lo primero que debe saber un escritor de cuentos es que nunca dispone de mucho tiempo y que el lector no admite que ese poco transcurra en vano. Si Javier Marías no lo sabe, al menos lo disimula, porque sus relatos no sólo complacen e interesan, sino que además turban desde su inicio. Al igual que en sus celebradas novelas, su prosa aquí es capaz de alcanzar en unas páginas una tersura y una tensión que apenas permiten apartar la vista, como si tuviéramos la cara pegada a un cristal y no pudiéramos retirarla con una mezcla de fascinación y zozobra.

En los cuentos de Cuando fui mortal nos encontramos con personajes y situaciones que formarán parte de nuestra imaginación: un médico español que visita de noche las casas parisinas de mujeres casadas; un guardaespaldas aficionado al hipódromo que deseará que haya muerto el hombre a quien protege; un fantasma que padece la maldición máxima de saber ahora cuanto ocurrió en su vida; una aspirante a actriz porno que aguarda la sesión de rodaje junto a su compañero de reparto a quien no conoce; un escritor que experimenta consigo mismo para poder escribir sobre el dolor más tarde; un hombre y una mujer asesinados por una lanza africana en un Madrid veraniego; un futbolista mujeriego, una señorita de compañía que amará a un fantasma a quien lee libros y otros que salen directamente de Corazón tan blanco o Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí, mostrando que los escritores de talento llevan siempre consigo su estilo y su mundo en sus visitas a cualquier género.

O quizá bastan las palabras del propio autor: «Sólo concibo escribir algo si me divierto, y sólo puedo divertirme si me intereso. No hace falta añadir que ninguno de estos relatos habría sido escrito sin que yo me interesara por ellos».

Ben says

Addictive short stories about "the normally invisible wall that separates life and death," and the residents on either side. Marias is like Keret with a longer attention span, with the same sense of how to frame dark and light so that the contrast makes the light seem rarer, more fleeting, more worth holding on to.

Written and published separately over a four-year period, these stories have been ordered to comment and build on each other, to imply common real-life or psychological threads. The translation reads so well that you know both that it must read wonderfully in Spanish, and that the translator loved the work enough to take special care.

Pamela Rahn says

creo que tal vez no fue la forma mas común para comenzar a embarcarme en el mundo de Javier Marías, pero tal vez si fue la mejor.

Esta serie de relatos, son uno mejor que otro, están llenos de verdad, de mortalidad y sobre todo de tristeza, por algo que no fue pero sigue siendo.

Javier Marías me enamoro, espero leer mucho mas de el.

Aiyana says

This is a really beautiful collection of short works. Many of them are amusing, or disturbing, or both, but all are interesting, and most contain intriguing twists. Odd characters meet in odd circumstances, and death is more often the beginning of a story than its end.

I admit I'm not the biggest fan of the punctuation; I don't mind long sentences but I find run-ons distracting, even with the stream-of-consciousness style of storytelling. The words, however, are wonderful.

Quotes:

"[Dinner parties] are perfect opportunities for not talking to or getting to know anyone that you don't already know." p 5, from *The Night Doctor*

On the subject of an overcrowded beach: "An indistinguishable mass is never a pleasant sight...an excess of bare flesh has a distinctly levelling effect." p 39, from *"Flesh Sunday"*

"Life is compassionate, all lives are, at least that is the norm, which is why we consider as wicked those people who do not cover up or hide or lie, those who tell everything that they know and hear, as well as what they do and think. We call them cruel." p 45, *"When I Was Mortal"*

"I've seen pain now, I've observed it, gauged it, measured it, but now it's my turn to suffer it again, and not only physical pain, which is commonplace enough, but psychic pain, the pain that makes the thinking brain want only to stop thinking, but it can't." p 72, *"Everything Bad Comes Back"*

"The woman's breasts were definitively soft, shapely and provocative, but nonetheless soft, sight and touch become fused in the end, we men sometimes look at something as if we were touching it, and this can sometimes cause offense." p 111, "Spear Blood"

"... you don't cease depending on people for the accidental fact that you can't see them any more." p 112, "Spear Blood"

