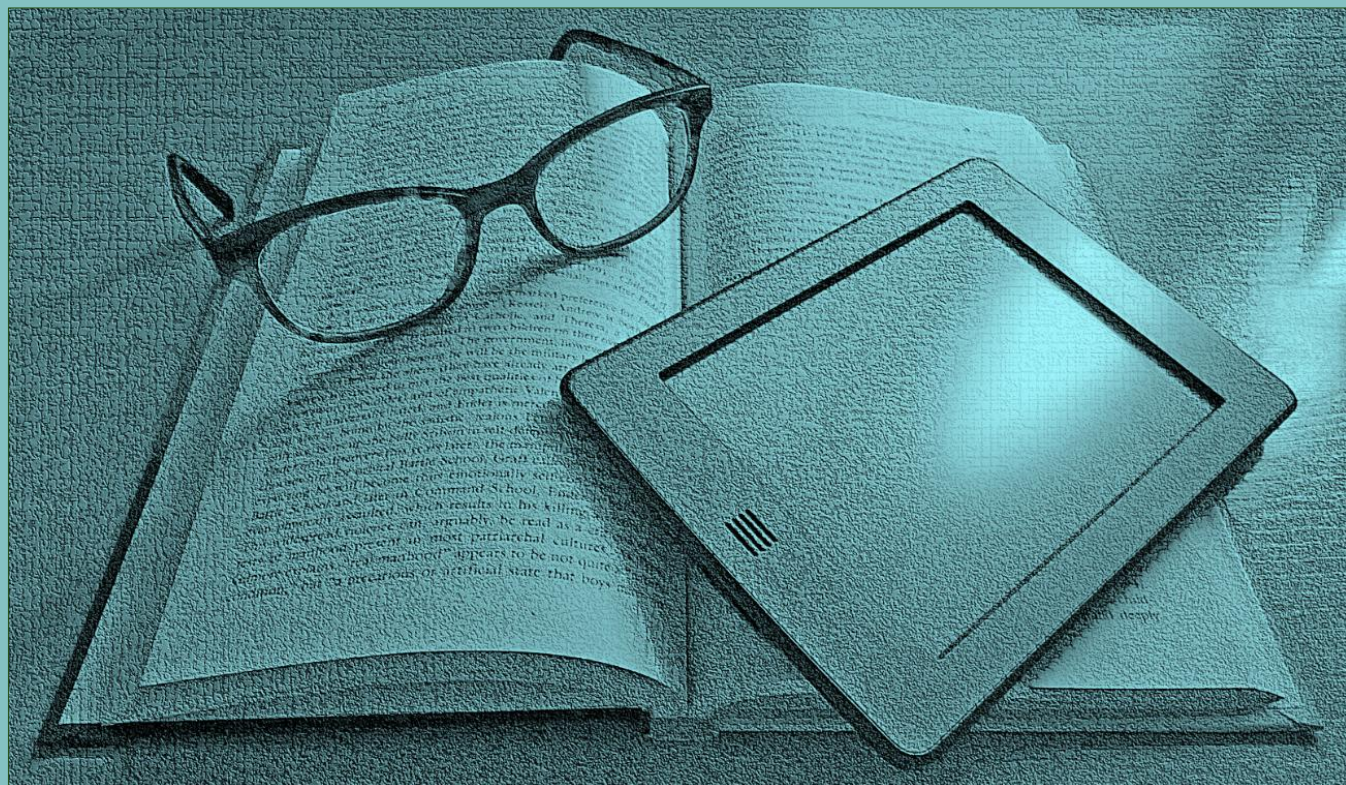




# THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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**PLEASE, NOTE:**

These are the posts published in my professional academic blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* (<https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/blog>), since September 2010) between September 2025 and July 2026. The fifteen previous volumes are also available from <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328>, together with the four first volumes (no. 12, 13, 14, and 15) in Spanish self-translation.

Sara Martín,  
Barcelona, August 2026

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## 9 September 2024 / THE FUTURE OF MEN BEYOND PATRIARCHY: MY NEW BOOK ON SF BY MEN

Happy new academic year! May it brings plenty of positive energy for teachers and students, and the thorough defeat of patriarchal darkness in all fronts and nations (yes, I'm thinking of those awful guys). I'll begin my sixteenth year as a blogger (how time passes!!), with a reminder that the all the yearly volumes can be found [online](#), including the Spanish-language volumes of the translated version that I started publishing in 2021. I have considered taking a break but finally decided against it for fear that this would end for ever the habit of writing a weekly post, so here I am again.

I'm using this first post of the year to publicise the latest book I have published, [\*Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction by Men\*](#), issued by Liverpool University Press within its noted collection [\*Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies\*](#). This is my third monograph in English and my sixth volume in that language, if I also include my three co-edited volumes, and I must say that, as regards the publishers, this has been my happiest experience. I wrote the book thinking specifically of the collection where it has appeared and from the first message my editor, Christabel Scaife, has been immensely helpful. The process of proofreading has been incredibly smooth, in comparison to the now habitual outsourcing of this process to companies that force authors to use appalling user-unfriendly platforms. I've had the pleasure of using a wonderful illustration for the cover by the artist @monofuture, of a truly handsome science-fictional man that I'm totally in love with. And, last but not least, Liverpool UP has allowed me to keep the rights for the Spanish language. Tired of being asked for money to publish my own translation into this language, the book is now available for free in true open access from UAB's repository as [\*Sin planes de futuro: masculinidad y ciencia ficción según los hombres\*](#). Enjoy both versions!

My first publication about men appeared in 1998, before I even knew that Masculinities Studies (now called Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities) existed. It was an article called "[Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mister Universe?: Hollywood Masculinity and the Search for the New Man](#)," in which I wondered why Schwarzenegger and other 'musculine' men (in Yvonne Tasker's famous denomination) did not embody a truly inspiring model, despite their popularity. Twenty-seven years later, I have reached the conclusion with my latest book that men simply have 'no plans for the future', hence my chosen subtitle. By this I mean that whereas most women (cis or trans), and gender fluid or non-binary persons, dream collectively of an egalitarian future, men do not dream about any specific gender utopia, except for the right-wing men who dream of a terrifying patriarchal future, as Margaret Atwood warned in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and the extreme right movements all over the planet reminds us every day.

In recent years, thanks to a lessened teaching workload, for which I thank my university, I have published diverse books on men and masculinities, apart from journal articles and book chapters. These books are *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* (Routledge, 2019), *Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film: Focus on Men* (CSP,

2020), *American Masculinities in Contemporary Documentary Film: Up Close Behind the Mask* (Palgrave, 2023), *Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture: In Search of Good Men* (Palgrave, co-edited with M. Isabel Santaulària, 2023) and the forthcoming *Masculinities in Contemporary Science-Fiction Television* (Bloomsbury, co-edited with Michael Pitts, 2025), apart, of course, from *Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction by Men*. I have translated myself the monographs into Spanish to give my research visibility in more than one language; *Detoxing* will also appear soon in translation. It's not as hard as it sounds, except for the index, which is the part of academic books I truly abhor.

As a woman, I have always enjoyed SF precisely because its vision of the future tends to be far more egalitarian than our present and has allowed me to believe that the feminist utopia will be fulfilled, sooner or later. There are, however, many other feminist scholars writing about women's or LGTBQIA+ SF and I decided a few years ago that in Science Fiction Studies we were losing track of what men are up to as SF authors, and of the characters their fiction. I could have chosen to consider men in women's SF fiction, but Michael Pitts had already done that in *Alternative Masculinities in Feminist Speculative Fiction: A New Man* (2021). Besides, I'm particularly interested in self-representation, and so the research question my new book answers is 'how do men represent men and masculinities in current 21<sup>st</sup> century SF?' I chose to consider only the current century because I believe that the SF by contemporary, living authors is substantially different from earlier 20th century SF, which is usually quite sexist. I'm not going to naively claim that current SF male authors are feminists, because that is not the case. Yet, I have found in their novels very many compelling female characters, treated with notable respect, and often placed in a much higher moral and personal ground than the less than ideal, often quite lost, vulnerable male characters.

My initial thesis was that male SF writers are not only aware of the impact of feminism on society and on SF in the Anglophone territories, but also of the negative influence that patriarchy has over men and the diverse masculinities. This thesis, I believe, has been proven along the fourteen chapters of the book, which cover seventeen authors of different nationalities and even different generations. The problem is that I have also been proven right (please excuse my smugness!) in the sub-thesis guiding me: namely, that despite their lucid awareness about the burdens that patriarchy imposes on the present, male SF writers have not invested their energies on imagining an alternative, egalitarian, truly free social order. They complain, or even rage, against the current patriarchal regime and fear that it can be prolonged into the future, hence the many villains roaming the pages of 21st-century SF by men, yet the lack of a common anti-patriarchal agenda, also missing in Western society at large, makes it very difficult for them to build the utopia that all human beings need now.

Here's the table of contents, hoping that these very well-known authors are minimally familiar to you:

Introduction: A Missing Agenda

1. How to Stop Future Patriarchy: Robert Charles Wilson's *The Chronoliths*

2. Queer SF and the Pursuit of Happiness: Geoff Ryman's *Lust* and Samuel R. Delany's *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*
  3. Body to Body: Ghostly Masculinity in Richard K. Morgan's Takeshi Kovacs Trilogy
  4. The Marrying Kind: John Scalzi's *Old Man's War* Series
  5. The Soldier, the Villain, and Hell: Iain M. Banks's *Surface Detail*
  6. Of Nerds and Geeks: Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* and *Ready Player Two*
  7. The Quixotic Space Captain: James S.A. Corey's *Expanse* Series
  8. Facing Disaster: Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* and Andy Weir's *The Martian*
  9. The Hero's Archive and the Evil Als: Daniel H. Wilson's *Robocalypse* and *Robogenesis*
  10. The Capitalist on the Moon: Ian McDonald's *Luna* Trilogy
  11. The Revenant General in the Woman's Body: Yoon Ha Lee's *Machineries of Empire*
  12. The Cowardly Hero That Nobody Likes: Tade Thompson's *Wormwood* Trilogy
  13. The Billionaire in the Digital Afterlife: Neal Stephenson's *Fall; or, Dodge in Hell*
  14. Men in Despair: Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*
- Conclusion

As you may imagine, it was extremely challenging to choose just a handful of authors among the many currently active in SF, and to choose within their production works that are both representative and relevant as regards the representation of men and masculinity. I did try to strike a balance, though. Of the seventeen authors included in the current volume, eleven are US citizens: Delany, Scalzi, Cline, Ty Franck and Daniel Abraham (the duo behind the penname James S.A. Corey), Whitehead, Weir, Wilson, Lee, Stephenson, and Robinson. Four authors are British: Morgan and Thompson are English (Thompson, of Nigerian descent, was partly raised in Nigeria), Banks was Scottish, and McDonald is Northern Irish. The other two, Wilson and Ryman are Canadian (though Wilson was born in the USA and Ryman has lived most of his life in the UK). There are gaps, then, to begin with, since I lack room for authors of other nationalities.

As regards race, fourteen authors are white, two are black (Whitehead and Thompson), one is Korean American (Lee) and another Indigenous (Daniel H. Wilson is Cherokee). Two authors are gay (Ryman and Delany) and one is a trans man (Lee); the rest are heterosexual, as far as the available biographies indicate. Regarding their dates of birth, the eldest is Samuel R. Delany (the only one born in the 1940s), followed by the authors born in the 1950s (Robert Charles Wilson, Ryman, Banks, Stephenson, Robinson), the 1960s (Morgan, Scalzi, Franck, Abraham, Whitehead, McDonald, Thompson) and the 1970s (Cline, Weir, Daniel H. Wilson, Lee). There is a thirty-seven-year-gap between the eldest (Delany) and the youngest (Lee). The selection might appear to be too biased towards US white heterosexual male authors, but they are the ones dominating the field and this is part of the make-up of the contemporary SF by men that I describe here. There are fourteen chapters in the current volume simply because the word count is necessarily limited. Readers might miss other authors (Stephen Baxter, Greg Bear, William Gibson, Stephen King, Alasdair Reynolds, Dan Simmons, Charles Stross, Adrian Tchaikovsky, Peter Watts and a long etcetera), but it is my hope

that if the volume is successful, my research might inspire other scholars to explore masculinity in men's SF beyond my selection.

As Richard K. Morgan writes in his kind review, I have carefully avoided "any smug blanket criticism of maleness," working with "an enthusiastic curiosity about *what the men are doing* and a principled but impassioned engagement with *why*." I have been very critical at points, whenever my feminist commitment has overcome my "enthusiastic curiosity" but I would be extremely happy if my book could enrich the conversation about men and masculinities in SF without the bitterness and acrimony that often plagues our approach to gender. As I've been arguing for many years now, it's about time we distinguish patriarchy from masculinity, to help build a future in which men are finally free from the poisonous toxicity of patriarchy. And SF by men, no doubt, can play a major role in that collective endeavour. Or should.

Now enjoy *Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction by Men* and please read the many great novels analysed in it.

**15 September 2025 / WHY WE NEED TO BE WARY ABOUT  
INTRODUCING AI INTO OUR TEACHING AND RESEARCH:  
COMMENTING ON GUEST ET AL.**

Today I'm using my post as an excuse to read an article titled "Against the Uncritical Adoption of 'AI' Technologies in Academia" by Olivia Guest and 18 other authors based mostly in the Netherlands. This text can be found in a pre-print repository (<https://philarchive.org/rec/GUEATU>) where it was filed on 7 September of the current year. The abstract warns that "under the banner of progress" many noxious products, such as tobacco, combustion engines, or social media, have been accepted with no reflection on the consequences, as we are doing now with AI. The authors, who had already published an open letter on this issue (see <https://openletter.earth/open-letter-stop-the-uncritical-adoption-of-ai-technologies-in-academia-b65bba1e>), call now "on our employers to reverse and rethink their stance on uncritically adopting AI technologies." Their aim is to convince universities to "counter the technology industry's marketing, hype, and harm; and to safeguard higher education, critical thinking, expertise, academic freedom, and scientific integrity." I share their worries 100%, hence my summary of their article for the benefit of my readers (it has a very long bibliography, in case this interests you).

I'll highlight a couple of opening statements, though it's hard to choose among so much of value:

- "The technology industry is taking advantage of us, sometimes even speaking through us, to convince our students that these AI technologies are useful (or necessary) and not harmful."
- "When it comes to the AI technology industry, we refuse their frames, reject their addictive and brittle technology, and demand that the sanctity of the university both as an institution and a set of values be restored."

The main points raised and discussed are (my paraphrase):

a) the fact that AI terminology, which has been around since the 1950s, is purposefully confusing, part of the corporations' use of buzzwords to sell products by creating hype

b) as teachers we lack the tech know-how to properly understand current AI systems and explain them in a nuanced way to our students (besides, "In the present, AI has no fixed meaning. It can be anything from a field of study to a piece of software"). Check: how many of you truly understand that ChatGPT is a LLM (Large Language Model) that possibly uses an ANN (Artificial Neural Network)? I say possibly because OpenAI is totally opaque about how it works and has not released source code (apparently an infringement of scientific regulations).

c) any rejection of AI places you in the field of the old-style, backward luddites. Your expertise is rejected in favour of the companies promoting the use of AI, which you can't oppose (a @BlueSky member told me that by forbidding my students to use AI I am seriously damaging their future professional prospects). The words 'ethics' and 'transparency' are often invoked to curb down our resistance, but they don't come from experts in AI application: they come from AI manufacturers. Greenwashing also plays a key role. The authors call "on the educational technology community to demystify AI systems and instead approach those with more criticality and humility."

d) AI is not unstoppable. Besides, if we contribute to its colonization of the university, we contribute to eroding the future and deskilling "students and ourselves," enhancing environmental destruction.

e) previous failures of technological promises to deliver should warn us that AI will inevitably fail. Its bubble will burst, leaving in its wake the destruction of many jobs and institutions of education. I'll add that, if you recall, primary school classes were digitalized in years past, only for teachers to conclude that this has been harming children. The Scandinavians, always at the forefront, are already emptying the classroom of digital devices.

f) anthropomorphism has made us jump to the very wrong conclusion that LLMs like ChatGPT are akin to persons in the way they interact with humans. Actually, LLMs simulate human behaviour based on the input they are fed but are BY NO MEANS independent, conscious thinkers.

g) we are integrating AI into our teaching (and research!) wrongly assuming ALL students use ChatGPT, when actually many understand its dangers and how it undermines the acquisition of key skills. I always tell my students that using ChatGPT to write an exercise is like having somebody else do it for you. Some are happy cheating that way, but many are not. One thing is teaching students

about AI technologies and their dangers, and quite another using them uncritically.

Finally, the authors provide five principles to protect “the ecosystem of human knowledge”:

- 1) Honesty (“we do not secretly use AI technologies without disclosure” and “one does not make unfounded claims about the presumed capabilities of AI technologies”)
- 2) Scrupulousness (we only use “AI products whose functionality is well-specified and validated for its specific scientific usage”)
- 3) Transparency (AI technologies are “open source and computationally reproducible”)
- 4) Independence (research is “unbiased by AI companies’ agendas” and “potential conflicts of interest are declared”)
- 5) Responsibility (our use of AI products cannot harm people, animals, and the environment, nor be “in violation of legal guidelines” such as copyright, data privacy, labour laws)

The authors end up noting that “the academic world has well-known structural incentives to cheat” inclining not only students but also researchers to use ChatGPT. I recently had to tell a young researcher asking whether it’s fine to write abstracts using ChatGPT that they should consider to stop writing papers... The authors, clever as they are, see the direct link between fascism and AI, for fascist regimes always attack academic integrity and prefer voters to be uneducated and uncritical. I find the analogy with tobacco most pertinent: knowing of the mortal risks we can now choose to smoke or not at our own peril. The difference between AI and tobacco is that we needn’t wait centuries to know that AI is addictive and harmful: we already have the evidence.

I’ll add a few more ideas:

- what we have now is not true AI (w.) which I mean a non-organic, digital intelligence capable of making autonomous, sentient decisions on the basis of a consciousness BUT this will come. It might take one year or one century, but the ‘singularity’ will happen. By giving in to current LLMs models, we further prepare the ground for real AI to take over human life when it does appear (please, read and see science fiction, which is full of that type of cautionary tale).
- AI, in its basic current form or advanced, can be a force for good if it frees humans from onerous occupations, daily hazards and medical problems. BUT for that it’s essential that its economic benefits revert to society and that AI is not controlled by corporations. What is wrong in the current development of AI is not AI per se but that its growth corresponds to greedy, ultra-capitalist, inhuman, fascist, patriarchal companies run by a handful of uncaring, unempathetic men (mostly white and living in the USA). There are wonderful uses to which AI can be put (for instance communication with animals), but the current model is based on eliciting dependence, which leads to financial gain (soon we’ll have to pay subscription) and predatory practices at all levels.

- AI can have a place in education and research but only as an aid, never as a replacement of the acquisition of academic skills. When I started studying in 1984, library catalogues were collections of typed cards printed on paper; now, library catalogues are searchable digital tools. I still need the same set of skills to find bibliography but, of course, the resources at the tips of my fingers are much larger. However, if you ask ChatGPT to write a bibliography for you, then you use no skills whatsoever, and will most likely end with a list full of fake entries (the famous hallucinations). You might use current AI as a far more advanced version of the typical Google search, but even so, you need to be careful, for LLMs are trained to please their users and will provide you with information to please you, even if that information is wrong.
- LLMs like ChatGPT are always extrapolating from the already existing knowledge and cannot innovate. So far, only human brains have the capacity to put 2+2 together and get a 5 instead of a 4 as a result, that is to say, have an insight that leads to a new idea. LLMs eat voraciously the documents we researchers produce to cut-n-paste, and pick-n-mix, which is why tech companies are currently the biggest thieves of intellectual property. YET, what current AI produces is necessarily derivative. It may be ok to pass a subject, but not to produce quality research, or train neurones.

This semester I'm teaching students to write book reviews and, thinking of the experience of last year with the same subject, I fully trust they will not use ChatGPT to write their reviews. I've built trust telling them 'surely, you won't let ChatGPT tell you what your opinion of a book is', so that they take pride in expressing their point of view about the texts they need to review. I believe this is crucial: we need to invite students to produce more personal exercises that do not simply parrot what we tell them, or what other researchers have claimed.

If students find uses for ChatGPT which do not harm their ability to acquire academic skills, I'm listening, but I'll certainly bear in mind the impeccable dissection of the problem that Guest at al. present, and the five principles that should rule a transparent, ethical, *avoidance* of current AI in academia. Try to imagine what would happen if instead of AI students had started using some mind-enhancing illegal drug and see whether we would so easily welcome it into our classrooms, for this the closest analogy to what is happening right now in the university.

## 21 September 2025 / ACADEMIC AUTHORS ARE WRITERS, AREN'T WE?

Today I'm inspired by an article published by Mariana Valverde (Professor Emeritus, Centre for Criminology and Sociolegal Studies, University of Toronto) in *The Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* (76.RS, 2025: 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.53386/nllq.v76iRS.1195>). The article is called "How the Academy Negatively Affects Writing Practice" and is part of an issue devoted entirely to writing (<https://nllq.qub.ac.uk/index.php/nllq/issue/view/134>). No, I'm not

suddenly inclined to reading about law matters, I've just come across Prof. Valverde's essay on the academic feed on @BlueSky (#AcademicSky). I would certainly recommend you to join this social network, and the feed itself to follow current debates.

Prof. Valverde's essay begins with her recalling the times in the 1970s when she was a young student busy as a journalist in diverse university and community newspapers in Canada. "Well before I had a serious position in the academy, I did a great deal of writing that was published," she writes. Tight deadlines, a hands-on approach to newspaper publication (she was often part of the team) and instant publication of her work freed her, relatively, "from the anxiety about printed texts that haunted so many of my graduate-school peers and, later, my academic colleagues."

As a post-grad student in Toronto, Prof. Valverde continued publishing for activist, feminist newspapers and magazines, a habit which, again, made her far less afraid of "of meeting deadlines and coming up with quick pieces on timely topics," unlike what usually is the case with PhD students. She attributes to her journalistic experience, then, her having eventually published "more books than most academics," and adds that she continues "to love writing, so it's likely I will keep doing it as long as my brain and my fingers cooperate." I share her feelings, though I have no previous experience like her in journalism.

Lesson number one: the assessment exercises we demand from our students are insufficient to create a solid writing habit. Asking (forcing?) our students to read does not result in a solid reading habit either, as we know. If we have so many difficulties to turn our students into constant, proficient readers, why should we assume that all of them can also acquire minimally reliable writing skills? What is, indeed, the meaning of the phrase 'good writing skills' in the context of higher education?

Prof. Valverde's article suggests that practice makes the (academic) writer, whether this practice is journalistic (as in her case), or, I would add, keeping a diary or, indeed, a blog. Writing on social networks is insufficient, as the word count is usually quite limited. However, very few young persons write substantial texts regularly, either for themselves or for publication, except for the papers and the pre-doctoral dissertations (BA, MA), which hardly prepare them to write a PhD dissertation. All the doctoral students I have supervised that have finally quitted have done so when faced with the daunting task (for them) of writing a first chapter.

Prof. Valverde's article continues with a statement we hardly ever consider: our main medium of communication are written texts, yet, she writes, "most academics are not born writers, and some really aren't suited to the task at all." Some, she notes, try to solve this shortcoming by teaming up with a colleague, but usually collaborate with other pure researchers, "thus compounding the problem." Others, Prof. Valverde observes, "can write, but only in the most wooden of prose styles" trying "to sound 'serious' and rigorous."

Prof. Valverde complains that many academic papers sound as if they have been translated from German or French, when English is "actually a great language for what one might call 'plain' writing." Recently, Catalan author and academic Borja Bagunyà complained that apart from recommendations and reviews, no engaging readings of literary texts circulate anywhere, meaning texts

that common readers without a PhD can understand. This is sad, considering the avalanche of academic publications issued every day. Valverde's and Bagunyà's reflections should make us consider what we gain by closing our academic texts to wider audiences, whether we write about the law or about literature.

Prof. Valverde, and other scholars I'm reading (like adaptation theorist Kamilla Elliot), complain that academic publishers are churning out articles and books written following the exact same model. Given the pressure to publish, there is no room for innovation. Gaps in the research are being filled in, but there is no way to substantially alter how academic articles and books are written (w.), for instance, making them more personal following a true essayistic style, or eschewing the need to overload the introductions with oceans of quotations and references to the extant literature.

Prof. Valverde protests that what might be called the 'genre' of the academic article is too static and too rigid, and has never been "properly reviewed," which is ironic given the current obsession with peer reviewing. I'll add that an obvious problem is that if you get reviewed by the kind of stern gatekeeping scholar that believes articles can only be written in one way, any attempt to try something different can hardly prosper. Like Prof. Valverde, I have a long list of rejections for that reason but have refused to be silenced: quite a few of my rejected articles are now online as self-published work (and they get cited) or in my books as chapters.

Precisely, Prof. Valverde recommends that we "limit the value—including the salary increase value—of articles published in scholarly journals" and give greater value to books. As we know, journal articles are valued above books because most scientists don't write books. Astonishingly, CNEAI, which runs the research assessment exercise for the Spanish agency ANECA, attributes the same value to articles as to books. Of the publications I submitted in my last 'sexenio', two were 300-page books and three were 20-page journal articles; it seems rational to think that a 300-page book should/could represent well enough six years of research, but that's not how things work. From this point of view, writing books is a ridiculous waste of time, but I just love doing that.

On the other hand, Prof. Valverde suggests that, if a scholar doesn't enjoy writing or lacks the skills to write books, they might experiment with other types of 'text' that could be likewise valid for assessment, including websites, films, podcasts, etc. It's always easier, however, to judge scholars by their journal articles, possibly because a number of interested corporations have insisted that their metric systems be used to gauge our research (this has proven to be much harder to apply to books).

Prof. Valverde's call "to think about style, genre and format—important dimensions of texts seeking publication that generally go 'without saying' in the academy," is particularly relevant, I think, for the Humanities. I don't think the scientists care so much about the quality of their prose, which possibly explains the proliferation of scientific articles written using AI. If you truly enjoy writing, you don't use AI. A dislike of writing and lack of skills also explains, of course, why so many young students use AI: they just don't like writing. I do use (revised) automatic translation for the Spanish version of this blog (I use Word's own translator), but it has never crossed my mind to use ChatGPT because the whole point of publishing a weekly post, is that I do like writing. A philosopher friend of

mine recently told me that writing (books, not articles!) is the centre of her academic life, and that teaching is just what provides a salary for her to write. This position used to be common in the past, when many scholars in the Humanities saw themselves primarily as writers, but it's not so common today when journal articles define our CVs.

Given our disinterest or inability to discuss the conventions of the genres we practice, even to acknowledge that our work is part of specific non-fiction genres, can we call ourselves writers or not? If we're not writers, despite the fact that the results of our research are always communicated in writing, then, what are we? Mere scribblers? Can a scholar who has published 100 articles be compared as a writer to an author who has published 100 short stories? If the reply is 'no', my question is 'why not'?

We sign contracts to publish, our work is subjected to the same copyright legislation, and we can register our texts as intellectual property (though often we give away property and copyright to greedy publishers). I used to believe that I am not a writer, until I saw myself described as one by a friend outside the university, which quite surprised me. Yet, it's about time to proclaim that, yes, I am a writer, and because I am one, I feel constantly frustrated that the conventions of the genres I write and the rules of academia are so constricting. This is the very reason why I started this blog fifteen years ago.

So, here's a simple proposal. In the journal I co-edit with Mariano Martín, *Hélice* (<https://www.revistahelice.com/en/main/>), we have a section called 'Miscelánea' to which authors can submit essays in the non-academic style they prefer. Some other journals have similar sections, but it would be nice to see them grow in all journals. This might bring in much needed fresh air and might end up changing the way we write—for we, academics, *are* writers, right? Or aren't we?

### 30 September 2025 / BACK TO ADAPTATION STUDIES: THE MATTER OF THEORIZING (AND KAMILLA ELLIOTT)

Back in 1992, when I started writing the shorter dissertation in our doctoral programme (the equivalent of an MA dissertation, since we didn't have yet MA programmes in Spain), I truly thought that my main field of research would be Adaptation Studies. My short dissertation dealt with the film adaptation of the novel by John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), directed by Karel Reisz in 1981, and scripted by the illustrious playwright Harold Pinter. I found Pinter's script extremely clever, and I defended in my dissertation the thesis that screen writers are unfairly overlooked, both in the study of adaptation and of films in general. More than 30 years later, reviewers still fail to include the names of the writers in their articles and few members of the audience (myself included) can name a favourite screen writer. Well, I'll name Charlie Kaufman.

Back to my academic biography, I decided next, in 1993, to focus my PhD dissertation on the film adaptations of *Frankenstein* but got carried away by the superb characterization of the creature in the novel and ended up producing a study of monstrosity between 1979 (*Alien*) and 1995 (I submitted my dissertation

in 1996). I did not, however, abandon Adaptation Studies. I've published articles and book chapters on *The Silence of the Lambs*; Orson Scott Card's novelization of James Cameron's film *The Abyss*; the adaptation of novelised biographical material in *Schindler's List*, *Heaven and Earth* and *Not without my Daughter*; the films based on cult novels *Dune* and *The Naked Lunch*; *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*; the adaptation of Pat Barker's WWI novel *Regeneration* (for the *Literature/Film Quarterly*); Corman's take on Aldiss' novel *Frankenstein Unbound*; *Final Fantasy* (a film that adapts a videogame); Spielberg's *The War of the Worlds*; and Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice*.

I'm very proud to have contributed a chapter to two key edited volumes: "Classic Shakespeare for All: *Forbidden Planet* and *Prospero's Books*, Two Screen Adaptations of *The Tempest*" (in Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye & Imelda Whelehan's *Classics in Film and Fiction*, 2000) and "What Does Heathcliff Look Like? Performance in Peter Kosminsky's Version of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*" (in Mireia Aragay's *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship*, 2005). In 2006 I published the short story collection *Siete relatos góticos: del papel a la pantalla*, with my translation of key gothic short fiction accompanied by a comment on their film adaptations; this book had a second version, [\*Ocho cuentos góticos: entre el papel y la pantalla\*](#) (2019).

The answer to the question of why I didn't finally pursue a career in Adaptation Studies, preferring to focus instead on Gender Studies and genres like gothic and science fiction is complicated. It took time for the field to be consolidated: the Association of Adaptation Studies was founded in 2006; its journal, *Adaptation*, appeared in 2008. By then, I was pursuing other research lines, with the added difficulty that in Spain Cultural Studies and Film Studies had (and still have) scant weight within English Studies. The key participants in Film Studies, in the University of Zaragoza, were never too interested in adaptations. Here at UAB, I did include film adaptations in some subjects, but I've never taught adaptation as such in any subject. Other areas of research, in short, offered wider avenues and I took them, though as a consumer of adapted films and series I have found much to enjoy, including many books discovered thanks to their screen versions.

There is another factor affecting Adaptation Studies, which is both positive and negative. Each case study is unique, which means, as I learnt with my short dissertation, that it's almost impossible to map all the correspondences between a source and the final product. This is a very engaging type of research that can be expanded in many directions; as you have seen, I have looked, for instance, into novelizations, videogames and even the intertextuality of actors. Yet, after working on more than a dozen adaptations, I began to have the impression that there was no way to find a common denominator to make sense of the practice of adapting. My work on gender, in contrast, has led me to assume far more solid theoretical positions. I have quite clear ideas about how masculinity and patriarchy interact and diverge, expressed in several books. I can't say with the same certainty how the kind of adaptation that most interests me, that of print literary texts onto films and TV series, works generally, except that screen writers are still woefully overlooked.

I had, however, two years ago, an idea for a book on adaptations after being invited to discuss the film versions of the novels by Shirley Jackson in Barcelona's

42, a truly great genre fiction festival. It occurred to me then, comparing the two films called *The Haunting* (1963, 1999), both adaptations of *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), that another element has been neglected in the study of adaptation: production design. I wrote then a couple of posts here (this [one](#) and that [one](#)) and opened a Word document with a list of literary works that have been adapted at least twice. I've been extra busy in the last two years, with my monograph on men in SF and two co-edited volumes, and although I revisited that Word file now and then, I simply had no time to start a new project.

When this Summer these three books reached the end of the long process of writing, I embarked on my monograph about secondary characters, and it became clear to me that any volume of mine on production design would have to be a collective endeavour. So, I have recruited seven authors I have already worked with, and have found three more through CFPs, and I'm currently waiting for them to send me their abstracts. The proposal will include eleven chapters, including mine on *Hill House*, comparing a speculative fiction text with two screen adaptations. The chapters will discuss how the 'production design' of the original source has been transferred onto the screen in each adaptation. By comparing two adaptations, we will insist on the idea that adaptations are specific readings, and as such, potentially infinite.

Since I have not worked for years on Adaptation Studies, and none of my collaborators are specialists (but they do know about speculative fiction a lot...), I have a bit of impostor syndrome. For that reason, I have updated my lists of bibliography and started my re-education by reading Kamilla Elliott's *Theorizing Adaptation* (Oxford UP, 2020). I must praise this volume for the astonishing feat that writing such a lucid text is, and for Elliott's handling of theory with a dexterity that I truly envy. Her bibliography is both exhaustive and exhausting; no wonder she often despaired, as the introduction declares, of ever finishing her book.

*Theorizing Adaptation* addresses many issues, but, of course, the main one is the one that worried me in my early days as a wannabe specialist: can the exploration of the case studies ever lead to a theory of adaptation? What Elliott does, very cleverly, is to expose the "dysfunctional relationship between theorization and adaptation in the humanities," which makes it "impossible to find the 'right' theories" (5). Step by step, she ends up criticizing the generalized acceptance of the "so-called theoretical turn in the humanities" (22) as a sort of one-size-fits-all garment. Boldly, she ends up announcing that: "As a process resistant to theorization, adaptation refuses to conform to theorization's definitions, taxonomies, principles, epistemologies, and methodologies. As a rival process to theorization, it is at work on everything addressed by humanities scholars, and much more: it is also at work upon theorization, adapting it. The problem of theorizing adaptation, therefore, is a relational one between rival processes" (305). What is theorization, after all, if not an endless process of adapting previous thought?

Among the long list of the principles of adaptation which Elliott offers, apart from her recommendation to respond to art with more art rather than with abstract thought (what she calls 'creative-critical practice'), I found these two: "Study adaptations of a single work over a long period of time to create longer genealogies of adaptation. Set multiple adaptations of a single work in dialogue with each other to learn more about the adaptation of adaptation" (237). These

principles articulate the collective volume I'm putting together, which begins with adaptations of *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831) and ends with adaptations of *The Shining* (1977).

I find from my previous co-edited books, and from *Hélice*, the journal I co-edit, that, generally, the academics in my field(s) enjoy textual analysis much more than they enjoy theory but feel obliged to use it. I myself have a very bad head for abstractions but love finding unexpected connections among texts and working with large corpus, an approach that for its opponents is mere belletrism. Reading Elliott's book, however, I was relieved to learn that my colleagues and I can be described as postmodern Cultural Studies practitioners, which for me is good enough (and lessens a bit the burden of my impostor syndrome).

For me, what spoils the current, post-1990, work we do in the Humanities is the imposition by force of a style of theorization that, as Elliott notes, does not fit what the artists we study actually do. She worries about adaptation; I worry about literature and audiovisual texts in general. I have always believed in the traditional function of the academic cultural critic as a specialist who illuminates a text for others. By this I mean that I love best the kind of criticism that helps me to dig deeper into a text and that is mainly focused on that text. This traditional style, however, was deemed to be too subjective starting in the 1960s, hence the gradual imposition of external theorization from philosophy, the social sciences, psychology and so on. This created a sort of inferiority complex in us, cultural, literary or film critics, that led us to legitimate our task with an overdose of theory, to the extent that its application dominates any other consideration and even displaces the texts we study to the margins. As a consequence, the pragmatic reality of how writers write and how films and series are made has been neglected to a ridiculous extent.

With the book I'm planning with my colleagues, then, I want to cut the gordian knot of theory to reveal, using a totally empirical methodology, how the imagination of the speculative fiction author and the creativity of the production designer engage in the process of giving material reality to stories outside the mundane. By foregrounding design, filmmaking takes centre stage as opposed to the type of Adaptation Studies which mainly explores plot (while still managing to ignore screen writers!). Of course, other aspects of filmmaking can be explored in adaptation, such as the role of photography or, as I tried to do back in 2005, the intertextuality of actors, whose bodies lend material reality to the characters imagined by authors. Yet, as happens, I'm now interested in production design. Perhaps I was first interested as long ago as 1999, when I wrote my chapter on how *The Tempest* had inspired the SF pop classic *Forbidden Planet*, but also Peter Greenaway's art film *Prospero's Books*, both films that I admire passionately.

The task that I love less about this projected book (apart from writing the index!) is penning the introduction. I wish this post could be the introduction, together with the description of the chapters, but the fact is that, as it is customary now, I must prove that I know the theory of Adaptation Studies before we proceed to discuss the practice. This means hours and hours of reading theory I'm not interested in at all, though I must thank Elliott for making this process much easier for me. I totally second her call to change the way we discuss adaptations, but also all types of narrative. We need to stop borrowing abstract thought from other

disciplines because our subject are the products of the human imagination in the narrative arts and, anyway, these other disciplines ignore us. We can still use theorization, indeed, but always as a tool to explain the art of telling stories, never as a priority in our scholarship. This lack of self-confidence truly needs to end.

About production design, here's your homework: next time you watch a film or a series consider the choice of location, the sets and their decoration, the props, the costumes, the make-up, the physical and the digital effects, and remember that there was a team headed by the production designer creating all of this. If it is an adaptation, consider how what you imagine as you read, on the basis of description, matches or not what you see on the screen, beyond plot. This what my co-authors and I will be exploring, and I can't begin to say how exciting our task is!

### 5 October 2025 / THE VALUE OF GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: RESISTING MANIPULATION, ABUSE, AND EXPLOITATION

I'm teaching this semester the core subject 'Contemporary Anglophone Literature: 1990 to the Present', which we introduced last year in the fourth year of our English Studies BA. I was presenting the introduction to the first unit, 1990-1997, with a survey of the main political, social, and technoscientific events, when I noticed that most persons I named were total unknowns for my students. I'm used to students not recognizing the names of Victorian authors or the titles of their books, and I never expected them to remember who Benjamin Disraeli or Thomas Huxley were. Yet, I'm more concerned about their not recognizing key figures of recent decades. Margaret Thatcher did not ring a bell. So, I'm writing this to prepare what I need to say to my students next week about why it's important to acquire a solid general knowledge and how this is done.

I mentioned to my class as an example of the pleasures of allusion a sentence in the book by Robert MacFarlane that I'm currently reading, *Is a River Alive?* MacFarlane is describing the astonishing process by which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly (the whole body is dissolved and rebuilt) and writes that this is "a metamorphosis Ovid would be proud of." If you don't know who Ovid is and that he collected in his book *Metamorphoses* (ca. 8 AD) over 250 myths and legends about bodily transformations, then you miss the clever allusion. On the other hand, if you've never heard of this author and his book, MacFarlane's sentence might make you feel curious, prompt you to check Wikipedia and help you to acquire general knowledge, perhaps even read *Metamorphoses*.

Curiosity, you see?, is the key to acquiring general knowledge but must be accompanied by the will to work on it. I gave my class a list of the best literary fiction in English 1990-1997, highlighting a few books (I used the book covers, always a good prop), but reading a list of unknown novels and authors (for them) does not automatically enhance general knowledge. You need to want to memorize names and titles, for which writing them down usually works; if possible, read the books. You have to study, in short, because even though we acquire bits of knowledge passively through allusion in what we read, watch, or hear people

mention, there is a difference between something that ‘rings a bell’ and something we know for sure. An individual’s general knowledge is no doubt composed in part of many items that are not known for sure, but a true education depends on being certain about the knowledge you acquire, which requires study.

Education is supposed to provide young persons with a sound general knowledge, but formal education is always limited. To begin with, school education depends on programmes devised by authorities with a narrow idea of what culture is. Besides, these authorities need to make sure that their programmes can be taught within a limited time. Whenever something is included, something else is excluded. Sometimes to a large extent. To give you an example, still today in 2025, cinema is not part of the general knowledge acquired in school, much less television, pop music, comics, or videogames. If you’re interested in any of these areas, you need to educate yourself, assuming an active role. Even so, general knowledge is organized in ranks, so that, for instance, not knowing about videogames is considered to be less important than not knowing about cinema. Gamers might disagree, but I’m speaking here of general knowledge, not of fandom.

So, how do you actually acquire general knowledge beyond what teachers make you learn in school and you need to study? (quite another matter is how memory acts once you have passed a subject and need not retain the knowledge acquired to pass it). You use your spare time wisely, that’s the answer. What happens if you don’t have any spare time? Well, you fail to acquire general knowledge. However, depending on your job you might manage to acquire some, either because the job requires it, or because you can access culture as you work: for instance by listening to music, audiobooks, or podcasts.

