

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MARIA BARBAL

Narrative work in Catalan, translations, awards, and honors

- 1985 *Pedra de tartera* (Mountain Scree). Prizes: Joaquim Ruyra (1984), Joan Crexells (1985), Children's Literature prize of the Generalitat de Catalunya (1985). Translations: Bable (1992), Spanish (1995), Portuguese (2000), Romanian (2000), French (2004), German (2007), Slovenian (2008), Italian (2009), Dutch (2009)
- 1986 *La mort de Teresa* (The Death of Teresa)
- 1990 *Mel i metzines* (Honey and Poisons)
- 1991 *Pampallugues* (Flickering)
Pedra de tartera –theatrical version (with Joaquim Vila i Folch)
- 1992 *Càmfora* (Camphor). Prizes: National Literature Prize (1993), Critics' Prize 'Serra d'Or' (1993), Literary Critics' Prize for Catalan Fiction (1993). Translations: Portuguese (1997), Spanish (1998)
Des de la gàbia (From the Cage)
- 1994 *Ulleres de sol* (Sunglasses)
- 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). Premio 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).
- 1995 *Espagueti Miu* (Miu Spaghetti)
- 1996 *Escrivia cartes al cel* (Writing Letters to the Sky)
- 1998 *Bari* (Barium)
- 1999 *Carrer Bolívia* (Bolivia Street). Cavall Verd Prize (2000). Translation: Spanish (2001)
- 2001 *Camins de quietud* (Peaceful Paths)
L'helicòpter (The Helicopter)
- 2003 *Bella edat* (Beautiful Age). Translation: Spanish (2003)
- 2005 *País íntim* (Intimate Country). Prudenci Bertrana Prize 2005. Translations: Spanish (2007), German (2008)
- 2008 *Emma*. Translation: German (2009) Jaume Fuster Prize



Maria Barbal: When the Human Landscape Becomes Literary Material

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Almost twenty-five years testify to the career of one of the most important novelists of contemporary Catalan literature. Without a doubt she has been most successful in creating a faithful and wide reading public, which in the last few years has crossed borders and burst into the field of European literature, especially in France and Germany.

This career began in 1985 with a novel that, although it was her first, has become the author's essential work of reference. That novel was *Pedra de tartera* (Mountain Scree), a short novel that surprised critics as much as the reading public for its immense beauty, its implicit poetry and its prevailing forceful style, altogether an intelligent exercise of good literature. Situated in Pallars (Catalan Pyrenees), from whence Barbal herself hails, the novel tells the story of a woman, Conxa, who tells us the story of her life in hindsight at three specific ages: childhood, youth and old age. With the background of the historical events of the Republic, later Civil War and Franco era, Conxa comes to know love and hope but also loneliness, uprootedness, injustice and pain. Strong, and capable of bringing her family forward on her own, socioeconomic events cause her to lose her roots and see her planning to go live in Barcelona at the end of her life, carried off like mountain scree, in a completely anonymous manner. The simile serves the author as a way to portray a type of character who, albeit with certain differences, she will continue to depict throughout her oeuvre: strong on the inside, but never recognized by a history that is always written by the winners. These main characters are history's silenced, those who suffer the consequences of that which they have not chosen. Maria Barbal adds the elements of Conxa's double silencing—the fact of being a woman, and furthermore, from a humble background.

Pedra de tartera was followed by a collection of stories, *La mort de Teresa* (The death of Teresa, 1986), and two novels: *Mel i metzines* (Honey and Poisons, 1990) and *Càmfora* (Camphor, 1992). These titles will form part of the *Cicle del Pallars* (Pallars Cycle), so named because they are set in the author's region of origin, but they already indicate another orientation, that of Barcelona, the place where the author has resided for some time. In fact, these two geographic spaces serve Barbal as a basis for reflection about the abandoned towns of the Pyrenees, which will later become explicit in the book *Camins de quietud* (Peaceful Paths, 2001), a reflective book of great beauty that travels, via the 53 prose tales it contains, through many of these towns. The author recovers them for us through her gaze, and returns to them the voices and fullness of life that they had known.

From here, like a tree profoundly rooted in its origins, a great crown of branches can unfold. The later works of Maria Barbal have made use of short narrative (*Ulleres de sol*, *Sunglasses*, 1994) and the novel, to portray very different worlds and diverse

settings, but always with a constant digging, through her characters, into the very foundations of the human soul. She uses materials furnished by her own surroundings or distant realities, but always with a point of view located in the great problems of contemporary society. On two occasions, Barbal employed real events to develop the plot and describe a situation of injustice. This is the case for *Escrivia cartes al cel* (Writing Letters to the Sky, 1996) and her latest novel, *Emma* (2008). In the case of *Escrivia cartes al cel*, Barbal started from the news of a kidnapping in a preschool on the outskirts of Paris, which occurred in 1993. Writing in the hand of the main character, the author makes use of various narrative devices (personal letters, letters to the editor, interviews and personal ads) to serve as different lenses for describing a whole series of questions about the role of important elements of society, such as justice or the media, the importance of emotion and education, and the devastating effects of despair. In the case of *Emma*, Barbal's latest novel, the point of departure is an event that occurred in Barcelona, the burning of a homeless man in a bank teller machine booth. Barbal uses this piece of news to construct, in contrast, the character of Emma, the wife of a notable person in politics, who falls into poverty through love and deception. The contrast is the opulence of high society and the poverty in which it results. Besides this, social contradictions and injustice flourish again in this novel, specifically in order to denounce the subject of real estate speculation and to praise personal relationships and solidarity among the weakest.

Between these novels are many in which the author uses different settings to infuse life into her characters and construct their stories: in *Carrer Bolívia* (Bolivia Street, 1999), she returns to the subject of rootlessness, telling in choral style the story of Lina, an Andalusian girl who settles on Bolivia Street in Barcelona. Through her we travel the immigration boom, the era of workers' struggles, and anti-Franquist confrontations, not to mention generational conflict, human passions, and solidarity. In *Bella edat* (Beautiful Age, 2003) two elements inherent in the human condition are presented in a special manner: beauty and the passing of time. Starting from here, through the hand of the writer Fidel Sala, or Simoneta, his companion, the novel brings us face to face with beauty and ugliness, sickness and death, youth and age, and invites us to reflect on how our society treats these subjects. In *País íntim* (Intimate Country, 2005), Barbal returns to and advances the narrative thread begun in *Pedra de tartera*, a kind of continuity but with a generational leap. By making the conflictive relationship between the protagonist, Rita Albera and her mother explicit, Barbal shows us how injustice makes emotional development impossible. In a quite poetic way she causes us to realize the necessity of recovering historical memory, of compensating victims and closing wounds in order to construct a healthy society. It is at once a mother-daughter love song and a denunciation of wars and injustice. Once more, Barbal makes use of historical backgrounds in order to show the profound humanity of her characters. Whether they are masculine or feminine voices, they fight for their own dignity, despite having gone through events that often force them to experience situations of conflict. A forceful, essential style infuses Barbal's prose with a grand poetic tone, underwritten by a rigorous language that is always at the service of verisimilitude.