"... everything has its limits, even the inexplicable.." p 113

"... people convince themselves that they want something as a more efficient means of getting it, and those people will always have the edge over those who don't know what they want or only know what they don't want." p 149, "In Uncertain Time"

jeremy says

when i was mortal collects a dozen of javier marías' short stories. all but one of these were commissioned, some with literary or thematic constraints, for various spanish-language publications in the early 1990s. while i, perhaps foolishly, have yet to read one of marías' novels, i do find his short stories well written and cleverly composed. as one who generally prefers the novel to the short story format, i must imagine his longer works as even more rewarding.

though *when i was mortal* is without a lackluster tale, none seem to excel quite so effortlessly as marías' recently translated short story/novella *bad nature, or with elvis in mexico*. nonetheless, the collection's best pieces include "the night doctor," "on the honeymoon," "broken binoculars," the title story, and "spear blood." *when i was mortal* was rendered from the spanish by the remarkable margaret jull costa.

i often used to pretend i believed in ghosts, and i did so blithely, but now that i am myself a ghost, i understand why, traditionally, they are depicted as mournful creatures who stubbornly return to the places they knew when they were mortal. for they do return. very rarely are they or we noticed, the houses we lived in have changed and the people who live in them do not even know of our past existence, they cannot even imagine it: like children, these men and women believe that the world began with their birth, and they never wonder if, on the ground they tread, others once trod with lighter steps or with fateful footfalls, if between the walls that shelter them others heard whispers or laughter, or if someone once read a letter out loud, or strangled the person he most loved.

Mike Puma says

Hints at stories. Hints at stories, with a familiar voice—not the familiarity of mere recognition, but the familiarity of intimacy. Those of us who've read a lot of Marías will understand, hopefully, that I'm not

speaking of the narrator's voice, but rather the author's voice, Marías' voice, a voice that speaks through a broad grin and says, "How lovely to see you again. Have I told you about...?" As the author's voice becomes more familiar, other aspects of Marías' style reemerge: his use of rhetoric, e.g. exquisite iteration of phrase, sequence or detail; his intricate characterization; his ability to build suspense from a mundane encounter. Twists of fate; humor, dry or dark. Classic Marías in bite-sized portions.

The Night Doctor—First do no harm? Really? Maybe? Perhaps.

The Italian Legacy—The inverse realities of two Italian women, friends of the narrator, and their unfortunate choices of men.

On the Honeymoon—An expanded excerpt of a scene from *A Heart So White* which makes me want to read that novel immediately. One of those astonishing scenes where Marías shines in his creation of character and tension between honeymooners and the woman-from-across-the-street. Pitch perfect.

Broken Binoculars—A chance encounter at a race track, an accessory after the fact? The narrator's (and author's) attention to detail might send you scurrying back to James Wood or David Lodge—as it will me. This one seems very familiar and may have been part of *Tomorrow in the Battle Think On Me* (published after the author's introduction to this volume).

Unfinished Figures—A forger who might also commit a deceit? Also familiar is the character Custardoy (the *Your Face Tomorrow* sequence and *A Heart So White*). And that three-legged dog—hasn't he been around the block once before, too?

Flesh Sunday—Two men watching the crowds on a beach, each with his own aim. Another wife named Luisa.

Fewer Scruples—A reluctant porn-actress gets a lesson in worse professions. Another cameo by Custardoy.

Spear Blood—Wow! A dispassionate narrator recounts the murder of an old friend some two years prior and his eventual solution to the mystery. By far, the longest story in this collection. Day-long Faulknerian sentences, at times demanding and at other times, effortless music. Cameo appearance by Ruibérriz de Torres, a minor character in *Tomorrow in the Battle Think On Me* and the narrator of *Bad Nature*, or *With Elvis in Mexico*, also present is RdT's trademark count: "one, two, three, four," although voiced by the narrator, Victor Francés. At one point the narrator resorts to window-peeping in a search of clues and confides:

That room too was only dimly lit, a large part of it lay in shadows, it was like trying to get to the bottom of a story from which the main elements have been deliberately omitted and about which we know only odd details, my vision blurred and with only a restricted view.

Boy, howdy!

In Uncertain Time—Perhaps, Thomas Wolfe was wrong; perhaps, you can *only* go home again, but you can't remain there long. A Hungarian soccer player for Madrid (or football player, if you prefer, or fútbol player, if you must) toys with the emotions of a packed stadium before a gentle tug and learning the meaning of *always*.