Suppose, however, that you have between one and three hours a day for leisure, after work and study. How do you use them to acquire general knowledge? Most young people use their leisure time for social media, but this need not be an obstacle to acquire knowledge: it depends on who you follow. You may spend your social media time following empty-headed influencers, or following persons that recommend books, art, films, series, comics, videogames, etc. It’s also a good idea to follow persons who post about science, technology, climate change, politics, society and so on. A small dose of gossip is always healthy, but don’t overdo it! It’s fundamental to read at least one newspaper (I always recommend *The Guardian*), check websites that offer information about books and current cultural topics (*Lit Hub* is great), and that you read books (apart from the ones you need to read in class).

As I have explained here many times, Spanish television used to be a main instrument to enhance general knowledge thanks to its constant broadcasting of older films and series (and of documentaries), and the popularity of shows in which contestants had to demonstrate a strong general knowledge (the main survivor today is *Pasapalabra*). From 1990 onward, with the start of the private channels, black and white films disappeared from the TV screen, and in general, all films made before 1980. Then Netflix started operating in Spain in 2015, and streaming services changed again the way we consume TV: mainly with a fixation on novelties, with a preference for series over films, and with a generally unexceptional quality.

Streaming platforms do carry classics in their catalogues, and the online services of public channels, such as RTVE, also carry older films and series, but here's the problem: in order to want to see, for instance, *Gone with the Wind*, you need to know first that it exists. Public libraries, from which you can also borrow DVDs, comics, videogames and other types of texts, apart from books, work on the principle that you browse the shelves and take home whatever calls your attention. Yet, nobody does this totally randomly: you need to have some personal organizing principle (streaming platforms and online services like YouTube, in contrast, offer to you pre-selected content based on an algorithm). Or not. Perhaps the best way to acquire general knowledge today is jumping from one Wikipedia page to the next. Begin with, I don't know, Spice Girls, and see where this leads you.

I'm a naturally curious person who loves to learn totally useless facts just for fun, so acquiring general knowledge is not a chore for me. When I think back to what I have done to enhance this knowledge, the usual activities come to mind: read a lot (books, newspapers, magazines); watch films (both TV and cinema), series, and documentaries; visit exhibitions; go to the theatre; go to concerts; listen to pop and rock music (I know nothing about classical music...); attend book festivals and presentations; attend lectures. I know this is not popular with students now, but when I was a student, it was not so uncommon for us to pop into teachers' offices for a chat. In fact, this still happened in my first years as a teacher. Indeed, conversation with those who know more (a teacher, a classmate, friends, family) and want to share their knowledge also helps. By the way, I come from a working-class family for which going to the cinema was ok, but not going to the theatre, visiting exhibitions, and much less attending lectures. I learnt from a very dear middle-class friend that I was missing a lot, and had to overcome my own prejudices, for which I thank him.

Now: the lists. I keep lists for the books I read, the films I watch, the exhibitions I visit... everything that helps me to be better educated and a bit wiser. In this way, I aid my memory to retain names and titles. I'm also constantly making lists of books I want to read, films I want to watch, exhibitions to visit, which requires keeping track of novelties through the conventional and the social media. And I've read many introductions and guides. The late Miquel Barceló, a teacher at UPF, wrote a very popular introduction to science fiction that created a whole generation of new SF readers in Spain. Browsing books in bookshops also helps, of course. Visit Gigamesh, please!

I understand that there is so much information out there that it is hard for a young person to know what kind of knowledge is worth acquiring. If you're not naturally curious, then enhancing your culture and general knowledge involves making an effort that might not be rewarding. Some persons are satisfied, for instance (w.) acquiring a vast knowledge of a small field to discuss what interests them, with no incursions into more general knowledge (this is as valid for football as for haute couture). Yet, I find that the larger a person's general knowledge is, the better suited that person is to understand how the world works.

In the end, the purpose of a general knowledge is multiple. It may give you personal satisfaction, but it also equips you to protect yourself from manipulation and abuse, and it is essential to preserve a clear-eyed understanding of past lives. These days I have been reading, of all things, a book about Elena Francis, a

fictional character (though people believed she was real) who, between 1950 and 1984, became a sort of influencer combined with an agony aunt, to whom mainly low-class women addressed their doubts; she would then reply to a selection of these letters on a very popular daily radio show. The letters cited in the book *Las cartas de Elena Francis: Una educación sentimental bajo el franquismo* by Armand Balsebre and Rosario Fontova (2018) are very painful to read, as they reveal an extremely low general knowledge, that is to say, a great ignorance. Comparing my life to the lives of those women, I must thank them for having made the effort of acquiring the knowledge that has allowed us, their daughters and granddaughters to study and face a much better future.

So, in short, we need a strong general knowledge so that nobody can treat us as many people kept wilfully ignorant by their exploiters have been treated and are being treated. The knowledge we need to acquire can have as many trivial facts as you wish, but it needs to absorb, above all, the notions that make us critical of manipulation, abuse, and exploitation. And of disrespect.

Now, continue educating yourself.

### 13 October 2025 / RETHINKING GEORGE MONBIOT'S CONCEPT OF VENGEFUL NIHILISM: US PATRIARCHY'S NEW PHASE?

I'm reacting much belatedly to an article by George Monbiot, a noted environmentalist and *Guardian* columnist. The [article](#) is called "The fact that humans can only survive on Earth doesn't bother Trump – and I know why" and was published on 5 March this year. The subtitle announces that "Vengeful nihilism is a big part of the Maga project."

Monbiot proceeds to share his suspicion that "the war being waged against life on Earth by Donald Trump, Elon Musk and their minions" may be actually prompted by the gang's wish to see the actual destruction of the planet rather than simply milk it dry following ultracapitalistic ideas. Monbiot then speculates that Trump's obsession with power is possibly fuelled by his urge to be "the last of the emperors: to close the chapter on civilisation." Monbiot describes some of Trump's policies, seemingly aimed at destroying the US environment, as "gleeful vandalism."

He connects next this glee with MAGA's vengeful nihilism, "the destruction of what they do not love, know or understand," which is being applied, as we've seen in the seven months since the article was published, to culture, science and basic human rights. Where I differ from Monbiot is in the critique against the project to occupy Mars, which, as a reader of Kim Stanley Robinson's SF Mars trilogy, I defend (yes, I do).

I'm as horrified, like many other SF fans, that this project is falling into Elon Musk's greedy hands before we fully understand its requirements and consequences. I agree with Monbiot that Musk's project sounds suspiciously like "the definitive fantasy of escape: from decency, care, love and the living planet itself" and a sort of lay rapture, but, still, we're going to Mars, sooner or later, ideally when we have managed to protect all of life on Earth and understand how

to rewild the dead red planet. Monbiot, nonetheless, warns, very sternly, that Mars is hostile to human life and closes his article with “This is our heaven, and there can be no other.” Fair enough.

I’ve read the 257 comments by *The Guardian*’s readers, and I’m here summarizing the main ideas. Essentially, three arguments are invoked in the attempt to make sense of the dystopia flooding the USA. One is personal. Trump is a stupid (their word...) old man who cares nothing for the future because he will soon die, but who requires instant gratification; hence his rants, tantrums, and wild executive orders. He wants to feel empowered and is acting out of a grudge against the social elites that rejected him, given his shady business credentials and glaring personal shortcomings. Consider who he is married to, and you can see how far he is from true upper-class America.

The second and third arguments are quite similar but are split on two camps, both aiming at the destruction of the planet. On the one hand, MAGA Christian fundamentalists care nothing about the world because they believe in Heaven; bringing on havoc will precipitate Apocalypse, hence the Rapture. On the other hand, Silicon Valley techno transhumanists want to empty the planet of 90% of unwanted human presence to build their techno AI-controlled utopia. If the planet is destroyed in the process, they aim to survive in their notorious New Zealand bunkers, or (Musk’s option) migrate to Mars.

These two groups are in tension because, being hardly educated, MAGA supporters hate science and technology, which the transhumanists need to construct their utopia. As you can see, of the two groups, the technobros appear to be the more senseless because they fail to understand that with an empty or devastated Earth their wealth will evaporate, and they will hold no authority over the armed survivalists that will kill them, probably the employees of their own security teams.

None of *The Guardian* readers mentions patriarchy or masculinity, but it’s obvious that the main players deciding the fate of current civilization are patriarchal men, both the first-row politicians (Trump, Putin, Xi and their imitators) and the backstage puppeteers (Thiel, Musk, Zuckerberg, Bezos and whoever does this job in Russia and China). Patriarchal masculinity, I’ve been explaining for more than 25 years now, is not ALL of masculinity, but a subset characterized by a strong entitlement to power, which, once conquered, the men in question seek to perpetuate at all costs, mainly by controlling and/or exterminating their enemies. Patriarchal power may die out with the patriarch or be overturned by a revolution but will always try to stage a comeback through democratic election (or a pretence thereof), or a takeover, violent or otherwise. Unless, of course, it’s inherited.

Now, what’s new today is that the endgame is shifting towards a so far unknown abyss, hence Monbiot’s concern that this is an expression of deep nihilism. Let’s agree, for convenience’s sake, that Trump, Putin, and Xi are on the same page, as predators who aim at dominating as much territory as possible, either through conquest or business, in order to exploit the local resources. This is classic imperialism: you have something I want, and I take it from you, either through war or a trade agreement. In the worst-case scenario (what is happening in Gaza), I wipe you out to rebuild your land as I please, with the help of my allies.

This is pure patriarchal rapine of the type seen in human history many times over. Yet, something else is at work.

What is new is the turn that US patriarchy is taking. Whether the impulse comes from MAGA's Christian fundamentalism or from the technobros' transhumanism, if the endgame consists of decimating human and non-human life in the US, or the whole planet, where is this leading?

In international strategic terms, it leads nowhere, for it is obvious that China is now in practice the world leader, and nothing will return the USA to the privileged position it used to occupy. It's not clear whether Russia is, as some are claiming in the USA, just a paper tiger about to collapse, its finances in shreds because of the aggression against Ukraine or a still strong post-imperial economy. Whatever the case, the disintegration of the USA is helping Putin, over whom Trump has no real power, to survive politically. My argument is that whatever Trump thinks he is doing, he is actually destroying the international reputation of the USA and undermining his own nation beyond the wildest dreams of his rivals. His patriarchal expression of power may be satisfactory at a personal level, but it's very costly for the internal and external survival of his own nation.

To recap, the same patriarchal system that promises to re-empower the USA is disempowering it, though it's still early days and the effects of the onslaught on science, technology, healthcare, social security, migration, the environment, reproduction, LGTBQ+ rights and many aspects of legislation and human rights will be made visible in about one year, when many people become unemployed and many die, including unvaccinated children.

The deployment of the National Guard in cities with Democrat mayors in states with Democrat governors indicates that the endgame might be a coup to be staged in 2026, to prevent voters from participating in the mid-term elections. The coup, which would confirm Trump as the authoritarian President he already is, would be followed by the suppression of the 2028 presidential election, or its reduction to the charade that elections are in Russia or China. A civil war is not likely, unless the US military, so far absolutely silent, splits in two. Or opposes Trump.

The problem with this scenario, which is the most likely one unless the Epstein files are soon published (supposing they do contain the material proving that Trump had sex with children), is that by 2028 very little will be left of the grandeur MAGA avowedly protects. The land will have been ravaged, the population deprived of fundamental rights, health, and even life. The USA will have become in effect Panem, and Trump the equivalent of President Snow. As Suzanne Collins explained in her *Hunger Games* dystopian trilogy, there is no advantage in falling from being a rich democracy into being an impoverished dictatorship, not even for the few privileged persons that run the show.

The other world powers we have now (the main patriarchies) come from disadvantaged backgrounds: both Russia and China used to be empires ruled by abusive monarchies that went through a Communist revolution and rebuilt themselves on the basis of rampant capitalism. The USA is taking the opposite trajectory: its current Government appears to be doing all it can to become an absolutist empire, complete with serfs if not slaves (w.) destroying a (mostly) fully functional economy and political system.

The supposition I find most intriguing is that Trump was supported by the technobros because he has the MAGA vote (or had), although the plan is to have him die soon (he's old, and unhealthy) and replace him with VP Vance, a puppet in the hands of German-born billionaire venture capitalist Peter Thiel, known for his anti-democratic beliefs together with his friend Curtis Yarvin (this agitator has openly spoken of tyranny as a desirable form of government in the USA). Thiel appears to be, rather, in favour of Christian capitalist anarchism, which would place the two men at odds: one dreams of total control, the other of total freedom only regulated by God. Both are, in any case, nightmarish expressions of a new-style US patriarchy which has no plans for the future beyond (white) masculinist empowerment.

You might think that patriarchy has always operated in that way, and that the Cold War already set a precedent in pitting against each other two blocks that could cause the world's destruction. What I find intriguing and quite inexplicable is that now, in 2025, the project is to destroy the very idea of democracy on which US world leadership was built after WWII, no matter how hypocritical that notion has always been. Patriarchal power is usually destroyed by rivals, but what astonishes today is how, *having no reason to do so since it is already very powerful*, US patriarchy is necrotizing the nation, I have no other word for it. Vengeful nihilism? Stupidity? A childish tantrum? All of it?

It is, besides, obvious by now that Trump is closely following Project 2025 (published in April 2023 by the Heritage Foundation, an American conservative think tank, indirectly inspired by Opus Dei). Project 2025 never acknowledges that its aim is to transform the USA from a democracy into a Christian dictatorship, but this can be inferred from the policies it proposes. The USA, in short, might eventually become a nation very similar to Franco's Spain, or even to current Islamic dictatorships like Iran or Afghanistan.

What the new US patriarchal current is neglecting is that with no planet left, it can't thrive. A reader objects to Monbiot's supposition that Trump's wants to be the last emperor ever, that this makes no sense as there would be nobody left to admire him. This is a return to the old argument that no one can win a nuclear war. During the Cold War, of course, US power always cast itself as the 'good guy' threatened by the Commie bully, whether the US President was Democrat or Republican. Today, however, the GOP has become an ultra-patriarchal machine aiming to devour US democracy at a time when world-wide democracy is needed to save the planet. It would be wonderful if these authoritarian men turned their energies into issuing orders to protect life, but this will never happen because patriarchal authoritarianism is born of psychopathology, defined as an inability to show empathy and offer care.

So, can the planet survive the fall of US democracy for self-destructing nihilistic reasons? We might, if the US were the only patriarchal government in the world, but it turns out that most governments are patriarchal: founded on accruing power, rather than on serving the people. So, yes, we're doomed. Unless the Epstein files are leaked and they do contain proof of paedophilia, the only crime which, apparently, a majority of Americans cannot forgive. What a thin hope...

## 21 October 2025 / BEST OF CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS: *THE ATLANTIC'S* SELECTION (AND A PERSONAL TOUCH)

Today I'm shamelessly piggybacking, this time using *The Atlantic's* wonderful [selection](#) of 65 outstanding US picture books for infant and toddler 'readers' to fill in this blog entry. The piece is not signed, but you can find for each book a comment by the person who chose it (authors, librarians and other experts).

The books, the introduction mentions, are limited "to titles that lead up to the transition from listening to an adult's narration to reading independently." The volumes are extremely varied but some trends can be appreciated: an abundance of anthropomorphized animals; the surprising longevity of some beloved classics (how can *Miffy* have appeared in 1955?!) and the opening up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of US picture books to other cultures (Africa, East Asia) and to problematic issues, such as bereavement and grief.

Since copying the list is a bit too lazy, I have added links for the authors and illustrators (in many cases the same person). All authors are US-born or naturalized, except when the opposite is noted. Enjoy the treasure trove!

*The Story of Ferdinand* (w.) [Munro Leaf](#), (ill.) [Robert Lawson](#), 1936  
*Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* (w., ill.) [Virginia Lee Burton](#), 1939  
*Madeline* (w., ill.) [Ludwig Bemelmans](#), 1939  
*Caps for Sale* (w., ill.) [Esphyr Slobodkina](#), 1940  
*The Carrot Seed* (w.) [Ruth Krauss](#), (ill.) [Crockett Johnson](#), 1945  
*Goodnight Moon* (w.) [Margaret Wise Brown](#), (ill.) [Clement Hurd](#), 1947  
*Blueberries for Sal* (w., ill.) [Robert McCloskey](#), 1948

*Harold and the Purple Crayon* (w., ill.) [Crockett Johnson](#), 1955  
*Miffy* (w., ill.) [Dick Bruna](#) (Dutch), 1955 (originally *Nijntje*)  
*Eloise* (w.) [Kay Thompson](#), (ill.) [Hilary Knight](#), 1955  
*Green Eggs and Ham* (w., ill.) [Dr. Seuss](#) (Theodore Seuss Geisel), 1960  
*Go, Dog. Go!* (w., ill.) [P. D. Eastman](#), 1961  
*The Snowy Day* (w., ill.) [Ezra Jack Keats](#), 1962  
*Where the Wild Things Are* (w., ill.) [Maurice Sendak](#), 1963  
*A Baby Sister for Frances* (w.) [Russell Hoban](#), (ill.) [Lillian Hoban](#), 1964  
*Fortunately* (w., ill.) [Remy Charlip](#), 1964  
*Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (w., ill.) [William Steig](#), 1969  
*The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (w., ill.) [Eric Carle](#), 1969

*Frog and Toad Are Friends* (w., ill.) [Arnold Lobel](#), 1970  
*George and Martha* (w., ill.) [James Marshall](#), 1972  
*Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (w.) [Judith Viorst](#), (ill.) Ray Cruz, 1972  
*Where the Sidewalk Ends* (w., ill.) [Shel Silverstein](#), 1974  
*Cars and Trucks and Things That Go* (w., ill.) [Richard Scarry](#), 1974  
*Strega Nona* (w., ill.) [Tomie de Paola](#), 1975  
*Rotten Ralph* (w.) [Jack Gantos](#), (ill.) [Nicole Rubel](#), 1976  
*Hippos Go Berserk!* (w., ill.) [Sandra Boynton](#), 1977

*I Really Want to See You, Grandma* (w., ill.) [Tarō Gomi](#) (Japan), 1979

*Fairyland* (w., ill.) [Gyo Fujikawa](#), 1981

*Miss Rumphius* (w., ill.) [Barbara Cooney](#), 1982

*Everett Anderson's Goodbye* (w.) [Lucille Clifton](#), (ill.) [Ann Grifalconi](#), 1983

*If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (w.) [Laura Numeroff](#), (ill.) [Felicia Bond](#), 1985

*Annie Bananie* by [Leah Komaiko](#), (ill.) [Laura Cornell](#), 1987

*Mirandy and Brother Wind* (w.) [Patricia C. McKissack](#), (ill.) [Jerry Pinkney](#), 1988

*The Talking Eggs* (w.) [Robert D. San Souci](#), (ill.) [Jerry Pinkney](#), 1989

*The Mitten* (w., ill.) [Jan Brett](#), 1989

*Tuesday* (w., ill.) [David Wiesner](#), 1991

*Tar Beach* (w., ill.) [Faith Ringgold](#), 1991

*The Salamander Room* (w.) [Anne Mazer](#), (ill.) [Steve Johnson](#) and [Lou Fancher](#), 1991

*Stellaluna* [*Stelaluna*] (w., ill.) [Janell Cannon](#), 1993

*Good Night, Gorilla* (w., ill.) [Peggy Rathmann](#), 1994

*Bark, George* (w., ill.) [Jules Feiffer](#), 1999

*Olivia* (w., ill.) [Ian Falconer](#), 2000

*Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* (w.) [Doreen Cronin](#), (ill.) [Betsy Lewin](#), 2000

*Beautiful Blackbird* (w., ill.) [Ashley Bryan](#), 2003

*Michael Rosen's Sad Book* [*El libro triste*] (w.) [Michael Rosen](#) (England), (ill.) [Quentin Blake](#) (England), 2004

*Kitten's First Full Moon* [*La primera luna llena de gatita*] (w., ill.) [Kevin Henkes](#), 2004

*Little Blue Truck* (w.) [Alice Schertle](#), (ill.) [Jill McElmurry](#), 2008

*We Are in a Book!* (w., ill.) [Mo Willems](#), 2010

*Big Red Lollipop* (w.) [Rukhsana Khan](#) (Pakistan-Canada), (ill.) [Sophie Blackall](#) (Australia), 2010

*Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match* (w.) [Monica Brown](#), (ill.) [Sara Palacios](#), 2011

*The Day the Crayons Quit* (w.) [Drew Daywalt](#), (ill.) [Oliver Jeffers](#) (Australia-Northern Ireland) 2013

*Sam & Dave Dig a Hole* (w.) [Mac Barnett](#), (ill.) [Jon Klassen](#) (Canada), 2014

*Grandad's Island* (w., ill.) [Benji Davies](#), 2015

*Last Stop on Market Street* (w.) [Matt de la Peña](#), (ill.) [Christian Robinson](#), 2015

*The Sound of Silence* (w.) [Katrina Goldsaito](#), (ill.) [Julia Kuo](#), 2016

*School's First Day of School* (w.) [Adam Rex](#), (ill.) [Christian Robinson](#), 2016

*Julián Is a Mermaid* (w., ill.) [Jessica Love](#), 2018

*A Big Mooncake for Little Star* (w., ill.) [Grace Lin](#), 2018

*Dreamers* (w., ill.) [Yuyi Morales](#), 2018

*Birdsong* (w., ill.) [Julie Flett](#) (Canada), 2019

*Lubna and Pebble* (w.) [Wendy Meddour](#) (England), (ill.) [Daniel Egnéus](#) (Sweden), 2019

*Knight Owl* (w., ill.) [Christopher Denise](#), 2022

*The World Belonged to Us* (w.) [Jacqueline Woodson](#), (ill.) [Leo Espinosa](#), 2022

*Millie Fleur's Poison Garden* (w., ill.) [Christy Mandin](#), 2024  
*I'm Sorry You Got Mad* (w.) [Kyle Lukoff](#), (ill.) [Julie Kwon](#), 2024

Some considerations. One is that, it seems to me, authors who are also illustrators have a clear advantage over authors than must partner with an illustrator, as they need not depend on someone else. No idea how this partnership works, I've never read or seen anything about it. Another consideration is that, like all genres, picture books have a circuit of awards. The [Caldecott Award](#) (named after nineteenth-century English illustrator [Randolph Caldecott](#)) is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children. The [John Newbery Medal](#) (named after eighteenth-century British bookseller [John Newbery](#)) is awarded by the same institution to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. The [Hans Christian Andersen Award](#) is the highest international recognition given to an author and an illustrator of children's books, and is given annually by IBBY (the International Board on Books for Young People).

Finally, I'm composing this post on the day when I have unearthed from the bottom of my computer the three stories I wrote for my nieces about ten years ago, and the other three I wrote with them. The time we spent together reading and writing the stories was simply wonderful, and I recommend to everyone close to children that they give it a try (I'm not a mother, I'm an aunt). It doesn't matter if the end result is not close by far to anything publishable: the fun is in making up stories, goofing a bit around, and creating sweet memories for when the kids are older. It works, promise!

#### 4 November 2025 / CRAVING FOR CREATIVITY IN LITERARY RESEARCH (AFTER A SEMINAR)

A week ago, the research group I currently belong to, [Beyond Postmemory](#), held the seminar "Nature Remembers: War, Trauma and Environmental Postmemory," in which we discussed how not only human beings but also nature can suffer, so to speak, from PTSD and show signs of trauma long after a conflict. Postmemory, a concept coined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to how subsequent generations inherit the trauma associated to conflicts they may never have lived. An example would be the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), a conflict that is still leaving a significant trail in current Spanish society, politics, and culture, even though fewer and fewer persons directly involved survive today.

What caught my attention is that out of eight presentations, four followed what might be called an unconventional format. Emeritus professor Andrew Monnickendam used his own holiday snapshots of Vietnam not just to illustrate his talk but to base it on them (he discussed monuments as traces of postmemory). I used artistic photos by professionals to create what I called 'a sensorial experience' of the novel by Cormac McCarthy *The Road*, in an attempt

to a) foreground what the text does say about traumatized nature, which is plenty, b) complement McCarthy's stark descriptions with a different artistic manifestation. That was also the method chosen by my colleague Nick Spengler, who read Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* juxtaposing it to an artistic video about the sea that, he felt, went well with this novel, although in fact it had nothing to do with it directly (great idea!). Our colleague David Owen decided to sing to us, very beautifully, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish ballad that was later adapted to fit the circumstances of the Spanish Civil War, celebrating in both cases the demise of a courageous young, working-class soldier from Glasgow. The other four papers offered, as it is habitual, argumentation about a specific text in the context of a dense theoretical framework. The seminar was supposed to gauge our commitment to submitting a chapter proposal for a joint book that Nick Spengler will edit. However, I opened up a debate about whether the four less conventional presentations could be transformed into conventional academic essays, and why we had chosen to present something alternative.

At one point, already quite a few decades ago, there was much talk of hypertexts, supposed to be digital text files opening up onto other types of files, such as images, sounds, audiovisual narrative and so on. Quite optimistically, a number of scholars and artists started generating hypertexts, but they failed to take into account that the technology employed became quickly obsolete. We went, then, back to basics, using print with the occasional black and white photo, which often looks so poorly it might seem better to discard it altogether. Apart from the expense of printing illustrated academic books, the matter of copyright needs to be considered. Nobody will bat an eye if a copyrighted photo is used piratically in a seminar before a handful of colleagues, specially as we're not making money from the event. But the expense of using just one or two full colour photos in a literature essay is just too much. Other files, such as sound or audiovisual productions would have to be linked externally, which requires maintenance of the corresponding digital archives.

You might think that just four scholars are not representative of any trend, but I've come across posts in @BlueSky challenging the idea that scholarly production should only be judged on the basis of standard printed academic publication. A computer engineer wrote that she would like to be judged on the basis of the code and the programmes she writes. And I've read posts by a researcher of autism who has generated choreographies based on the gestures produced by autistic persons. These two examples refer to scientific research, but the craving for creativity and the demand for a different type of evidence to judge our research leads to very many new possibilities. We, teachers of Literature, should be able to submit for assessment published fiction, poetry, drama, etc together with academic publications. The same applies to translations, adaptations of literary works into different artistic media, and other types of textual production, in the wide sense of the word, that I can't even begin to imagine now.

There is also a growing tiredness with the current system of academic publication, a system which, many claim, is already broken. We are supposed to be constantly publishing (articles in particular), which has led to a brutal stream of publications nobody can follow track of anymore. Journals used to be based on the idea that you would subscribe and read them regularly to keep up to date in your field, but there are so many journals and so many articles that it's

impossible to keep up. In the end, we read whatever we might need to support the claims we make in our own articles, cheekily mining other scholars' texts for suitable quotations.

We only read in more depth the key works that constitute our theoretical framework. Since, however, a solid theoretical framework can be constituted by any number of authors up to twelve or more, we are left with very little actual room for our ideas and hardly any at all for the literary text we're supposed to analyze. Journal editors complain that they cannot find peer reviewers and, frankly, I'm not surprised. The texts we produce today are unexciting, and mostly second-hand in their ideas. So, for no payment and no merit to add to our CVs, who wants to employ their time perpetuating this appalling lack of real dialogue and the waste of academic energy?

Live presentation by researchers in seminars and conferences might be, or so it seems to me, the way to start deconstructing and altering for good how we communicate our findings about literature, yet we're still stuck in the same routine: the twenty minute paper, often read in a monotonous tone that puts stones to sleep, followed by one or two questions, but very little real feedback (unless the coffee breaks are used wisely).

In the conversation that followed the presentations in the seminar, we agreed that a serious problem is how young scholars are being forced to accept static conventions by a gatekeeping system that is absolutely inflexible. If you want to get an accreditation, a grant, or a job, you must show specific credentials, and these exclude any minimally creative or slightly unconventional contribution. These means that tenured professors who have stopped caring about the rules, either because they are retired or because, like myself, do not care at all for promotion, are the ones free enough to alter said rules. At the same time, they are the ones setting them (at least the group in charge of the assessment agencies), so here we are. Well stuck.

In two weeks, I'll be attending a conference in person after six years without doing so, except online. I have nothing against conferences per se, except that highly polluting academic tourism is a main by-product, but I just can't put myself anymore through the excruciating routine of listening to twenty-minute papers from 8:30 to 18:00 (Spanish conferences have long days!). I wish we had no presentations at all, or only creative ones, and that our time was employed in actually talking to each other. I'm now a senior academic, and chances are I will meet no one new, though I do look forward to meeting friends I have not seen in a while. In a more relaxed atmosphere, with more long breaks, there might be time to break the ice and meet younger scholars, perhaps do some mentoring (or learn from them). One thing I can tell for sure is that I will not see any young scholar dancing to their papers, basing them on holiday snapshots, or singing songs. That would be nice, though.

Inertia is the main enemy of scholarship. In Literary Studies we switched in the 1980s (or so) to the current theory-based model, and we've been practising it with no reflection about why we do what we do for 50 years, if not more. We have accepted rules which are alien to the Humanities, because we were told that we didn't sound scientific or intellectual enough, even though that's the whole point. I'm not a scientist, though I very much respect scientists. I'm an arts critic, specializing in literature and, secondarily, film and TV. I'm interested in what

artists who write do, and I express myself also in writing. As a literature researcher, I follow the writers striving to do something new and interesting in their fields. Yet, I'm not allowed to alter the rules of my own writing and, in general, scholarship.

There was a belief that literary scholarship had been shaken out of its foundations in classic Humanist practice by the introduction of theory, and of the many political currents brought on by Cultural Studies, but the fundamental rhetoric has not been altered. As I have noted here again and again, we use now much more bibliography than, say, in the 1960s, and our essays tend to be more abstract, with far less textual analysis. But they are still stuck in the same model, with no chance of showing a personal voice, whether in anger or in a satirical vein. The authors hardly exist for us, their voices drowned by our darn theoretical frameworks, and we hardly exist, our voices lost in the noise all the scholars outside Literary Studies have brought to our field.

When one complains, one must act. So, perhaps I should organize a (meta)conference in which participants are forbidden to present papers and instead they should dance, sing, perform playlets, recite poetry, do stand-up comedy, or simply talk to the audience over coffee. The problem is that I can't be bothered to organize a conference. The last time I did, back in 2011, the whole thing was quite a nightmare (courtesy of a students' strike). I will insist, though, that if we begin by breaking the rules of conferences and seminars, we might break the rules of publication.

Yet, cowardly me, I'm ending here this post to go back to the book I'm writing, in which I'm breaking no rules for, guess what?, it has to pass peer reviewing and all the usual gatekeeping.

Be subversive, try please...

## 10 November 2025 / THE EDITOR'S JOB: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

I attended yesterday the talk at Barcelona's Festival 42 by US horror author [Grady Hendrix](#), a man who looks disconcertingly like actor Brady Cooper's brother or cousin. Hendrix has made a name for himself as an author who combines the gruesome, the shocking, and the humorous in his novels, though I must confess that I could not finish the one I tried to read, *The Final Girls Support Group*. Too gimmicky for my taste. A friend who is much more into Hendrix recommended that I read *The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires*, which the author describes as a spiritual sequel to *My Best Friend's Exorcism*. I don't think this is going to be a priority.

I'm writing about Hendrix because, as happens, I quite enjoyed his talk with interviewer Natàlia Sánchez. The man is a charmer, talks non-stop, and is extremely candid about himself and his career. What is there not to like? I was struck in particular with how willing he is to discussing the role of his editors in the process of writing. Hendrix's first novel, *Horrorstör* (2014), is a haunted house thriller set in, of all places, an Ikea store. The author commented nonchalantly that

the idea was his editor's, which did not seem for him to affect at all the value of his novel as an original work.

Along the interview Hendrix described his problems to get some of his novels off the ground, narrating how another of his editors almost cancelled the publication of a novel that he decided to massively rewrite in just nine days, or else lose the advance money and go bankrupt. My impression was that Hendrix is the kind of writer who does need an editor to make the best of his talent to write, a dependence that always surprises me, though I do know it's positive. On the other hand, I'm fully aware that with a competent editor, the books by Stephen King, to name the current top horror writer, would be far better. Perhaps he does have an editor but ignores their advice.

I also attended a talk (or interview) with Prof. Roger Luckhurst, who visited Festival 42 to present a cool volume [\*Graveyards: A History of Living with the Dead\*](#), which made me very envious because it has 167 colour illustrations and 76 b/w illustrations. Luckhurst mentioned that the book had been commissioned by an editor at Princeton UP, which, again, makes me tremendously envious. I was once commissioned by an editor (and publisher), to write a book about *The X-Files*, and although I loved writing the book, the experience was a disaster, as I never saw a euro from the royalties (and I do know that the book did sell considerably well). I would have loved to collaborate with an editor/publisher in parallel to my academic books, but this never happened, not at least until I came across [\*Maite and Ángel\*](#) from Dilatando Mentes (a publishing house and a bookshop in Alicante), who had the immense kindness of issuing a revised version of the *X-Files* book, [\*La verdad sin fin: Expediente X\*](#).

We all assume with no second thoughts that periodical publications need editors, that is to say, persons who make decisions about the contents of each issue, stay in touch with authors, review manuscripts, ask for revisions and changes and so on. Anna Wintour, the editor-in-chief of *Vogue* magazine from 1988 to 2025, is possibly the best-known editor in the world of commercial periodical publications. In my field, SF, John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* (later called *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*) from late 1937 until his death in 1971, shaped to a great extent the Golden Age of Science Fiction, for good or bad. In the academic world, we meet editors mainly as the persons heading the teams behind academic journals. I'm myself co-editor of [\*Hélice: reflexiones sobre ficción especulativa\*](#), which I run in a rather old-fashioned way with my independent scholar colleague Mariano Martín (no relation!). This means we are also the journal's peer reviewers, though in monographic issues we have authors peer review each other, too.

The editors that concern me in this post, however, are, rather, the book editors. I had heard so much of the excellent job that editors do in the Anglophone world that my disappointment with the academic editors I have come across so far is quite deep. They are not, to be fair, editors properly speaking, but commissioning editors, that is to say, persons who buy manuscripts to turn them into books, and who make sure that both the proposal and the final text are peer-reviewed. I don't know what it's like for other academic authors, but I would have liked to receive the help of proper editors, rather than peer reviewing. This comes at the end of a long process of years when you, as an author, are very unwilling to accept suggestions. It's different for an article, which does not take so long to

write. Anyway, I'm disappointed and it's taken me a while to understand that academic presses do not use editors as I expected, but as noted, commissioning editors.

Just today I came across a post in @BlueSky by Elias Isquith (@eliasisquith.blog) arguing that "in all seriousness, the reason writers need editors—especially opinionated and charismatic writers with lots of ideas—is the same reason why a slave would whisper 'memento mori' to whoever was being celebrated during a Roman triumph," namely, to stay humble. That's a good point. What Isquith implies is that humbler authors, like Grady Henrix, are far more open to using professional help. Of course, non-professional writers, such as celebrities or other public figures, use editors to write memoirs and other books, if not collaborators and, in the less respectable cases, ghostwriters. The writers who most strongly resist the input of editors are, as Isquith writes "charismatic writers with lots of ideas" whom he calls, please note, "opinionated," thus indicating that authors are too often blinkered about their own talent.

In Spain this matter is complicated by the fact that 'editor' means both editor and publisher, even though, of course, many editors are employed by publishing houses which they don't own. When we think of Spanish editors we think mainly of persons who have discovered fine authors and eased their path to publication, names such as Carlos Seix Barral, Esther Tusquets, Jorge Herralde, and so on. They are not, however, editors in the Anglophone sense of the word, in the way Maxwell Perkins was the greatest possible editor (or text improver) for Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Tobias Wolf; or Ford Maddox Ford for Joseph Conrad. Note that these and other big names never thought of their editor's input as a black mark against their originality as literary authors. Our prejudice as readers, reviewers, and scholars is what taints collaboration with a negative reputation.

This raises the issue of literary originality, which was not compulsory until it was deemed so in Romantic times. Originality, by the way, is the value that inspired the idea of copyright, only fully embraced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century at an artistic and legal level. I'm not questioning copyright, which I fiercely protect even in the creative commons licensing of the texts I publish online (I use the most restrictive version). What I'm questioning is the still existing taboo (at least in Spain) against any form of contribution to a text. I quite like it when I see editors mentioned in author's acknowledgements because this seems to me a guarantee that someone has been in charge of improving the text. The silence indicates either a lack of help, or, what is worse, a suppression of the helper's names. I can think of several scandals in Spain involving ghostwriters which could have been easily avoided if the contribution of a collaborator had been acknowledged.

As a friend told me, if Anglophone style editors were more common in Spain the level of the national literary production would be much higher. I have to agree, and note, again, that if unambitious authors like Grady Hendrix are comfortable discussing in public the input received from editors, there is no reason why Spanish authors should be uncomfortable. When I edit other persons' texts, from the exercises by my students to academic work by fellow scholars, for collective volumes, monographic issues or the journal *Hélice*, my aspiration is that the final text is as good as possible. When my own texts are edited in that spirit, I feel happy that someone has found a way to make my words sound much better.

But, then, I'm not a writer with literary aspirations and I understand that the resistance to editorial intervention is possibly harder in that case, despite the example already mentioned of Fitzgerald and company. I find it peculiar, at any rate, that the prejudice against editors is still high in Spain, given the success of that type of collaboration in the Anglophone world.

A word of caution: editors cannot be supplanted by AI tools because these tools are not creative. I'm sure that an AI editor might make suggestions to improve some aspects of this very post, but in ways that tend to flatten personal voices and aim at an obvious standardization of language. This might work for non-literary writing but might totally spoil the search for a singular voice by literary authors. For that, a human editor is always much greater help. The problem is, rather, where to find them.

Hendrix and so many other authors are truly lucky to have such committed editors.

## **16 November 2025 / THIRTY YEARS OF CULTURAL STUDIES IN SPAIN: SUCCESS AND FAILURE**

I have just come back from Vitoria-Gasteiz, where the colleagues of the English Department at the University of the Basque Country have organized the 48<sup>th</sup> AEDEAN conference, a yearly meeting which gathers together many Spanish specialists in English Studies. David Walton, a recently retired teacher at the Universidad de Murcia, and a dear colleague, proposed that some of us celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of Cultural Studies in Spain with a round table. And so we did.

The participants in this highly enjoyable table were David himself, Felicity Hand (UAB), M<sup>a</sup> José Coperías (U València), Antonio Ballesteros (UNED), Manuel Estévez (U A Coruña) and myself. We represented the scholars involved throughout the years in the seminars we called 'Culture & Power'. These were started by Felicity Hand in 1995, hence the anniversary. Rosa González (formerly of UB) and Chantal Cornut-Gentile (formerly of U Zaragoza) were also fundamental in the development of the seminars until 2015, when Manuel Estévez organised the last meeting at the University of Santiago de Compostela. The other essential branch of Cultural Studies is, of course, the AEDEAN panel, first coordinated by Antonio Ballesteros and currently in the hands of Andrea Ruthven.

The label Cultural Studies was first used by the founders of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, England, founded in 1964 by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart and closed in 2002. The centre was forced to merge with the Sociology Department in 1988, and eventually caved in to pressures against its interdisciplinary nature, which were deemed to encroach into other academic territories. I'm mentioning this because in a way the CCCS failure to survive mirrors the much more modest failure of the Culture & Power group to live on. Here's the paradox: there is no doubt that Cultural Studies is as fully consolidated as a discipline (or research methodology) as Literary Studies, yet the CCCS did die and here in Spain it appears that only

my university has a subject fully devoted to Cultural Studies (the BA elective I often teach).

I'm here dealing only with English Studies, as our Departments where the ones to introduce Anglo-American style Cultural Studies, though I can't say that they are present in other Departments. At UAB the Theory of Literature Unit within the Spanish Department has used the label in its MA degrees, but as happens, this was because I was the first to teach their elective 'Estudios Culturales'. On the other hand, the association [La Torre del Virrey](#), which is not attached to a specific university, maintains its activity since 2013, with a journal, seminars and so on. We (the Culture & Power main members) did have a meeting with them in València (I mean with its director Antonio Lastra and other persons) which, mysteriously, led to nothing further for obscure reasons.

As Culture & Power, then, we have both succeeded and failed. The seed we planted in our diverse seminars all over Spain and in the Cultural Studies panel in AEDEAN, has certainly bloomed. Our main task, allow me to explain, was to normalize the presence in English Studies research of texts beyond canonical literature, and beyond the printed word. A measure of our success is that, indeed, many BA and MA students choose today for their dissertations popular fictions, films, TV series, graphic novels and even videogames. A key concept in Cultural Studies is that all cultural manifestations can be read as texts, hence analysed and explored. Within English Studies, we limit this to cultural manifestations linked to the English language and the Anglophone cultures, but, obviously, the practice of Cultural Studies is open to any text, anywhere.

This openness is at the same time a problem. We have noted that scholars obviously doing Cultural Studies often reject the label, perhaps because they find it too unspecific or, as I worry, uncool. It's of course quite counterproductive for the cause of Cultural Studies to force any scholar to accept that this is what they do. Yet, while someone interested in, say, Irish plays, would have no problem to grant that they're doing Literary Studies, persons in, say, Medical Humanities, might categorically deny they are doing Cultural Studies. In the process of growing, Cultural Studies has somehow melted into more specific labels and has been lost in this process of transfer.

