

# A COMPANION TO CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE

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## CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
1 <i>Entre visillos</i>	13
2 Short Stories	35
3 <i>Ritmo lento</i>	56
4 <i>Retahílas</i>	71
5 <i>Fragmentos de interior</i>	87
6 <i>El cuarto de atrás</i>	102
7 <i>Nubosidad variable</i>	123
8 <i>La Reina de las Nieves</i>	143
9 <i>Lo raro es vivir</i>	158
10 <i>Irse de casa</i>	171
11 Essays and Historical Writings	185
12 <i>El cuento de nunca acabar</i>	205
13 Theatre and Poetry	221
14 Children's Literature and <i>Los parentescos</i>	244
Conclusion	266
Further Reading	273
Bibliography	275
Index	289

## FOREWORD

I first met Carmen Martín Gaité thanks to some common friends who introduced me to her many, many years ago, when I was studying at the Complutense University, Madrid, and she had begun to write short pieces following the award of her degree from the University of Salamanca. Later, as a lecturer at the National University of Ireland, in Dublin, I taught a course on the contemporary Spanish novel and included *Entre visillos* on the syllabus. I well remember the enthusiasm which that novel sparked off in my students who, overcoming inevitable linguistic hurdles, could identify with those provincial Spanish girls living in a closed-off world and facing the inherent difficulties that it presented for them. For those Irish students that world was typically Spanish, yet, even if the dilemmas were not as acute, they could see similarities with the Ireland in which they were growing up. At least, that's how they saw it, and their reactions provoked considerable interest and debate in class.

In 1983, thanks to University funding to bring contemporary writers from Spain and Italy to Dublin, I invited Carmen Martín Gaité to Ireland, thinking she would be the perfect speaker to fire the students' imagination – not only because of her excellence as a novelist, but also because of her extrovert personality, which I had glimpsed all those years before in Madrid, and my hunch was confirmed as soon as she set foot in Ireland. The official funds available were limited, so I asked her to stay in my home, an invitation which she accepted at once with delight...

I'll never forget that week which Carmiña – as her closest friends call her, as she is from Galicia – spent in our house. Her first reaction, on being shown her room, was to rearrange the furniture. The armchair, where she could relax and read, was too far from the window and the free-standing mirror was too close, since she wasn't a woman who needed a lot of light to see her by now completely grey hair, which she brushed almost without looking. Those, at any rate, were the justifications which she gave for the rearrangements.

Her visits to our department and contact with the students were also unforgettable. I was afraid that, in the face of a visitor from Spain, the students might retreat into the timidity which was habitual on such occasions. I need not have worried. She and the students got on famously, and neither hesitated to raise their voices if they disagreed. I'd go so far as to say that the students

learnt a lot not just about literature but also about the Spanish temperament.

Happily, my youngest daughter got on well with her too. She was then about 18 or 19 and of an age with Carmen's own daughter, and they went shopping, not for things of Carmen's age (by then she was 57), but for the girls' generation – they went to fashion boutiques and the odd second-hand shop, with Carmen all dressed in frills and lace. Practically everything they bought was for her daughter, her only daughter, whom she adored and who died tragically only a few years later. Carmen would reflect with me, sitting in her room at night, about her life, revealing confidences about the break-up of her marriage to Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio; at other times, she would forget such sad matters and, at her instigation, we would sing together songs from our youth, famous romantic *boleros*, with their unforgettable erotic touches.

Inevitably, being in Ireland and given Carmen's love of partying, we took her to a pub, in Tallaght I believe. She took a certain care with her appearance, and particularly her hair. Her appearance in the chosen establishment caused an undeniable sensation. It was obvious not just that she was foreign, but also that she belonged to a certain type of bohemian middle class (which was quite true): someone who had rebelled, just like so many of her characters, against the *status quo* of the professional middle classes. But not in an aggressive way, more an inner rebellion... As was usual, the band asked if anyone wanted to sing. And Carmiña jumped up at once and took the stage. But if the Irish were expecting 'Cielito lindo' or 'La paloma', they were surprised to hear an old Castilian song, 'Salamanca, la blanca'. The applause was thunderous, even if no one had understood the words.

Carmen also went to Galway for a few days. I put the furniture back in its place, and we all reminisced on her visit with fondness. After that, each time I went to Madrid I would meet up with her, hear of her literary successes and her personal tragedies – which changed her, left her more distant. Writing was her only consolation. She died in 2000 but her memory lives on in many of us.

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