No More Loves—A gentle ghost story and an homage to *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (the novel, not the old TV show). References to Lord Rymer, the hard-drinking warden of high tables in *All Souls* and a Mrs. Cromer-Blake—there is another character in *All Souls*, a gay professor named Cromer-Blake; I don't recall

mention of a Mrs.

Well worth the time spent reading; the appearances of characters from other JM works is a bonus, but none of the stories rely on their familiarity.

Iris says

Oh man, oh god, oh man, oh god - I'm writing a novel.

I imagine that this is the thought that threatens to choke writers. Some authors' novels can seem stilted compared to their wild and free short stories. Shorter pieces offer more room to play and experiment, often bringing authors to their most vivid and original moments.

An exception: the work of Javier Marías, author of this story collection, "When I Was Mortal." Though delightful, these stories are stilted when compared to his wondrous novels ("All Souls," "A Heart So White"). Like Flaubert or Tolstoy, he is more innovative in long, contemplative works.

In his introduction to "When I Was Mortal", Marías describes his respect for commissioned stories. Indeed, most masterpieces at the Louvre or the Prado were the result of a patron's constraints and rules. There's an art to working through specifications, and Marías had to obey specified subject matters and lengths and even vocabularies when writing these stories for *El Mundo* and other newspapers.

I agree that creativity flourishes under arbitrary top-down rules. Yet entirely of his own accord, Marías returns to the same fixations in these stories. It's fascinating to watch him work through these obsessions:

- night doctors ("When I Was Mortal," "The Night Doctor")
 - Italian women living in Paris ("The Night Doctor," "Italian Legacy")
 - dropping a pair of binoculars when noticing that the man standing next to him is a sharpshooter ("Broken Binoculars," "Flesh Sunday")
 - the humdrum existence of a ghost ("No More Loves," "When I Was Mortal")
 - obscure early 20th-c. British literature ("Everything Bad Comes Back," "No More Loves")
-

Jonathan says

I only picked this book up from the library when the title caught my eye...oh and it was a Penguin Modern Classics as well - but I'd never heard of the author before.

This short collection contains twelve stories ranging from a few pages to about fifty pages. I won't go into detail about each story but I only want to say that I was impressed with them. They reminded me of the early

Ian McEwan collections, such as First Love, Last Rites and others. They're all set in modern Spain, or sometimes Paris; they're urban; there's a subdued sense of menace in nearly all of the stories; and in many of the stories a plot twist or revelation at the end of the story.

My own real complaint or query is that the first three stories are probably the weakest - why do this when many people will abandon it before they get to the better stories? Incidentally, the better stories also seem to be the longer stories so I'll have to check out some of his novels - A Heart So White looks as if it's a good one to start with.

Lady-R says

No soy mucho de libros de relatos y menos cuando no tienen conexión unos con otros, pero me encanta el estilo narrativo de Javier Marías y por eso, cuando me topé con Cuando fui mortal, quise leerlo.

Es una compilación de relatos escritor por encargo, puede que por eso, no me hayan acabado de agradar todos ellos, pero leer a Marías sigue siendo un placer. A partir de, más o menos, mitad de libro están los relatos que más me han gustado, destacaría el que da nombre al libro y Todo mal vuelve.

Luís C. says

(...) We must not let time chess, this is the worst we can do, because they permeate and contaminate everything immediately, any aspect of existence, to the oldest, most distant from the sphere in which the disaster occurred, as a bloodstain. Even at the risk of string two away and stain more. There are people who are sinking like that.

C?r?i ?i c?l?torii says

De data aceasta, l-am descoperit pe Marias ca autor de povestiri ?i, surpriz?! am fost la fel de impresionat? ca de romanele sale.

În prefa?a volumului, autorul m?rturise?te c? unsprezece din cele dou?sprezece povestiri care îl compun au fost scrise la comand?, pentru a fi publicate în diverse reviste sau ziare, ceea ce m? face s?-l admir ?i mai mult. Nu e lucru u?or s? sco?i a?a ni?te texte frumoase, interesante, pline de suspans ?i cu un final mereu surprinz?tor din câteva cuvinte cheie, de exemplu, sau cu limit? de lungime.