A key issue is why the Culture & Power group failed to consolidate as a research group with research projects in the way that, for instance, others in Irish or Indian Studies have done in Spain. There are diverse answers to this question. One is that we started, as noted, in 1995, when the notion of the research group was not yet fully established in the Humanities in Spain. The first group I joined started operating in 1998 (it was focused on war literature). When the issue was raised by Chantal Cornut-Gentile, my position and that of other members, was that we were too diverse in our interests to present a coherent research project (it would have been as wide-ranging as a project about Literary Studies).

We were also very unlucky. The connection with a specialist at the University of Lisboa, Alvaro Pina, led to the founding of IBACS (the Iberian Association of Cultural Studies) but strange personal tensions eventually killed the association before we had time to set up an archive (we did have a web for a while) or managed to establish a journal. Today, IBACS is the acronym for the International Bachelor Arts and Culture Studies of the Erasmus University at Rotterdam. I have already mentioned the failure to set up a collaboration with La

Torre del Virrey. I'll add now that we also failed to connect with SELICUP (Sociedad Española de Estudios Literarios de Cultura Popular), which runs the journal *Oceánide*, now in the capable hands of José Igor Prieto Arranz (UIB).

At this point you might think that Culture & Power has been quite a disaster but I'm 100% confident that despite our failure to consolidate the project we did our best for the cause of Cultural Studies. David Walton hinted during the round table that being a group born to oppose the academic system in Spain we were always a bit roguish. He may have a point, though individually we have fully committed ourselves to fulfilling the demands of academia.

In the afternoon, after the round table, I attended one of the sessions of the AEDEAN Cultural Studies panel. It was crowded, with a young audience and young panel participants, all of them doctoral students or recent doctors. The papers presented were diverse in the object of study, solid in their theoretical framework but, as it often happens with the work of young scholars today, lacking a historical perspective of the discipline (or the world). I was together in the session with a colleague of my same age who was present at the round table, and we both wondered why none of the young persons in the room had attended it. Our conclusion was very similar: it is great that so many young scholars are doing Cultural Studies, but a pity that our pioneering work is unknown and unacknowledged. I'm personally very happy that my BA, MA and doctoral students needn't struggle to have their topics of choice accepted but I wish they knew that back in the early 1990s some of us had to fight very hard to have our choices accepted and respected.

During the round table I mentioned that when I retire (hopefully in seven to ten years' time) my legacy might be lost as nobody will continue my teaching in the Department. I'm already seeing this with the work that Felicity Hand has done teaching Postcolonial Studies, though she's happy enough that her disciple Esther Pujolràs is continuing that legacy at the Universitat de Lleida. My own disciples are in other universities, too, but I miss having someone at UAB. My colleague and good friend Nick Spengler tried to assuage my concerns, telling me in private that Cultural Studies methodologies are indeed being applied in all the Literature subjects in the Department. Yes, I know, but this is not the same as having someone else teach popular fictions, film, music, TV series and so on, as I have done and plan to continue doing.

I end, then, with a bittersweet feeling. English Studies in Spain have now little to do with the rigid Filología Inglesa of my time as a young student, and I'm very proud to have contributed to normalizing the presence of Cultural Studies within them. I'm sorry, though, that the Culture & Power group could not consolidate its work, and that the younger scholars do not know us. Funnily, I'm known among them, as I could see, because I'm always sending emails about activities connected to my research fields to the AEDEAN listserv. That's part, of course, of my still ongoing Cultural Studies activism, a task I'll keep up not until the day I retire but for as long as I can.

Thank you, David Walton, for organizing the round table. Hopefully one of the young scholars in the panel session I attended will organize one day the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cultural Studies in Spain's English Studies.

## 23 November 2025 / THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE IN ENGLISH STUDIES (IN SPAIN)

A week ago, as soon as I returned from the national conference of English Studies, I sent a joint email to five young scholars who had discussed SF in their presentations. I presented myself as the Spanish representative of the Science Fiction Research Association and the author of a recent book on masculinity and SF. I explained that the purpose of my message was to establish contact for whatever they might need and invite them to, perhaps, join SFRA. Only one has replied so far, which is, to say the least, disappointing.

I think that this disinterest is part of a regrettable generational divide that I hinted at in my previous post, when I mentioned that no young scholars had attended the round table to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cultural Studies in Spain, though the panel sessions were full of them. I didn't approach any of these young scholars in person because I know the detrimental effect that ageing, keen women chasing young people has. I hoped that my approaching them would work better on e-mail but, obviously, that was not the case. Please, note, that in my time as a doctoral student I was the one approaching senior scholars, not the other way round. In any case, one of the reasons I stopped attending the national English Studies conferences is that I noticed the young scholars flocked together but did not approach any seniors, which felt awkward. At least in this last conference, I've made a lovely new young friend, whom I have met, I must say, through one of the most senior attendees (her former doctoral supervisor).

Plainly, something has changed. My friend Felicity Hand, who pushed me to attend my first conferences, explained to me that it was very important to meet senior scholars, for they might be part of tribunals I had to eventually face, my future peer reviewers, or just good contacts. So, I dutifully introduced myself to the ones she pointed out, or I understood to be key persons, after their talks. I'm not good at cold calling at all, but one thing led to the other and I more or less know everyone of relevance in English Studies in Spain between the ages of, say, 50 and 70+ (I'm myself 59). I realise that I hardly know any young scholars, though I've been collaborating with some and taken part, too, in a few tribunals and so on. Curiously, senior and junior members of AEDEAN, the national English Studies association, know me (as I could see) because I'm constantly sending CFPs and other information to the national email list.

This generational divide has very much to do with a deplorable habit of Spanish scholars: we don't cite each other, despite our firm presence in the bibliography generated in our fields. Beginning more or less in the early 1990s, when I myself started my doctoral dissertation, the whole collective of English Studies scholars here in Spain has made a prodigious effort to be visible internationally. I remember being bowled over when Juan Antonio Suárez (U Murcia) published in 1997 *Bike Boys, Drag Queens and Superstars* (Indiana UP) for that was the first book that I knew about written by a Spanish scholar in English Studies published in a US university press. Since then, many of us have been publishing internationally both in journals and in university and corporate presses. Now young scholars expect to publish their dissertations with Routledge or Palgrave as a matter of fact, while it took me many years to teach myself how to

approach them. I was told, you see, by my seniors in the Departament that this was very difficult to do; it turned out that they themselves did not have that experience. Other seniors in other Departments did much better and were obviously far more helpful.

So, here's my guess about what happened. When we started fighting to have our research published in Anglo-American journals and presses, we may have been afraid to sound provincial and, so, we didn't quote from the work published locally in Spain, in lesser journals and presses. We quoted from the big names published in English, to establish our credentials as well-read scholars and to impress our peer reviewers. Our bibliographies may have occasionally included some well-known Spanish names (perhaps Ortega y Gasset or Unamuno, among the classics; perhaps sociologist Manuel Castells among the moderns), but they were composed 99% of Anglophone texts. If there were translations in them, these were of Russian, French or German names of the first rank, such as Bakhtin, Foucault or Habermas, not of English Studies scholars like us. Forget about citing bibliography directly in Spanish or any other language we may have known.

This habit of not citing our Spanish peers stuck and we did nothing, or very little, to cite them even when they had internationally acknowledged publications. I am myself guilty of this horrid sin. I know who is who in the fields I work in, but I have directly cited very few Spanish scholars. My justification is that their work, while of great interest, does not suit the purposes of my own research, though I grant that there is now plenty to choose from. The consequence of not citing each other is that our own students perceive a divide between what is quotable and what is not. Once, I had a master's student who neglected to cite me in a paper on *Star Wars*, even though I had pointed out to her that I had a relevant book chapter on Darth Vader in a British book. When I complained, she replied that compiling a bibliography required a search for hard-to-find sources and that citing a teacher she saw frequently was too easy. Or something to that effect. If, in short, I could not even impress this student, who was going to cite me?

We do get cited, indeed, as our Google Scholar's h index shows, but we are more frequently cited by specialists elsewhere rather than by Spanish scholars. This means that, if we are known at all, we're known for the areas we work in, but not actually for what we've written. I may be known because I do research on Masculinities Studies and Science Fiction Studies, and I've published a ton in these fields, but I think that very few of the scholars citing my work are based in Spain. As doctoral supervisors, we should obviously do more in that direction, indicating to our students that their bibliographies should contain at least, say, 15% of sources written by Spanish scholars, including some in Spanish (or Catalan, Galician, Basque). If they get used to citing local scholars, we will be better known and this will increase the chances that the generational divide dwindles.

In that sense, one of the most harmful habits is the use for the theoretical framework of foreign names. You might object that the key names in any theoretical framework are invoked depending on their reputation, rather than their nationality, but I'm sure you will have noticed that whenever non-Anglo-American names are used as foundations for further research they have published in English. In part, this is because we know English but hardly any other foreign

languages (how many of us can read in French, German, or Italian?). Yet, even in the case of scholars in our national circles who have published in English we hardly, if ever, use them as our theoretical framework, behaving a little like that MA student I've mentioned who refused to cite me. Somehow, we think that ideas coming from native speakers of English have more value than the ideas coming from those thinking in Spanish and, secondarily, in English. The exception is so rare that it's truly endearing. A young scholar whose panel I attended in the AEDEAN conference cited mostly the Spanish members of the research project she belongs to, with high words of praise. This is as it should be, but, in our context, it was odd and even cloying.

An added problem, as we know, is that young scholars have scant resources and very often attend conferences just on the day when they deliver their paper. Socializing over coffee and meals, which is when networking truly happens, is, then, limited. Since few can afford the luxury of staying for the whole conference, they also miss key sessions with plenary speakers and, my guess, skip round tables in favour of panel sessions. Obviously, both junior and senior scholars participate in panel sessions but I'm not the only one among my peers to be attending fewer and fewer conferences. They are expensive, even with financial support from projects, count practically nothing for our CVs and, if you're not into travelling (as I'm not) they become a disruption it takes days to recover from. So, it may be partly our fault that as senior scholars we have made ourselves less available to junior scholars, who, in turn, do not know that we exist.

I assume that matters are different in Spanish (or Catalan) Studies, in which most key names are Spanish, and in which most foreign specialists publish in Spanish. It's a sort of mirror world of English Studies, though I remember from my early years as an undergrad taking some Spanish Literature subjects that there was a reverential respect for the foreign specialists I have never come across as a foreign specialist in English Studies. In Spain, we are generally grateful that a foreign person decides to invest their professional life into studying our culture, but, somehow, Anglophone persons seem to take it for granted that foreigners are interested in their culture... But I digress. Or maybe not, for perhaps that's the root of the whole thing: Spanish culture has always taught us that we're second rate in comparison to our Anglo-American betters, hence the bad habit of quoting them, not our Spanish colleagues. And, hence, the generational divide I've been talking about.

Our English Studies association, AEDEAN, and its yearly conferences survive in good health. The association is about to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary (it was founded in 1976) while the conference will do so in 2027, which is fantastic. There were worries at one point a few decades ago that the conference might die as scholars decided to attend more specialized meetings. Yet, since the conference works as a meeting point for friends and colleagues in all areas, and since many young scholars start their public careers in it, so far it is faring well. We might say that four generations of English Studies scholars have contributed: the one already retired, the one facing retirement in five to ten years, the one in the middle of their careers and the young scholars. More or less. The difference, I would insist, is that while the youngest generation are there, usually prompted by their PhD supervisors, they seemingly have no need to know who their seniors are. It's part of a well-known generational presentism but, I insist, it's a pity. Also,

a waste of academic resources and a disparagement of recent achievements, leading to research that reinvents the wheel.

I'll try to remember all I've written here next time I attend a conference and work harder to erode this generational divide.

## 1 December 2025 / AFTER WITCH MARKET BARCELONA: MOVING ON TO NEW AUDIENCES

Witch Market Barcelona is an annual event that takes place on a weekend in late November or early December in the historic building of the University of Barcelona, in downtown Plaça Universitat. This singular building, the work of Elies Rogent i Amat, has been in use since 1871, having been designed in 1861 applying the German architectural style of the Rundbogenstil. With its late Gothic vibe, walking into the UB building almost feels like stepping into Hogwarts, the school of magic from the *Harry Potter* universe. It's the perfect backdrop for the whimsical, fantasy-themed market at the heart of the festival, which gives the event its name

Witch Market actually started back in 2016 as Potter.con at the Espai Jove La Fontana in the Gràcia neighbourhood of Barcelona. Soon enough, the organizers decided to change both the name and the venue, broadening the scope beyond just the world of J.K. Rowling to encompass fans of all kinds of fantasy. Now, visitors can enjoy not just the market, but a range of fan-driven activities—some organized by groups or associations, others offered by individual participants (as it is my case). As a mini convention, it's no surprise to see plenty of fans dressed up as their favourite characters (witches, of course, are a big hit). It's especially heartwarming to see kids, toddlers, and even babies cosplaying alongside young parents, passing on their love for fantasy.

I met one of the organizers, Sofia de Juan, as part of the organizing committee of Eurocon 2016 held in Barcelona. In fact, Potter.con was held in September 2016 (3-4), while Eurocon took place in November (CCCB, 5-6). I don't remember if I myself proposed my participation or if I was invited by Sofia. The fact is that I gave a talk at that Potter.con about Sirius Black, based on an academic article that at that point had already been rejected by six journals and that is now a chapter in my book *Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film: Focus on Men* (2020). The reaction of the audience was good, and the following year, 2017, I joined the first Witch Market with a talk about the villain of the *Harry Potter* series, Voldemort. In subsequent editions (there were none in 2020 and 2021, due to the pandemic), I talked about three more characters from the same series—Prof. Snape, Merope Gaunt (Voldemort's mother), the witch Bellatrix—but also about Morgoth, the great villain of Tolkien's *The Silmarilion*, and, this past Saturday, about Katniss Evergreen, the heroine of *The Hunger Games*, as a final girl.

I prepared this last talk thinking it would be my final one at Witch Market for several reasons. For one, my *Harry Potter* talks were originally a birthday gift

for my niece, Lola, with whom I shared the series. But now, like me, Lola feels a strong aversion to J.K. Rowling's transphobia, so we both agreed it was time to move on. Lola isn't a big fan of fantasy either, so my motivation to continue these talks has faded. Last year, I invited my rather perplexed mother to my talk on Tolkien (she knew next to nothing about him), as she always complains that, because I teach and write mostly in English, she never really gets to learn about my interests. This year, I invited a friend, but she couldn't make it. The downside of having guests is that it limits my time to take part in other activities at the festival. At least this year, I managed to attend a fascinating interview with dark fantasy author [A.M. Strickland](#).

Another reason for stepping back from Witch Market talks (which I give for free, for the love of popularizing research) is that, as I've mentioned, I feel increasingly out of sync with the latest trends. This year, Sofía de Juan forgot to mention to me that the theme was romantasy—a genre I don't read nor care much for—so my talk on *The Hunger Games* felt a bit off-topic, though I'd planned it without knowing what else was on the programme. I am a reader of science fiction rather than fantasy and, in any case, I would not want the yearly Witch Market talk to require extra reading and excessive preparation time. The idea is to disseminate knowledge about what I already know.

In short, I went in to give my talk about Katniss sure that I was closing a cycle, but I left with the public's request to continue. It turns out, and this is the most peculiar thing, that I have fans who come to my talks year after year. I give these talks in the building's Aula Magna, which seats 150 people, and it's usually full. Not only does my audience like to listen to me, but they also like to talk to me. I always leave about 10-15 minutes for Q&A, but this time my talk was a bit shorter, and we debated for about 20 minutes on whether Katniss makes the right decision by not executing President Snow but (spoiler alert!) the new president, Alma Coin. We would have been at it a good while longer if it weren't for the rush to finish before the next session.

By the way, I chose to speak about Katniss because last year, my audience requested it. I hadn't planned to ask them for input this year, but a small group of people came up afterward reminding me that I should—so I listened. Now I'm torn between talking next year about science fiction or, more likely, classic fantasy cinema.

Among the audience this past Saturday was a former student from twenty years ago and a current student from my Contemporary English Literature class. The former was kind enough to say that I look the same (I don't believe that...) and that my teaching style hasn't changed at all (hopefully!). My current student was a bit confused because my speaking style during talks is so different from my usual classroom approach. As I explained to him, the audience makes the difference, not me. And that's where I wanted to go with this: attending Witch Market every year (this was my seventh time) gives me a chance to experience what I wish could happen in class—an audience that listens attentively, laughs at my jokes, engages in lively debate, and asks for more. Of course, as I told my current student, the laid-back festival atmosphere, the timing (Saturday at 5:00 p.m.), and the context all play a huge part in making it feel so energizing. Teaching on a Monday at 8:30 a.m. is not ideal for anyone, whether teachers or students.

I fully acknowledge the unique conditions of Witch Market and what it's like to speak to an audience that I needn't grade and that is already 100% on board with the topics I'm discussing. But the fact remains: I often leave Witch Market feeling like I could take on the world, while leaving class rarely has me feeling the same way. Some days, I'm just ready to draw a thick veil and forget. I'm sure there's some lucky teacher on planet university for whom every class is as energizing as a Witch Market talk is for me, and if they exist, I envy them. I had that kind of experience for a semester in 2013-14 when I taught *Harry Potter*, and my students reacted just like my Witch Market audience. Sadly, I can't recreate that anymore because of Rowling's transphobia (which, as noted, has turned me off the series), and I can't think of any other text that would have the same wide appeal across generations. *Star Wars* came close, but I can't see myself dedicating an entire subject to it.

I think students don't know that it's in their power to make teaching work much better. I don't complain at all about my current students, with whom, in addition, I talk a lot. While they interact with each other for half an hour each class, I move about the classroom to start brief conversations about the books they read. There is a good atmosphere in class, much better than in previous years (I am thinking of the years after Covid-19), but there is also a difference in interests that I cannot erase. Whoever comes to my talk at the Witch Market, comes 100% ready to learn from me and that generous willingness gives me wings to speak with enthusiasm and gusto. Faced with a class that is not necessarily interested in literature, and that has to attend several more classes on the same day, and so on from Monday to Friday, it is much more difficult to maintain my enthusiasm (it can even ring hollow).

I accept, then, the limitations of university teaching, but I see now that it would be absurd to deprive myself of the little pleasure of speaking every year at Witch Market. I realize that among the reasons that made me think about leaving the talks, I have not mentioned perhaps the main one: the affectionate response of the audience, for which I am deeply grateful, is not the response I get at the university. Each talk is a beautiful but bittersweet reminder of what university teaching could be like, but is not, for whatever reasons. I know that it is not a personal issue, and I also know that there will always be students who simply dislike certain teachers, and that things would be very different if all subjects were optional (compulsory subjects are where more resistance is found). But, well, things are what they are, and after 34 years of teaching I have no choice but to try to reproduce in the classroom the spirit of the Witch Market talk before a very different audience and hope for the best.

Too bad Rowling has spoiled her legacy, because *Harry Potter* could have given me many more happy hours as a teacher. And it is sad to think that no other text, either past or current, can generate the same general interest among broad layers of the various generations. The *Star Wars* saga came close to it, but I don't see myself and never have turning it into the object of an entire (elective) subject.

See you next year, dear Witch Market audience! That's for sure.

## 14 December 2025 / STRAWSON'S DIACHRONICS VS. EPISODICS: BEGINNING TO THINK ABOUT AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I was planning to teach this academic year an elective subject on narrative non-fiction of a journalistic type but I will be teaching instead autobiography and memoirs. I have included non-fiction as one of the four categories of contemporary prose students need to read in my Contemporary English Literature subject (the other three are varieties of fiction). The case is that students who have been assigned narrative non-fiction (I'll mention as an example Nathaniel Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea*, 2000) have found it difficult to cope with the substantial amount of information that this type of book carries. And so, I decided to focus instead on 21<sup>st</sup> century autobiographies and memoirs, perhaps simply because these are the genres I most frequently read apart from novels.

I'll be following the same method I'm using now in Contemporary English Literature, that is to say, each of my 35 students will be reading four different volumes. The difference is that in the case of the new elective (which, formally, is called 'English Prose'), I've asked students to choose their books from a list of about 200, which I have compiled mixing my own reading list with online lists of the best, or at least, of the most attractive autobiographies and memoirs published in the last 25 years. Through interacting with each other, students will learn about approximately 140 titles. I still don't know how I'm going to assess the subject, as I'm planning to have students write reviews to collect them in an e-book, but I also would like them to write personal recollections, and I need to offer as well a theoretical framework and a basic history of the genre. As you may imagine, I do have a bibliography and have now started reading from it, beginning with Linda Anderson's effective introduction, simply called *Autobiography* (2001), and Ben Yagoda's truly exciting volume *Memoir: A History* (2009).

I'm currently reading Paul John Eakin's *Writing Life Writing* (2020), a collection of some of his key articles, and I became curious about his many references to the theory of English philosopher [Galen Strawson](#) about the Diachronics and the Episodics, which he seems to have formulated first in his article "[Against Narrativity](#)" (*Ratio* XVII, 4 December 2004). With apologies to those who have participated in the intense debates generated by this article and by Strawson's subsequent amplification of the theories presented in it, I'm not a philosopher, and I was totally ignorant that he exists until literally yesterday. Checking another blog post about Strawson, written last April by another blogger, I see, however, that it's never too late to join a fun party, and that Strawson's theories have, if not much coherence, at least the merit of making one think hard about our life and how we make sense of it. This is, of course, the function of philosophy.

In "Against Narrativity," Strawson attacks the commonly accepted idea that our sense of self depends on the narrative we tell ourselves about our life. Our narrative, psychiatrist Oliver Sacks has claimed (no doubt following Freud), is our identity. If self equals narration, this means that we are fundamentally autobiographical creations, which might explain the popularity that the genres of the autobiography and the memoir currently enjoy. The other generally welcome supposition that Strawson rejects is that this autobiographical, narrative approach

to how we build our sense of identity is essential for an ethical life, for only if we cohere narratively can we understand our actions. What Strawson calls the psychological Narrativity thesis (he uses the capital N “to denote a specifically psychological property or outlook”) and the ethical Narrativity thesis, which he believes to be normative, are often combined. Strawson demolishes both, separately and in combination, arguing that “It’s just not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative.”

At this point he proposes the thesis that self-experience can be of two types: Diachronic (when one sees an obvious continuity between a past, present, and future self) and Episodic (when one does not see that continuity and feels “no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms”). To begin with, and I’m sure that many other persons have presented the same objection, the opposite of Diachronic is Synchronic; at least, these are the terms preferred when we consider, for instance, a language’s history in contrast to its present. Strawson clarifies, however, that Diachronics and Episodics are not different by virtue of how they relate to the present, but by whether they see the present as part of an ongoing narrative or not.

Using himself as an example of a typical Episodic personality, Strawson claims that although he has memories of his past experiences, “yet I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.” He insists that this doesn’t make him a less ethical person, he just doesn’t feel the ethical mandate to see his life as a narrative. “Self-understanding,” Strawson remarks, “does not have to take a narrative form, even implicitly. I’m a product of my past, including my very early past, in many profoundly important respects. But it simply does not follow that self-understanding, or the best kind of self-understanding, must take a narrative form, or indeed a historical form.”

Paul John Eakin, who was entangled in an academic duel of sorts with Strawson, dismisses his arguments, mainly counterarguing that thinking of ourselves as a variety of selves scattered along our timeline with no narrative link to each other makes no sense. Autobiography, which is what interests Eakin (who is not philosopher but a specialist in English Literature), could not exist either as a literary genre or as a fundamental reality in our life. Now we know, however, that only 30% to 50% of all humans regularly think to themselves in internal monologues (the rest think in images or patterns). It might well be that this inner conversation with oneself is more crucial to how we build our sense of self than Strawson’s division into Diachronics and Episodics, or Eakin’s acceptance of Antonio Damasio’s neurobiological theses by which the self is an expression not just of the mind but of the brain. Think of how persons with Alzheimer’s end up not knowing who they are.

I do see my life as a narrative, a fact which I have always attributed to my being career-oriented. My impression is that whatever I thought of myself as a child changed when I became 14 and, because of the nature of the Spanish education system back in 1980, I had to choose between professional training and secondary education. I chose the latter (*I myself* did, not my parents) and this

opened up the chance to attend university. Once in university, I started daydreaming about being an academic. Personal matters, of course, have also influenced deeply how I've been shaping my own story; for instance, I knew very early that I wanted to be in a stable relationship with a man, but that I didn't want to be a mother, regardless of what profession I ended up having. So, yes, I do believe that we see our lives as a narrative, though I often wonder how persons who are not career-oriented (the majority...) narrate their lives to themselves. At the point I'm now, I worry about how the narrative of my mother's life will end (she's almost 83), having gone last year through the sudden ending of my father's life. And, of course, I'm both curious and fearful about how the next years of my life will unfold, both narrowly considering my own existence and more widely the way the world is going (to hell).

At the same time, despite this basically Diachronic approach to my life, I'm not sure at all about the continuity of my self. The body constantly changes throughout life, and it is clear that the body I have today is not the body I had when I was born, or even last year. Yet, all those other bodies no longer exist (except in photos or film) and I have (and I am) just my current body. Nobody disputes I'm the same person named Sara Martín that I was in my photos as a child or a young woman. With the mind, matters are more complex, and I'm not speaking here of the capacity to remember, which is always very spotty, unlike what autobiographers and memoirists claims. Although I would be totally incapable of writing a minimally reliable autobiography (and it would be, anyway, rather short because there is so much I want to forget, and so much I've forgotten), I'm often struck when I read texts I wrote many years ago by how little my writing voice has changed. A few weeks ago, I reused for a new article a text I wrote back in 1997, and I found myself totally agreeing with what I'd written 28 years ago. Some days I think this means I must be a very coherent scholar, others days that I have not progressed at all. So, it seems I'm both the same person, but also many other selves. Both Diachronic and Episodic.

I'm beginning to see that this new elective of mine will force me to think hard about how we narrate our self, though I'm also realizing that, despite the current flood of autobiographies and memoirs, we don't talk enough with each other about how we make sense of our lives.

### 31 December 2025 / A LIMINAL POST: BETWEEN 2025 AND 2026

I'm writing today out of stubbornness, because if I let a third blank week go by I fear that I might give up entirely this blog. I'm procrastinating my proper academic writing (an article and a book chapter have been waiting for too long), and I worry that if I also delay writing yet another blog post I might enter very dangerous doldrums. This is not writer's block, which consists of being unable to fill in a blank page, but the sheer laziness that attacks literary scholars when we conclude that nobody cares whether we publish or not. There are moments when we run the risk of no longer caring ourselves, so here I am. Ranting and raving, be warned...

The date does not help, either. It's 31 December, the middle of the Christmas break and the last day of the year, when everyone is going through the past 365 days and anticipating the following 365. I'm sure you know that January is named after the Roman god Janus, who presides over all liminal affairs, from material gates, doorways, and passages to immaterial processes with a beginning and an end (I always marvel at the convenience of having a pagan god for everything). You are perhaps familiar with his double-headed representation, with one face looking back and the other forward; two heads totally unable to look at each other, what a symbol of time's passing from past to future.

So, this being the end of the year, the public and the social media are today full of lists of the best of 2025 and of the most expected for 2026, and of surveys of all that went wrong in the year now ending (a lot!) and what might be even worse in 2026 (or just a bit better, for nothing will be truly good). Seeing the horrors of 2025 nobody dares anticipate a bright 2026. My own wishes are totally thanatophilic (or death-oriented): I ardently hope that a handful of tyrants find a swift ending and the Earth breathes a bit more easily.

Since I've been thinking of autobiographies and memoirs in the recent weeks, as I prepare my new elective (or electives, depending on what I end up teaching in 2026-27), I can't help thinking of the passage of time in personal ways. For me, 2026 will be the year when I turn 60, an age which surely marks a turning point in the natural, social, cultural, and personal process of ageing. A dear friend recently chided me very lovingly for my insistence on attaching importance to decades, but the fact is that in 2026 I will be starting the last decade of my career, if only for legal reasons.

University teachers retire at 70 in Spain (full professors can stay on as emeritus for up to four years, but I'm not, thankfully, in that category), so it's time for me to start planning retirement, supposing the tyrants I alluded to do not destroy the planet. There are days when I think I'll work until 70 to complete 45 years as a teacher/researcher; on other days, I think I'll retire a bit earlier, perhaps at 67 or 68. If health allows it, I have at most ten academic years to try new experiences in teaching and must carefully plan the handful of books I still want to write (perhaps even after retirement). So, 2026 is not for me just the next year, but the beginning of the countdown towards retirement. I know that this countdown started back when I signed my first work contract, but it's now entering a final phase. It's scary, let me tell you.

The process of ageing has been described in countless literary and audiovisual works and is daily monitored in the media (both traditional and social) with its relentless observation of the ageing bodies of public figures. Ageism is rampant at all levels because we are fixated on physical appearance although change is inevitable, despite the advances of medicine. The brain and the mind, in contrast, are far less appreciated. They only capture our collective and personal attention in relation to their possible decay, now that Alzheimer's disease and the different types of dementia are so widespread. Some persons here in Spain are now writing wills asking for active euthanasia in case their brain is terminally diseased, and they are no longer themselves. I have friends seeing a parent face that horrifying process and I totally share the urge.

The cult of the young body and the fear of brain disease are, in any case, preventing us from enjoying the beauty of a rich, mature mind. I don't mean just

an intellectually rich mind, though, of course, that should be highly appreciated, but a generally rich mind, capable of securing personal fulfilment at last and of providing others, and the community, with sound values and good living. Education is supposed to equip individuals with the means to enrich their minds so that they may enter adulthood as well balanced, fully capable persons who can be also engaged citizens seeking the best for their communities. This is the ideal, of course, though very few educational systems in the world totally respond to it, perhaps with the exception of the Scandinavian countries. Instead, our current educational systems have passed from being systems of mental and bodily repression to being a simulacrum, as philosopher Víctor Bermúdez recently [warned](#) in *El País*. In part, this has to do with the disconnection between generations, which is more pronounced between the youngest students and the most senior teachers.

Bermúdez explains that “I see my classmates working like crazy trying to get the students hooked. But we don't know how to compete with, how to get to, or what to impart. And we don't know how to recover that background of general culture, of common cultural references that children don't get to share with us.” Yes, indeed, we lost control over education when social media took over in the early 2000s as the main providers of information and values for the young, and now AI's LLMs are giving us the final cut. As a teacher of Literature, it was my job to guide students into admiring the beauty of human imagination and of the creative mind, and to encourage them to cultivate their own minds. This passes, I think, through learning to admire and take example from more mature minds, but, then, young influencers took over from us the job of educating our students and we face a losing battle. It gets worse as we age.

This is sad. A main pleasure of ageing is that constant discovery and the process of learning never end. If they end it's only because people give up taking good care of their minds. I am now a student as much as when I was an actual student, for there is not a single day when I don't learn something new from the sources I use. I truly pity the students who, as an academic colleague wrote in @BlueSky, absurdly resist being educated, for, apart from causing a waste of money, time, and resources, they show a terrible disregard for their own minds.

As researchers, in Spain we have made a gigantic effort to catch up with international research, perhaps an even more noticeable effort in English Studies because we must publish internationally (I mean within the Humanities). I think we are all bursting with ideas, and much more so as we age, but our students do not knock on our doors for a chat, to benefit from what we could share. Instead, they turn to ChatGPT which, guess what, depends on our stolen publications to have something to say. It's the saddest paradox.

My purpose as a teacher, then, for the following decade, beginning this new 2026, is to create as many chances as possible to talk to students, hoping that they will want to listen. In the two editions of my subject 'Contemporary Literature in English' I have made room, as I have explained here, for students to talk to each other 30 minutes in each session. Their mutual interaction has enriched their reviews, of this I'm sure, and helped them to practice the almost lost art of conversation, but it has also given me a chance to get closer to them. As they talk to each other, I walk around the classroom and join their conversations. I tell them about my own experience of reading the books

assigned to them, I comment on film adaptations if there are any, I mention my own academic work. And I do ask a lot of questions about their preferences.

Perhaps this is what we're missing: more conversation, more contact between young and mature minds, of a closer type, not the kind that emanates top down from the lecturing platform, as it used to do in the past. Now, the challenge is to make our richer, more mature minds attractive to our students who mainly see us, I'm afraid, as relics or freaks devoting their lives to the inscrutable purpose of learning for the sake of learning. And, yes, this all boils down to a simple point: I wanted to be a teacher because I admired my teachers and loved talking to them. I wanted to be admired (at least a little, by just a handful) and enjoy the conversation of students who loved talking to me, but, I'm now a teacher in a world no longer interested in learning. I'm facing the extinction of my profession, not just my own retirement.

As for 2025, well, here's a paradox: it's been for me an extremely complicated year, with still many unsolved personal issues, which explains why I needed the comfort of learning. I've published eight [books](#): a monograph in English and my own translation into Spanish, a co-edited collective volume, the translation into Spanish of another co-edited volume in English, two volumes with posts from this blog, and two with work by my students. This will give you an idea of how learning has helped me to cope with the bad days. I hope my 2026 is a much happier year, and that my learning is more relaxed, which is what my mind needs at this point...

May 2026 brings you much enjoyable learning and the peace we all crave for. And down with tyranny!!

## 6 January 2026 / A BAD BEGINNING TO MY READING YEAR...

I read in one sitting on January 1<sup>st</sup> Caroline Darian's memoirs (in Spanish translation by Lydia Vázquez) *Y dejé de llamarte papa* (2025, *Et j'ai cessé de t'appeler Papa*). Caroline's actual surname is Pelicot, but she is using a mixture of her brothers' names (David and Florian) for her penname. In this touching book she narrates how their monstrous father destroyed their family when he subjected under chemical submission his wife Gisèle to hundreds of rapes, by him and by 73 other men (50 of whom have been sentenced). Caroline and Gisèle are no longer in speaking terms, as the mother refuses to accept that the daughter was, if not raped, at least molested by Dominique, the father (the police showed both photos that prove Caroline is also a victim). I found Caroline's brief book bold, well-written and necessary. I intend to read, as well, Gisèle's memoirs, not out of morbid curiosity but as a student of patriarchal men's villainy.

So, 2026 started very well but my reading quickly went downhill. I must have broken a personal record because yesterday I gave up on seven novels (fortunately for me, all of them borrowed from my local library). I have decided not to mention titles and names, because my difficulties to find engaging books might have more to do with my problems with focusing on fiction than with the novels themselves.

After Darian's memoirs, I started reading a well-received 2013 novel by a South Korean woman author (no, she's not Nobel Prize winner Han Kang) dealing with a female employee in a travel agency specialized in disaster tourism. The novel started quite well but, halfway through, the plot started to sag. The novelist has her Korean protagonist fall in love with a local young man on a Vietnamese island, which seemed a good idea, but their romance starts very abruptly to be credible; besides, the writer forgets to clarify in which language her characters speak (apparently, the protagonist picks up Vietnamese overnight). Absurdly, the protagonist makes nothing of collaborating in a plot to murder hundreds of natives to stage a fake catastrophe intended to boost the island's dwindling income from disaster tourism. I read a bit more but could not swallow the last 25 pages out of just 200 hundred. No way, not even to add yet another title to my personal reading list. It must be the first time I find myself unable to finish a novel so close to the ending. It's frustrating because I have gained nothing by trying to read this novel, except the topic to fill this paragraph.

Next day, I started a non-fiction volume by Spanish science historian [Juan Pimentel](#), titled *El rinoceronte y el megaterio* (2010). I'm a very omnivorous reader and this book promises to be one of my favourite reads of 2026. It is, however, a bit dense, and 50 non-stop pages into it I decided to halt and start reading a novel, which is when disaster struck. I spent close to three hours reading first chapters of six of the seven novels, and, sorry, going through countless negative reviews on GoodReads.

I started with a brief novel by a celebrated Danish woman novelist, who has announced she will eventually publish seven volumes in the same series. The problem is that this woman has not seen Harold Ramis's brilliant 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, nor have, apparently, the reviewers who believe she has hit on an original premise. Well, she has not. Her protagonist, who runs a business selling 17<sup>th</sup> century books with her husband, suddenly finds herself stuck on the same day again and again. It's not a particularly exciting day and she is a singularly dull woman. It took me about 30 pages to be bored out of my wits (again, this was quite a short volume) and I gave up. I also abandoned a novel by another Nordic writer, in this case Swedish, supposed to be the beginning of a very funny saga. Twenty pages into the English translation, I already saw it was a very unfunny novel, or a kind of humour I did not get.

Next, I took a 1971 minor SF US classic, which I quickly discarded when the male protagonist boasted about being able to choose among three young, beautiful women in love with him (and bickering for his attention). No thanks. So, I tried a very long historical novel by a best-selling English author, with dozens of characters from several families, and ambitious enough to attempt to narrate both WWI and the Russian Revolution. I started reading and I found in the first chapter a blatant rip off of Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*, except that it started with a 13-year-old checking on the day of his birthday (also his first in the mines of his Welsh hometown) whether his 'peter' was already that of a man. No thanks. Also, this famous writer uses a very bland prose and treats his readers as morons who have no idea about history, or even general culture.

Then, I gave up on a highly praised novel by a young Spanish novelist, which I had already tried to read a month ago. I borrowed it again from the library after reading that this young man is being harassed online for being gay and for

his approach in this novel to the Spanish Civil War. I didn't even start it. A brutal review in GoodReads did such a thorough demolition job that I decided not to try again. The idea of using magical realism to narrate the tragic Spanish Civil War did not appeal much to me to begin with, and this GoodReads reviewer convinced me that, even if I managed to start the novel, I would not read all of its 700 pages.

So, I turned to an older Spanish novel, published in 2007 and today acclaimed as one of the best works of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Spain. The problem with this novel is typical of Spanish literature: stream of consciousness needs to reflect the personality of the character and exclude any literary flourishes by the author. This character, a corrupt builder from the Mediterranean coast, however, thinks as a literary novelist. The author overwhelms readers with pages and pages and pages of the man's banal thoughts peppered with clever phrasing but with no paragraphs. It seems that later monologues by other characters don't even have punctuation, but I stopped before putting myself through this kind of postmodern torture.

Finally, I abandoned a novel by an acclaimed Irish novelist for a similar reason. The novel combines the secret diary of a 100-year-old woman locked up in a psychiatric asylum since her youth, and the reports by her psychiatrist, who needs to choose which patients must be transferred elsewhere before the degraded institution closes. I could see immediately how these two characters are connected beyond their being doctor and patient but, well, I don't mind much spoilers. What killed my interest is that I could not suspend my disbelief and accept that what the novelist offers is how a very old woman, disconnected from mundane life for very long, would write. The idea, besides, that she could write for hours on end without anyone discovering her was just preposterous.

By the time I gave up on this novel, it was well past midnight, and I didn't return to Pimentel's essay, which I will continue reading as soon as I finish writing this post.

Whenever I tell my friends about my problems to find attractive novels, they always recommend some they have enjoyed, but this is no help. All the novels I've described here were recommended to me, one way or another, both by professional and amateur reviewers. Perhaps the problem is that the reason why I read and the reason why novelists write no longer match. I read to learn in general about life and, specifically, to share human experience. The novelists seem, however, more focused on their own careers, whether they see them as a commercial or a creative concern, but are not very interested in reaching out to readers. For very different reasons, Caroline Darian and Juan Pimentel do want to communicate with their readers: she has painful personal reasons to do so, he is fascinated by a topic within his professional remit. I don't find that urgency and passion in novels anymore. They seem to me perfunctory, particularly the ones published in recent decades, which, besides, tend to be much overhyped by the book industry and by readers, both seeking the next big thing. And they are mostly very boring.

Possibly, this is the curse of the ageing reader, for the more you read, the harder it is to find a fully satisfactory novel (thank you writers for non-fiction!). I'm, however, at a loss to explain what I'm looking for in a novel. It's not, definitely, a particular topic, for, as noted, I'm very omnivorous. Or a style. I just don't want to feel that I'm reading. I want to disappear into the novels I read and avoid that

crushing boredom. I want to stop finding myself agreeing with the negative reviews on GoodReads. Either the novel is dying in the 21<sup>st</sup> century or I've totally lost my taste for novels. It's possibly a mixture of both...

Aren't you curious about the titles and authors of the seven novels I gave up on the same evening...? Or have you already guessed?

### 13 January 2026 / RESPECT FOR WOMEN'S BODIES AND CHOICES: JENNIFER LOPEZ, MADONNA, AND GROK

Today I'm writing from a mixed Gender Studies and Cultural Studies perspective adding, obviously, some very personal views. The gist of my argumentation can be summarized as 'let 50+ women display their bodies as they wish and destroy Grok so that it can't produce fake images of naked women', but, logically, arguments like this are never that simple. So, let's begin with JLo.

Jennifer Lopez's Las Vegas residency started back in December when the star's haters were at their most active, following her fifth tour 'Up All Night: Live in 2025', the first in six years after 'It's My Party' (2019). Lopez is now 56 and her skimpy showgirl outfits unleashed a torrent of ageist abuse on Twitter, Instagram, and Tik-Tok, asking 'granny' to cover up, even though there is no longer a specific age-appropriate dress code for performers. In the opening night of her Las Vegas show, Lopez addressed the haters' complaints before her audience: "I do laugh at some of the things sometimes, 'cuz they do say funny things too. Why is she always dressed that way? Why don't she dress her age? Why is she always naked? And I say, 'If you had this body, you'd be naked too'." Last night, she turned up at the Golden Globe awards ceremony wearing a spectacular 2003 naked dress designed by Stéphane Rolland for Jean-Louis Scherrer, a bold statement designed to further silence the haters. Instead, she was saluted with another wave of extremely nasty ageist comments.

I'm not a Jennifer Lopez fan, as I'm not into her kind of music and I find her taste in outfits rather vulgar, even when they are haute couture (remember the Versace green dress?). I much prefer Kylie Minogue who, despite being a year older (57) and dressing sexy, is never the object of the ageist abuse poured against Lopez, at least that I know of. Haters, it seems, dislike in particular the excess of Lopez's self-presentation, which is miles away from Minogue's classy style. However, leaving my personal preference for Minogue's style (and music!) aside, I wish to defend Lopez against the haters.

Lopez's body is, most visibly, the product of the star's intensive investment in it, from punishing gym workouts to plastic surgery, and the fact is that it's a spectacular, unique body. As a work of (commercial) art, Jennifer's body is much above the quality of her music, and if she chooses to display it, barely dressed or totally bare, that's her prerogative. If I had a body like hers, let's be honest, I would also display it (and monetize it). What is causing the wave of ageist hatred is that her ultra toned body breaks the rules of ageing, though I'm not sure who this is a problem for. Is it women who hate Lopez for the impossible high standards she imposes on us, 50+ women, or is it men who can't stomach the idea of being

sexually aroused by a 'granny'? (By the way, Lopez is not a grandmother yet). I used to feel anxious about the demands that Lopez and similarly stunning 50+ women impose on the rest of us, but now I see them as fantasies that have little to do with me or most 50+ women. I flaunt my brain (I live off it!), she flaunts her curves. We both self-exploit, though, yes, I know, her self-exploitation has its roots in women's constant sexualization, which she is contributing to prolong into old age. Also, she makes much more money than I.

In this, Lopez's teacher is, indeed, Madonna. Just last week, Madonna unleashed yet another wave of ageist hatred with the new Dolce & Gabbana campaign. The [video](#) for the add, which I found quite sexy, shows Madonna cavorting in and outside bed with two Italian-looking men, one of them possibly in his 40s, the others in his 20s. Madonna, 67, is currently dating a 29-year-old very attractive man, so you cannot say that the video is unrealistic, at least from the point of view of her private life. However, the video displays a few questionable elements. One is that Madonna's face looks far smoother than the wrinkled face of her older companion (at least twenty years older than her), which is quite contradictory and suggests that either digital effects have been used or that her plastic surgery has reached a new height. It's not normal for 67-year-old women to have zero wrinkles or to display thigh completely free from cellulite or stretchmarks.

The other downside is that the video's triangle has incestuous undertones: this could be nonna having sex with her son and grandson, if this is how we want to read the story. Or with two gigolos. One thing is the image of a performing star on the stage in concert and quite another a sexy audiovisual fantasy that can be easily backfire. I like Madonna far less than I like Lopez, for her insistence on highlighting sex above everything else in a woman's life and because she's guilty of endorsing the abusive sexualization of female performers. Yet, I'll defend her choice to monetize her ageing body as she chooses. To me, she looks ridiculous, not because her self-presentation is inadequate, but because she's trying too hard to stay sexy. Like JLo, Madonna is excessive and vulgar. I find Dame Helen Mirren (80) far more attractive because she is far more elegant. JLo and Madonna, I insist, are both excessive and vulgar because they have always been so. Minogue and Mirren have always been classy and will remain beautiful till the day they die.

Now, Grok. Here I am, defending 50+ women's choices to display their fit, half-naked bodies and in the meantime villain Elon Musk has given all the idiot male and some idiot female haters the perfect tool to undress women and humiliate them online without their permission. Grok's new feature is really not very different from having the creep in the classroom draw naked pictures of his high-school classmates using pen and paper back before smartphones existed. The difference is that AI users are now legion and have managed to flood the internet with a myriad nasty naked images, not of only of adult women but also of children. There had already been a number of scandals about deepfake porn involving famous stars and, yes, high-school girls, but the Grok scandal is the last straw. My view is that Grok is just an instrument and that its users are the real scandal, as the images they have generated reveal how extensive misogyny and paedophilia are. If this were not the case, the use of Grok's naked feature would be just a minor anecdote. Musk has now stopped non-paying X users from having

access to this particular feature and has made paying users legally responsible for their use, but this is by no means sufficient. The many images already circulating will not be erased, and privileged users will be even more likely to do as they please, being less afraid of the consequences.

I don't know if there are already any Grok-generated images of the naked bodies of Madonna and Jennifer Lopez, and I wonder whether the idiots abusing women's rights over their own image have ageist prejudices (it might seem so, since many minors' images are being violated). Is Grok being used to make ageing women look older, I wonder? For that would also be a sort of misogynistic perversion. Musk tried to poke fun at the whole thing having Grok generate a ludicrous photo of himself clad in a bikini, but this only shows how sick his sense of humour is and how little he understands the huge problem. Perhaps women should use Grok to generate humiliating images of naked men, but this is not a response any woman has proposed so far. Rather, women are debating whether we should stay on X (well, the ones who are still there) and fight the bastards or leave the platform and let it further sink into the cesspool it already is. I'm surprised, in fact, that any self-respecting women are still on X.

So, to sum up, the choices made by JLo and Madonna to display their spectacular mature bodies as they choose are cancelled by the rise of AI naked applications like Grok. I don't think that ageing women are the object of the manipulated images, but the point is still valid: none of the women abused and humiliated on X have given their permission. The disgusting men who are generating the images (the women, too) are perpetrating a very serious crime. I was told off, by the way, by a woman expert on sex crimes, who told me that by calling this men 'disgusting' I dehumanize them, and thus diminish the chances of their re-education. I'm sorry, but I disagree. From the creep who used pen and paper to the creeps that use AI, there is a very human line of male behaviour that needs to be rooted out. I don't know how to combine this with JLo's and Madonna's sexualizing of their own bodies, but I know that we need to strike a balance that guarantees the respect for women's choices and denies men's access to tools that manipulate their images and multiply them online. That manipulation is, I insist, disgusting, and so are the manipulators.

### **18 January 2026 / REMARKABLE PRE-21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND MEMOIRS: A LIST**

As I have mentioned I'll be soon teaching an elective subject on autobiographies and memoirs (in English). In preparation, I've been putting together a list of 100 remarkable pre-21<sup>st</sup> century texts in those genres, apart from the list of 21<sup>st</sup> century books my students need to read (each student chooses four from this list). This type of list is useful but hard to find, so I'm sharing the results of my work. Out of these, I should be commenting in class on about 50. As you may imagine, any selection is just the tip of the iceberg of two genres that have grown enormously since the early 1990s. By the way, I have read just around 30% of all the titles here. And I have decided to use the original titles in the list; if you're

curious Wikipedia can help you track the books in your preferred language. The bias in the list, of course, is towards English, as my subject is for the BA in English Studies. And, yes, I know, there should be more women and non-white persons, I've done my best... this is very hard work! Enjoy!!!

### **Early examples**

1. 50/40 BC Julius Caesar. *De bello Gallico*

### **Beginnings**

2. 397-398 Saint Augustine. *Confessiones*

### **Renaissance**

3. 1561-62 (written 1588) Teresa de Jesús. *Vida de la Madre Teresa de Jesús*

### **17<sup>th</sup> Century**

4. 1666 John Bunyan. *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*
5. 1682 Mary Rowlandson. *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*

### **18<sup>th</sup> Century**

6. 1782-1789. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Les Confessions*
7. 1789-1798 (published 1822-1825) Giacomo Casanova. *Histoire de Jacques Casanova de Seingalt, vénitien, écrite par lui-même à Dux, en Bohême*
8. 1791 Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography*

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century**

9. 1807 (published 1907). Benjamin Constant. *Le Cahier rouge*
10. 1811-1814 (vols. I-III); 1933 (vol. IV) Johann Wolfgang, von Goethe. *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*
11. 1834 Thomas Carlyle. *Sartor Resartus*
12. 1845 Frederick Douglass. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
13. 1850 William Wordsworth. *The Prelude*
14. 1854-55 George Sand (Aurore Dupin). *Histoire de ma vie*
15. 1855 (published 1877) Harriet Martineau. *Autobiography*
16. 1861 Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
17. 1864 Cardinal John Henry Newman. *Apologia pro Vita Sua*
18. 1871 Henry M. Stanley. *How I Found Livingstone*
19. 1873 John Stuart Mill. *Autobiography*
20. 1885-1886 Ulysses S. Grant. *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*
21. 1885-1899 John Ruskin. *Praeterita*
22. 1887 Charles Darwin. *Autobiography*
23. 1893 Frances Hodgson Burnett. *The One I Knew the Best of All*
24. 1899 Margaret Oliphant. *Autobiography*

### **20<sup>th</sup> Century 1900-1949**

25. 1901 Booker T. Washington. *Up from Slavery*
26. 1903 Helen Keller. *The Story of My Life*

27. 1907 Henry Adams. *The Education of Henry Adams*
28. 1910 Jane Addams. *Twenty Years at Hull-House*
29. 1920 Edward Bok. *The Americanization of Edward Bok*
30. 1925 Adolf Hitler. *Mein Kampf*
31. 1925 Thérèse de Lisieux. *L'Histoire d'une Âme*
32. 1926 T.E. Lawrence. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*
33. 1927 William Butler Yeats. *Autobiographies*
34. 1929 Mahatma Gandhi. *The Story Of My Experiments With Truth by Mahatma*
35. 1929 Robert Graves. *Good-Bye to All That*
36. 1930 Maxim Gorky. *Detstvo*
37. 1931 Emma Goldam. *Living My Life*
38. 1931 Margaret Sanger. *My Fight for Birth Control*
39. 1931 Albert Schweitzer. *Aus meinem Leben und Denken*
40. 1933 George Orwell. *Down and Out in Paris and London*
41. 1933 Gertrude Stein. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*
42. 1933 Vera Brittain. *Testament of Youth*
43. 1934 Sándor Márai. *Egy Polgár Vallomása*
44. 1935 Sigmund Freud. *An Autobiographical Study*
45. 1937 Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen). *Out of Africa*
46. 1938 George Orwell. *Homage to Catalonia*
47. 1939 Virginia Woolf. "A Sketch of the Past." *Moments of Being*
48. 1942 Beryl Markham. *West with the Night*
49. 1942 (written 1939-41) Stefan Zweig. *Die Welt von Gester. Erinnerungen eines Europäers*
50. 1944 Pío Baroja, *Desde la última vuelta del camino*
51. 1945 Richard Wright. *Black Boy*
52. 1948 Ramón Gómez de la Serna. *Automoribundia*

## **20<sup>th</sup> Century 1950-1999**

53. 1951, 1966 Vladimir Nabokov. *Speak, Memory*
54. 1955 C.S. Lewis. *Surprised by Joy*
55. 1956 Eli Wiesel. *Night*
56. 1956 Gerald Durrell. *My Family and Other Animals*
57. 1958 Primo Levi. *Se questo è un uomo*
58. 1959 Rafael Alberti. *La arboleda perdida*
59. 1961 Carl Jung. *Erinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken*
60. 1963 Jean Paul Sartre. *Les Mots*
61. 1964 Ernest Hemingway. *A Moveable Feast*
62. 1964 Charles Chaplin. *My Autobiography*
63. 1969 Maya Angelou. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
64. 1972 Peter Handke. *Wunschloses Unglück*
65. 1974 Jan Morris. *Conundrum*
66. 1974 Pablo Neruda. *Confieso que he vivido*
67. 1975 Roland Barthes. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*
68. 1976 Maxine Hong Kingston. *The Woman Warrior*
69. 1977 Eve Babitz. *Slow Days, Fast Company*

70. 1977-1985 Elias Canettis. *Die gerettete Zunge*, 1977; *Die Fackel im Ohr*, 1980; *Das Augenspiel*, 1985.
71. 1978 Harry Crews. *A Childhood*
72. 1982 Russell Baker. *Growing Up*
73. 1982 Audre Lorde. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*
74. 1982 Michael Ondaatje. *Running in the Family*
75. 1982 Gonzalo Torrente Ballester. *Dafne y Ensueños*
76. 1983 Joyce Johnson. *Minor Characters*
77. 1983 Rigoberta Menchú Tum (& Elizabeth Burgos). *I, Rigoberta Menchú*
78. 1983 Eudora Welty. *One Writer's Beginnings*
79. 1984 Janet Frame. *An Angel At My Table*
80. 1985 Richard P. Feynman. *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!*
81. 1987 Vivian Gornick. *Fierce Attachments*
82. 1989 Tobias Wolff. *This Boy's Life*
83. 1990 Terenci Moxi. *El peso de la paja*
84. 1991 Jung Chang. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*
85. 1991 Philip Roth. *Patrimony*
86. 1991 Terry Tempest Williams. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*
87. 1992 Rosa Parks (& Jim Haskins). *Rosa Parks: My Story*
88. 1993 Anatole Broyard. *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir*
89. 1993 Lars Eighner. *Travels With Lizbeth*
90. 1994 Lucy Grealy. *Autobiography of a Face*
91. 1995 Temple Grandin. *Thinking in Pictures*
92. 1995 Mary Karr. *The Liars' Club*
93. 1995 James McBride. *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*
94. 1995 Barack Obama. *Dreams From My Father*
95. 1995 Gore Vidal. *Palimpsest*
96. 1996 Frank McCourt. *Angela's Ashes*
97. 1997 J.M. Coetzee. *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*
98. 1997 Katharine Graham. *Personal History*
99. 1997 Carlos Castilla del Pino. *Pretérito imperfecto*
100. 1998 Ernesto Sábato, *Antes del fin*

## 29 January 2026 / (OVER)REACTING TO STUDENTS' NEGATIVE CRITICISM (AND TRYING TO STAY COOL)

I wrote a while ago a [post](#) titled “Students’ Ratings of Faculty: How It Works and Some Ideas to Improve It (sic),” criticizing how the survey to rate our task as teachers is organized. Since then, I’ve been pestering the Dean of my school to do something about this matter. Other teachers must have been protesting, too, because there is now a committee to work on improving the surveys. Today, my post is not about the surveys per se, but about the emotional reactions that students’ negative criticism generates. For, you see, teachers have feelings.

I usually end my subjects with a conclusions session, in which I review the, so to speak, narrative arc of my teaching, and invite students to offer feedback. This time I took a blank page to class and told the students that, since I don't know their handwriting (all the exercises are done at home using computers), they were welcome to offering anonymous feedback for me to consider. The class rejected my offer, but a couple of students made suggestions, verbally and in public: 1) I should use more time to teach how to write reviews in class (last year the class told me I used too much) and 2) I should offer feedback on the reviews in class, and not only through the tutorial I email after returning all marked exercises (I replied that with the emails I reach everyone, whereas class attendance is around 60%). So, I went home quite content, thinking that the students were satisfied. I was myself very satisfied, as the three reviews out of four (80% of the final mark) I had already marked were between correct and very good. There had been a few problems, but they had been ironed out.

It turned out that, although I have a handful of very positive emails, a sizeable portion of the students were not satisfied with the subject or my teaching. I know this through the surveys that my school runs and which, as is customary in colleges around the world, university students can fill in anonymously. I happen to be, as noted, a human being with feelings, and can't help being deeply hurt by comments that, in some cases, show great animosity. I'm not used to social media haters as, possibly, students are, and perhaps my skin is thinner than the situation requires. Anyway, after 24 rather awful hours, I did what scholars do: research, in this case about how university teachers handle negative comments. It turns out that there is plenty and this is a burgeoning field.

Students' surveys of teachers appear to be a 1920s invention of US colleges in the context of private higher education ([see](#) d'Apollonia & Abrami, "Navigating Student Ratings of Instruction," 1997). We owe to H.H. Remmers, professor of Psychology and Director of the Division of Educational Reference at Purdue University, the development of the idea and the formalization of the method and of the area of research, both in the mid-1930s. The surveys expanded in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to students' demands for their opinions to be considered. Between the 1970s and 1990s teacher surveys by students were used informally to improve teaching and as tools to evaluate teachers regarding tenure, promotion, and hiring. In 1993, a formal tool, the College Student Survey, was introduced by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). This is not limited to teachers' rating; it is, rather, a tool that unified surveys at a national US level. See the results (for 2024) [here](#).

For the Spanish context, where I work, I have checked F.J. Tejedor & J.M. Jornet's "La evaluación del profesorado universitario en España" (2008). They identify five key moments:

1. University-oriented and controlled assessment (1981-1989).
2. Implementation of the Decreto de Retribuciones (1989) by which extra retributions were added to wages on the basis of teaching quality.
3. Approval of the Plan Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad de las Universidades (1992).

- d) Implementation of the accreditation system for hired staff and of the national habilitation for civil servants with the Ley Orgánica de Universidades (LOU) (2001).
- e) Creation of the Agencia Nacional para la Evaluación de Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA) and of the corresponding regional agencies (2002), such as Catalan AQU.

The current national and regional system follows the directives of ANECA's [Docentia](#) programme, but this is much larger than just the student's evaluation. In my last application (in 2021) to obtain the supplementary retribution for teaching granted by the Catalan agency (AQU), there were five sections, only one of which was based on students' surveys. In fact, I can hardly make sense of my own trajectory, since I have six teaching assessment exercises validated by the Ministry and AQU, a total of 30 years, but I can't recall how I was assessed before 2001, when the current system was implemented following LOU. What I know is that whereas students' assessments were said to be a sort of extra in 2001, they are now a mandatory element that may result in negative evaluation.

I'm not writing, however, about their impact on our salaries but about the distortion that surveys impose on teacher-student communication. Anonymity, as we know from peer reviewing, is open to animosity. So, while we, teachers, were being schooled in a softer pedagogy that demands we give friendly, encouraging feedback (a pedagogy I endorse and do my best to follow), students have been encouraged to use surveys to lash out at teachers and subjects they don't like for whatever reason.

It is most likely the case, as Pekrun et al. [argue](#) in a 2010 article, and Emma Kennedy [paraphrases](#) in her blog that "Students cannot function as objective evaluators; their feelings about your teaching are affected by a variety of strong factors which are unlikely to be under their control." I will insist that a lifetime of social media usage, often anonymous, has encouraged Gen Z students to be as emotional as they wish before a screen. I hardly think that students can be objective, but my query is why they have been allowed to be so openly subjective and even cruel, disregarding the feelings of teachers. This is NOT feedback, this is... vendetta.

So, what advice are we being offered to cope with negative comments on course evaluations? Basically, the classic stiff-upper-lip reaction ('keep calm and carry on'), or the Spanish 'te aguantas' (chin up and swallow up your chagrin!). Please, note that since surveys results come when classes are over, there is no chance to reply in person to criticism. I did consider sending a collective email, and ended doing that but to thank students for their positive criticism, without mentioning the negative views. I saw no point in acknowledging them, as this is not expected from the system or the students.

Maryellen [Weimer](#) speaks of 'overreaction' in a personal case very similar to mine, and advises the following: 1) Step back; 2) Look again later, but with objectivity; 3) Decide what you're going to do; 4) Talk to a trusted colleague; 5) Talk to a few students; 6) Recognize that you are not alone. She also recommends Hodges & Stanton's 2007 "classic" [article](#) "Translating Comments on Student Evaluations into the Language of Learning," which I have not read yet. I've taken steps 1-4 and 6, but since I don't know who's not happy about my teaching, I can't

talk to them. I'm, by the way, running an experiment: I'm openly telling my Department colleagues about the negative comments I've received, and although they commiserate with me none has acknowledged having received any. This puzzles me: either I'm the Department's black sheep (me, who used to be popular!!) or they are too embarrassed to discuss this question.

I'm starting a new subject in about two weeks' time, with half the class that gave me the negative comments, and, as you may imagine, my self-confidence is at a low approaching burnt-out. A point I must clarify is that I very much suspect that the central problem is that the subject I've been assessed for, Contemporary English Literature, is a compulsory fourth-year subject. Many of our linguistics-oriented students very much dislike having to take yet another Literature subject, which, besides, did not appear in the syllabus they registered for a few years ago. That, of course, is not my fault. Introducing Contemporary and making it compulsory was a joint decision of the whole Department. I just volunteered to teach it. Perhaps that's enough to make me a hateful person, I don't know.

As you can see, I'm not addressing the elephant in the room: am I, then, an awful teacher? I could take the negative criticism and reply to each complaint one by one here, but I see no point. You, my reader, would still not know what kind of teacher I am, for I could be lying. Of course, I honestly believe that I am a very committed teacher who does care for their students and that I am doing my best for them. I had some very bad teachers in my student days, and I really think I'm nothing like them, but, obviously some students totally disagree.

I feel that I am very unfairly judged through means that do not give an adequate measure of how my classes work. The additional problem is that this anonymous feedback offers no useful tips. I will certainly consider for next year the requests (politely given in class during general conversation) about using more time to teach how to write reviews and offer feedback on them, but what can I do with opinions such as "in this subject I have learned nothing" or "if attendance were not compulsory nobody would be in class" (there is much worse...)? I just think that anonymous opinions should be written as if they were addressed to the teacher face to face in their office, once assessment is over and both students and professors are free to speak.

My hope is that, if not now perhaps in the future, students look back and conclude that, after all, they did learn something from me and that you don't have to necessarily like your teachers. I also hope that, if they ever become teachers, they can manage to be much better teachers than me and please their students. As for the next semester, I'm considering whether to stop reading students' surveys to protect my mental health.

I finish today with my deepfelt thanks to the Head of Department and the BA Coordinator for having listened to me and helped.

## 10 February 2026 / A NEW BOOK: MASCULINITIES IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE-FICTION TELEVISION

I've been busy these past weeks finishing the edition of a new e-book with 96 book reviews written by my undergrad students in the subject Contemporary English Literature, whose publication I'm very proud to announce: [Reviewing Contemporary Anglophone Fiction and Nonfiction](#), vol. II. You can check here the [post](#) I wrote last year about producing this kind of publication. This has been my fifteenth e-book with texts written by students and, yes, this second semester I'll be taking a break as I consider whether to go on. Each e-book is 80-100000 words long, a whole 250–300-page volume and, as you may imagine, they are hard to fit in with my own research.

Actually, the subject of today's post is another edited volume, [Masculinities in Contemporary Science-Fiction Television](#) (Bloomsbury Academic), published on 11 December 2025, and which I have co-edited with Michael Pitts. I haven't found the time until today to write about it here, but it's about time I do so. I'm currently proofreading another co-edited volume (with Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen) for Palgrave, *Exploring Reproduction and Gender in Contemporary Feminist Speculative Fiction: Mothers Out of this World*. And I signed yesterday the contract with Edinburgh UP for yet another volume, *Production Design as Adaptation in Anglophone Speculative Fiction: Creative (Re)Settings*, which I'll be editing alone. This will be my eighth edited volume (apart from the fifteen with my students) and I would like to vindicate collective books as true research projects. I'm very much annoyed that the Spanish Ministry of Universities and ANECA do not consider edited volumes on an equal footing to research projects, or as merits for assessment exercises, when they do at no cost (I've never paid for publication) what funded projects are supposed to do: gather together a group of scholars and publish research done under a common theoretical framework.

*Masculinities in Contemporary Science-Fiction Television* has a backstory which I wish to narrate even though it makes me appear in a very bad light. Michael Pitts, a young US researcher whom I had not met, published in 2021 *Alternative Masculinities in Feminist Speculative Fiction: A New Man*, which I asked to review for the journal *Extrapolation*. I wrote a rather negative review because I found that Dr. Pitts was too ready to praise male characters I found deplorable just because they had been written by feminist women writers. So, I wrote my obnoxious review and sent it, only to find out next that Michael was editing a symposium called 'Conflicting Masculinities in SF' for the *SFRA Review*. I very much wanted to participate in that symposium, so, I emailed Michael and candidly explained the situation with the review. That's how we met. After reading it, and expressing his regrets that my reading did not match his intentions, Michael just accepted that it would be published as it was. Still, he very kindly accepted my proposed [article](#) for the symposium, published as "Being the Other, the Other Being: Masculine Insecurities in Matthew Haig's *The Humans* and Blake Crouch's *Dark Matter*" (Fall 2022). In gratitude, I asked *Extrapolation* to allow me to resubmit the review in a better informed, fairer version. This doesn't mean that I lied about the merits of Michael's book in this second review, but that I corrected

the glaring misjudgements of the first version. Lesson learned: make friends, not foes.

To my surprise, Michael, one of the most generous scholars I've ever met, proposed that we worked in whatever project might suit me and we eventually agreed that a collective volume on men and masculinities in SF series sounded like a very good idea. I had already started work on my book [\*Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction by Men: No Plans for the Future\*](#) and this is a method I recommend: working in parallel on a monograph and a collective volume. It's been, truly, an extremely enriching experience. Anyway, Michael and I made a list of scholars who had already published on men and SF in audiovisual productions (series and films) and sent invitations. I included in the list scholars I had already worked with, but we cold-called others we didn't know. Collaborating with all of them was a real pleasure. The result is our fantastic table of contents:

- CHAPTER 1. Michael Pitts, The Captain as Auteur: Reconsidering Masculinity in *Firefly/Serenity*
- CHAPTER 2. Marianne Kac-Vergne, Remodelling Cyborg Masculinities in Terminator: *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*
- CHAPTER 3. Hasan Gürkan, Technological Reflections of Masculine Vulnerability: Analysing Emotional Detachment and Dependency in *Black Mirror*
- CHAPTER 4. Jonathan Hay, "Am I A Good Man?" Regenerating Masculinity in *Doctor Who*
- CHAPTER 5. Juan Carlos Hidalgo-Ciudad, "If All the World Is a Stage, Identity Is Nothing but a Custom": Liquid Masculinities in *Sense8*
- CHAPTER 6. Miguel Sebastián-Martín, A Different History but the Same Old Story?: Rethinking Hegemonic Masculinities from the Fascist World of *The Man in the High Castle*.
- CHAPTER 7. Sara Martín, 'What Am I Now If I'm not a Father?': Fox Mulder's Ageing Masculinity in *The X-Files*
- CHAPTER 8. Amaya Fernández Menicucci, The Black Man and the Man in Black: Black Masculinity in Jonathan Nolan's and Lisa Joy's *Westworld*
- CHAPTER 9. Kimberly Yost, Commanding the Masculine Space: Leadership, Power, and Gender Performance in *The Handmaid's Tale*
- CHAPTER 10. Paul Mitchell, Envisioning Masculinity and Caring in Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*
- CHAPTER 11. Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco, Takeshi Kovacs: The Commodification of the Male Body in *Altered Carbon*
- CHAPTER 12. M. Isabel Santaulària i Capdevila, 'You Know What They Call a Superhero Who Works Alone and Doesn't Listen to Anybody? A Villain': Interrogating Patriarchy, Hegemonic Masculinity and Heroism in *The Umbrella Academy*
- CHAPTER 13. Bridget Kies, A Stranger to Himself: Perfection, Paterfamilias, and *Picard*

Of course, the field of SF television series is vast, and a 100000-word volume can only accommodate so many chapters, which means that we could only cover a

selection. Yes, *Battlestar Galactica* is missing and so are the series in the *Star Wars* franchise, but, as we argued in the proposal to our publisher, Bloomsbury Academic, our volume is intended to open up a field of research, not to have the last word.

When we set out to explore the science-fiction TV series that constitute the corpus of our volume, we did so hoping to find signs of a clear regeneration regarding the representation of gender in comparison to similar series of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our main research question was whether the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought significant changes in the way the future of men and of humankind is imagined, whether this future is near, far, or alternative. The answer to our question is that whereas the progress may be obvious if two versions of the same TV series can be compared, it is far less perceptible if we advance series-by-series, as we did, from *Firefly* (2002) to *Picard* (2023). Generally speaking, the macho men of Golden Age SF disappeared long ago to be replaced with more vulnerable and caring models of postmodern masculinity although, as superhero cinema shows (this is also a branch of science fiction), there is much reluctance to let go of the ultra-muscular male body and little effort to transcend individualism in the search for communal justice, despite the different alliances among male and female superheroes.

The TV series analysed present a far more flexible masculinity (or masculinities, rather), but are still far from offering the variety of male characters that the audience is demanding, which ranges from revised traditional models to the non-binary individuals that reject all attempts at limiting gender to essentialist positions, portrayals that frequently also take into account sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, ability and other identity markers. This is bound to change since TV series, now mostly in the hands of streaming platforms, are, for basic commercial reasons, quite sensitive to the demands of the mostly young demographic at which they aim their products, an age group more in touch with the need to reform gender norms than older segments of the audience.

These conclusions are very much in tune with my own findings in [\*Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction by Men: No Plans for the Future\*](#), which deals with 50 SF novels by 17 male authors, but also with the findings of the volume I co-edited with M. Isabel Santaulària, [\*Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture: In Search of Good Men\*](#) (Palgrave, 2023; see my blog [post](#) on it). *Detoxing*, which covers male characters in texts from Jane Austen to *Mr. Robot*, paints a panorama in which while patriarchy and its toxicity are rejected by all authors, few truly good men can be found. Michael Pitts and I assumed that SF, being oriented to the future, would offer a more diverse roster of new masculinities, but the fact is that SF extrapolates from the present and there are clear limits to the alternatives to patriarchy that can be imagined. As I've been arguing, whereas women's writing is mostly guided by the utopian wish to reach full equality, men who reject patriarchy have no common agenda. No plans for the future, as I subtitled my book.

Please, enjoy *Masculinities in Contemporary Science-Fiction Television* (which, by the way, lost its subtitle *Exploring New Spaces* in the process of publication) and be demanding as part of the large TV audience. We need progressive masculinities that can break away from the grim panorama of the manosphere and the rise of extreme right-wing patriarchal political forces.

Imagining new models in fiction is indispensable, and in that sense SF offers a vast field to act out thought experiments that may alter how we apprehend the oppressive mundane reality dominating mimetic fiction, and our lives.

## 16 February 2026 / COUNTING THE HOURS: SUPERVISING A PHD DISSERTATION

So that you know, according to the current regulations of my university, and following Catalan legislation, a full-time teacher (24 ECTS) is supposed to devote 640 yearly hours to teaching, out of the 1640 we're supposed to work annually. Actually, if I multiply the 215 working days of the current academic year 2025-26 by 7,5 daily hours (by contract, civil servants like me work 37,5 hours a week), we get 1612,5 hours, but that's fine as the 28-hour difference has to do with the diverse local holidays.

Our 1640 hours are subdivided into 38-42% for teaching, depending on the credits assigned; 38-42% for research; and 16-20% for admin and other activities (such as writing reports, or being in committees). I'm actually teaching only 17 ECTS (= 450,5 hours), because my five research assessment exercises get me a discount of 7 ECTS, which I'm using for research (an extra 185,5 hours on top of the maximum 688 I should be using, that is, 873,5 hours, about 50% of my total hours). I'm doing practically no admin, now that I'm very senior and can get away with that, except for attending meetings, organizing our annual teaching seminar, and a few more minor tasks. So, yes, I'm using as much time as I can for research.

One teaching credit is valued at 26,5 hours (subdivide 640 into 24 and round it off) and we take into account the size of groups, so that my subject Contemporary English Literature (73 students) is worth 8,227 ECTS (268 hours) and my new subject English Prose (40 students) is worth 6,358 ECTS (218,5 hours) even though formally they are each worth 6 ECTS and I spend the same time in class for each. Supervising a TFG (or BA dissertation) is valued at 21,28 hours (0,803 ECTS) and a TFM (or MA dissertation) at 47,04 hours (or 1,775 ECTS). The tricky thing about these hours is that in English Literature and Culture we need to read plenty to prepare classes or tutor a BA/MA dissertation.

I find the figures I've quoted so far more or less acceptable, though I've never counted the actual hours I spend on each task. Being a university teacher is not really a job that can be restricted to a specific schedule, and I often find myself, like all my colleagues, working evenings or weekends, depending on the particular needs of each moment. I don't take days off if I work extra hours, but that's because I need my time for research. If I'm in the middle of writing something, taking time off can indeed help, for the brain needs a rest to be really productive. Yet I've never taken time off just because I felt like doing nothing. I think this is habitual among us, researchers. I have no idea what teachers who don't do research do with their days.

As a researcher, I'm supposed to tutor PhD students, and this is the aspect of our workload which is less satisfactorily valued. Currently, at UAB, a PhD dissertation is worth 100 hours of teaching (3,77 ECTS), or, basically, a little above

two MA dissertations (that would be 94,08 hours). We, PhD tutors, are allocated 25 hours each of the first two years our full-time tutorees take to write their dissertation and the remaining 50 in the academic year following their viva and their earning the title of doctor. Technically, doctoral students have four years to complete their dissertation, so we technically use 25 hours per year for each. This might be tolerable if, as we do, we consider the monthly tutorial (60 to 90 minutes), the six hours of the yearly workshop, the six hours of the yearly examinations, and other tasks.

I'm not counting here the hours employed to read the texts that the student is working on, texts whose number is really open to us (I just can't read all the texts my tutorees of all levels analyze). The 100 hours, however, become totally insufficient when, for whatever reason, the student needs to take one or two extra years to finish their dissertation, years in which you supervise them for free. Add to this the long process of reading drafts, from section drafts to the whole dissertation (250-300 pages), and you can see that the 100 hours are quite a joke. If supervising a 35–50-page MA dissertation is worth 47,04 hours, supervising a PhD dissertation should be worth at least 50 hours per year, a total of 200 hours, with 50 hours added for any extra year.

We can supervise up to six doctoral students simultaneously, but, having done that, I can tell you that it's crazy. I'm currently supervising three students and waiting for another to finish her temporary medical leave (this is a co-supervision, for which my co-tutor, who works at another university, gets no hours whatsoever). So far, I can cope well, but this is because they are at early stages and still writing little. My concern is that the three of them finish in the same year and I have three 300-page dissertations to read and comment on at the same time.

I've discussed all this today with the Coordinator of our programme in English Studies, and she tells me that there was a meeting about this issue with the Head of the Doctoral School just last week. There is, the Coordinator explained to me, widespread discontent about the issue I've raised here, and some kind of action is being demanded from UAB. She and I know that we just don't have enough staff to cover all the teaching programmes, BA, MA and PhD, which is, of course, the root of the problem.

We are all under a lot of pressure to keep our three types of programme as full as possible, but the cost this implies in working hours is never considered. The tutors in the doctoral programme are exploited (sorry, but that's the word) in worse ways than in the BA and MA programmes, because tutoring PhD students falls between teaching and research. The assumption is that we can (or should) employ research hours in tutoring doctoral students. This might work for scientists or engineers working in labs, but it doesn't work for us in the Humanities. It might work if we forced our students to work on areas with the same bibliography we're using in our own research, but even in the best circumstances, I have never found any kind of shortcut for my own research in my students' research.

If, supposing, the Doctoral School agrees that 200 hours, instead of 100, is the reasonable figure for a PhD supervision, where are we going to find the resources? This year, the combined workload of my two subjects has already prevented me from tutoring BA and MA dissertations (I mean, I could do it but

only by giving hours away for free, which I have decided not to do any longer). Next year, I will be in an even worse situation, for UAB will have to add to my work count the three dissertations I'm supervising (so, 75 hours). In practice, I will be supervising my PhD students for free, giving my teaching hours away. If we count all the hours that we're giving away for free in my Department, they amount to a few full-time teachers. If we increase the hours allocated for PhD supervision, as it would be only fair, then we'll be in very red numbers.

PhD students, I assume, have very little information, if any, about how we tutor them. They have to fight other battles, too, such as the fact that, unless they are the recipients of a full-time scholarship, they have no right to office space anywhere. Imagine undergrads and MA students being told they cannot use any corner of our buildings! I don't want to give PhD students in any way the impression that they are an obstacle for their tutor's research, or an imposition on our time. Not at all!! I've found much satisfaction in shepherding PhD candidates towards finishing their dissertations along the years, and I certainly enjoy tutoring. In fact, I apologize to my current PhD students because I understand that they might need more time from me, but I just don't have it.

The problem, as usual, is that whereas teaching and admin work must be given priority for the institution to fulfil its immediate tasks at a department, school or university level, research is always relegated (at least in my area) to a secondary position, even though it may be a primary occupation. I can miss, for instance, a Department meeting because it overlaps with a class, or even because I'm away at a conference, but not because I'm in the middle of writing an article. We all accept that classes must be taught and time deducted off research, but in the case of PhD supervision the problem is, I insist, that this is done at a too high cost for our research time. Again, I must insist that PhD students are not the problem at all, but the extremely limited budget with which UAB, and many other public universities, try to keep all their programmes alive.

At one point, not too long ago, I suggested that, since we have insufficient teaching resources, we should cancel our MA programme and focus on the PhD programme, which is more closely connected to our research. My proposal was rejected on the grounds that the MA programme is supposed to provide us with doctoral students, even though many come to us from other universities. The question, at any rate, is that I've never seen the Department get more staff because we need more PhD tutors; the resources are always allocated on the basis of the BA and the MA. If, as I have noted, PhD supervision starts being better valued, we will need more teachers, which we're not going to get anyway. We might end up giving away many more hours for free...

Yes, I'm wondering as I write who can be interested in all this farrago, but this is a professional blog, and this is the part of my profession that worries me today. When I tell people that I teach English Literature they all go 'ohhhh, that's so coool'. Well, sometimes it isn't cool at all... though I do get that what I have described here today are the problems of a privileged worker only my colleagues can understand.

It's not at all usual for me to abandon an article at the writing stage, but today I'm giving myself permission. I'm sharing this misadventure in case you've also fallen down a rabbit hole and can't climb out. Forgive me in advance for the long tale, I'm sort of exorcising this unfinished article from my to-do list and it hurts. So far, I've published everything I've written one way or another, and only abandoned projects when I just had notes and a bibliography, but abandoning a half-written paper is new for me. Perhaps it's more habitual than I think. I wonder.

Last October, the research group I currently belong to, [Beyond Postmemory](#), held the seminar "Nature Remembers: War, Trauma and Environmental Postmemory," in which we discussed how not only human beings but also nature can suffer from PTSD, so to speak, and show signs of trauma long after a conflict. Postmemory, a concept coined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to how subsequent generations inherit the trauma associated to conflicts they may never have lived. An example would be the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), a conflict that is still leaving a significant trail in current Spanish society, politics, and culture, even though fewer and fewer persons directly involved survive today. I chose to discuss nature in the novel by Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), a text I thought I knew well. I focused my presentation on what I called 'zero ecology', that is to say, a situation in which the biosphere has been lost to such a degree that recovery seems impossible.

The idea was to turn my seminar presentation into a chapter for a collective book which the group intends to publish next year. One thing, however, is to offer a twenty-minute paper, and quite another to familiarize myself with the theoretical background in postmemory and ecocriticism that the future chapter and the book's editor require. You might ask at this point why I have joined this research project if the group doesn't use bibliography I know well. That is a pertinent question. I have joined the project because in Spain you're expected to work within a group with a financed project. I've been attached to diverse research groups since 1998 and although I have done research in very interesting areas, the tasks carried out have always distracted me from my main research. This is the reason why formally I'm only a part-time researcher as far as the Beyond Postmemory group is concerned. I'll leave for another post why I have never led a research project.

Anyway, I told myself that since I would have to eventually write the projected chapter on *The Road*, a novel I like but I'm not passionate about, I might as well write something else about using the tons of bibliography accumulated. Since I'm also editing a book on the role of production design in film adaptation, I decided to write about the 2009 film directed by John Hillcoat, based on the script by Joe Penhall and with production design by Chris Kennedy. I made that decision in November and soon I came across the excellent graphic novel *La route* (2024) by French artist Manu Larcenet, another adaptation of McCarthy's novel. Since in the book I'm editing we're comparing the original source and two film adaptations, I thought that I could compare in a separate article McCarthy's worldbuilding with Kennedy's production design and Larcenet's (re)design of the

post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*. This is where the rabbit hole opened up beneath my feet and down I fell.

I've been doing many different things in the last three months, but the projected article about the double adaptation of *The Road* has taken plenty of my time and energy. I soon found bibliography for the film and the graphic novel, enjoying in particular the many interviews. I intended to submit the article to *Adaptation*, a top quality Q1 journal by Oxford UP, which I've had in my sights for a while. *The Road*, however, happens to be a very slippery text and I found myself taking lots of notes about its worldbuilding and trying to make sense of its episodic nature. I drew endless lists of scenes and locations, and I did the same for the film and the graphic novel. The film, it turns out, significantly alters the order of the episodes (except the last segment), whereas the graphic novel more or less keeps it. Both are faithful adaptations.

I finally managed to write a 7000-word draft only to realise that whereas comparing two film adaptations makes sense, comparing a film and a graphic novel does not work so well. Since the word count was growing at an alarming rate, I decided to split the article in two: one about the film, the other about the graphic novel. I did finish about ten days ago the article about the film adaptation; surprisingly, there are not many similar articles and my approach based on foregrounding production design has not been used yet. I've submitted this article to the journal *Science Fiction Film and Television*, by Liverpool UP, the fourth most important in the field of SF. I'm now crossing my fingers and hoping to pass peer reviewing.