Povestirile sunt ciudate, pline de secrete (Medicul de noapte), de coinciden?e (Mo?tenirea italian?), confuzii de identitate (În c?l?torie de nunt?, episod ce a fost inclus ulterior în romanul Inim? atât de alb?, dar cu un altfel de deznod?mânt), planuri criminale ascunse sub aparen?e banale (Binoclul spart), falsificatori de art? (Siluete neterminate), violen?e ce sparg lini?tea ?i rutina plajei (Duminic? de trupuri – ce titlu inspirat!), fantome (Când eram muritor ?i Sfâr?ite sunt iubirile), scriitori ?i experimentele lor literare (Orice r?u se întoarce), filme porno (Mai pu?ine scrupule), accente poli?iste ?i fantastice (Sânge pe lance), fotbal ?i jocul

de-a voin? a ?i de-a iminen? a (În timpul nesigur).

Am fost surprins? s? recunosc printre personajele pasagere câteva nume, cum ar fi Luisa, so?ia naratorului, Custardoy ?i Ruibérriz de Torres, ce apar ?i în romanele sus-amintite. E ca ?i cum povestirile ar prevesti sau ar prelungi romanele, iar personajele comune s-ar plimba liber dintr-unele în altele, a?a, s? mai schimbe peisajul (îns? f?r? a fi inconsecvente).

Recenzia întreag? pe: <http://mihaelaburuiana.com/cartisical...>

Rahul Mehra says

My actual rating would be 3.5 but since Goodreads doesn't welcome half star ratings.

This was the first thing I read by Marías and it has been an entertaining read. The majority of this short stories in this collection were born out of commissioned work which does somewhat cage Marías skills.

Nevertheless, When I Was Mortal is a gripping collection full of short stories evincing precise narration and at times, dazzling prose.

I was disappointed by some of the stories in this collection because a few of them hinge on a similar use of the plot twist. However, there is enough variation here to be devoured.

A special mention for the titular short story which shows how great a writer Marías is. I was simply enthralled by the style and subject of this short story. This is where it seems that Marías has been let loose and allowed to shine. If you're in a fix about buying this, this short story is worth it.

Other favourites from the collection, which I have read more than once include "Unfinished Figures" (only 4 pages long), "Everything Bad Comes Back" (reminded me of Bolaño and Borges), "Fewer Scruples" (simply for the subject) and "Blood on a Spear" (crime or thriller told in a flamboyant style).

I think this has served as a very good introduction to Marías writings and I simply can't wait to read a novel by him - there are so many and I know how difficult it is for me to not buy a copy.

"A Heart So White", "All Souls" and "Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me" seem all fascinating novels to start with. I really love his prose, sadly which only shined, as I said before and risking verbosity, in the eponymous story When I Was Mortal.

Recommended for everyone.

Jessica says

My introduction to Javier Marias and an excellent one. Stories that are elegant, quirky, brilliant, delicious.

SemneBune says

Spuneam recent c? printre pu?inele c?r?i care îmi vor reveni în minte, dintre cele citite anul trecut, se num?r? ?i Când eram muritor, Javier Marías. Nu pentru c? ar reprezenta vreun vâr? al scrierilor lui, nici pe departe, ci pentru c? printre cele 12 proze scurte adunate în acest volum s-au strecurat câteva foarte reu?ite. În ansamblu, Când eram muritor scoate în eviden?? faptul c? Javier Marías nu este scriitor de proz? scurt?. Cel pu?in asta e impresia pe care mi-a l?sat-o mie, aceea c? stilul lui digresiv nu se pliaz? foarte bine pe acest

gen, în sensul c? unele povestiri par s? se termine brusc sau par s? aib? finaluri improvizate, tocmai pentru c? se simte nevoia lui de a (le) continua, de a despica firul mai mult, a?a cum face de obicei în romane, unde are spa?iul necesar pentru a?a ceva. De altfel, el ?i explic? unele lucruri, într-o not? de la începutul volumului, ?i precizeaz? c? multe dintre ele au fost scrise la comand?, pentru diverse reviste, ?i i-au fost impuse dimensiunile.

de la surs?: Javier Marías – Când eram muritor – SemneBune <http://semnebune.ro/2014/javier-maria...>