I have found myself, however, unable to finish the article on Larcenet's graphic novel, for two reasons. One is that I can't reproduce what I say in the article about the film adaptation about the worldbuilding of McCarthy's *The Road* without incurring in blatant self-plagiarising. I may have re-used some lines, perhaps one paragraph, in similar texts, but re-using 3000 words seems plain wrong. I felt, however, too lazy to thoroughly re-write, or paraphrase, what I had already written and, besides, at this point, I was beginning to be fed up with *The Road*.

The other problem has to do with my inexperience in dealing with graphic novels, a genre I like but I'm not really familiar with. I've spent, then, a few days reading basic bibliography and more advanced research about which literary works have been adapted in this format. A major obstacle, of course, is that I've never felt confident enough to discuss Larcenet's artistic achievements in *La route*. I can explain how he has (re)articulated McCarthy's narrative, but I lack the vocabulary to discuss his art. I have even used (the horror, the horror...), ChatGPT to make a list of the colours Larcenet uses, thinking that his singular palette of coloured greys could be the centre of my article.

A few days ago, I got nervous about whether *Adaptation* would welcome an article about a graphic novel and I emailed them. They said yes, no problem, but the article must make a theoretical point about graphic novels in adaptation and not be limited to a case study. I could make the point that Larcenet was attracted by McCarthy's 'sets' (this is the word he used) above the storyline, but I'm not equipped to turn this idea into theorization for most graphic novels in the context of adaptation. So, I quit. That's it. What's more, I've already started looking for another novel to replace *The Road* in the chapter about postmemory and

ecocriticism for the projected book. I have decided that *The Road* has already received (too) much attention, and I'd rather work on a less famous text, such as Robert McCammon's *Swan Song* or Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore*, both 1980s post-apocalyptic novels dealing with nuclear warfare.

So, I'm out of the rabbit hole but fretting about my fall. The article on the film adaptation of *The Road* might have a chance to be published, but right now I deeply regret having chosen McCarthy's novel to work on. Larcenet's graphic novel has been a wonderful discovery, and I don't think I have wasted the hours spent learning about graphic novels, but that's a road (ha, ha...) I won't be taking now.

I think that I have fallen into the rabbit hole because my motivation to explore *The Road* was always spurious. It came out of wish to please my colleagues rather than from genuine interest in the text. The joint article about film and graphic novel also came from shaky motivation: I want to publish a few articles as quickly as possible so that I can be done with the requirements for my sixth and last assessment research exercise (due in 2029) and be free to work on my books. This plan, however, is backfiring because it's leading me to articles, like the one on *La route*, which force my hand in directions I don't usually take.

I'm too senior to be making this kind of mistake, I know, but I assume that this happens to all of us. I don't know how many articles Literature scholars abort in the course of their careers, but I'm sure that there must be a few. As I write about scholarship, I realize that there are whole areas of our professional experience we never discuss. Abandoned articles are one. Anyway, I am not going to destroy the files for the unfinished article. This morning I have got rid of a few digital folders with preliminary work for articles I will never write. Yet, I still keep quite old folders with material for the articles that I didn't bring myself to write but that still appeal to me. I think that the folder for *La route* is one of those. I might care to write that article one day, but the fact is that nobody will miss it if I never write it.

Let me add a coda about the last nail in the coffin. McCarthy refused to explain intra or extradiegetically what causes the catastrophe that destroys the biosphere and human civilization in *The Road*, which has unleashed endless speculation. The nameless protagonist, simply called 'the man', recalls a violent event that takes place at 1:17 am, when the clocks stops. Commentators are divided between supposing this is the start of nuclear war or the fall of a meteorite, though currently the focus falls on the radical climate change that follows the mysterious event.

I was going to write about that for the chapter, but I found a very brief academic article, "The Setting of McCarthy's *The Road*" by Carl James Gridley, which stunned me. Gridley explains that in fact McCarthy narrates the aftermath of actual Apocalypse. He argues that 1:17 is an allusion to "Revelation 1.17, which introduces Christ's theophany to John the Divine." He notes that if McCarthy's novel is read "as a document of the so-called Tribulation of Judeo-Christian mythology, many interpretive issues become readily resolved." Indeed they do, though I'm not falling into this theological rabbit hole. I have a certain suspicion that McCarthy has made fools of us, his non-religious readers... Nuclear war, meteorite, climate change, ha! and ha!

So, goodbye *The Road*, time to explore other paths. And sorry *La route*, I was not up to standard.

#### 4 March 2026 / DESIGN IN FICTION: BETWEEN 'WORLDBUILDING' AND 'SPACE'

In his famous, but rather absurd, essay "The Death of the Author" (1968), Roland Barthes ranted about the impending dismissal of authors from literary criticism, to be replaced by a sort of totally objective super-reader that would focus on the text as if sprung from language itself, with no active mediation from the author. The justifications were not truly Barthes's original ideas, but a sort of distillation of formalist currents alive in France and Russia since the 1930s that also fuelled US New Criticism in the 1940s. Barthes attributes to capitalism the bothersome presence of the author in the media, as an advertising prop for the book. The irony, of course, is that after strenuously denying that the author had to be regarded at all, Barthes became a most potent presence in the scholarship about his texts. I mean, he even wrote an autobiography.

I've been disputing Barthes's ideas for years, on the grounds that they are nothing but a narcissistic projection of the literary critic. Lacking humility before the creativity of the literary author, Barthesian literary critics assume that their reading contains the ultimate truth about the text, far above anything the author may opine, and even when this truth is subjected to the rigours of postmodern deconstruction or of today's post-truth. The text, we have been told again and again, is the only reliable reality, whereas the author must be always seen as an unreliable construct and, at worst, as a ghostly medium through which the mystique of literature flows thanks to his or her performing of writerly acts (Oxford linguistics was all the rage in Barthes's 1968).

Today I'm working on a segment of an introduction to a book, for which I need to think hard about how we deal academically with the fiction writer's 'production design' as opposed to the work carried out by designers in audiovisual productions of adaptations of speculative fiction. I've read Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor's essay "Notes Toward a Critical Approach to Worlds and World-Building" (*Fafnir* 3.3, 2016, 7–18) to that end and have stumbled upon yet another instance not just of the author's death but of overkill.

Ekman and Taylor name "three major categories of world-building based on how the imaginary world is approached: through the author's creative effort (authorial world-building); through the reader's (re-)construction (readerly world-building); and through the critic's analysis and interpretation (critical world-building)" (8). Before focusing on critical world-building, they rather curtly dismiss authorial and readerly worldbuilding. Of the processes authors engage in, Ekman and Taylor claim that "While it is of course possible to discuss this kind of world-building process, it is difficult to subject it to critical analysis, because, ultimately, actual authorial world-building processes cannot be analysed by anyone but the author in question; no one else has access to their mind. It is possible to analyse oral or written comments that a writer makes regarding their world-building

(interviews, public comments, private communication, published letters), but such analysis will always suffer from problems *with imperfect recollection and veracity*" (10, my italics), presumably on the author's side.

Now, imagine raising Leonardo Da Vinci from the dead, eager to discuss 'La Gioconda', only to tell him, "you know what? I don't really care about what you have to say, and I'll stick to my own (subjective) reading, on the basis of the evidence provided by the painting itself. Who cares if the painting is yours? You wouldn't be able anyway to say anything of substance about it, lacking the theoretical framework that I possess.' Deep sigh... If we spoke more often to living writers, we might begin to understand whether they think of 'design' when considering the locations and settings of their fiction, down to the look of their characters. But, anyway, let me put together what I have so far.

I need to mention first J.R.R. Tolkien's famous essay "On Fairy-Stories" (1947), a discussion of this genre as a literary form, originally offered as the lecture "Fairy Stories" in the Andrew Lang series of the University of St Andrews, in 1939. Famously, Tolkien distinguished between Primary and Secondary worlds in fantasy, meaning, respectively, those set in a (modified) mundane setting and those totally apart from our own world. Tolkien's own *The Lord of the Rings* is the most famous example of Secondary subcreation. This is the main concept that Mark J.P. Wolf amplified in his indispensable volume *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012) and in subsequent works, such as his edited volume *Exploring Imaginary Worlds: Essays on Media, Structure, and Subcreation* (2020). Whereas Wolf's monograph focuses mainly on fantasy and on Tolkien, interestingly the collective volume has essays on realist authors Fiódor Dostoevsky or Thornton Wilder. For, here's the thing: even a mimetic, ultrarealistic novel set in the present requires the building of an imaginary fictitious world because fiction is *not* documentary.

In the case of mimetic fiction, the usual concepts invoked in pre-theory scholarship in relation to what I'm calling design are place and setting. Thus, I've come across delicious pre-theory works such as Leonard Lutwack's book [\*The Role of Place in Literature\*](#) (1984), and a couple of very cool articles: Nikolaus Pevsner's "The Architectural Setting of Jane Austen's Novels" (1968) and William R. Risley's "Setting in the Galdós Novel, 1881-1885" (1978). Also, lots of MA dissertations on similar topics, submitted in the 1970s and 1980s. This model of analysis based on close reading, however, fell out of grace to be replaced in the 1990s with, guess what?, narratological theory. The website called *The Living Handbook of Narratology* offers an article called "Space" (2012) by top specialist Marie-Laure Ryan, which begins by connecting Bakhtin's 'chronotope' (the set of space-time relations characterising a particular genre or work) with Genette's ([1972] 1980) "diégèse," Werth's (1999) "text world," and Herman's (2005) "storyworld." Ryan warns that 'setting' is a too loose term that needs to be reconsidered and defines it as "the general socio-historico-geographical environment in which the action takes place." Thus, the setting of *Wuthering Heights* is 1790s Yorkshire, regardless of the number of specific indoor and outdoor locations where the scenes take place.

Here's the funny thing: 'space' is a concept closely linked to SF (though, yes, in another sense), but Ryan sticks to non-fantasy genres and, like all narratologists, has no use for 'worldbuilding' (what I prefer to call 'design'). Not

that SF specialists have much interest in how narratology approaches (deep) space, either. 'Worldbuilding' is commonly used in speculative fiction (fantasy, SF, horror, utopia/dystopia) by authors, reviewers, academics and fans, but as Ekman and Taylor warn, this is a concept that (like 'settings') needs to be reconsidered.

The marvellous *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction* has an article on ['world-building'](#) (I prefer 'worldbuilding' with no hyphen), according to which the concept was first used by English philosopher/astrophysicist A. S. Eddington in *Space, Time & Gravitation* (1920); I have been unable to find an alleged earlier usage in vol. 33 (Dec. 1820) of the *Edinburgh Review*. Next, author Philip K. Dick seems to have used the label in his short story "The Trouble with Bubbles" (1953), where 'world-building' is "the ultimate art form. It takes the place of all entertainments, all the passive sports as well as music and painting."

S. Coleman may have been the first to use 'world-building' for criticism. He wrote in the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (August 1974) that "The deemphasis of detailed world-building separates [Larry] Niven from the writers with whom he is usually grouped, 'hard-science' writers like Poul Anderson or Arthur Clarke." Apparently, Brian Attebery imported 'world-building' into academia in *Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* (1980). By the mid-1990s 'world-building' was already common in SF and fantasy studies, and a source of unease given its alleged informality (against which Ekman and Taylor warned).

The points I want to make here are that a) 'worldbuilding' applies to all kinds of fiction; b) it goes far beyond the narratological notion of 'space' to be closer to what is called in the audiovisual industry 'production design'; c) since fiction is not a 'production', perhaps we might use 'design' for authors. By this I mean that to make a story work, writers need to place their characters in specific locations, which need to be imagined or 'designed.'

Just as production designers are responsible for giving material reality to the world imagined in the screenplay and coordinated by the director and the producer, fiction authors of all types must incorporate into their plots their design for the required world. This encompasses the whole 'look' of each novel or short story: the general setting (when and where), but also the specific locations for each scene, the props, and the look of the characters. Design relies on description to be transmitted to readers, who must supply with their imagination what authors do not describe (or not, depending on their willingness to collaborate). This is very different from looking at the work of the production designer on the screen, but the principle is similar: if Emily Brontë hadn't 'designed' *Wuthering Heights* no reader (or film adapter) would be able to make sense of the plot. Quite another thing is throwing away the author's design to imagine as readers (or adapters) whatever pleases us.

So, I'm waiting for the day when a SF specialist and a narratologist sit down together to explore how the twin notions of 'worldbuilding' and 'space' overlap, and what is needed to make them converge. It would be lovely if authors on both sides of the fantasy divide could join them to discuss how they 'design' their fictions. And I would love to join the conversation!

## 9 March 2026 / READING MEN'S MEMOIRS ABOUT FATHERS: THERAPY AND VALUE

I was going to start writing my projected book on secondary characters, but then I realized that since it is not exclusively focused on English-language literature but on a selection of European novels in different languages, I might have problems presenting it in my next research assessment exercise (the board might value negatively my straying away from my area). Yes, this is how academic creativity is curbed down. I have decided, then, to start the other book I was planning.

I had already decided that this book would deal with journalistic narrative non-fiction, from the point of view of genre theory, but it turns out that I'm now preparing a volume on how sons represent their fathers in memoirs about their relationships. This has three justifications: 1) I'm now teaching autobiography and reading plenty of secondary sources for the course, so basically I already have a bibliography of the main names; 2) I've worked on diverse books on masculinity as represented in diverse genres and it makes sense to follow the same productive line, tired as I am of Gender Studies; 3) this is very personal: my father passed away about fifteen months ago, and I'm processing my (mostly negative) feelings towards him by reading the corpus of my future book.

I have not chosen to write about daughters and fathers because I'm interested in how men deal with the legacies of their fathers, having seen my brothers reject my father's model to build a completely different kind of masculinity. I believed that the central conflict of my life was the bad relationship with my father, but I'm beginning to see, once he is gone, that this central conflict is actually how to avoid following my mother's model of inescapable submission. I could have chosen to work on mothers and daughters, but I don't want to work on conflict among women, as this type of study tends to undermine sisterhood and increase misogyny. I'd rather work on intergenerational change within masculinity and/or patriarchy, addressing men readers. I'll solve my own issues with my mother (who is, as anyone who meets her knows, a very good person) in other ways, if I ever can.

I'm now in the process of reading a list of about 50 memoirs by men about their fathers, of which I'm aiming to select around 15 for the book. So far, I've come across one academic monograph entirely devoted to the same subject: Stephen Mansfield's *Australian Patriography: How Sons Write Fathers in Contemporary Life Writing* (2014). Mansfield claims that the seven books he focuses on (beginning with Edmund Gosse's quintessential *Father and Son*, 1907) are enough to cover the spectrum that runs from memoirs dominated by the father's presence to memoirs dominated by the son's authorship. Mansfield also speaks of an 'eulogy-denouncement' continuum. These two axes (character/author, praise/dislike) are indeed very useful, but in my books I have always tried to strike a balance between different identities. Mansfield, himself Australian, sticks to what his nation has produced, but not being attached to any Anglophone area, I'm free to roam as I want. As I read, I'm careful to select different identities and, above all, different experiences.

Although my focus is, as usual, the 21st century, I can't really ignore previous memoirs, such the already mentioned book by Edmund Gosse, J.S.

Mill's *Autobiography* (1873), or the one I've read this weekend, J.R. Ackerley's *My Father and Myself* (1968). The prestigious TLS Ackerley Prize for autobiography and memoir is named after this author and literary personality (and to say that I was very much surprised by Ackerley's candid memoir is the understatement of the year). In fact, I started my reading for my future book with Philip Roth's 1991 *Patrimony*, which I had read ages ago (like Gosse's memoir) when I was a doctoral student, and had not impressed me very much. I have enjoyed it much more now, if only because I'm much older and have a better understanding of the issues Roth raises about ageing parents. I must say that, as memoirs of writers go, *Patrimony* seems to me much better in its focused concision than Martin Amis's *Experience* (2000), which I had already read and recalled with fondness. I don't know why, since in this re-reading I found it so unbearably rambling and narcissistic that I have already decided not to write about. Amis junior doesn't really say that much, besides, about the fraught rivalry as writers between his father and himself, unlike what criticism usually suggests.

The process of selecting material for a book is always very tricky because no matter what you decide to write about the field is always immense and so is the potential corpus. Going back to my decision to read around 50 books, I find that this is for me the least I need to make sense of any topic I address in books, though, as I have noted, Mansfield comments just on seven, and I've reviewed monographs based on just three novels. I don't know what it's like for other scholars writing monographs, but I seem to have integrated in my head a reviewer who is constantly finding fault because I have excluded this or that. (My inner reviewer is warning me, for instance, that excluding Amis might be a serious mistake). I think that my inner reviewer must be Spanish to the core, because in the Spanish critical tradition we tend towards the encyclopedia rather than close reading (as I know from my own doctoral dissertation). In the Anglophone tradition, scholars take it for granted that when facing a vast field, you don't have to justify yourself for choosing a limited sample for study, perhaps because productivity is awarded above thoroughness.

I've read so far about half a dozen memoirs and look forward to reading the rest along this year. I already know that some memoirs will be discussed in my book, whether I like them or not because they are important volumes that have called much attention (Richard Flanagan's *Question 7*), but I also know that I'll write about less important memoirs that say something unique (*The Measure of a Man: The Story of a Father, a Son, and a Suit* by Asian-Canadian author J.J. Lee). Apart from Amis, I have discarded Terry Jennings's *Waylon: Tales of My Outlaw Dad*, co-written with David Thomas, because I found it to be very poorly written and, anyway, I have on my list other memoirs by non-famous sons about their celebrity fathers (a favourite of mine is Juan Thompson's *Stories I Tell Myself: Growing Up with Hunter S. Thompson*, a book I like much better than any written by Thompson himself). I know that it's habitual to dispense with one's own literary taste and opinion in cultural analysis, but I have problems dealing with books below par. In my book on SF and masculinity there is a chapter that made me truly uncomfortable because I needed the author (a member of a significant minority) to be present in the book, but I disliked his novels. He ended up being a tokenistic presence, which I regret.

In the concluding paragraph of his memoir, Ackerley writes: "A good many questions have been asked, few receive answers. Some facts have been established, much else may well be fiction, the rest is silence. Of my father, my mother, myself, I know in the end practically nothing." I may have started with a set of memoirs that, accidentally, also lack a sense of closure, but this may be the main pattern. The memoirs I am interested in are technically called auto/biographies, since they are both an autobiography of the son and a biography of the father, constituting together the memoir. What they reveal is that living persons are much harder to handle as constructs than characters, who are, by definition, partial persons. Any autobiographical author faces the same challenge: it is hard enough to give an account of oneself that makes sense to the reader, imagine trying to portray another person. The close-up portraits I'm reading are, so far, blurry, a fact that sons acknowledge in their books, commenting on the difficulties of portraying somebody whom they thought they knew and on the impossibility of being fair to their fathers.

Pat Conroy's memoir *The Death of Santini* establishes a singular paradox. Conroy grew up suffering the physical and psychological abuse of his Marine father and, once a novelist, he fictionalized his childhood in *The Great Santini*. His father was, apparently, shocked out of his violent ways against wife and children when he saw his portrait in this novel, but also enjoyed being known for it, to the point that he often accompanied his son in book presentations, even signing more copies than him. The father rationalized this bizarre situation by claiming that, as a fiction writer, his son only told lies in the novel. The son responded by writing the memoir, fusing in the title his fictional and his real father. He also uses the memoir to stress that the violence which the father always denied was very real, and that it was hardly altered in the autobiographical novel *The Great Santini*.

In any case, not even the best memoirs of the type I intend to study can do justice to the father in them, either for good or for bad, because the distance between him and the son is not enough. Sons are very poor biographers of fathers, being too close to be minimally objective, and, so, the portraits that emerge are biased and twisted. This is, naturally, what makes these memoirs so interesting, for by articulating their opinion of their fathers, these men must consider who they themselves are as men and as human beings. I must note, by the way, that whereas there are quite a number of daughters writing about their fathers, I have not seen so far memoirs of sons about mothers (maybe I need to look harder).

As I read, inevitably, I wonder how my brothers or myself would write about our father. My youngest brother used to say that we missed the chance to make a fortune by not writing books about my father's obnoxious behaviour and preposterous opinions, and he may be right. This same brother, when I reminded him of the first anniversary of my father's death, quipped that he no longer thinks 'about that person', which is possibly the healthiest attitude. We don't need Freud to understand that fathers can cause very deep wounds, and it's easy to see that the memoirs I'm reading are therapeutical.

In this I'm split: I understand the need of sons to process their memories of bad to indifferent fathers, but I believe that as a decaying, deeply patriarchal world civilization we need more memoirs by men of good fathers (warts and all). Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Beautiful Struggle*, a memoir which pays homage to his

father W. Paul Coates for his efforts to provide his children with a solid education, strikes me as the kind of memoir men need now. A memoir about disastrous fathers like mine may have therapeutic value but is hardly the inspirational discourse we need to progress.

I might change my opinion as I read, I'll keep you posted.

## 26 March 2026 / THE STUPIDEST WAR (NO NEED FOR A SUBTITLE)

So, here we are in what might be seen retrospectively by historians as the beginning of World War III. All wars are stupid, but this one has been started out of such rampant stupidity that it's really hard to believe. Neither the governments that clashed in WWI, nor Hitler, who provoked World War II, were so flagrantly stupid (and they were so by a good measure). At the same time, the idiots who have unleashed the current wave of international attacks are all patriarchal men who think they're both intelligent and clever. They are clever indeed in the sense that by starting WWIII they are doing great business for their own personal gain, and covering up their moral and legal deficiencies, but they are profoundly stupid in that they don't understand the consequences of the attacks and have zero political and military capacity to plan the aftermath of war.

The war we are seeing for the time being (Ukraine excluded) is a war waged from the air, consisting of destroying property and persons by using self-propelling long and mid-range missiles, and other explosives carried by drones. Civilians are dying; if you recall in one of the first attacks the USA military killed about 150 Iranian schoolgirls. So far, we have not seen any boots on the ground, and it seems clear that any use of troops is doomed to fail. Perhaps Israel can manage to invade south Lebanon again, as it has invaded Palestine, but it's just totally out of the question that they and the USA can successfully invade Iran, considering the total failures of Vietnam and Afghanistan, and the awful mess left in Iraq. The EU has made it clear that we will not participate in this war (thanks Pedro Sánchez!), China is standing by mightily annoyed, and Russia is still embroiled in Ukraine, so hopefully this is not really WWIII. However, because of the energy crisis the conflict is already unleashing, the environmental damage and the concern that the food chain might be halted if the Ormuz Strait is closed to all trade, things look ominous. In the meantime, all people care about is tourism. I have just read Spain has doubled its bookings for Easter, being regarded as a safe destination unlike all of the Middle East. We are really an idiot species.

I have been hearing in my head today a great song, simply called "War", by Black soul singer Edwin Starr, which hit the top of the US charts in the Summer of 1970, when the Vietnam War was raging. I know the song thanks to Bruce Springsteen's cover, from his *Live/1975–85* album, which he sang to protest Reagan-era foreign policy, with all its misguided misadventures. The [lyrics](#) of Starr's song are as straightforward as possible, let me quote part of them. Apart from the iconic lines "War, huh, yeah / What is it good for? / Absolutely nothing, uhh", Starr sings "War, I despise / 'Cause it means destruction of innocent lives / War means tears to thousands of mother's eyes / When their sons go off to fight /

And lose their lives.” Also “Oh, war it's an enemy to all mankind / The thought of war blows my mind” and “Oh, war, has shattered many a young man's dreams / Made him disabled, bitter and mean / Life is much too short and precious / To spend fighting wars each day / War can't give life / It can only take it away, oh.”

Starr's lyrics focus on the combatant soldier (and his mother) while the fact is that civilians of all descriptions have always borne the brunt of war, being besieged and attacked with all manner of weapons (from clubs to atomic bombs), killed, maimed, and abused in all wars. I don't think I need to explain that wars are an expression of the patriarchal disdain for life, even of its necrophilia. Some patriarchal women have also shown an interest in war, even happily accepting the sacrifice of their children (mainly sons) to this patriarchal necrophilia (otherwise known as 'glory'), but if the lyrics of Starr's song refer specifically to mothers this is because if it were up to them, wars would stop immediately. Women understand life much better than (patriarchal) men, for obvious biological reasons. You don't go through the pains of childbirth and the effort of rearing a son, for him to be used as mere cannon fodder by idiot rulers.

Military censorship makes sure war is misrepresented while it happens so that, for instance, along the years of the Ukraine war we have seen very few images of the damage done to persons. We've seen countless images of war-torn cities (allow me to recommend the documentary [20 Days in Mairupol](#)) and given nonchalantly daily figures for casualties (the Ukrainian [claim](#) that 1288850 Russian troops have been 'liquidated'). War correspondents, beginning with William Howard Russell, the Irish reporter for *The Times of London* in the Crimean War (1854–55); war photographers, from Roger Fenton (in the same war) onwards; and reporters using a film camera (Frederic Villiers's lost footage of the Greco-Turkish War of 1897, the combat images of the Boer War (1899-1902) filmed by John Bennett in South Africa in 1899) have brought war home to those away from the frontlines. Yet I insist, military censorship and media self-censorship have always intervened to spare us the most graphic images, the ones that would make us scream and render us sleepless at night. Without those images, war is sanitized, undistinguishable from an action film or a videogame.

This censorship I'm talking about creates a time lag between actual war and understanding by the general public, which benefits the war mongers because by the time the process of grasping the reality of a specific war is complete, this war over and the next one, claimed to be completely different, begins. As happens, I've working with diverse research groups connected with the theme of war since 1998 (I am currently a member of the research project Beyond Postmemory: English Literary Perspectives on War and Memory in the (Post)Postmodern Era (POSTLIT), PID2023-147481NB-I00, IPs Cristina Pividori and David Owen, UAB). And that is one of the main lessons I have learned. While the war is happening, people are saturated by the news and the need to go on living the approximation of a normal life and tend to take contemporary testimonials with a bit of wariness. Once the war is over novels, memoirs and films start flooding the market. For WWI (1914-1918), for instance, 1929 was a key year, even though poets and some novelists have been decrying the horrors of this war since at least 1916. I'm not talking about books and films with a propagandistic intention, of which there were plenty during WWII, but of the high and low poetry and narrative with an honest intention to offer a testimonial.

The only time in my life I have left a cinema was back in 1998 when I was so shocked by the first hour of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, which narrates the D-Day landings in Normandy, that I couldn't focus on the rest of the film. It took me three tries to finally watch the complete film at home because I couldn't go past that first hour. And it took me about a year to be able to return to a cinema with the confidence that I could watch anything, no matter how horrific (well, I stopped watching horror films after Eli Roth's *Hostel*, in 2005). I'm no soldier, and I can't tell whether *Saving Private Ryan* is a realistic representation of war, but I can say that we need to be shocked out of our complacency. War consists of doing persons grievous harm with intention to kill, which is a very serious crime in any other circumstance, and it is absolutely monstrous to think that ordinary men can participate in war and keep their mental health intact. We learned that lesson from WWI poetry and Vietnam movies but pretend that war is a normal part of civilization instead of its antithesis. The way to debunk that lie is to openly show, with no censorship, what war is really about in the news as it happens, through social media and through documentaries, memoirs and, yes, fiction. War is not about moving troops from point to point to conquer territory: it's about destroying bodies and minds with unbounded violence in ways that are absolutely repellent in any civilized society.

In an [article](#) that I've read while taking a break from writing this post, called "Trump's video game war: AI, memes and a simplistic narrative have flattened the conflict in Iran," Nesrine Malik offers today in *The Guardian* arguments quite similar to my own, but naming *that* man: "The war on Iran, even as it spreads and destabilises the Middle East and the global economy, is not real. This is how it is being portrayed by the Trump administration. The war is a video game, a spectator sport, a social media festival of dunking. The architects of this war have made a virtue out of stupidity and have been supported in that by a stupefying information ecosystem. The conflict waged by the US feels like the first of its kind in the modern age: distinctly remote and profoundly ignorant." I couldn't agree more, but I will add that this is not really new. The impression that war is not real started with the Gulf War of 1990-91, the first narrated using videogame aesthetics. The human element has been elided, and the actual human victims disappeared. In the current war, this situation is being made even worse by the introduction of countless fake AI-generated images, which are already giving future historians huge nightmares. What we're seeing is, in many ways, the gamification of war, with strikes that kill human beings presented as thrilling explosions and points added to the gamer's score.

As you can see, Malik also uses the word 'stupidity' in the passage I have quoted, and I would like to highlight it, with the caveat that there is also now more stupidity than ever in the audience that receives the war news through social media like Elon Musk's X and other social networks. Now more than ever young men are unwilling to find glory and honour in the battlefield (ha!), but now more than ever young men are being drawn towards extreme right-wing positions with the promise of gratifying violence by the stupid patriarchs in power. And I mean everywhere in the world. Stupidity, as we know, kills empathy, though I don't mean by this that only intelligent people are empathetic. What I mean is that there is a level of stupidity that is indecent in its inability to understand that human pain must be avoided at all costs.

I am outraged by this senseless new war in the Middle East, but I am, above all, fed up. I find myself feeling deep hatred, which is not a feeling I enjoy or support. And I am massively tired, for at this point we all know how history works, yet we are still allowing ourselves to be dominated by stupid persons with the capacity to destroy the planet. I know that sooner or later one of the stupid men will use a nuclear bomb, when this moment of human history should have been overcome years ago. A friend told me a joke yesterday that has been circulating online for years now and that sums up who we are: the Terminator comes from the future and explains that because of the increasing human stupidity the machines won the war against us led by a simple Nespresso machine. No higher intelligence was needed to defeat us.

War, huh, yeah / What is it good for? / Absolutely nothing, uhh... Say it again!

## 10 April 2026 / THE STUPIDEST WAR CONTINUES (AND CULTURE FAILS)

I don't know if I'm suffering from writers' block but it's the first time since I started this blog back in 2010 that I feel I might be exhausting my topics. I've been trying to write something for the last four days, and I have finally decided to clear my schedule and force myself to write. Here we go.

This blockage is not something of a personal nature, I'm not depressed. I just feel overwhelmed by how the erratic (or purposely evil...) behaviour of US President Donald Trump is altering the world. Someone asked on BlueSky a couple of days ago whether anyone is working out the mental cost of facing daily life, pretending that this is normality, when it is not. Trump's announcement on Tuesday that on that evening an important civilization would die (meaning Iran, perhaps the USA...) could be simply braggadocio or a direct nuclear threat. It has so far melted into yet more TACO (in)action, but the war is still raging, with Israel massacring poor Palestinian and Lebanese people and the Iranians fearing the worst despite the announced ceasefire (not that they are behaving well, either). Trump's palpable humiliation might in the end have worse effects than a nuclear weapon, and we need to see how the Iranians' totally illegal intention to charge a fee to cross the Hormuz Strait affects international trading. In a way, and hoping nobody else dies or loses their homes, a good jolt might be what the world needs, to end that absurd dependence on fossil fuels, yet this will have a high cost for all involved, with much loss of life and a general increase in poverty for millions of us.

In these circumstances, I just don't feel inclined to write about literature, though at least I have kept my daily recommendation of a book on BlueSky. I returned to class yesterday after the Easter break and told my students that I was tempted to replace my lecture on autobiography and memoirs with a collective conversation on the current events. They were not interested. In part that was a relief because in times of stress it helps to be able to focus on work. So, I spoke, as scheduled, about women's autobiographies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (following a

book by Linda Anderson) and introduced, as I do every session, three pre-21<sup>st</sup> century autobiographies or memoirs. Looking at the lives of persons of the recent past teaches the lesson that all passes, even the worst experiences, which seems optimistic. The downside is that as events unfold, they seem to do that very slowly and with much suffering and stress. And these days worse and worse seems to be piling up.

Someone asked, also on BlueSky, to which I have become hopelessly addicted because of the presence of many US progressist persons protesting the actions of their government, whether the USA can recover its lost prestige, fearing that Trump might actually bomb Iran with a nuclear device. I expected that to happen anytime in Ukraine, but even Putin seems wary of breaking that absolute taboo (or is it?). The White House hurried to say that the President did not intend to use nuclear weapons, but his threat to wipe out Iran implied some form of mass destruction (what supposedly Iran was about to unleash against Israel). I posted that the USA's prestige and popularity was not affected by the damage done to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but that dropping a third nuclear bomb would be unforgivable and would turn the nation into a pariah. I stand by my words.

All this situation begs the question of how, beyond politics, we can respond to US culture from abroad, and, specifically, from Europe. Being an English Studies specialist, these days is, to say the least, quite rocky. I'm more inclined to the UK than to the USA, although my academic work is more focused (I think) on the latter. The post-Brexit UK has fallen into a process of fast decadence that has left me reeling. I watch the spectacle of Labour's dissolution into an incoherent mess with greater and greater perplexity, wondering what will come of it. A return to the EU? The unthinkable rise of Nigel Farage as the next PM? I used to admire the UK very much, but, frankly, not so much now (though Scotland still offers much hope and so does Polanski's Green Party).

In this rather bleak atmosphere, what kind of culture can thrive in Britain? And in the USA? More middle-class novels about narcissistic people with first-world problems? More morbid true crime? More masochistic dark romance and romantasy? Will writers have the courage to finally address serious social themes? And I think I mean white writers, for racialized writers tend to address social themes all the time, like migration, or being a refugee, or a war victim. You might think that the question of what culture will emerge from our deeply stupid, dangerous times is a secondary concern in comparison to the loss of human rights or the international order, and the ruin of so many lives lost to war, genocide, rampant billionaireism and so on. Yet, culture matters.

To cite an example, Bruce Springsteen has presented his new US tour 'Land of Hope and Dreams' as an activity aimed at protesting against the loss of democracy under Trump. But he seems to be an exception rather than the rule. The last No Kings protests gave us a beautiful image of Jane Fonda and Joan Baez together, but these are the 2020s and not the 1970s when they protested against the Vietnam War. The image that was needed was, rather, one of Taylor Swift and Beyoncé together. Javier Bardem carried to the Oscars ceremony the same No a la Guerra badge he carried to the Goyas in 2003, to protest against the Iraq war, and he was applauded for that. He has become, however, just a tokenistic presence in a totally complicit Hollywood, which is basically doing nothing to reject Donald Trump. Susan Sarandon is still out of a job because she

dared defend Palestine, a position we consider pure common sense in Europe (as she could see in the Goya gala that honoured her). I've been speaking of musicians and actors, and I'm leaving aside writers because I truly have no idea what's going on with them. The new novels I see announced either in the UK or the USA have nothing to do with the circumstances, though my hope is that the fiction about the new horrors we're seeing these days is being written.

I've invited my students to use part of our class time (15-20 minutes) to write short autobiographical texts of about 300 words, from a list I drew up based on similar examples. They can prepare or complete the texts at home and replace my topics with their own choices. I'm mentioning this because they appear to enjoy this activity and perhaps what we need now more than ever is giving tools to people so that they can express themselves and leave a testimonial of the current times. You might say that social media already fulfil that function, though, of course a typical post is too short to carry much weight, and we know how full of hatred some networks are. Perhaps this is why blogs have returned, transformed into the quite popular Substack newsletters. Perhaps current fiction (novels, films, TV, comics, even videogames) will become superfluous if it's not already dead. We all know that it's harder and harder to come across truly significant stories and it has been so for a while. We're clutching at straws, which might explain the acclaim with which the rather silly movie *Project Hail Mary* has been met, and I speak as an SF fan.

I need to finish breaking my writer's block today with a final paragraph. I do hope that these last two posts are just a temporary departure from my habitual writing, and that soon I'll get back to discussing what's closer to me. I mean, I'm working on my classes and my books, but I just did not feel today like writing about what occupies me: secondary characters, production design in films, sons' memoirs about fathers, or even Kylie Minogue (more about her soon!). This blog is supposed to keep me sane so that I can go on writing about my niche interests and this is what I'm using it for today. It's a form of autobiographical therapy, and I invite everyone to do the same: write as rationally as possible to curb down the rampant stupidity that is threatening to end not just one civilization in the Middle East but the very idea of human civilization.

I ask culture creators (by no means the same as content creators!) to contribute to saving us from that end. From what I'm seeing these days, political cartoonists are becoming the avantgarde we need to follow. Perhaps only satire can help us.

More next week, and better, I hope.

## 17 April 2026 / THE ENDOGAMIC NATURE OF THE SPANISH UNIVERSITY: THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

Today's post is partly inspired by Ana Bravo-Moreno and Francisco Javier Ogáyar-Marín edited collection *Los males de la academia: Abuso de poder, endogamia, acoso, corrupción y otras violencias* (Peter Lang, 2026), which can be downloaded for free [here](#). This is a necessary book to animate a conversation

carried so far discreetly away from public attention, but, at the same time, possibly not the book we need. The authors offer either autoethnographic accounts, in which they present themselves as typical cases of the situation they describe, or reports on a selection of victims in Spain, Mexico, Argentina, and, oddly, Indonesia (this choice lacks any cultural or geographical coherence, unless the point is to prove that the rotting university culture is the same anywhere, even randomly). I expected a systematic report, with a clearer typology of the types of abuse and the corresponding analysis, with statistics and figures, but this is not what the editors had in mind. I found very appropriate, at any rate, the Mexican notion of 'academic violence', which serves very well to cover the whole field.

I'm a victim of academic violence, but I'm not ready yet to give a full account, and I'll focus instead of the endogamic nature of the Spanish university, which so much offends Bravo-Moreno. Her chapter is a lengthy account of her difficulties to enter a Spanish university department after a long stay abroad first training for a PhD and next working as a teacher-researcher. It seems that I have never written about endogamy here and this has an explanation: in Spain, 68.8% of all tenured teachers work in the same university where they obtained their PhD, and often their MA and BA. I'm one of them. I've been at UAB for forty years now. I transferred from UB in 1987-88 as a second-year student, after a gap year in England as an au pair, was first employed in 1991, earned my doctoral degree in 1996, and tenure in 2002. I am not comfortable with this situation, but I refuse to feel guilty because I'm certainly not at all a product of corrupt endogamy. So, let me explain a few matters.

Mobility is taken for granted in the university, internationally, but this is an ideal that clashes with the actual situation of the persons involved in academic careers and that is much easier to implement up to the age of 25. The Erasmus programme, launched in 1987, has made it easier for BA and MA students to integrate mobility in their CVs at an early stage. I've mentioned here a few times that I spent a year, 1986-87, as an au-pair in England and that is how many (female) students used to access a cheap kind of mobility before Erasmus. Upper or middle-class families, of course, sent and still send their children to spend a year abroad already in secondary school, or to take a BA, or MA. Yes, academic mobility is a good idea, particularly if it begins during the BA years. Some scholarships like La Caixa's and others offer funding for MA degrees and other options. I spent a year in Scotland (1994-95) as a visiting doctoral student, with a La Caixa grant, for which I am extremely grateful.

That year abroad was also a requirement to continue my contract at UAB as a full-time associate teacher, and this is where complications begin. I totally agree that a university teacher aspiring to tenure should spend at least one year away from their home university, either abroad or in a national university, but this is a requirement that makes strong demands on personal life. At this point, say between 25-30, young researchers may find themselves in stable relationships they don't want to risk or already planning a family, the normal things people do at that age. Ambitious persons may consider the risk worth taking and go away for a time, or transfer to another university, seeking a long temporary contract or even tenure. Good for them.

In practice, things are complicated. Couples break up, or young researchers abandon academia opting to take care of children. Yes, all this affects

women mainly, for, clearly, university mobility comes from a time when academics were mainly men and they could uproot their families to go elsewhere if a new job materialized. Add to this that in Spain we have strong attachments to family and friends, and even though we have been migrants for centuries seeking better jobs and lives, and many young researchers left Spain after the 2008, this is not seen as something desirable for personal progress. Mobility interests many researchers, of course, but, as it is obvious, many others accept it only because they have no other option.

I tried to leave UAB three times along my earlier career, for a mixture of personal and academic reasons, with endogamy acting very much against my interests. You'll see the case is typical, so here's my autoethnographic account. My husband is from Madrid and when we met, we considered the possibility that I moved there, so I signed up for a tenured position as soon as I became a doctor (this could be done then). A friend gave me the gentle warning that the position was for an in-house candidate who had been waiting for years and had a strong CV. I should not turn up for the public presentation, he told me, so I didn't. A couple of years later I met said in-house candidate and she greeted me rather aggressively with the salutation 'So, you're the person who signed up for my tenured position, right?' Just imagine. Next, I applied for another position in another Barcelona university, following the indications of my UAB Department, for, I was told, they would not guarantee tenure for me. This time I did show up, knowing the house candidate had a much weaker CV but would anyway win the position. I'm still reeling from the abuse I suffered to secure the position for him. A few years later, when I was very unhappy at UAB, I tried to leave again, even if that cost me passing yet another public state examination but the university I contacted told me that their jobs were for their own people. So, three tries to get away from the endogamic game, three fails.

Bravo-Moreno narrates how frustrating it is for someone returning from abroad to be received with so much suspicion and wariness when she applies for jobs. Well, I certainly wasn't welcome when I tried to work in other Departments, but I also was less than welcoming to a returning academic aspiring to occupy the tenured position I had waiting for. I had been working at this point for about nine years at UAB, I think, when a protégée of the professor returned from abroad. I was already competing with another in-house candidate for tenure as my Department made a point, exceptionally in Spain, of not playing by any endogamic rules. Yet, it turned out that the endogamic rules were played to facilitate the return of this person. You can imagine the atmosphere, but I won't go into more details. I did win tenure, but I can only describe the experience as deeply traumatic. I have no idea, then, what it's like to easily win a tenured position that your endogamic Department has always destined for you. Often, I envy the peers who were that lucky.

The situation is awfully unfair for everyone. You might be fully qualified and competitive but be rejected in favour of far weaker candidates (I have just narrated that). You might be doing a great job in a Department but lose tenure to someone who, while better qualified, perhaps had personal circumstances that facilitated a long stay abroad or the acquisition of diverse merits. Some Departments protect their local candidates fiercely; others have strange loyalties to persons who left and demand to return. But the core of the question is never

discussed: there are not enough positions. Ideally, nobody with a doctoral degree, post-doctoral experience and a solid CV should be left out. The Spanish university, however, is poor and employs as few teacher-researchers as possible, forcing many to simply abandon academia. Resources are spent in training doctors than then end up seeking jobs away from Spain, which, for me, is a total waste. One thing is wanting to work abroad, another very different having to do so because there are no jobs locally.

Endogamy, I'm trying to argue, is not as simple as its critics suggest and not as corrupt. Many factors concur, from personal to socio-cultural circumstances. What for me is truly baffling is not so much the mutual attachment of researchers seeking tenure and their universities, but the almost total impossibility of moving once you have tenure. You can transfer to another university temporarily on secondment (in what is called a service commitment) but the only way to work elsewhere is by passing again a state examination, which is only called when a tenured position comes up (and these are mostly only called if there is already a qualified candidate). A friend of mine needed to transfer from Lleida to Tarragona for family reasons, and even though Tarragona did have a position with no in-house candidate, he had to pass a second state examination for the same category he already had. There was a far more complicated case in Oviedo, leading to a lengthy legal dispute, of which there are quite a handful. I don't know how this works for other civil servants like judges, but my guess is that there is more mobility and in far easier terms.

So, my view is that we are so endogamic for two main reasons: the lack of jobs makes it extremely difficult to secure a tenured position, and you might get stuck for all your working life elsewhere if you apply for tenure in another university. So, people patiently wait for their own universities to offer positions and universities tend to reward loyalty for that long wait. I would insist that in Spain we're used to the idea of having to move if you have no other option, but we've been always far less willing to move chasing a job, putting it before family or love. In general, we're a low mobility nation and the endogamy of our university partly reflects this reluctance to leave home. I must also say that our endogamy has a silver lining: you can find very good teacher-researchers in all Spanish universities. We don't have a system that attracts the best academics to just a small ring of top institutions, and I prefer that.

So, yes, I'm a product of endogamy because I've been rejected by other endogamic universities, but not because I was protected in any way by my own university. I know of many who enjoyed that protection, some of whom did not deserve it, but I also know of many others who are great teacher-researchers. I think it benefits any Department to employ a mixture of their own doctors, who know the house well, and of newcomers, who might refresh the atmosphere, and I find full endogamy as ridiculous as the automatic rejection of your own doctors. What we all need are more jobs, it's as simple as that, and far more freedom once you're tenured to work elsewhere, with no need for further hassle.

## 25 April 2026 / STUDENTS' ABSENTEEISM: A NEW REPORT BY THE UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA

My post refers today to *L'absentisme a les aules universitàries de la UAB: per què val la pena anar a classe* [Absenteeism in UAB's university classrooms: why attending classes is worthwhile], a report coordinated by José Luis Muñoz Moreno and Edelmira Badillo Jiménez, and authored by Patricia Olmos Rueda and Dolors Márquez Cebrián. You can download it [here](#). This is the first report in a new series offered by UAB's Institut de Ciències de l'Educació and promoted by the Vice-rector of Teacher Training and Teaching Innovation, Muñoz Moreno himself. I've gone through its 160 pages and can attest that this is a very solid report, which maps very proficiently the current situation and that attempts to answer with a rigorous spirit the question we are all asking: why do university students who are perfectly free to attend class choose to stay away?

Although I agree with the report's detailed survey of the situation, there are a few issues I wish to raise regarding the conclusions. To do so, I'll begin with an examination of the students' replies to the question of what seems to be the problem with attendance. I believe that the report, as is typical of UAB, pays too close attention to what students demand and too little to what we, the teachers, should demand from them. I also miss a comparison with past situations, when far worse pedagogies were no obstacle for attendance. My own experience this semester, when I have introduced a series of changes to improve class attendance, is that there is not really much more that we, the teachers, can do to offer more attractive teaching if students are not willing to collaborate and if we don't take into account external causes which are impacting the university.

To understand where we stand, the report observes that 23% of students attends less than 60% of the classes, and that in total absenteeism amounts to 44%. Take my current subject as an example, the fourth-year BA elective 'English Prose: Autobiography and Memoir'. Of the 42 students following the subject (44 are registered but 2 have never attended any class), daily attendance runs from 21 to 25 students, with a core of about 12-15 who attend very regularly. Committed students email me to justify their absences (due to causes related to work, health, family, transport), the others just say nothing. When I've contacted them directly, some have never replied, others have given me diverse excuses (like being uncomfortable interacting with their peers). A percentage of the final mark in my subject (20%) is connected to class attendance because I use 30 minutes every session for classroom practice (30% is awarded for attendance, 70% for the interaction with peers). I ask students to sign the attendance list, and they do know that attendance is very important for me.

Table 25 of the report (119-120) offers an overview of what would motivate students to attend classes. Here's a summary of what they want:

\*Clear, well-structured explanations offered in a reasonable tempo that helps take notes, so that study time is reduced; for them, attendance should reduce students' efforts, not duplicate them

- \*The class should offer what cannot be found on Virtual Campus or the class notes that often circulate from one year to the next, and clear clues about what to study independently
- \*Teachers are a key factor: they are expected to be enthusiastic, show passion for the subject, speak fluently, and be respectful, flexible and understanding with students
- \*The classes must be dynamic, not based on reading from PowerPoint, combine theory with practice and be participative (but without making participation compulsory). They must be closely connected to assessment, but attendance and participation must have a limited weight. The sessions must be connected to future professional practice; all subjects must be perceived to be useful
- \*Schedules must be compact, so that students don't waste time attending isolated classes; very early and very late hours should be avoided; coordination must be improved to avoid overlapping. There should be more flexibility as regards attendance, with permanent access to materials including recorded classes; teacher should accept independent learning
- \*Commuting should be limited to a reasonable length of time and public transport should be improved
- \*Material conditions should also be improved: classrooms are uncomfortable, Wi-Fi needs to work better, the campus needs to be more welcoming; cafeteria prices should be cheaper
- \*Students' workload should be limited to cause less stress. Students should be respected, with no threats or humiliations, or compulsory participation; they wish to feel welcome in the classroom
- \*The sense of community with other students and with the university should be improved
- \*Groups should be smaller so that students are recognized by teachers and can receive more individual attention.

Here's what I have to say:

- \*being a good teacher is much, much harder than students assume and teachers tend to perform poorly when they notice students are bored or disinterested; absences do feel like negative judgement and do not lead to improved teaching
- \*many of us are introducing classroom activities to make the classes more dynamic and content which is not fully available on Virtual Campus, but still many students stay away
- \*students want us to be flexible regarding attendance but also to avoid lectures without student participation, but this is contradictory: if we design more active classes, then students must be in class and participate. Independent learning must happen apart from classroom learning, not instead of it
- \*UAB has always been in the same place and commuting time used to be much longer before 1994, when UAB finally had its own train station (now we have two). Mobility, then, cannot be a reason for not attending, though I agree that bad scheduling is. Teachers are also very reluctant to be at UAB for short activities.
- \*material conditions in the classroom have improved, but climate change has increased the heat very palpably. We have, however, installed air conditioning or fans. The furniture, I agree, could be much better. Students must note that the

campus looks now much greener than in the past. And, yes, the cafeteria prices are a scandal, but we have microwaves for public use

\*students want to work less, but so do teachers – academic life is very stressful for us, too; we also want to be respected, and not be insulted or humiliated in students' surveys

\*the sense of community with other students and with the university is the students' doing; the university is constantly organizing activities, but socializing is the students' responsibility, not the institution's

\*it's not true that knowing who your students are by personal name improves attendance, though I would agree it's very important for assessment

The report concludes that we need to make classes more attractive, and I have no doubt that in some cases this would help. However, there is an elephant in the room that nobody is naming: boredom. I first wrote about boredom in this blog back in 2014, and I raised the issue again in a previous [post](#) of 2023 on students' absenteeism. The new report mentions a teacher's opinion noting that "there's very little capacity for concentration, there is a presential absenteeism," so that students physically present in class are disconnected, checking who knows what on their laptops. Martín-Criado and Alonso-Carmona ([2024](#)), the reports informs, identified three types of absent students: the practical, the intellectual and that who passes easily, stressing they all are products of boredom, caused by three factors: "the relationship of contents with students' interests, the way the contents are structured, and how they are transmitted" (47). Blame the teacher, of course!

The same authors explain that students have become very good at calculating how much effort they need to make to pass a subject, and this is also a key factor in absenteeism. In my current subject, you can still pass if you never attend class and sacrifice 20% of your mark, which makes it possible for the less interested students to skip class. I've tried to connect attendance to obtaining a pass but UAB is very reluctant to making attendance compulsory and has opened, besides, Pandora's box with single assessment, which allows certain students to pass a subject without ever attending classes. That's a very serious mistake. One thing is accommodating the needs of working or ill students, another downplaying the value of classes.

A few years ago, as I narrated in this blog, I had a very deep professional crisis because I believed that the low attendance in my subjects connected with my poor performance as a teacher. Eventually, a student explained to me that it was nothing personal, and little by little I've got used to the idea that absenteeism is a widespread, international problem. What the universities don't seem to understand is that students have changed (most likely due to the impact of social networks): the worst of them have low attention spans and a very low boredom threshold, feel no interest in academic life (from learning to socializing) and are always calculating how to do as little as possible. There have always been students like that, the ones who spent their whole time at the cafeteria, but the difference is that the students of past times were far less entitled: they (we!) put up with appalling teachers and did our best. The joke is that the bad teachers of today, the ones who don't care about their students, are having a much easier time than those of us who care. I do care very much, and this is why any absence

is so hurtful. We are constantly tense in class, worrying that we're not offering interesting enough teaching and doing poorly because of that tension.

Alternatively, perhaps we should not care so much about the students who never attend class or only irregularly to focus on those who do come to class, and who seem to be forgotten in all this concern about absenteeism. We need to ask *them* why they come to class. What irks me most, to be frank, is that absentee students (and I mean those who could attend but choose not to) still expect us to employ all our energies in assessing them. This is unfair. They should understand that a student who shows total disrespect for the teacher's work by not attending classes (this is how it feels) can hardly be seen with as much sympathy as one who makes the effort to attend every day, being always punctual and ready to participate.

In *The Professor* (2018), Johnny Depp plays an English Literature teacher with an attitude. The first day of class, he announces that he'll give a pass to any students who have registered but will accept never coming to class or bothering him with assessment. About half the class leaves, amused and enchanted. The rest stay for a true learning experience, which is also satisfactory for the teacher. In practice, many students take this easy way out; the only problem is that we still need to mark their work. Do they learn more than the students in that film who are given an automatic pass? My view is that you have to be a very, very good student to learn independently, without attending classes. What the students who skip classes don't seem to understand is that, even when the teacher is not that good, class time gives you a chance to think about the subject and improve your performance. But, again, I insist, if students treat the university as a just a way of obtaining a degree and lack interest and curiosity, there is nothing even the best teacher can do for them.

I'll finish my post thanking the students who attend my classes regularly for collaborating with me: they make want to be a better teacher. It's a pleasure to interact every day with you, and to learn with and from you. I understand that some students have no option but to miss classes, and they have all my support, but I will never understand the students who, having the chance to attend classes with no obstacles, stay away without ever explaining why. Don't you see how little sense this makes?

By the way, the report never really says why attending classes is worthwhile (and nor have I!) ... we need to ask, then, the students who attend regularly.

#### 4 May 2026 / A CHANCE TO IMPROVE?: A REPORT ON THE DIFFICULTIES OF LEARNING ENGLISH (IN CATALONIA)

Today, my post deals with a new report coordinated by a very much admired Departament colleague, Elisabet Pladevall Ballester. The report is called *Per què ens costa tant l'anglès?: Propostes per millorar l'aprenentatge de l'anglès a l'escola* [Why is English so difficult for us?: Proposals to improve English learning

at school] and has been commissioned by the foundation Equitat.org, from whose website it can be [downloaded](#).

In its concise 28 pages, the report offers a quite complete snapshot of a well-known situation: Catalan children start learning English mostly at a pre-school stage (0-3 years), but the evidence gathered suggests that the long years of learning up to the end of compulsory secondary school (or ESO, 16), or the end of pre-university *batxillerat* (18) do not result in a solid command of English. These modest results, the report notes, are closely linked to the 'complexity' of the (public) schools and the socio-economic level of the families for, as everyone knows, results are much better among the children of ethnically homogeneous middle and upper-class families that attend private or semi-private schools and receive further English lessons in language schools. Poor children of low-class, Latin American and African immigrant families have far less chances to demonstrate a good command of English than the children of well-off families (who often are, let's recall this, the children of wealthy expats). The report shows an evident concern about this manifest inequality in resources, which is why it mainly addresses the need to counterbalance it with better public education that allows all children to learn English. Good!

The issue of why few Spaniards can understand, speak and write English well enough flares up now and then in the press, and in academic circles, with nobody being able to offer an accurate diagnosis and much less a sound solution. The discussion takes it for granted that we must all speak English for reasons of employability (which have little to do, for instance, with the cultural reasons why French used to be popular among the European upper classes, including the Russian aristocrats who hardly ever spoke Russian). It seems obvious, however, that whereas some jobs require interacting with foreign persons in English, many others don't. And since dubbing and translation facilitate access to culture and to entertainment, there is really not a big inducement to learn English among large segments of the population.

Working-class families do know that English can be essential for social mobility but also that their children might end up employed in service jobs requiring just the basic English you need to interact with tourists. I am not claiming that children know from a very early age what they need to learn English for, but it's evident to me that families see that need very differently depending on their position. It might well be the case that migrant families in Catalonia regard learning Catalan as a priority for employment purposes rather than English. By the way, and speaking of employment in international situations, Pedro Sánchez is the first Spanish PM to be fluent in English, a fact that says plenty about the skills required for employability.

Back to the report, a main claim that the authors make (and that also relates to the difficulties, I'll add, that Catalan is facing) is that a language cannot be learned only in the classroom without being accompanied by some type of 'natural' practice. Catalan is the native language in Catalonia, yes, but for many newcomers it's a foreign language never practiced at home, just as English is not practiced. For migrant children struggling to learn Spanish (if they're not Latin American) *and* Catalan, adding English to the equation must be a nightmare. Supposing that Spanish and Catalan are perfectly integrated in the learning processes and in the social practice of children in Catalonia, and that's a lot to

suppose, English can never occupy a similar space as a third language, simply because it's not spoken as a native language in Catalonia.

I'm saying what is only very obvious. Learning a foreign language requires making an extra effort to find occasions to practice it, which is why traditionally the upper classes have hired foreign nannies, governesses, tutors, companions and so on, and the middle classes have employed au pairs. You may teach a child of a less privileged class all the English you want but you're always going to crash against a major barrier: how are they supposed to practice oral communication in English? I'll confess here that even my own oral English is becoming quite wobbly for lack of practice: I teach in English, yes, and talk to my students in class in English, but outside that environment, I listen to English, I write in English but hardly ever interact in English (except to give tourists directions...).

The report does see that the lack of opportunities to practice oral English is a major obstacle and recommends investing resources in splitting primary school groups (age 9 and later) into smaller groups for English practice, using also the resources that are wasted on younger children. It also asks for the ridiculously low number of language assistants (145 for all of Catalonia) to be multiplied, to that their presence guarantees the chance to interact in English in the classroom. I can only support and applaud these measures but, still, they cannot undo, particularly among teen students, the impression that interacting in English in class is artificial and, in the worst-case scenario, embarrassing.

The supposition is that Catalan children, being used to speaking or at least understanding the two languages of Catalonia have fewer difficulties to acquire English than monolingual children. The report makes no allusion to this supposition, and whenever monolingual regions of Spain are mentioned (like Madrid) there seems to be little difference in the degree of English that is commanded. The community of Madrid has been more open to embracing CLIL programmes, that is, teaching subjects that have nothing to do with English in that language. The report is less enthusiastic about this practice (which it calls AICLE), warning that English should perhaps be better used in subjects such as music, arts, sports and similar, with less intensive academic content.

To be sincere, I have never understood this idea at all, for I think that children need to acquire general purpose English and not the specific jargon of a certain subject. But, anyway, I teach Literature, so what do I know? The point, to get back on track, seems to be that more effort should be made in the English classroom, but at later ages than currently and when children are better equipped to understand their own learning processes regarding language.

I'll address now an issue that the report skips: the attitude of the child students and how this is conditioned by social perceptions. I have no idea how this works in Sweden or in the Netherlands, the European countries with the highest percentage of proficient speakers of English, but a few other factors also count. Countries with a national language spoken in many other countries are more reluctant to learning foreign languages (this includes all the Anglosphere, beginning with the US and the UK). And the other way round: Swedish and Dutch people have low expectations that anybody else in the world will want to learn their language, hence their investment in learning English. I assume that in their societies speaking English is seen as a necessity, which is not the case in ours,

both Spain and Catalonia. The situation would be very different, of course, if only Catalan were spoken in Catalonia.

We can't ignore the 'cool' factor, either. In sociocultural terms, speaking English has never been considered cool in Spain. It can be considered necessary for certain kinds of employment, a point I have already discussed, but it's not cool in the sense of giving a speaker extra social points, extra kudos. About a decade and a half ago, quite a few Catalan children started showing an interest in learning Japanese, attracted by manga and anime, cultural products which gave this language a high degree of coolness. In contrast, what is English for children and teens? A school subject, and that is, definitely, uncool. The same, by the way, applies to Catalan, which has not managed to conquer sufficient space in popular culture and social media to be cool in younger speaker circles and is, let's face it, slowly dying.

There is something else I'm struggling to define, let's see if I can. I'll use Japanese again as an example. Nobody is expected to learn Japanese, whether in Spain or in Catalonia. This means that the persons who have chosen to learn that language are not facing any specific expectations and are learning at their own pace, as their linguistic talent allows them (for not everyone has the same ability to learn a language). I assume that these learners of Japanese want to interact in that language and seek contact with native speakers in language schools but also in other circles, such as clubs, fan associations or, indeed, in social networks.

English is a very different matter. Very few children and teens are inclined to learning the language and its culture for personal reasons, whether they are future employability or pure enjoyment. These truly interested children and teens may eventually get degrees in English. For the rest, the immense majority, English is an imposed choice, something they must learn, such as Maths or Geography. This is not at all the best possible circumstance to enjoy learning a language. Our children and teens hear and read more English than any other previous generation, but why should they have the ambition to be good English speakers? The learners of Japanese will tell you that they want to improve their knowledge of Japanese popular (and maybe elite) culture. But what's the final aim of learning English? Why make that continued effort for so many years, whether they are six or sixteen? Jobs? They will be taken by the more privileged children. Access to culture and entertainment? You don't really need English. Travel? Many people get by with no English. So... what for?

As things are now moving in the world, it would perhaps be more advisable in terms of employment and enjoyment to start teaching Chinese in primary school. Mandarin, I assume. The 'obligation' to learn English, besides, is relatively new. I myself received English tuition for two years in primary school (at a modest public institution) when I was between 8 and 9, as a rather peculiar extra soon suppressed. Then nothing. I only heard that English was indispensable in 1980, when I started secondary education at 14, for which it was made compulsory. So, the idea that everyone in Catalonia should speak English is not even 50 years old. French, as I have mentioned, used to be the more desirable language until then.

We should research not only why in Catalonia (and Spain) learners have so many problems to speak English but whether the investment in teaching and learning English pays at a national and a personal level. Perhaps we need to

diversify, give children more choice, and make room for languages with plenty of speakers already here: Arabic and Chinese to begin with. Just an idea.

Also, I think we need to ask the reverse question: how come English native speakers are generally so bad at learning foreign languages...? If you've noticed, not even most of those living among us speak Catalan or Spanish, an issue only raised with other types of foreign residents. I believe these are also pertinent questions that need urgent answers.

### 10 May 2026 / A NEW BOOK: ON MOTHERS AND MOTHERING IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

The new book I present today, *Exploring Reproduction and Gender in Contemporary Feminist Speculative Fiction: Mothers Out of this World*, is a collective volume that I have co-edited with Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen, of the University of Zaragoza. This is the end of a long collaboration, initiated by Jessica herself, which has lasted about two years, perhaps two and a half.

As my readers know, I tend to write about men much more than about women, and I'm not a mother. When Jessica, whom I've known for years from diverse conferences, proposed that we did something together about motherhood (she's a mother of two young children), I wasn't quite sure how to react. So, I started by offering the chance to publish a monographic section in the journal I co-edit, *Hélice*. In the end, our call for papers attracted enough articles for two special sections, published in Spanish in *Hélice*'s no. [37](#) and [38](#).

Jessica and I were less confident about the next step we had planned, which consisted of convincing a major academic Anglophone publisher to accept the texts, translated into English, as a collective volume. Fortunately, Linda Braus, from Palgrave USA, saw no inconvenient in the fact that the chapters had been already published as journal articles in Spanish, which opens very interesting possibilities for other similar projects, either ours or by other academics working in languages other than English. By the way, the book can be downloaded from the many university libraries subscribing to Springer Nature services.

Without further ado, here's our very exciting TOC:

\*Introduction: On Motherhood and Mothering, Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen, Sara Martín

\*The Travelling Mother: Naomi Mitchison and *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, Sara Martín

\*Prole(tarian) M/others of the Future, Unite: Queer Social Reproduction and Utopian Kinship in the Speculative Fiction by Marge Piercy and, M.E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi, Ira Terán

\*Domination and Silence: Motherhood in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cadáver Exquisito*, Sofia Duarte

\*Reproductive Processes and Systemic Violence in Three Contemporary British SF Novels: *The Birth of Love*, *Intrusion*, and *The Growing Season*, Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen

- \*Fairy Tale, Myth, and Reproductive Dystopia: Jane Rogers's *The Testament of Jessie Lamb*, Daniel Nisa Cáceres
- \*Mothering, Family, and Survival: The Post-apocalyptic World of Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*, Carmen Velasco-Montiel
- \*Re-sculpting the Mother-Daughter Bond and the Idea(l) of the Female Body: A Reading of Madeline Miller's *Galatea*, Madalina Armie
- \*Posthuman Reproductive Futures: The Eco-Queer Kinship of Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*, Lidia María Cuadrado Payeras
- \*Monstrous Maternities: Motherhood, Mothering, and Ectogenesis in "MOM" by Nieves Delgado, Irene Ruiz Vidal
- \*"Why Do You Look at Me Like That, Mother?" Motherhood, Abjection, and Entrapment in *Vivarium*, Verónica Membrive
- \*Mother Yourself: Cloned Women and Paternal Erasure in *The Echo Wife* by Sarah Gailey, Vicky Brewster
- \*Institutionalized Maternal Surveillance: Violence and Resistance in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers*, Paula Serrano Elena
- \*Natural and Scientific Conception: Motherhood(s) in Louisa Hall's *Reproduction*, Aline Ferreira

In the introduction, we explain that mothers and mothering are central to our work in this volume. Motherhood has been often seen by radical feminism as a burden for women (a term now fraught with complications, as certain trans men still keep their wombs and, hence, the capacity to bear children). Motherhood, however, was vindicated by later feminist thinkers, such as the prolific, omnipresent Andrea O'Reilly, as a source of power, which is how it should be seen. Patriarchal oppression is clearly based to a great extent on patriarchal men's grudging realization that the survival of the species depends on women's willingness to bear children. To guarantee its own survival, then, patriarchy has enslaved us, beginning by imposing the cult of virginity to guarantee that the first-born child is the husband's. This is important since property, a patriarchal invention and foundation, is transmitted from father to sons, occasionally daughters. Adrienne Rich introduced the concept of mothering, which refers to the relationship between mother and children, and today, more generally, to parenting. This relationship, as we know, can be complicit with patriarchy but is also a source of potential anti-patriarchal resistance and rebellion.

The authors and we (Jessica and I) have dealt in our chapters with the challenges that technoscience presents for mothers, motherhood, and mothering. These challenges are best explored in science fiction, though we're using the label speculative fiction to consider other texts which, strictly speaking, are fantasy or even horror. In recent years, scholarship has increasingly illuminated how feminist science fiction engages with the intersecting themes of reproduction, technology, and gender, offering critical insights into the biopolitical regulation of bodies and the cultural construction of motherhood in new representations. These critical interventions reveal how speculative fiction reimagines reproductive roles and maternal identities beyond traditional, biologically deterministic frameworks, contributing to broader feminist debates around embodiment, autonomy, and reproductive justice.

Building on this body of work, in this volume our main argument is that we have outgrown the term ‘mothering’, which was very useful in past decades but now requires redefinition in light of contemporary theories and lived experiences. As the authors and their theoretical perspectives demonstrate, we can no longer speak of the mother as a totalizing or enclosed entity. Instead, motherhood must be understood as a fluid, relational, and often contested site shaped by technological mediation, cultural expectations, and political struggle. Through committed feminist critical engagement, we aim to unravel the intricate tapestry of reproductive experiences within speculative fiction, illuminating the intersections of gender, power, and autonomy along the way. We aim to join, above all, the debate on whether technoscientific intervention in the natural process of human reproduction is harmful to women. The position we defend is that it will harm women as long as science and technology are dominated by patriarchal interests.

As the chapters demonstrate, feminist speculative fiction is a particularly fertile ground for interrogating the ethical, emotional, and political dimensions of reproduction, an issue that, naturally, concerns all human beings and not just mothers. From imagined futures governed by biotechnological intervention, or posthuman landscapes where care is redefined through alien and artificial kinships, to hair-raising dystopias, the analyses of the chosen stories create a space for us to think in a novel way about what it means to be a mother, to create life inside one’s body (or outside), or to inhabit an anatomy forced to gestate and nurture beyond the will of the mother. The works examined in each chapter go beyond the stagnant and traditional representations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ motherhood, revealing instead a multiple, fluid, situated, ambivalent motherhood, deeply shaped as well by personal relationships (often with other women but mainly with controlling men), interconnected with the environment and, on the whole, resisting a clear and stable definition.

Ultimately, we invite readers to think beyond the present, to question outdated theses about gender, care, and creation, and to imagine reproductive futures that are more equitable, more diverse, and more attuned to the many ways we make and unmake ourselves and others. A wide space opens up before us for further exploration. Future research will be able to deepen these discussions and explore topics such as trans\*, differently-abled, and neurodivergent motherhood, with more non-Western and decolonial perspectives, or analyze how digital and interactive narratives are reshaping the aesthetics and politics of speculative motherhood. What this volume demonstrates, however, is that the maternal remains a place of generative inquiry, one that speculative fiction is uniquely positioned to explore.

The conversation around motherhood and mothering has been certainly growing in recent years, not only because our reproductive rights are at risk in many democracies where they seemed to be absolutely guaranteed, but also because other issues require urgent measures, from surrogacy to the so far silenced process of mourning for stillborn children. The physical process itself of bearing a child has been the object of much exploration by expectant mothers, and the role of fathers has changed enormously not only in relation to this process, but also in relation to the legislation around paternity leave and other vindications.

All these changes and new contributions to the ongoing conversation are accompanied, however, by a greater reluctance than ever to have children. Prospective mothers have many difficulties to find suitable partners (in the UK a study found out that is the main reason why women freeze their eggs, not, as supposed, a selfish dedication to their careers) and the financial situation, with precarious jobs and limited access to housing, makes it very difficult for all individuals to consider reproduction and forming families when they're still in their twenties and even thirties. With this panorama, it is no wonder that most of the stories the authors have analysed are mainly dystopian (perhaps with the singular exception of the one I chose, Naomi Mitchison's unique *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*).

The technoscience thriving in our times has made it possible for many women to become mothers but also threatens to turn us women into objects of total patriarchal control, in a sort of science-fictional rendering of Atwood's dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale*. The eventual arrival of viable ectogenesis (or reproduction outside the human body via artificial wombs) might be either liberating, as radical feminism imagined, or a nightmare as Aldous Huxley already imagined back in 1932, with his *Brave New World*. We need to add to the conversation as well the decision many of us have made not to bring children to this world, which is not a selfish decision, as it is often said to be, but an expression of the fear and dislike of the fiercely patriarchal world we live in, apart from other personal considerations.

Jessica, our authors and I hope that you find much food for thought in our collective book, and, above all, that you read (or see) and enjoy the works we analyze. We hope that the exploration of motherhood continues in as many different directions as possible, and that new-style fatherhood is also explored, though we worry that there are still very few works of speculative fiction addressing this issue. Perhaps that should be our next project: finding and studying them.

## 17 May 2026 / TEACHING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND MEMOIRS: SOME CONCLUSIONS

I'm three classes away from finishing (on 28 May) my third/fourth year BA elective subject 'English Prose: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Autobiographies and Memoirs' and I've been drafting my conclusions. I have decided to share them here, together with a couple of lists.

Each class (80-90 minutes) has consisted of the following: a mini-lecture (35 minutes) in which I have presented three autobiographies or memoirs and one academic secondary source; time for writing practice (15 minutes), in which students have written a 300-word autobiographical text (from a list of topics I have provided, though they could also choose free topics); and interaction time (30 minutes) during which students have maintained three 10-minute conversations with their classmates about the books they have been reading (each student has read four different autobiographies or memoirs). At home, they have completed

their daily 300-word essay and written four 800-1000 word essays linking their books to the scholarship I have presented in class. Forty of the forty-four students will complete the assignments, and, as I anticipate, pass the course. I'll be having an individual tutorial with them in June, in which we will discuss their writing practice. They also need to bring two lists: ten books they would like to read among the 74 I have presented in class, and ten books selected from their conversations with their peers (on average 60-65 books/conversations). A student that has followed all aspects of assessment and always attended class will have learn about almost 140 books or more and read 4 in depth (all 21<sup>st</sup> century).

Here's the list of autobiographies and memoirs I have very briefly presented in class. No, I have not read all of them and, yes, there should be more in other languages. I have used Wikipedia, as I told the students, and reviews to compose one PowerPoint slide for each (with book covers, and, if possible, photo of the authors). They are all highly recommended; please, note the 1990s immense boom:

1. 50/40 BC Julius Caesar. *De bello Gallico*
2. 397-398 Saint Augustine. *Confessiones*
3. 1561-62 (written 1588) Teresa de Jesús. *Vida de la Madre Teresa de Jesús*
4. 1666 John Bunyan. *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, or a Brief Relation of the Exceeding Mercy of God in Christ to his Poor Servant John Bunyan*
5. 1682 Mary Rowlandson. *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*
6. 1782-1789. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Les Confessions*
7. 1791 Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography*
8. 1811-1814 (vols. I-III); 1833 (vol. IV) Johann Wolfgang, von Goethe. *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*
9. 1849-50 *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* (English: *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*), François-René de Chateaubriand
10. 1845 Frederick Douglass. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
11. 1850 William Wordsworth. *The Prelude*
12. 1855 (published 1877) Harriet Martineau. *Autobiography*
13. 1861 Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*
14. 1864 Cardinal John Henry Newman. *Apologia pro Vita Sua*
15. 1873 John Stuart Mill. *Autobiography*
16. 1885-1899 John Ruskin. *Praeterita*
17. 1887 Charles Darwin. *Autobiography*
18. 1899 Margaret Oliphant. *Autobiography*
19. 1901 Booker T. Washington. *Up from Slavery*
20. 1903 Helen Keller. *The Story of My Life*
21. 1907 Henry Adams. *The Education of Henry Adams*
22. 1926 T.E. Lawrence. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*
23. 1927 William Butler Yeats. *Autobiographies*
24. 1929 Robert Graves. *Good-Bye to All That*
25. 1933 George Orwell. *Down and Out in Paris and London*
26. 1933 Gertrude Stein. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

27. 1933 Vera Brittain. Testament of Youth / Testament of Friendship
28. 1937 Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen). Out of Africa
29. 1939 Virginia Woolf. "A Sketch of the Past." Moments of Being
30. 1945 Richard Wright. Black Boy
31. 1951, 1966 Vladimir Nabokov. Speak, Memory
32. 1955 C.S. Lewis. Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life
33. 1956 Gerald Durrell. My Family and Other Animals
34. 1964 Ernest Hemingway. A Moveable Feast
35. 1964 Charles Chaplin. My Autobiography
36. 1969 Maya Angelou. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
37. 1974 Jan Morris. Conundrum
38. 1976 Maxine Hong Kingston. The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts
39. 1977 Eve Babitz. Slow Days, Fast Company: The World, the Flesh, and L.A.
40. 1978 Harry Crews. A Childhood: The Biography of a Place
41. 1982 Russell Baker. Growing Up
42. 1982 Audre Lorde. Zami: A New Spelling of My Name
43. 1982 Michael Ondaatje. Running in the Family
44. 1983 Joyce Johnson. Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir
45. 1983 Eudora Welty. One Writer's Beginnings
46. 1984 Janet Frame. An Angel At My Table
47. 1985 Richard P. Feynman. Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!
48. 1987 Vivian Gornick. Fierce Attachments: A Memoir
49. 1989 Tobias Wolff. This Boy's Life
50. 1989 Peter Mayle. A Year in Provence
51. 1990 William Styron. Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness
52. 1991 Philip Roth. Patrimony: A True Story
53. 1991 Terry Tempest Williams. Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place
54. 1991 Jung Chang. Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China
55. 1991 Kingsley Amis. Memoirs
56. 1991 Andy McNab. Bravo Two Zero
57. 1992 Rosa Parks (& Jim Haskins). Rosa Parks: My Story
58. 1992 Nick Hornby. Fever Pitch
59. 1993 Anatole Broyard. Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir
60. 1993 Lars Eighner. Travels With Lizbeth: : Three Years on the Road and on the Streets
61. 1994 Lucy Grealy. Autobiography of a Face
62. 1994 Nelson Mandela. The Long Walk to Freedom
63. 1994 Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs, John Lydon, Keith Zimmerman, Kent Zimmerman
64. 1995 Temple Grandin. Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism
65. 1995 Mary Karr. The Liars' Club
66. 1995 James McBride. The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother
67. 1995 Barack Obama. Dreams From My Father
68. 1995 Gore Vidal. Palimpsest
69. 1995 Bill Bryson. Notes from a Small Island

70. 1996 Caroline Knapp. *Drinking: A Love Story*
71. 1996 Frank McCourt. *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir of Childhood*
72. 1997 Mitch Albom. *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson*
73. 1997 JM Coetzee. *Boyhood*
74. 1998 Ruth Reichl. *Tender at the Bone: Growing Up at the Table*

Apart from presenting these books, I have read and commented in class passages from the following academic texts, in the chronological order they appear here. Esther Pujolràs and Felicity Hand presented, as guests, their own volume in a special session:

1. Shumaker, Wayne (1954). *English Autobiography: Its Emergence, Materials, and Form*. University of California Press.
2. Gusdorf, Georg (1956) "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", reprinted in James Olney (ed.). *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton UP, 1980.
3. Barthes, Roland (1986). "The Death of the Author" (1968). In *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. Hill & Wang. 49-55.
4. Olney, James (1972). *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton UP.
5. de Man, Paul (1979). "Autobiography as De-Facement." *Modern Language Notes*, 94: 919-30.
6. Jelinek, Estelle, ed. (1980). *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Indiana UP.
7. Eakin, Paul John (1985). *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. Princeton UP.
8. Lejeune, Philippe. (1989) *On Autobiography*. Trans. Katherine Leary. University of Minnesota Press.
9. Heilbrun, Carolyn G. (1989). *Writing a Woman's Life*. Ballantine Books.
10. Derrida, Jacques (& Marie-Louise Mallet and David Wills) (2008). *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Fordham UP.
11. Gass, William (May 1994). "The Art of Self: Autobiography in the Age of Narcissism." *Harper's Magazine*: 43-52. <https://harpers.org/2017/12/the-art-of-self/>
12. Morrison, Toni (1995). "The Site of Memory." William Zinsser (ed.), *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Houghton Mifflin. 83-102.
13. Rugg, Linda (1997). *Picturing Ourselves: Photography & Autobiography*.
14. Anderson, Linda (1997). *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures*. Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf.
15. Broughton, Trev Lynn (1999). *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto/Biography in the Late Victorian Period*. Routledge.
16. Gornick, Vivian (2001). *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
17. Miller, Nancy K. (2002). *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives*. Columbia UP.
18. Pozuelo Yvancos, José María (2006). *De la autobiografía: teoría y estilos*. Crítica.

19. Moore-Gilbert, Bart J. (2009). *Postcolonial Life-writing: Culture, Politics, And Self-representation*. Routledge, 2009.
20. Douglas, Kate (2010). *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory*. Rutgers UP.
21. Yagoda, Ben (2010). *Memoir: A History*. Riverhead Books.
22. Poletti, Anna and Julie Rak (ed.) (2016). *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. The University of Wisconsin Press.
23. Pujolràs, Esther & Felicity Hand (2023). *Mourning and Resilience in Indian Ocean Life Writing*. Routledge.
24. Schep, Dennis (2020). *The Autobiography Effect Writing the Self in Post-Structuralist Theory*. Routledge.
25. Hayes, Patrick (2022). *The Oxford History of Life-Writing. Volume 7: Postwar to Contemporary, 1945-2020*. Oxford UP.
26. Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson (2001, 2010, 2024). *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. University of Minnesota Press.

This last book by Smith and Watson is the most adequate as introduction to life narratives, as you can see from the title, but I decided to use a much wider range of scholarship. Our students are not really exposed to much scholarship and I decided to introduce a more sophisticated approach than usual. Quite another matter is whether they have been at all interested in my theoretical discussions. I hope so!

Here are a few quick notes about other matters I have learned:

1. That teaching an elective subject closest to the interests of the teacher-researcher is ideal (yes, I'm doing research for a book on memoirs written by sons about their fathers).
2. The long lecture is gone, and we need to structure out sessions in shorter segments, with more student interaction.
3. Students have welcomed writing in class (by hand, on notebooks), which suggests that we need to introduce creative writing in the English Literature class.
4. Students' interaction is a very useful teaching tool (though it's quite difficult to increase the depth of the conversations, as students begin each unit without having read the corresponding book yet).
5. From the 74 autobiographies and memoirs I have commented in class, I have learned that we overvalue the novel and that these genres have much to contribute to literature, being literary and not just aspects of sociology, anthropology, ethnography and so on.
6. It's fascinating to see how a new field of research unfolds and what problems are attached to its unfolding: from the initial narrow focus on 'great' white men to the struggle to open up the study of Life Writing to the texts by all types of persons.
7. Life Writing Studies has been shaped by external factors that have to do with the evolution of Philosophy from the 1960s onwards, and of other intellectual movements such as Structuralism (from Anthropology and Linguistics) and Post-Structuralism, rather than just from internal needs.

8. The concept 'Life Writing' is both very useful and confusing, as it puts together many texts that really need separate treatment (studying biography is very different from studying autobiography).
9. The general consensus on the side of authors and scholars that autobiography and memoirs needn't be truthful clashes with the common readers' perception that they should always tell the truth.
10. By avoiding the classic chronological narrative most authors have ended up creating another tradition by which autobiographical texts are supposed to be fragmented, partial, and even disorganized. Call it post-modern, or post-post-modern.
11. An undertheorized issue is the fact that the consumption of autobiographies and memoirs changes depending very much on whether the reader is already familiar with the author or not.
12. Some autobiographies or memoirs are part of larger clusters, either because the author writes diverse texts, or because other persons in their circle also write books about the same events.
13. The USA is the main producers of these genres, much above any other nation because of its religious traditions, cult of individuality and current interest in the misery memoir. Add to this the publishing industry's interest, and the proliferation of creative writing courses at all levels.
14. To the reader the quality of the book matters more than the interest of the life narrated. A not so appealing life narrated in good prose attracts more than a very interesting life narrated in a not too well-written book.
15. An interest I thought was personal is actually part of a much larger phenomenon, which totally exploded in the 1990s. I believed that my interest in novels has been waning as I aged, and it turns out that everyone in seeking in life write the interesting characters we no longer find in fiction.

I might write a second conclusions post in one month, when I'm done marking, but, in essence, this sums up what I've been teaching (and learning) this semester. My 40 students will have read and shared a total of 160 books, and I might eventually publish the list. Mid-semester I decided to join specific conversations rather than simply monitor all the conversations, and this means I've directly spoken to six students every class. That has turned out to be very enjoyable (I hope it's been useful for them, too).

More next week...

## 23 May 2026 / LOOKING FOR THE POSTER BOY: MASCULINITY AND CINEMA TODAY

I was interviewed a few days ago by the [Colectivo Cala](#) of Alburquerque (Badajoz, Extremadura) for their radio segment (available as a podcast) '[Hombre tenías que ser](#)', in which they comment on diverse aspects of masculinity. I was asked to comment on ideal masculinity, men and cinema, a topic which I had not considered in a while (since I published my [book](#) on US men in documentary, in

2023). I checked diverse online lists of the kind that tell you who's currently the most popular male star, and, together with the veterans, the main names that came up were Timothée Chalamet, Tom Holland and Jacob Elordi.

I'll comment on them eventually but let me begin by noting that actors are usually subdivided into generations and since they are active from childhood to advanced seniority, there is an enormous variety of personalities to consider (take your pick!). Veteran Clint Eastwood (95) clearly represents a male model quite different from that of Christian Bale (52) or Chalamet (30). It is, then, quite difficult to select just one man as the icon dominating current cinema and, in many ways, it has always been so. The passage of time helps to simplify each period, so that now the reign of Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando, Cary Grant, Paul Newman, Robert Redford and other star actors seems more absolute than it was in their time. I might be wrong about that, though.

From the questions I was asked, it seems that we still measure the men on the screen against the macho model of 1980s action cinema. Yvonne Tasker studied this model in her essential monograph *Spectacular Bodies Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993), a book that flaunts a shirtless, sexy Jean Claude Van Damme on the cover. My hosts mentioned Bruce Willis in the context of that type of cinema, and I noted that Willis has now become associated with the extreme vulnerability that illness brings to the male body (he suffers from frontotemporal dementia), a topic that needs to be further explored in public discourse (think also of Michael J. Fox). Tasker coined the word 'musculinity' to label the type of male screen presence that idealized the muscular body, a model that still survives in action cinema and in superhero sagas (think of Chris Hemsworth's Thor), perhaps with less exaggeration than in the past, but still as a sign of male discipline and control over the body, even for senior men. I'm thinking here of Ralph Fiennes (63) as a surprisingly muscled Ulysses in *The Return*.

This is a moment of change, in which older values coexist with the public's demand for more vulnerable, more caring models of masculinity in all types of cinema, including action and superhero movies. With or without muscles, male characters are supposed to show deep feeling while male actors are supposed to emote authentically and not simply be interesting masks. Younger male actors are, perhaps for that reason, avoiding specialization and typecasting, so that nobody is surprised to see Paul Mescal as the depressed young father of indie hit *Aftersun* and the fierce fighter of blockbuster *Gladiator 2*.

This later film, which is simply atrocious, is interesting for my discussion for two reasons. Mescal (30) plays the son of the protagonist of the original *Gladiator* (1999), Maximus, played by Russell Crowe (currently 62, 35 in that film). Crowe looked more manly than Mescal at a similar age, but at the same time he's a rather catastrophic example of how not taking care of your body can spoil your stardom. Brad Pitt and Crowe are the same age, and that says much about how some men have embraced self-care and others have not (though, as we know now from his children, Pitt's genial persona is pure façade). In *Gladiator 2*, Mescal's (false) antagonist is played by Pedro Pascal (51), an actor everyone adores now but who only broke through with his role as Oberyn Martell in Season 4 of the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2014). Pascal's ambiguous sexuality is no obstacle for him to be much liked, which certainly is an advance over previous

times when top male actors were forced to conceal any departure from strict heteronormativity, the most extreme case being, no doubt, Rock Hudson.

Box office takings indicate that the most popular male actors today are men in the 50-60 demographic or over: Leonardo Di Caprio (51), Brad Pitt (62), Tom Hanks (69), Denzel Washington (71), Johnny Depp (62), Robert Downey Jr. (61), Tom Cruise (63), Will Smith (57), Christian Bale (52) or Keanu Reeves (61). I'll add Matthew McConaughey (56) for good measure. I would say that Hanks and Reeves are close to being universally liked, embodying kindness, each in their own way, as few men do and apparently being the real thing. If you're missing actors of other nationalities of global appeal, I can add Javier Bardem (57), Antonio Banderas (65), Jean Dujardin (53), Omar Sy (48) and Song Kang-ho (59).

As you can see, I have not added yet any British actors. It seemed to me that Henry Cavill (43) and Tom Hardy (48) were the most likely candidates to be major global stars, with their good looks and talent, but something has limited them, whether bad luck with their roles or other factors. The British, by the way, have been struggling for years to replace Daniel Craig (58), the last James Bond so far (seen in *No Time to Die*, 2021). Craig's Bond was much vulnerable and did learn to care for others, which turned the character into someone very different from Fleming's original creation. It seems quite impossible to keep Bond alive in our times, almost as hard as choosing the adequate actor to play him. The names bandied about have included Idris Elba (Craig's choice), James Norton, Theo James, and Aaron Taylor-Johnson. There is now talk of Callum Turner, Harris Dickinson, Jacob Elordi, and even Tom Holland.

I say 'even' Tom Holland because at 29 Holland is just too young to play Bond. His lean physique made him a good choice for Spiderman, but he lacks credibility to be the manly man Bond is supposed to be. My interviewers pointed out that Holland is a very positive model precisely because he does not emphasize manliness (in the line of his Spiderman predecessors Andrew Garfield and Toby McGuire) and, attention! because he's dating a taller woman (Zendaya). The title of my post today is 'looking for the poster boy' and this is so because I told my interviewers that to determine which actor embodies currently ideal masculinity we should think of which poster we would hang on our bedroom's wall (if you're young) or office. Sorry, but I would certainly not choose Holland! Nor Timothée Chalamet, a man who, like Di Caprio, will always look like a grown-up boy and, who, excuse the gossip, is dating a woman from the Kardashian-Jenner clan.

Until recently, perhaps the most obvious poster boys (men!) were Ryan Gosling, Ryan Reynolds, Chris Evans, and, no doubt the handsomest, Chris Hemsworth, an actor who presents himself as a committed father and husband, and who has a healthy sense of humour as shown in the short films he made with Taika Waititi mocking his superhero roles. These men, now past 40, are huge stars, but not at the level of the 50-70 cohort I mentioned before. Among the actors around or under 40, other names frequently mentioned (apart from Chalamet, Mescal and Holland) are the following (see how many you recognize): Robert Pattinson, Michael B. Jordan, Austin Butler, Ansel Elgort, Lucas Hedges, Noah Centineo, Barry Keoghan, Harris Dickinson, Fionn Whitehead, Taron Egerton, Richard Madden, Régé-Jean Page, Henry Golding. There has been a rather intensive operation to turn Glen Powell (37) into the next best thing, as a

men's man who can also please the ladies (yes, it's that old-fashioned!), but something has not clicked. Unfortunately, cancer robbed us of an actor who had the charisma to become a truly major star and role model. I'm talking about Chadwick Boseman, who passed away in 2020. As Wakanda's king, he projected something truly majestic and thus made an ideal poster actor.

It might be perhaps positive that there is not a single desirable model of masculinity, but a variety represented by all the actors I have mentioned here (and don't forget supporting actors; I once wrote a [post](#) about Paul Bettany, one of the best we have today). Current preferences call for a masculinity that is flexible, culturally diverse, unafraid of vulnerability, capable of showing emotion and, yes, stylish in a personal way. Masculinity is not totally gone, but physical resilience has replaced brute strength. Male actors and the roles they play (unless they play villains!) must show empathy, self-control, good social skills, total acceptance of equality, and hold unprejudiced views. Traditional masculinity is not wholly gone, that is obvious, but it is no longer tolerated without the traits I have mentioned and a higher emotional maturity, which is also much sought after in real-life men. In that sense, it's interesting to contrast the same characters in past and present iterations, beginning for instance with Tom Cruise's Maverick in *Top Gun* (1986, 2022) or the diverse Batman, a character with a particularly dark disposition despite being heroic.

I'm writing here about the male actors that usually play positive role models but, of course, the essence of current masculinity might be better represented by far less adjusted roles. The success of *Joker* (2019), with the title character played by Joaquin Phoenix, truly horrified me, as this film openly sympathizes with a horrendous man (I really don't care about his past traumas). At the same time, the variety of male characters, though apparently enhanced, is still quite limited. Chalamet's breakthrough film was *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), in which he played a gay teen. However, like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) with Jake Gyllenhaal and the late Heath Ledger, *Call Me by Your Name* has also failed to normalize the presence of gay protagonists. A rumour is now circulating that trans man Elliot Page might play Achilles in Nolan's *Odyssey*, directly challenging Brad Pitt's role in *Troy* (2004). It will be interesting to comment on the reactions if/when this happens.

I haven't spoken about series because I don't like them (too time-consuming). I've been, however, following the new version of *All Creatures Great and Small* (2020-, 6 seasons), a gentle British comedy about three rural vets in Yorkshire, based on the books by James Herriot, and set in the 1930s and 1940s. The three main male characters (Herriot himself, and brothers Sigfried and Tristan Farnon) are quite different men, but they are honest, honourable, hard-working men. The show is quite candid about Sigfried's shortcomings, poking fun at his cantankerous, rude behaviour. I don't know whether these men would welcome a female colleague (Aleen Cust, the first woman veterinary surgeon in the UK, qualified in 1922), an issue not raised so far in the series. Yet, I'm enjoying a masculinity that excludes deep anger and violence, even though Sigfried (a WWI veteran) and Tristan (deployed in Sicily during WWII) carry their own traumas. It's a traditional, very British type of gentlemanly masculinity, and I take my enjoyment as a sign that fed up with the toxic US male characters, we're forced on our global screens.

I realise, re-reading the post, that I have said nothing about Jacob Elordi, seen in the same year as Frankenstein's monster and as Emily Brontë's monster Heathcliff, and a firm candidate to play James Bond. He's also in the series *Euphoria*, playing the far from ideal Nate Jacobs. Well, give Elordi a positive male character and he might be the poster boy for our times, given his very good looks. As long as he is only offered toxic roles, he won't be able to truly shine. Ultimately, this is the main problem: there are many good male actors, but we need them to play many more positive male characters. Let's ask for them to be written.

### 31 May 2026 / THE STAGES OF AN ACADEMIC CAREER: NOTES FOR BEGINNERS

Somewhat rashly, I told my last-year BA students that if any was interested in an academic career they were welcome to discuss their future plans with me. The first email message I have received indicates that they are not necessarily familiar with the concept 'academic career', so this post is intended as a beginners' introduction to that concept, and to the stages of said career (in Spain, where I work).

As an undergrad, I myself had no inkling about what actually an academic career entails. I just wanted to be a university teacher because that sounded more glamorous than being a primary or secondary school teacher (my B plan). I very much admired one of my UAB teachers, Guillermina Cenoz, and I wanted to have a job like hers. I eventually found out that Guillermina was not really active as a researcher, but as a teacher she is still very much my model. She did try to warn me that not all was glamorous in her (and mine) chosen profession, but I was young, innocent and a foolish dreamer (I still am).

When I was first hired, thanks to Guillermina, nobody explained to me what I was supposed to do as a teacher-researcher and doctoral candidate (now UAB has training programmes for new recruits). I had to learn by trial and error. Besides, Spanish university-related legislation has changed several times in a few decades, as it constantly does. What has not changed is the very long process of obtaining tenure (that is, a permanent job or position). Up to the mid-1990s it could be really fast in Spain, a matter of obtaining a doctoral degree and perhaps having published one article. But then this process became increasingly elaborate and demanding. Those of you interested in the current legality may check the Ley Orgánica del Sistema Universitario ([LOSU](#)), passed on 23 March 2026. I don't intend to comment on this law, however, but to describe more generally what we mean currently by 'academic career'.

An academic career is a professional trajectory developed in a university context, consisting of teaching, doing research and admin tasks (the operations needed to run the Departament). An academic is, in short, a university employee, though, notoriously, we are a collective very reluctant to be seen as salaried workers. The noun 'professor' comes from the verb 'to profess' and we see ourselves as a 'professional' caste, apart from other (teaching) collectives in our intensive dedication to our pursuits. Currently, all kinds of teachers, from

kindergarten to secondary school, are protesting in the Spanish streets against their appalling working conditions, but I can't imagine university teachers mobilized in the same way, particularly tenured teachers (like me) enjoying the safety of a job until retirement. An academic career has, essentially, two parts, the pre-tenure and the post-tenure period, and it's much easier to imagine pre-tenured academics protesting in the streets. Indeed.

So, you're a BA undergrad about to finish your studies and you need to decide whether to follow an academic career. Your main aim must be to obtain tenure, a permanent job. This can be of two kinds: a permanent contract which does not guarantee 100% that you will never be fired, or a position as a civil servant ('funcionario') which cannot be cancelled (unless you commit a very serious offence). The first kind is usually offered by regional governments (like Catalan Generalitat) and the second one by the Spanish state, depending on who provides the funding. I'm myself a civil servant employed by the Spanish state (though part of my wages comes from Generalitat). You don't get to choose: you're offered what is available. By the way, I speak here about public universities, but, of course, the number of private universities is growing in Spain. They offer contracts, I don't know how stable.

To obtain tenure you must compete with other junior academics, so you need to make yourself as competitive as possible by accumulating as many research and teaching merits as you can in your CV. Academic careers are so stressful because, since competition is open, nobody knows how much you're supposed to do and everyone tries to accomplish as much as they can. Legislation determines the minimum you need in order to apply for a long-term contract or a tenured position, but not the maximum. You might feel confident that your merits are sufficient to be a tenured teacher-researcher only to discover that your rivals have done much more (God knows how!).

When do you start competing for tenured jobs? Well, the moment you decide that you want to write a doctoral dissertation. If you're finishing your BA, you need to decide next whether you wish to take an MA degree or not. Many, if not most, students take MA degrees wishing to be better qualified for jobs and see the MA as the end of their studies. Others take an MA to enter a doctoral programme, which in Spain consists of a minimum of three years of independent study, supervised by a tutor, with a view to writing a book-length dissertation. The BA includes a final dissertation (20 pages), in which you produce individual research under a tutor's supervision. You might discover then two things: a) that you enjoy doing research, b) an interesting topic you might like to explore further. In an ideal situation, that topic becomes the subject of your MA dissertation (35-50 pages) and even of your PhD dissertation (250-300 pages).

A PhD is the highest qualification you may obtain. Many PhD students (or 'candidates') abandon their studies after two years or more, when they discover that one thing is enjoying research and quite another writing a long dissertation. Add to this that, unless you obtain a scholarship (which is difficult), you need to combine a job with your doctoral studies. Until 2008, when legislation changed, doctoral students could be employed as full-time teachers (that was my own case), but since then they are mostly employed as part-time associate teachers. Doctoral students often combine a university part-time job, a second part-time job and the thesis for up to five or six years. Stressful, yes.

While you work on your PhD dissertation, you're supposed to fulfil the requirements of the programme (in ours you participate in a yearly workshop, present a paper at a conference, try to publish an academic article), and, if possibly, go beyond them attending more conferences and publishing articles and book chapters related to your thesis. It's hard work, and you might think that very few people become doctors, but you will always find at least a few others competing for the grants and the jobs you apply for.

This is where things get really tricky. Before LOSU (the new law, remember?) persons in possession of a doctoral degree who wanted to pursue their academic career and eventually get tenure had to either find a post-doctoral grant (very scarce in the Humanities) or get an accreditation to be hired as a full-time lecturer (job titles may vary). An accreditation is a certificate validating your merits, and you may obtain it from a national agency like ANECA or a regional one like Catalan AQU, depending on the job you aspire to. The first, basic accreditation has now been suppressed, which is good news, and you now simply compete for lecturing contracts (4-5 years) on the basis of your CV. The CV is, indeed, the most important element of an academic career for, essentially, you work to add competitive merits to it, almost until retirement.

Supposing you become a lecturer, you need to use your contract years to add more teaching and research merits to your CV and get an accreditation for the next step: a tenured position, the Holy Grail. If you've followed me, at this point you have under your belt an academic career already lasting for about seven to twelve years: PhD (3-5 years), perhaps a post-doc period (1-2 years) and lectureship (4-5 years). If you get the accreditation (either national or regional), you can then apply for tenure, if there are any positions available. Both in the first stage (lectureship) and in the second (tenure) you can apply for jobs in your university or in others but be warned: Spanish universities tend to protect their own, and usually only offer positions when someone from 'the house' has enough merits (I wrote recently a post about this).

Suppose you earn tenure and are hired permanently. By this point, you're in your early to mid-thirties. The next step would consist of accruing more merits to think of obtaining a full professorship (or 'cátedra'), the highest professional category in an academic career. You need a long list of publications, leading research groups and projects, being a good teacher, doing plenty of admin work, and international contacts. Full professorships are usually applied for between the ages of 45 (or a bit earlier) and 55 (or a bit later), after you earn yet another accreditation. The new legislation allows you to be judged on your merits without competing with other candidates to the position, but in many cases full professorship still may involve competing with other academics.

Until a few decades ago there were tenured positions which did not require the persons thus employed to be a doctor. These positions were for teachers uninclined to doing research. That time, however, is over, and now every tenured teacher in all Spanish universities is a doctor, most of them active in research. Some claim that this is not as it should be. Universities have positions for full-time researchers, mostly employed by research institutes, but they no longer have tenured staff totally devoted to teaching. We are supposed to combine teaching with research and admin work, but very few professors are good at these three branches. Good researchers do not necessarily make good teachers, and the

other way round; and very few teacher-researchers enjoy the heavy bureaucracy of admin tasks.

So, is an academic career worth the huge effort? I don't know. I'm personally satisfied, but I must say that I only started fully enjoying my academic career quite recently, after I stopped doing admin work, which gave me the time to write books. The eleven years before tenure were anxiety-ridden; today, I would have been referred to a psychologist for therapy, no doubt about it. But other persons are more pragmatic and more resilient. One thing that is clear to me is that academic careers are designed for competitive persons who can count, ideally, on the support of family, friends, and very sympathetic partners. Yes, I mean men... An academic career is always much harder for a woman, and far more so for a mother, so that's something to consider. However, if you're a young woman, don't be deterred. Talk to the women teacher-researchers in your Department who are also mothers and ask for their advice.

Would I choose the same path again? Yes, I think so, if only because I can't imagine myself in any other profession. Now, if you're one of a BA students, imagine yourself as a university teacher-researcher and need advice, make an appointment with a teacher you particularly like or trust. We love helping!

## 9 June 2026 / STUDENTS CAN'T OR WON'T READ?: SOME THOUGHTS

An article by Tyler Jagt, published on 1 June 2026, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "[My Students Can't Read](#)" has been creating a bit of a stir this past week and I'd like to comment on its gist.

Jagt claims that his BA students' inability to read a 20-page article (he teaches Rhetoric) suggests that there is "a measurable, generational collapse in sustained reading and writing, and the academy is responding to it with improvisation and exhaustion rather than the structural overhaul it requires." He worries that we're "admitting a cohort that cannot read at a college level and [we] are pretending otherwise." Universities are "conferring degrees on students who cannot do what the degree is supposed to certify," a concern many of us share.

Jagt highlights three main factors, supported by scientific research, for the diminished reading skills: the neurological loss caused by the continued use of smartphones from a still early age (10-11); the 'cognitive debt' or diminished ability to read and write provoked by the use of generative AI; and the introduction at US K-12 level of Common Core-influenced reading instruction, which relies on disconnected fragments rather than whole texts. He insists that US democracy is at risk because "The students who cannot read a 20-page article today are the voters who will not be able to read a bill, or the jurors who cannot follow a closing argument, tomorrow." Literacy, he says, must be rebuilt and the academy has both the willingness and the obligation to do it.

However, Jagt's idea that banning smartphones and generative AI is urgent clashes with students' ability to short-circuit any restrictions, as we are learning these days with the nightmare that is controlling cheating students at the Spanish

university access tests. Correcting the deficits of the secondary school means correcting the deficits of the primary school and, ultimately, of society's disinterest in literacy. As things are now, the elites that govern the world want docile citizens, preferably illiterate, to better manipulate them. Foucault explained to us already many decades ago how this is done. The (immediate) future looks bleak, particularly because those elites are not themselves particularly intelligent or well educated. They're mostly psychopathic and stupid, but clever, a horrific combination.

I mostly agree with Jagt's arguments, but I would like to play Devil's advocate to argue that it's not the case that students can't read but that they won't read. I want to base my argumentation on my experience of having taught this semester the subject I have mentioned lately quite often, 'English Prose: Autobiography and Memoirs', and on comments Jagt makes about the 20-page article his students could not read.

I'll begin with the article. I don't know what exact article Jagt used, but he explains that, given its importance for his subject, he split it in two and offered a version with explanatory notes to his students, thus investing time in skills that, he notes, should have been learned in middle school. In my subject, I have not used complete academic articles or chapters, much less books. Instead, I have used a selection of passages from 26 secondary sources, published between 1952 and 2025, that are essential to understand autobiography and memoirs. I have used those sources to teach my students, additionally, how new knowledge unfolds from a pioneering PhD dissertation to the establishment of the combo association-journal-conference. I also invited two friends, Felicity Hand and Esther Pujolràs, who have co-authored a first-rate academic book on life writing in the Indian Ocean, for students to enjoy the fruits of academic collaboration and friendship.

When I prepared my mini-lectures in my office the passages I selected seemed to me reasonably accessible to third/fourth year BA students. Yet, when I started reading them in class aloud, I could immediately notice that the students were having difficulties following them, not because their reading skills are inadequate (though they may be) but mainly because academic prose has become an anti-didactic jargon that only cares to address specialists like myself. I did comment on this issue in class, now and then, but decided to forge ahead and treat my students as if they were MA or PhD level students. Please, note that they are non-native speakers of English, yet, even so, they never complained that they could not follow me.

The essays the students have written, connecting each book they have read with one of the secondary sources I brought to class, have given me a clear indication of what they prefer: they like academic prose that is accessible, communicative and didactic. Jacques Derrida interested no one, but they loved Vivian Gornick, who, of course, is not an academic but a journalist and memoirist who has written very lucidly about life writing. Students can't read academic texts proficiently, Jagt is right, but we need to discuss why current academic prose is so dull, ugly and inefficient. By refusing to read the article he gave them, his students were not only saying 'I can't' but also, most likely, 'I won't read this text.' Of course, the refusal to read may be connected with the frustration generated by not understanding said text, but I confess that I don't understand much current literary theory, and I certainly don't belong to the same demographic.

As a retired teacher in my Department reminded me, I got the wrong impression about my own 1980s cohort for not everyone read the set books or read them well. The refusal to read is co-substantial to children's and young adults' resistance to being educated, because that takes a huge effort. There was never a golden age when every university student was perfectly literate and able to read complex texts. And although smartphones, AI, and pig-headed educational policies are major hindrances on the road to progress, it has always been the case that most people are functional illiterates, if not downright illiterate.

If US democracy is at risk of dying, by the way, this is not because of the new conditions shaping the younger generation but the result of the political illiteracy of generations miseducated before the internet was a thing. A high degree of literacy is always desirable, and it's the goal to which I myself and every other Literature teacher devotes all their efforts, but political Western democracy was born when most voters were illiterate. Our main worry is not the inability to read, but the inability to read critically, though I would agree with Jagt that you can hardly read critically if you can't read. You can't run if you don't know how to walk. Obvious.

I would say, then, that Jagt is not adequately addressing the combination of the two key factors I'm discussing: the inability to read (and write) with the reluctance to do so in order to get an education. I have a clear example of this in my own teaching this year. In the first semester, as I have narrated here, I taught a core subject, 'Contemporary English Literature', for which I got ferocious criticism in the students' surveys. In the second semester I have taught, as noted, a Literature elective. Most of the students in the elective were also enrolled in the core subject, and talking to them has confirmed my suspicion that the negative feedback came from the students who prefer Language and Linguistics. They were furious because they were being forced to take yet another compulsory Literature subject when they expected to be done with reading (we introduced 'Contemporary' only last year). Believe me when I say that the atmosphere in class had nothing to do with the atmosphere in the elective subject this semester.

All the students in 'Contemporary' did well, including the most reluctant ones, but I know that they won't read another book in their life if they can help it. In contrast, the students in 'Autobiography and Memoirs', being more inclined to read, have been surprised to discover yet another genre to read and enjoy. That willingness to read and the fact that they could choose their books (from a list I provided) has greatly increased standards, which is why I could teach advanced literary theory as I did not dare do in 'Contemporary'. Both types of students, by the way, will be getting the same degree, even though their reading skills are diverse.

My argument, if you follow me, is that, as university teachers we can't teach students to read and write unless they want to learn, and the problem is that they're very reluctant. We need to address that reluctance at the same time as we consider the impact of other factors. The reluctance I'm mentioning is what has sent students massively into the cold embrace of AI. In contrast, in my own subject, in which students have been actively collaborating with my teaching, I have detected no AI use. I still need to solve the problem of how to keep students looking at me instead of their laptops as I lecture, but that's another question.

For me, the key mistake was made when primary schools started delaying the onset of reading instruction to around seven and told parents that they should not teach their children to read and write independently. My mother was taught to read by her father, a humble former shepherd later employed as a porter at a train station, when she was not yet four. She still reads non-stop. The supposedly poorly run public school of my neighbourhood taught us children to read beginning at four. At that age, kids still understand reading instruction as a game; by 7 it's a chore. I have seen this with my nephews and nieces. Out of five, only two girls are readers, and that's because they got interested as teens when they started to choose their own books. So, there you are: either you catch them young, or you run the risk of never catching them. Smartphones and AI don't stop the best students from doing great work but are poison for the rest, who lack a sufficiently strong training in basic skills and quickly surrender.

On the worst days, what depresses me is the idea that we have thrown away the project to increase critical literacy for the sake of the bunch of idiots that perverted the uses of the internet. The smartphone and the laptop *per se* are just tools to access social networks, which are our worst enemy. If we spoke of children's and young person's addiction to Wikipedia that would not be a problem at all. The problem are the illiterate mediocrities making fortunes as influencers or technobros and the appalling bad example they give, as they destroy the appeal that education should have. They are the ones teaching our students that it's cool to be illiterate and we are uncool. To add to our mortification as educators, tech companies are now telling us that we all need to train our students to be 'AI literate'. In fact, since generative AI is not generating benefits, they are desperate to push it down our throats and make us all subscribe their services, which are based on pirating knowledge.

So, students can't read but, most importantly, they won't for many wrong reasons. Let's address them. More next week...

### **17 June 2026: THE VANDERBILT REPORT: A SERIOUS THREAT AGAINST ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE HUMANITIES**

The "[Report](#) on the State of Scholarship in the Humanities and the Humanistic Social Sciences," also known informally as 'The Vanderbilt Report' was published online by said university on June 5. It has created quite a stir, which is not surprising considering it is addressed "to university chancellors and presidents" all over the USA.

The report, devised by Daniel Diermeier, Chancellor of Vanderbilt University, and Andrew D. Martin, Chancellor of Washington University, and commissioned to Paul Boghossian, corresponds to the concern that "humanistic disciplines have allowed background ideological values to distort the objective pursuit of knowledge in those fields." A red flag to begin with... It is signed by Boghossian himself (philosophy), Kwame Anthony Appiah (philosophy), Kit Fine (philosophy and mathematics), Joseph Henrich (anthropology and human evolutionary biology), Katherine E. Fleming (history), Jason Merchant (linguistics),

Gary Saul Morson (Slavic languages and literatures), Gideon Rosen (philosophy), Ashley Rubin (sociology) and Sean Wilentz (history). Eight men, two women, all white except for a Black person; nine professors from top private universities, only one from a public institution. The report purports to cover the areas of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, literary studies and music studies (though no specialist represents this specific area). Cultural Studies is not mentioned.

This report could be one among many others, but what makes it particularly scary, even from the distance separating Spain from the United States, are two sentences. The authors grant that their conclusions “are not yet supported by the kind of quantitative evidence that would be expected in a peer-reviewed study of these matters” and so, they “*urge caution on the part of administrators who might wish to act on the basis of our report*” (my italics), thus broadcasting that the report is intended to have actual effects on the disciplining of Humanities scholars. Later, they speak to concerned university administrators, advising them to take a “first step”: “an intensive study of the units in question conducted by reliably broad-minded disciplinary experts (in-house and external) and by experts in adjacent disciplines who take the problems seriously and can be relied on to take a measured view. *In our view, nothing in this report warrants any intervention more intrusive than such first steps*” (original italics). In other words, the report authorizes the beginning of a witch hunt against scholars who don’t meet the standards set by its authors, implemented by the group of “disciplinary experts,” an adjective that alludes to ‘discipline’ as in ‘field of study’ but also to ‘discipline’ as in ‘control and punish.’ Academic freedom in the Humanities is thus threatened. If you don’t see it, you simply can’t read.

The authors of the report focus particularly on publication, not on teaching, though, of course, both are linked. They complain that publications in the Humanities are often the product of bad or even pseudo-scholarship, noting that ideas still in development are taken as fully tested evidence, and that political agendas overwhelm the search for knowledge (a buzz word in the report). They dispute the commonly held idea in the Humanities that pure objectivity does not exist, insisting that it does and should be a target in research. Truth and reason are also defended as mainstays of scholarship, a point that can hardly be disputed.

The only point I agree with in the whole report is that academic prose is tainted by an “extensive abstract jargon, often borrowed from philosophy and sometimes even from the sciences, the result of which is prose that has the superficial form of scholarship but which in fact verges on a kind of nonsense.” Yet, the clear prose of the report is proof enough that nonsense is not always the fruit of convoluted academic writing. The authors protest in another key passage that “the scholarly goal of understanding the world is displaced by, or supplemented with, the aim of telling stories that serve a pragmatic purpose,” as if knowledge about the world could be obtained with no obstacles but should never be applied in pragmatic ways. Knowledge is thus characterized as an ivory-tower possession withdrawn from the rest of society for fear it could be degraded.

What is to blame for this sorry state of scholarship in the Humanities? According to the report, the legacy of (French) postmodernism, with its call to consider relativism and how this helped the usual suspects, women and the minorities, to abandon “disinterested enquiry” for the pragmatics of identity

politics. In its conclusions, the report maintains that disinterested inquiry is “aimed at knowledge and understanding, both for their own sake and for the sake of further goods that require genuine knowledge and understanding, rather than ideologically informed opinion, for their promotion,” and should be the main goal of the university. Very conveniently, the authors neglect to mention that thanks to postmodern relativism, people other than white, cis, heterosexual, privileged men learned to see the conservative politics behind the ‘disinterested enquiry’ so sorely missed from the good old times of the university.

You may check [here](#) the negative reactions of the scholars misrepresented and misquoted in the report, which happens to be a piece of very bad, tendentious scholarship barely concealing its ominous intentions. I’ll cite, besides, the many complaints voiced on social networks like @BlueSky (where most progressive US scholars meet now), Substack and the academic media, Dwight A. McBride’s [article](#) “The Question Haunting That Humanities Report.”

McBride is executive director of the Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity & Equity, Gerald Early Distinguished Professor of African and African American Studies, and professor of English and women’s, gender and sexuality studies at Washington University in St. Louis. As he writes, “Underlying much of the report is a nostalgic vision of the academy as a realm of apolitical objectivity—a place where scholars once pursued knowledge free from ideological commitments and where disciplinary standards were insulated from social and political concerns. But that imagined academy was also an academy from which women and people of color were largely excluded. Even after formal barriers fell, their perspectives, experiences and intellectual contributions remained marginalized across much of the humanities and social sciences.” McBride argues that the emergence of the fields associated with the study of race, gender, class, etc (or identity politics), were not “a departure from scholarly inquiry” but a “response to long-standing absences within it.” I couldn’t agree more.

McBride notes that the report does not attack “the expansion of scholarly attention to women, racial minorities and other historically marginalized groups, but rather the methods used to study them.” Yet he also sees, as we all must see, that by questioning our methodology (I’m a woman doing Gender Studies, remember?) our field of research is threatened with radical exclusion on the grounds that we produce bad scholarship and no knowledge. Sooner or later, university administrators will establish learned ‘disciplinary’ committees with the purpose of dictating proper methodologies of research in the Humanities, and these will exclude critical thinking while pretending to work in favour of truth, reason, and knowledge. This is very dangerous. The report aims at destroying key avenues of accruing knowledge established since the 1960s and is akin to the ongoing parallel attack against Civil Rights and human rights that the right-wing politicians are unleashing all over the world. The report is, in short, pure anti-wokeism under the disguise of philosophical pure reason.

At one point, the authors attempt to cover their tracks by coyly noting that although “the politicized undermining of scholarly standards we describe is largely associated with the academic left,” the “remedy” cannot be “to promote politicized scholarship from the right, let alone to stigmatize and punish serious scholarship from the left. That would be to take a bad situation and make it worse.” This statement supposes that there is a neutral position from which the ‘bad’

scholarship of the less 'serious' scholars of the left could and should be 'disciplined' into producing 'proper' research devoid of any ideological content, a view which should be laughable if it weren't so dammed scary. The report, by the way, does not examine any single sample of right-wing scholarship to criticize its rhetoric and methodology, and this blatant silence speaks volumes about the intentions of the commissioners and the authors. This is a tool, I insist, to discipline left-wing Humanities scholars who do not meet criteria implemented from right-wing positions, with the authors presenting themselves as neutral gatekeepers of disinterested enquiry, which is in itself a highly politicized concept.

Allow me to return to the matter of the low quality of current academic prose, for this is now an important obstacle in the transmission of the *critical* knowledge needed to stop the onslaught of the right. I have already noted that somebody should write a doctoral dissertation about how the heady mixture of Marxism and French philosophical intellectualism, to which we might add Lacanian psychoanalysis, resulted in a language for the initiate that is impenetrable to most persons, including those with university degrees. I believe that a very serious mistake was made when the ugly prose of the key postmodern thinkers was taken as the standard against which we need to measure our publications.

At a time of urgent socio-political resistance to the demolition of civil and human rights, we can't be using a rhetoric only a few understand and praise. We need clear, rotund language that can appeal to as many people as possible within and outside the university. The battle outside is raging, and it's being won by the manipulative rhetoric of the right on social media, on the basis of a direct language that we in the left might hate but that is very effective. Mired in its twisted academic prose, many left thinkers have lost the ability to appeal to large segments of the population, which is in many ways sadly ironic. We are the new ivory tower.

Let's take advantage of the criticism in 'The Vanderbilt Report' to build a new language for our scholarship and a new methodology than eschews the crutches provided by dense theoretical frameworks to offer instead radical new thinking. Let's appeal to others by being appealing, and let's write articles and books that can be read with pleasure even by those who, in principle, disagree with us. Let's be honestly didactic, in short.

Yours, much afraid and very angry.

### **23 June 2026: FED-UP ALTOGETHER – TIME TO STOP TRYING TO PUBLISH ARTICLES IN JOURNALS?**

Today I've received one of those blind peer reviewer reports which tells me how useless I am and how totally sub-standard my work is because... I mean, so many things that, really, I wonder that I've published anything at all. What the reviewers don't know is that I no longer need to publish any more papers in any academic journal because the Ministry has already validated five of my assessment exercises (sexenios), and the rules of my university do not require that I validate

the sixth, final one to keep my reduced teaching workload. I just want to complete my score and go for the sixth *sexenio* (in 2029), though I might finally just skip it. We'll see.

As for the article, well, I got the rejection message by 14:00 and thirty minutes later I had already archived it in the digital repository of my university, to be made available in about 24 hours. I have added a note about how to cite it and, voilà, ready for circulation. That's the rule I've been applying for a while, after learning that a rejected article is rarely accepted elsewhere because it always needs to be modified one way or another to meet specific journal requirements. I upload my rejects as self-published papers, poor things, and move on. Of course, matters would be very different if I had to get an accreditation, grant or similar, but I'm already past that videogame screen. I aim at filling the internet with my rejected 'trash' and see what survives.

I must conclude that I'm a rogue scholar, for I really don't care much for the kind of articles we write today in Literary Studies and Cultural Studies. I'm not as irresponsible as to allow my PhD tutorees to disregard the required standards, since they are junior scholars and need to go through all the steps of the academic game. I am, however, truly fed-up with the haughty tone of most peer reviewers and with the expectation that all articles must fill the same rigid mould. Where are the rules published? Show me!

I'm also discovering that many reviewers are very poor readers. Many are lost without the pointers provided by the theoretical framework and can't identify a thesis statement or a line of argumentation if it bites them. I also notice great difficulties to distinguish critical/analytical commentary based on close reading from plot summary. My job, as I understand it, is to illuminate (fictional) texts and explain how they are constructed on the basis of how the plot, the narrative and the context intertwine. I refuse to use somebody else's theorization in philosophy, sociology or whatever to pretend that this makes literary analysis more scientific. But this is the fashion these days, and I'm as stubborn as a stubborn mule. Hence, my growing pile of rejections.

I was trained to frame my research within the work done by the predecessors who had studied the same text, not to bring in alien comment, and my standards as a peer reviewer go in that direction. In my most recent peer review I was asked to assess an article about a novel I know very well. The article in question read this novel from an angle that, while appropriate, did not really contribute anything substantial because the bibliography didn't include a single article or book chapter dealing with said novel (and there are quite a few). I strongly objected to that omission, as it seems to me that any new reading of a work needs to interact with the already existing ones. Otherwise, the reading tends to repeat the basics and marvel that a wheel is round.

This article bounced back for a second round of reviewing, and I found that the author had included, as I requested, two or three secondary sources directly dealing with the novel. The problem is that they felt force-fed into a text that didn't really have any use for them. The copy of the article I was given was already set for publication, it was no longer a basic Word manuscript, and I felt that I had little to say at that point, except 'throw the whole thing away and start again'. So, as far as I'm concerned, my peer reviewing was good for nothing and that article will soon be published. The theoretical framework, oh yes, was very solid as they

usually are, but what the author had to say about the novel was, let's say it, underresearched and irrelevant, though they won't know this from my report. I'm considering, however, never participating again in the circus that peer reviewing has become if my opinion will count for so little.

Now, let me explain the crucial difference between a peer reviewer and an editor. I'll begin with the latter. I'm co-editor of the academic online journal *Hélice* and I have edited quite a number of monographic issues in academic journals, collective books and e-books with students' work. An editor works to make a text better, applying a positive, constructive attitude towards the author's work. As editor, it's my job to shepherd the author towards the ultimate goal: the publication of a solid piece of academic writing that, regardless of the theoretical standpoint chosen, illuminates a text for the benefit of other readers.

Editors, as professional writers know, (mostly) love authors and work generously to improve writing and argumentation, and to make texts presentable and, above all, readable. In contrast, peer reviewers (mostly) dislike authors because a) they don't know them; b) paper reviewing takes time away from other more pleasant tasks; c) a blind peer review does not benefit the reviewer in any way. Editors, in contrast, take pride in what they do. We know the authors in our 'team', we love our task and it makes us proud to publish the result of our efforts with our name attached to them.

Peer reviewers lurk in the shadows of anonymity. Editors bring light into the hard task of coordinating a journal issue or a collective volume. Peer reviewers are inquisitorial, judgemental and often rather nasty because that has no consequences. Editors, in contrast, are unselfishly generous because they have a relationship to maintain with the authors, which may even be of friendship. Being nasty to strangers is easy, being nasty to authors you know and respect is totally out of the question. This is why when a peer reviewer insisted that my co-editor and I eliminated one chapter from the last book I have published, we both dug in our heels and kept the chapter. The reviewer didn't know our author at all, but we had been working with them closely for two years and one person's anonymous criticism was not going to spoil our work as editors.

For me, trying to pass blind peer reviewing has become a truly masochistic exercise. Every time I send an article for review, I do so convinced that this time I've got it right and my work will be accepted. Then I get the same reports again and again. This might indicate that I need to alter my methodology. Yet, the same methodology seems fine to the journals who have accepted my work for publication. I must conclude, then, that the fault does not lie in my approach but in the lack of consensus among reviewers for, I insist, there is no publicly available set of rules to determine what makes an article worth publishing. Each journal has its own sets of questions to guide reviewers, but, for instance, this time I was criticized for briefly quoting from some authors or simply referencing them, when this is standard usage. You interact in depth with some sources, but others are there to provide context, background, or support for a minor point. We work by imitation, and I see many other authors using quotations in that sense, so why should I be criticized for that? Where is, I insist, the rule book?

When working on book chapters, matters are very different because we work with an editor and on the basis of a proposal. The last book chapter I have published is "The Posthuman Patriarchal Villain as Absolute Military Threat:

Winston Duarte in *The Expanse* Novel Series” for the volume [\*Wars We Never Fought: Armed Conflict in Speculative Fiction\*](#), edited by Matthew B. Hill and Leigha H. McReynolds (Bloomsbury, 2025. 177-193). This is an article I’m very proud of because Matt, whom I have never met, did a great job of improving my first draft, for which I’m very grateful. He showed appreciation for my work from the beginning, which helped me to gain confidence and see that the changes he proposed, mainly aimed at clarifying and strengthening my argumentation, were always constructive. I don’t know if this is true, but both Matt and Leigha claimed to have enjoyed my chapter, and that matters to me very much. We all need a friendly slap on the back to go on, not the furious anonymous attacks from blind peer reviewers. I’m puzzled, I insist, because I wrote the chapter I’ve mentioned with the same methodology and earnestness as the rejected paper. I’m the same person, why would I want to write trash one day and a good article the next one?

I’ve already come across the criticism that it’s ‘easier’ to publish books or book chapters than articles in journals because peer reviewing is non-existent or less demanding in the former. For me, it’s a matter of perspective. Books are peer reviewed at the proposal stage and before publication, and I find that at this latter stage reviewers are hardly in a position to ask the publishers to throw a book under contract into the bin basket. It may have happened, but not that I know of. A person who writes a book has made a mighty effort and, in my experience, reviewers usually give the go ahead, with few changes. With collective books, as noted, it’s in the interest of the editor(s) to make sure that all chapters are solid. In journals, to be honest, I’m not sure what the function of the editor is, beyond coordinating peer reviewing. When I get rejection messages, the editor never tells me ‘I agree with the reviewers’ or ‘despite the reviews, I want to publish your article’. Once, when I got a very unfair negative report and I complained about its unnecessary cruelty, the editor coolly pointed out that the reviewer was a very much respected scholar. That journal editor was on the reviewer’s side, which will never happen in an edited book.

I have three other articles ‘doing the rounds’, as I say, and I’m bracing myself for yet another batch of rejections. This, of course, won’t stop me from publishing my work online (watch me!), much more so seeing how anyway the internet is flooded with papers from open-access journals with a cavalier attitude not just to peer reviewing but to basic proofreading (you all know what I mean). As for writing more articles, we’ll see. After (almost) 35 years as an academic, I don’t feel much inclined to subject myself to so much masochism and have no enticement to do so (beyond the *sexenio*...). We’re usually praised for the quantity, rather than the quality of our articles, and while I’ve been congratulated on my books, nobody has ever congratulated me on one of my journal articles.

Ok, that’s enough venting. I have a book to edit...

## 28 June 2026 / SELECTING A CORPUS FOR A BOOK (ON PATRIOGRAPHY): HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

If I write here about the books I'm preparing, I eventually shame myself into writing them, so here we go. I had been reading for a while for a book on secondary characters in the European novel when it struck me that the committee judging the research exercises (or 'sexenios') might consider it Comparative Literature rather than English Studies. That might not be the case, but I've put it aside for the time being. Other interests have led me to explore instead memoirs by sons about their fathers (what Thomas Couser called patriography, including also daughters) and this is the topic of my next book. I'd like to comment today specifically on the difficulties of choosing a corpus, as I'm finishing that process.

I wrote my '*tesina de doctorado*' (the equivalent of a long MA dissertation) about *one* film adaptation, exhaustively comparing the novel, the screenplay and the film. I could have added half a dozen more adaptations and this would have resulted in a PhD dissertation. However, I decided to explore all the adaptations of *Frankenstein*, and finally convinced myself that I actually wanted to write about the representation of monstrosity, following a Cultural Studies methodology. Since neither of my two supervisors stopped me, my corpus grew to 75 novels and 150 films. Why so many? Mainly because that's what I found in the works on genre fiction that I read. I feared that I could say nothing minimally coherent without exploring a vast corpus, which also delayed the process of writing. It was also great fun to read novels and watch films with monsters!

This obstinate encyclopaedic approach almost kills my capacity to write books. I spent a decade, while I wrote articles and chapters in collective books, wondering how to approach the figure of the villain for a book. I had the longest imaginable list of all kinds of fictions. In despair, I asked my former PhD supervisor, Andrew Monnickendam, for help, and he suggested that I focused on what was less explored. This was post-WWII British fiction and that is the direction that my [book](#) took. The corpus selection was quite easy, but since some of the nine chapters dealt with trilogies and series, I ended up writing about forty novels.

That was also, more or less, the number of documentaries I covered in my following [book](#), after another long list (from checking the Oscars and the Sundance awards), and watching about 100 films. At least, films are not as time-consuming as novels! For my [book](#) on men and science fiction, my list of authors and novels extended to about 200 volumes. Reading Wikipedia pages and reviews, I whittled it down to the 17 authors and 50 novels I finally covered, in 15 chapters. Again, you might think this is crazy, but I was dealing with the whole field of male-authored 21<sup>st</sup> century SF, and from that point of view my corpus is tiny. Also, I loved (almost) all the novels I worked on!

The biggest conundrum in that book was how to choose a *representative* corpus, without the presence of certain writers feeling tokenistic. I have the same problem again. My predecessor in this type of study, Stephen Mansfield, examined in his monograph *Australian Patriography: How Sons Write Fathers in Contemporary Life Writing* (2014), a book apparently based on his PhD dissertation, just seven works by men born in the post-WWII period: Richard Freadman's *Shadow of Doubt* (2003), Raimond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father*

(1998), Robert Gray's *The Land I Came Through Last* (2008), John Hughes's *The Idea of Home* (2004), and Peter Rose's *Rose Boys* (2001). They are well-chosen examples, 'most of which,' he explains, 'have had a significant popularity and/or impact over the last fifteen years.' This seems reasonable for one nation and one decade (1998-2008) but I have much more ground to cover. I have considered focusing only on the UK, as I did for the villains, since US patriography is generally better known, but I got curious about Ireland, Canada and even New Zealand (and Palestine!), without totally dismissing Australia, and now I have the problem of how to narrow down my sprawling corpus and justify it.

Add to this that one thing is selecting a corpus, and another doing the homework so that reviewers don't call you illiterate. The word count for an academic book is 80000-120000 words, most commonly 100000, and I find that it cannot be split into more than 15 chapters. That is an inescapable fact. Yet, the list of pre-21<sup>st</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup>-century memoirs I've put together runs to about 60 books. Some I have started and abandoned, seeing they were not leading in an interesting direction. Others I read a long time ago and must now re-read. Some I've read with great expectations only to be disappointed. I've left some that I've loved, but can't compete with other more prominent titles, for a couple of separate articles.

I want to share all those books with you, so I'll begin with the list of the pre-21<sup>st</sup> century volumes, the beginnings of English-language patriography. It is often argued that modern patriography begins with Edmund Gosse's account of his teen rebellion in *Father and Son* (1907), but I set the origins in J.S. Mill's *Autobiography* (1873). I have no room to comment here on each book, so please, trust me when I say that those two and the following are all great books:

- 1967 JR Ackerley, *My Father and Myself* (UK)
- 1968 Frank O'Connor, *My Father's Son* (IR)
- 1969 Thomas Blackburn, *A Clip of Steel* (UK)
- 1979 Geoffrey Wolff, *The Duke of Deception* (USA)
- 1982 Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (USA)
- 1986 Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (USA)
- 1989 Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life* (US); yes, this is Geoffrey Wolff's brother
- 1991 Philip Roth, *Patrimony: A True Story* (USA)
- 1993 Blake Morrison, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (UK)
- 1993 Farley Mowat, *My Father's Son* (CAN)
- 1994 Clark Blaise, *I Had A Father: A Post-modern Autobiography* (US/CAN)
- 1995 Stephen Humphrey Bogart (& Gary Provost), *Bogart: In Search of My Father* (USA)
- 1995 Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (USA)
- 1996 Calvin Trillin, *Messages from My Father: A Memoir* (USA)
- 1998 Christopher Dickey, *Summer of Deliverance: A Memoir of Father and Son* (USA)

If you had to choose just one, please read Calvin Trillin's slim volume, no doubt one of the most beautiful books ever written by a son about his father. This

generous Ukrainian-born man was a migrant who knew that he would not succeed as a man in the USA but that his son might, and so he did all he could to help him.

Now the 21<sup>st</sup> century volumes. Very conveniently, my book was to begin with a chapter on Martin Amis's *Experience* (2000), but I just can't write well about works I don't like much and, although I must deal with Amis, there will be no chapter on him. I'm not saying yet which ones I have chosen for the book, only that 5 are British, 5 US and the other 5 Canadian, Irish, Australian and from New Zealand (or Palestine?). All had been published before I started reading for my book, but I knew my selection could not be complete without Tom Junod's memoir, published a few months ago, and I was right. I learned about Junod when writing my book [chapter](#) on Fred Rogers, and I've been waiting for his book since then. It was worth the wait. Here's the list (I have crossed out the year of the books I won't be dealing with, not because they are flawed in any way but because they don't fit my projected book):

- 2000 Martin Amis, *Experience* (UK)
- 2000 Carlo Gébler, *Father & I: A Memoir* (IR); by Edna O'Brien's son
- 2004 Alexander Waugh, *Fathers and Sons: The Autobiography of a Family* (UK); by Evelyn Waugh's grandson
- 2004 Hanif Kureishi, *My Ear at His Heart* (UK)
- 2004 Tim Russert, *Big Russ & Me: Father and Son: Lessons of Life* (USA)
- 2005 William Childress, *An Ozark Odyssey: The Journey of a Father and Son* (USA)
- 2005 Gary Imlach, *My Father and Other Working-Class Football Heroes* (UK)
- 2005 JR Moehringer, *The Tender Bar* (USA)
- 2006 Christopher Lemmon, *A Twist of Lemmon: A Tribute to My Father* (USA)
- 2007 Mark Kurzem, *The Mascot: Unraveling the Mystery of My Jewish Father's Nazi Boyhood* (AUS)
- 2008 Ariel Sabar, *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for His Jewish Past in Kurdish Iraq* (USA)
- 2008 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Beautiful Struggle: A Memoir* (USA)
- 2008 Augusten Burroughs, *A Wolf at the Table* (USA)
- 2008 Sathnam Sanghera, *The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton* (UK)
- 2008 Andrew X Pham, *The Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars* (USA-VIETNAM)
- 2009 Dan Hill, *I Am My Father's Son* (CAN)
- 2010 Michael Frayn, *My Father's Fortune* (UK)
- 2010 Luke Jennings, *Blood Knots: Of Fathers, Friendship and Fishing* (UK)
- 2011 John Darnton, *Almost a Family: A Memoir* (USA)
- 2011 JJ Lee, *The Measure of a Man: The Story of a Father, a Son, and a Suit* (CAN)
- 2013 Pat Conroy, *The Death of Santini: The Story of a Father and His Son* (USA)
- 2013 Michael Hainey, *After Visiting Friends: A Son's Story* (USA)
- 2014 Alan Cumming, *Not My Father's Son: A Memoir* (UK)
- 2015 Jonathan Kozol, *The Theft of Memory: Losing My father, One Day at a Time* (USA)
- 2016 Adam Dudding, *My Father's Island: A Memoir* (NZ)

2016 Ralph Webster, *A Smile in One Eye: a Tear in the Other* (USA)  
 2016 Chris Offutt, *My Father, the Pornographer* (USA)  
 2016 Hisham Matar, *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* (USA-Libyan)  
 2016 Juan F. Thompson, *Stories I Tell Myself: Growing Up with Hunter S. Thompson* (USA)  
 2017 Thomas G. Couser, *Letter to My Father: A Memoir* (USA)  
 2017 Daniel Mendelsohn, *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son, and an Epic* (USA)  
 2017 Sam Miller, *Fathers* (UK)  
 2018 Larry Elder, *Dear Father, Dear Son / A Lot Like Me: A Father and Son's Journey to Reconciliation* (USA)  
 2018 David Giffels, *Furnishing Eternity: A Father, a Son, a Coffin, and a Measure of Life* (USA)  
 2019 Brian Harvey, *Sea Trial: Sailing After My Father* (CAN)  
 2019 David Crow, *The Pale-Faced Lie: A True Story* (USA)  
 2019 David Slucki, *Sing This at My Funeral: A Memoir of Fathers and Sons* (USA)  
 2020 Charlie Gilmour, *Featherhood: A Memoir of Two Fathers and a Magpie* (UK)  
 2022 Rajah Shehade, *We Could Have Been Friends, My Father and I: A Palestinian Memoir* (PAL)  
 2022 Nabil Ayers, *My Life in the Sunshine: Searching for My Father and Discovering My Family* (USA)  
 2023 Richard Flannagan, *Question 7* (AUS)  
 2023 Jonathan Raban, *Father and Son: A Memoir* (UK)  
 2026 Tom Junod, *In the Days of My Youth I Was Told What It Means to Be a Man: A Memoir* (USA)

If you want to read just one, my recommendation is Charlie Gilmour's beautifully written *Featherhood*. If you're a Pink Floyd fan, you'll be pleased to know that Charlie's loving stepfather is David Gilmour.

An extensive reading list demands investing money, which comes from my pocket. Although my Department can buy some books for me, they are the property of the library, and I can't deface them with my notes. The Ministry, as far as I know, helps research groups to pay for trips to conferences, but not for books. So, I have bought many of the books second-hand, and employed, as you may imagine, other resources. Writing books is, in the end, an expensive hobby and sales of the published volumes are so low that royalties do not cover the cost. That's a matter for another post.

By the way, I forgot to announce my thesis. This is that patriography by sons reflects like no other literary or audiovisual genre the process by which masculinity changes from one generation to another: what is appreciated, what is just tolerated, what is rejected. That's why I'm reading all those many books, and learning plenty! I'll keep you posted.

## 5 July 2026 / AFTER A SEMINAR: SOME REFLECTIONS ON DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS (IN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND CULTURE)

I've had the honour of being a guest speaker at the seventh doctoral seminar that [AEDEAN](#) (Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-norteamericanos) has organized at the Universidad de Cantabria, in Santander. This has been held less than one month after the conference organized by [ASYRAS](#) (Association of Young Researchers on Anglophone Studies), at the University of Alicante. It's certainly an advantage for our doctoral students here in Spain to have the chance to network through two different but perfectly compatible associations and events, and also to present their work in public. It's very good training for the viva.

The three-day AEDEAN seminar consists of two plenary sessions (one for Literature/Culture and one for Language/Linguistics), and a series of panels in which students present their dissertations in just ten minutes. They receive then feedback from the audience and from the two conveners, who were this time AEDEAN's President Rosario Arias, and Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas from the University of Granada. Feeling I was there to do more than deliver a guest lecture and avoiding the temptation of roaming all over lovely Santander, I participated in the panels as an informal third convener.

Typically, the 35 attendees were divided into separate panels for Literature/Culture and Language/Linguistics, which makes sense, but somehow contributes to perpetuating the growing distance between the two areas. At least, we were all together for the Q&A session, Juan Antonio Cutillas's fine plenary lecture on upper-class accents in British screen fiction (focused on *The Crown*) and my own lecture, on the importance of publishing books. We were also together for the in-memoriam session commemorating Javier Ruano García, of the Universidad de Salamanca, who sadly passed away unexpectedly a few weeks ago. Javier's many merits are difficult to sum up, but, among others, he was a key figure in the AEDEAN board and ASYRAS's founder. The seminar also included a public reading at Santander's beautiful Librería Gil to present Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas's new poetry volume [Oxford Circus](#).

I'm not offering here a formal report of the seminar but an overview, based on my personal impressions about the presentations. I attended eighteen in total by students mainly at the early stages of their dissertations, with just a few near the end of the process, all in the area of Literature and Culture. I won't be naming any names, except for Marcelo Fornari López (Universitat de Barcelona), whose dissertation *Interstitial Selves: Autotheory in Contemporary US Literature*, soon to be submitted, sounded simply fascinating. Other dissertations were also very interesting, but not as complete (yet), which is why I won't mention them. Instead, I'd like to raise some issues. They are all interconnected and it's hard to begin specifically with one, but it must be done, so, here we go.

I'll begin with the supervisors. Rosario Arias reminded the students that they had to name their supervisors in their presentations, as most didn't mention them, but this is not what concerns me. In an ideal situation, when a student mentions a topic for a possible PhD dissertation to a teacher in the Department where said student has taken a BA or MA degree, the honest thing to do is to put

them in touch with a specialist, in whatever university this person might work. If, to give an example, a student asks me to supervise a dissertation on neo-Victorian fiction, I should put this person in contact with Rosario Arias, who happens to be the main specialist in the area. The student should, then, register at the Universidad de Málaga, where she works, and present their dissertation there.

Instead, we tend to accept supervisions even when the projected dissertation is not really in our area, because it's convenient for either our CV or our Department's doctoral programme. It might well be that the student won't or can't register in another university, for lack of funding since, as we know, grants are very scarce. We tend to stay local. Yet, if a non-specialist supervisor ends up selecting for the viva board members who are not specialists, either, we end up passing doctoral dissertations that a true specialist would not validate. In this way, we lower the standards.

I was truly astonished by the self-assurance with which most PhD students handle sophisticated theorization, and I've been wondering what kind of training they have received at MA level, since many were first-year students. Either that, or other supervisors have methods I don't know to train beginners efficiently in the complexities of theorization. Now, the problem with this approach is that the PhD students I heard didn't seem to have a similarly strong grasp of the primary sources they must explore. It seems to me that PhD students know much more about theory than about English Literature itself, and that the theory they are familiar with is not necessarily literary theory but a variety of theorizations from Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, Environmentalism, and even science (in Medical Humanities).

This result of this spotty knowledge of literature is a series of problems connected with the corpus: a) an insistence on studying ultra-canonical old and newer names, while many past and present authors are neglected; b) theses that study a very limited corpus, from one to three texts, because, with all the theory this is sufficient to fill in 300 pages, regardless of whether the scant number of texts is sufficient to make a solid point; c) theoretical frameworks so specific that there are actually very few primary sources corresponding to them. The dissertations with the more substantial corpus presented another singular problem: in those cases, the list of novels, for it's always novels, was too heterogeneous in terms of place and period to cohere.

There's another matter I've also come across today in a brilliant MA dissertation that I must soon judge as a board member: the approach is impeccably professional but not necessarily passionate. I don't doubt that all doctoral students I saw at the seminar are in love with their topics, but a certain something I can't even begin to define was often missing. I'm here wildly speculating, but it might have to do with the supervisor's excessive intervention; or, alternatively, the student's excessive dependence on the supervisor. Perhaps, even, difficulties to grasp what a dissertation entails for lack of familiarity with any of the finished products (meaning that many doctoral students have not read any theses and it's not clear to them what they are). It could also be just a matter of still imperfect communication skills. The older students sounded much more passionate, the younger more detached, as if playing the role expected from them, rather than performing in a more personal way. Perhaps, and that's

something to consider, they were just nervous, even though all the sessions were relaxed and friendly (at least, that was the intention).

As a mentoring convener, I gave feedback practically to everyone, a task facilitated by the fact that most dissertations dealt with contemporary fiction, with a few focused on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a territory I'm also familiar with. Perhaps this is something to comment on, too. In my Department, as I see from the yearly doctoral workshops, we also train PhD students in the period between the Middle Ages and the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and I assume this is the case in many other Departments. Yet, to judge from the projects present at Santander, most PhD students prefer contemporary texts. I was happy to see areas such as speculative fiction (SF, dystopia, horror), animated children's films, digital life writing, and so on represented, but I wonder what the whole map of current research in English Studies in Spain looks like. There are hundreds of dissertations being written in the two main areas of Literature/Culture and Language/Linguistics and, perhaps, what I've seen in Santander is not as representative as it might seem of our area.

The last issue I want to raise is our difficulties to establish genealogies of knowledge, though I'm possibly misusing the term. This issue connects, too, with the difficulties of choosing the most adequate tutors. Let me explain what I mean. At this point, in 2026, a good number of Spanish scholars in English Studies have solid careers with many international publications. Yet, all the students presented theoretical frameworks in which none of us was mentioned. It might be our fault for always suggesting that they seek referents abroad, which totally undermines what we do as scholars. We've taught PhD students to avoid presenting themselves as our disciples, as if this was too provincial or amateur.

We're also neglectful of our achievements. In one case, a student presented a project very similar to a dissertation by a person I know, already a tenured teacher. This dissertation was mentioned in the bibliography, but not as a major referent. When I asked the student about this matter, she told me that the dissertation is not even online, much less published as a book, which is what I told the author she should do a few years ago, when she passed her examination for tenure (I was on the board). This omission or neglect means that the student presenting her PhD in the seminar ran the risk of replicating work that her predecessor had already done. This should never happen.

My impression, to sum up, was very good. I wasn't expected to attend all the panels, but the fact is that I did, and with much pleasure. It was wonderful to see so many talented young persons, and I hope with all my heart not only that they eventually submit their dissertations and get cum laude, but also that the Spanish university makes room for them. As an English Studies specialist, I'm proud of the enormous collective effort we have made in Spain, particularly in the last three decades, to pull ourselves by our bootstraps and to become much better tutors of our young PhD students than ours were. They are the future of the area and our true, most brilliant legacy.

### 13 July 2026 / GETTING RID OF BA DISSERTATIONS AND VINDICATING ORAL EXAMS: A PROPOSAL

In my Department's recent meeting about the last batch of BA (or, as we call them, TFG) dissertations we have assessed, we already considered the possibility of suppressing them in the near future. This is not for us to decide, but we work on the assumption that, sooner or later, our school or UAB, if not all universities in Spain, will have to rethink the use of BA dissertations. Perhaps all universities around the world.

As you may imagine, the debate has everything to do with the LLM's, beginning with ChatGPT, but also other tools that have integrated AI, such as Grammarly, a favourite among our second-language students. A problem we failed to anticipate was posed by the method used by one undergrad student, who drafted the whole dissertation independently, but then used ChatGPT to improve the text, sentence by sentence. This could be acceptable in a situation in which a non-native author needs to make sure a text is fully intelligible to native speakers of English. The problem is that we judge the actual command of English of each student, and, in that sense, using ChatGPT or any AI enhanced editing tool is incorrect. You might argue that Word also integrates tools that automatically correct spelling and grammar, but these have very minor capacities in comparison to what generative AI can do.

The use of AI becomes immediately apparent during the oral presentation, or viva, of the dissertation when students' English is often seen not to correspond to the much better written TFG. This is why we have proposed two innovations. One is that the mark awarded for the proposal be based 50% on the written text and 50% on the ensuing tutorial with the supervisor. We have a tutorial anyway based on the proposal, so why not use it formally for assessment? The other innovation will consist of using a bigger part of the 30-minute viva for a conversation between the student on the board on the dissertation. ChatGPT appears to be linked to Canva, so that it can automatically generate a PowerPoint (well, the Canva equivalent) and the text accompanying it, which students then memorise. ChatGPT cannot answer questions addressed by the board to the student during the viva, so we'll ask some more instead of the couple which we usually ask.

Asking students politely to refrain from using LLMs does not work. Threats about failing their dissertation don't work, either. They have simply internalised that using gen-AI is like using any other tool we authorise, like those embedded in Word. I never tire of explaining that if you're going to be judged by your possession of certain skills, anything that gives a false impression is cheating. If a third party takes an exam instead of the student, this would undoubtedly amount to cheating. The same applies to elements that function in practise like substitutes capable of doing the full job, or that correct or edit text, applying skills the student lacks. This is also cheating, like being on drugs to boost your athletic performance.

BA/TFG dissertations were introduced in Spain with the European-style degrees in 2008/9. The old style *Licenciatura* already included a final '*tesina*', of which the newer TFG is descended. Indeed, many universities still keep the older

label. In my times as an undergrad, writing a *tesina* was not required, and though I can't find information about their suppression, my guess is that they were gone when the Spanish university became massified in the early 1980s with the access of working-class students. This is, precisely, a factor that was absurdly ignored when the new grades were planned, for it was taken for granted that all departments would have sufficient staff to tutor all the final-year students. As far as I recall, we haven't hired any external tutors for the only purpose of supervising TFGs, though I know from one of my ex-students that this is a habitual practise in the UK.

The supposition behind the TFG dissertation is that the huge investment of teaching hours it entails is necessary because that TFG validates the skills students have acquired throughout the degree. In the particular case of the Humanities, and specifically of English Literature, these skills can be perfectly mimicked by ChatGPT and other LLMs. This is very unfortunate because there is no other set of skills we can teach, and if we don't teach those we use our profession will die. To use an analogy outside my field, suppose AI-controlled robots become so skilled at surgery that they surpassed human surgeons in all areas. Suppose next that all schools of Medicine stop training human surgeons to operate on patients. In just one generation, all the expertise accumulated might be lost. So, yes, computers can now write BA, MA or PhD dissertations but if we go down that road, the loss for humanity will be incommensurable.

What should we do then to safeguard intellectual skills? Well, to begin with, we should suppress the requirement that *all* students write BA dissertations. The obligation to write them is an open invitation for the weaker students to cheat and is resulting not only in a waste of valuable teaching time, but also in a system of student policing ten times worse than the always awkward monitoring of plagiarising. I insist that being a teacher is like being married to a spouse that will inevitably try to cheat, which is not a good basis for any marriage. Let's keep the TFG dissertation only for the better type of student, who won't cheat, and let's introduce a pseudo-honours system. Let's ask for a B+/A average mark before issuing invitations for students to write a TFG dissertation. There is always the chance that even good students will cheat, but this is less likely, as they're proud of their achievements. Of course, this possibility can never be entirely ruled out. At least, with fewer undergrads to tutor, we should save precious teaching hours. Finding and encouraging these honours (and honourable) students, besides, is of extreme importance, as they will become the true heirs of the skills we value so much.

Almost two decades after the introduction of the skills-based degrees, we're beginning to notice that serious mistakes were made. One of the major ones was the cavalier disregard of knowledge and the downplaying of any skills connected to memory and memorising. The main (wrong) assumption then made was that if a student learns to do something, knowledge will follow, which is not necessarily the case. To give an example, students are being taught to identify the main periods and authors of English literature, a key skill in our degree, but there is no requirement for them to study, memorise, and remember them. It's perfectly possible for a student with good grades in, say, Romantic Literature, which we teach in the second year, not to remember who Byron was two years later, by the end of the degree. Grading is based on textual commentary, applying

close reading, and, while this is positive, it's not always conducive to acquiring information or knowledge. In the tutorials I had last June with my fourth-year students, many had problems to remember which authors and books they had written about only a few months before.

The only way to make sure students don't use AI, have good communication skills, and possess a sound knowledge of the content we teach them is an oral exam on each of the main areas of the degree (Language/Linguistics, Literature/Culture). In short, I'm proposing that we use the Italian system for a final exam based on the whole degree instead of the TFG dissertation. Among all European Union countries, the Italians have the largest experience of examining students orally; we should perhaps consult with them and see what advantages and disadvantages follow from that method. For the final oral exam students should revise the basics of all subjects taken and train themselves to answer questions about them. As for the required resources, we are already using many teaching hours for the TFG viva that could be used for the oral exam. The time students employ to prepare their TFG should be invested in studying. Honours students should also take my proposed oral exam and write the dissertation as an extra, though I see this needs fine-tuning (you might make TFG dissertations mandatory to take an MA degree, for instance).

I can imagine the resistance to this proposal, but I don't see how else we can guarantee that the students actually possess the skills we certify in their diploma. I also believe that we need to be more realistic about the skills we teach. We train students as if all of them should eventually write a doctoral dissertation, which is like teaching kids to dance assuming their target must be the Bolshoi. This doesn't make sense. Our aim should be to make sure that students with an academic inclination are given the help to develop the necessary skills, while we make all of them proficient learners capable of teaching others at secondary-school level, or develop professional careers other than academia.

This might sound old school, but texts cannot be read adequately, much less critically, if information is not retained and knowledge accrued. My view is that in the concern to boost academic skills and avoid memorising 'useless' information, we have undermined the methods for students to acquire actual knowledge. With the current TFG, we test them on key academic skills, but, to be honest, I don't see how those apply to real life, nor what they mean without some basic knowledge. I don't mean that English Studies graduates should be able to recite the complete list of Dickens's novels or Shakespeare's plays, but they should be able to discuss how English Literature has evolved and is currently evolving, rather than write 20 pages commenting on just one text. Even in the best-case scenario, that of the brilliant student who gets an A+ for their TFG, this doesn't mean that they *know* much about English Studies.

BA/TFG dissertations are on the way out, that much is clear. In the meantime, we need to think of alternatives that help us to correct the direction taken back in 2008/9. I've supervised many brilliant TFG dissertations, and I'm very proud to have helped a number of BA students to publish their work in the journal I co-edit, *Hélice*. Yet, I also know that less gifted students do not really consolidate their academic skills by writing a TFG and use up, I'm sorry to be so blunt, plenty of teaching time which could be better used. As a second-language degree, we attach an excessive importance to writing, to the detriment of

communication skills, which are hardly practised in our crowded classes and are only assessed in the instrumental language subjects and in the TFG viva, for about 30 minutes. Testing students orally in all subjects is just impossible, but it doesn't make sense to trust the testing of all their academic skills to written language. We could get by doing this until 2022 when ChatGPT erupted to change higher education perhaps for ever. Let's talk to the Italian academics and start considering how to test our English Studies students on their actual communication skills, and in their own English.

## 20 July 2026 / THE DEATH OF UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENTS: TWO VARIANTS

The Department I work for, the English and German Department of UAB, is very confused about its own history, meaning that we don't really know where we come from. We have not bothered so far to keep track of our main events and their chronological progression, and I don't know whether we're typical or atypical in this. The Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona was founded on 6 June 1968 and the school, the Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres, on 27 July of the same year. Yet, there is no information online about when the Departament was founded and digging deeper means bothering a number of persons who might or might not have the relevant information. This is worrying. A new emeritus professor has promised that she will soon do this deep digging, but we'll see, as she's still very active in her research.

I became a UAB student in September 1986 and learned then that the Department was originally part of EUTI (Escuela Universitaria de Traducción e Interpretación), which is now the Facultat de Traducció. In the early 1980s, the Department of English and German became attached to the Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres. Legislation passed in 1983 (Ley de Reforma Universitaria or LRU) regulated the old-style 'cátedras' and introduced departments, I assume that in imitation of Anglo-American universities. Before that, full professors ('catedráticos') had total control over the funding of their areas and the persons employed to teach the corresponding subjects.

This was a pyramidal, hierarchical system and I can see that the transition towards a more democratic, managerial system, must have been very hard, particularly considering that it put an end to the Spanish state's direct intervention in the universities, made fully autonomous by the 1983 decree (passed by Felipe González's Socialist Government). My university was, in fact, together with Madrid's own Autónoma, an early experiment of that type. The doctoral dissertation by Leonardo Sánchez Ferrer, *Políticas de reforma universitaria en España: 1983-1993* (1996), from Madrid's Autónoma, argued that the deployment of the new departments found a number of important obstacles, and I can imagine that these came mainly from old-style professors who didn't want to lose their power. I'm beginning to understand a few things in my own Department.

I'm writing about all this because last week, in the final Department meeting of this academic year, it was announced that the law passed in 2023 (LOSU, Ley

Orgánica del Sistema Universitario) makes it compulsory for universities to reduce the number of departments, in principle to minimise expenses connected with their administration, though this target seems quite dubious. In our case, it seems we might be fused into a single Modern Languages and Literatures Department, together with the French, Spanish and Catalan Departments. This is no shock since our administration units merged a few years ago. The new legislation, however, comes at a time when UAB departments have existed for decades and after the diverse heads have made great efforts to consolidate their identities. This new legal measure has been received with very little enthusiasm and in the case of the Catalan Department with the threat of open revolt, for evident nationalist reasons.

In a similar process, the Universitat de Barcelona decided a few years ago to maintain the departments of Filologia Catalana i Lingüística General and of Filologia Hispànica, Teoria de la Literatura i Comunicació, while creating a Frankensteinian creature called the Departament de Llengües i Literatures Modernes i d'Estudis Anglesos, which gathers together sections for Slavic, French, Italian, Galician, Portuguese, German and English Studies. Being bigger than the others by far, the English Studies Department forced UB to include its name in the new macro-department before becoming a section.

At UAB we have just a Department of French, but they lost their BA degree a few years ago, after trying to keep it alive jointly with UB, for lack of student demand. UAB's French teachers are mostly employed in the combined degree English and French Studies, and in the School of Translation, which, apparently, they want to join. No new staff have been hired or given tenure since the loss of the BA degree, which means that when the extant staff retires, in a maximum of ten years, the French Department will be gone. Unless, that is, it's lost earlier in the supposed fusion with other modern language departments, perhaps with English.

Departments, in short, die in two ways (or three, if we contemplate sudden defunding). A department can gradually disappear when the degrees it offers are suppressed for lack of demand and the staff eventually retires, or it can be merged into a bigger unit. The French Department is about to go through the two processes simultaneously, while we, the English and German Department, a very solid component of the school's degrees offer, might cease being an independent unit. Or not. In fact, the law calls for mergers but offers the chance to establish sections with their own head within the new department's admin structure. Nobody among my colleagues, nor I, understands how this makes admin cheaper. It's not clear yet, besides, how the heads of the new-style departments will be chosen, nor who will have the right to vote in the meetings. What is at stake is not just a matter of identity or scholarly coherence, but jobs. Everyone is very much afraid that decisions about their section's positions will be made by persons outside it, and this is indeed a main concern.

There is an associated matter I want to mention today. We award yearly a prize to the best BA dissertations in each area, Language and Linguistics, and Literature and Culture. When we started doing this (I can't remember exactly when), we decided to name the award after two members of our staff we lost too soon, respectively, Mia Victori and Guillermina Cenoz. Mia passed away fifteen years ago, when she was only 45, and Guillermina around twenty years ago, when

she was 63. I was asked to improvise a brief speech for the award ceremony about who they were because the dissertations coordinator is a younger teacher who, besides, comes from another university. She didn't know either of them.

When I looked at the audience, I realized I was one of the few people in the room who could remember Mia and Guillermina, and said so, feeling quite disheartened that this was the case. Each in their style, Mia and Guillermina had a very positive influence on our Department: Mia with her commitment and passion as a researcher (she was into Applied Linguistics), and her friendliness; Guillermina with her infinite kindness and qualities for mentorship (she introduced theatre and short fiction in our Department). The key question here is who are we as a collective if we can't remember the persons we have lost? We are young enough as a Department to be able to remember them all, but at the same time I became aware last week that we have recently undergone quite a generational shift, with staff coming from other universities, that needs to be addressed. Urgently, before we are merged with other departments and are demoted to being a mere section.

You might think that perhaps I'm the most suitable person to write a history of the Department, being so interested in this topic and having now reached the ripe age of 60. I've been, besides, attached to the Department, as a student and a teacher, for 40 years. However, I have decided not to volunteer because there is a part of that history which, if told candidly, might be too painful. A few days ago I met after many years a friend from secondary school. When I described how the Department was run when I first became a teacher, she asked whether I had done anything to make it better. I'm proud to say that I have, indeed, but what I went through can't be integrated into an 'official' version of the Department's history, this is why I will never write it. All that is a matter for posts I'm not ready to write yet, but that I know I will have to write one day.

Spanish university departments were born in 1983 and LOSU has decreed fifty years later that some should die to be reborn as mere sections; we'll see how we cope with that unwanted metamorphosis. This and the generational changes make it imperative to start writing our histories, though I wonder who the best historians can be. Not I, for sure, though I have enjoyed learning today a little bit about where our departments come from... before they go for good.

## 27 July 2026 / OUR PLACE IN HISTORY: REFLEXIONS ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE UNIVERSITY (IN SPAIN)

In my last post I cited the doctoral dissertation by Leonardo Sánchez Ferrer, currently of the Universidad de Burgos, [\*Políticas de reforma universitaria en España: 1983-1993\*](#) (1996). I downloaded it to take a quick look, and ended up devouring it, given its informative, reader-friendly tone. PhD dissertations are not a genre I tend to read unless I'm part of an examining board, which will give you an idea of how well researched and written Sánchez Ferrer's work is. To my surprise, he submitted his dissertation the same year I submitted mine, and here's the irony: if I had read his thesis then, I would have understood much better my

own situation and the hardships I faced in the following years. At least, I have now a valuable instrument to make sense of circumstances I believed to be unique to my Departament, but that turn out to be part of a much larger national pattern.

Because I have turned 60 and been attached to UAB for 40 years (35 as a teacher), I find myself going through my academic biography with a certain intensity this summer. Last week I met, after many years, one of my best friends from my secondary-school days, and we both agreed that the education we received at the Instituto Menéndez Pelayo was simply outstanding. I was actually depressed for the first two years of my university education (at the Universitat de Barcelona), owing to the much lower standards and the incredibly crowded classrooms. My quite desperate transfer to UAB in 1986-7 was the right decision, as I found there younger staff, smaller groups, and a degree of personal attention I could only dream of at UB, but that I had already enjoyed at Menéndez.

What I didn't know, but Sánchez Ferrer has taught me, is that the period when I was a secondary-school student and an undergrad student (1980-1991) corresponded to a very complicated process to try to update Spanish higher education for the new democratic, post-Franco era. I did know, but only superficially, without the necessary details.

Children and younger teens are not aware of how they are situated in history, and that includes the development of the legislation that shapes the institutions of education. You go to school and are taught a series of contents articulated by the legislation and political background of the time, which in my case was conditioned by the final years of Franco's regime (I started primary school in 1970, when the Ley General de Educación was passed, after the turmoil of the 1968-9 protests). The difference between the school I attended, Rius i Taulet in Barcelona, and my secondary school was abysmal, as corresponds to the immense differences between Franco's Spain and the democratic consolidation of the 1980s under Felipe González's governments (1982-1996).

I didn't really know who Franco was until he died in 1975 (I was then 9) and it might be said that I first became aware of my position as an individual caught in national history in the exciting following years, between the referendum for democracy (15 December 1976) and the first democratic elections (15 June 1977). I was a mere child, but it was practically impossible to ignore what was going on, though I realized as an adult that I had missed much of the violence of those times. History, however, caught up definitely with me (or I with it), with the attempted coup of 23 February 1981 and, most definitely, with the History lessons by my admired secondary-school teacher Joan Roig i Vicens.

I can't remember exactly when, I must have been 16 or 17, but one day I realized thanks to Prof. Roig that History was not only about the past but about what was going on in the present. My personal choices were, therefore, conditioned by the historical reality, whether I wanted it or not. As a girl from a working-class family, this meant that I could enjoy educational opportunities unheard of for my mother, including attending university. She, in contrast, was always frustrated because her primary-school teachers offered to help her prepare for secondary education, and perhaps a profession like nursing or medicine, but my sexist grandfather decided that she should start working (at 14!) and help to pay for her younger brother's education. Those were other times indeed.

After reading Sánchez Ferrer's thesis, I am confirmed in my own view, formed in the years when I was head of Department, that university professors always tend towards anarchy. I mean by this that, as all education ministers have eventually found out, one thing is passing legislation and quite another implementing it with the full acquiescence of the professors. This is the result of an intrinsic tension that can't be solved. As teachers and researchers, we must show much personal initiative. Besides, except for classes and meetings, we can organize our time as we prefer. This means that most of us have fiercely independent personalities that are not easy to manage either individually or as a collective.

The system implemented in Spain in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in imitation of Napoleonic policies, tried to modernize the university by making all the centres (just 12) respond to the Ministry's authority. At the same time, it relied on full professors (*catedráticos*) who were given immense amounts of power, and who made sure to infiltrate the political institutions to hinder any decision they didn't like. This system, with its strong hierarchy, remained in place basically until the publication in 1969 by the Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia of the Libro Blanco, on which the 1970 law was based. A major change introduced by this law was the reorganization of the *cátedras* into departments headed by full professors, which means that the same hierarchical structures were perpetuated, but in bigger institutions. Sánchez Ferrer basically claims that the Ley General de Educación failed because of the reluctance of the universities to implement it; in plain words, because of the resistance of the *catedráticos* to give up any of their privileges.

This situation of stagnation, complicated by the first massification of the Spanish university (when middle-class young persons, mostly women, broke the monopoly of the upper classes) and the irregular hiring of thousands of underqualified teachers, lasted until 1983 when the Ley de Reforma Universitaria was swiftly passed, thanks to the Socialist majority in the Parliament and the Senate, after the failure to pass the 1980 Ley de Autonomía Universitaria.

That was the year I started secondary school, which means that by the time I started the Licenciatura in Filología Inglesa, in 1984, I found a very different university, with far more consolidated departments, actual independence from external control (well, more or less), and a declared willingness to improve research through international contacts and collaboration. I owe to Minister José María Maravall, and his collaborators Joaquín Arango, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, and Emilio Lamo de Espinosa, the legal foundations that enabled me to convince my far from privileged family that a university education was feasible.

Sánchez Ferrer, however, has opened my eyes to the far less savoury consequences of how each university applied (or twisted) the new 1983 legislation to hire young staff. The law rescued the older title 'ayudante de cátedra' (a sort of 'professor's aid') to create new full-time positions with a light teaching load, aimed at having younger staff write their PhD dissertation. In fact, I and many others were hired as 'ayudantes' to teach full-time. Sink or swim...

My first job title was Ayudante de Escuela Universitaria, even though I worked for a Facultad, a higher institution than a Escuela. I was asked to teach two annual subjects (one instrumental language, the other Literature) with no previous training of any kind and, as far as I recall, no supervision, except that I had to teach the same programme as the other teachers. I was an Ayudante in

diverse categories for nine years, and then a full-time associate for two more. This might seem very convenient in comparison to the subsequent extinction of full-time temporary contracts, but the fact is that for eleven years I taught as many subjects as a tenured teacher for half the pay (and wrote my dissertation, in three years).

Sánchez Ferrer argues that the young staff who, like me, worked under these conditions, could not offer quality teaching, being untrained as teachers and inexperienced as researchers. We were perhaps awful teachers, I don't know, but we certainly compensated any deficiencies with enthusiasm and with many new ideas. These came from our collective effort not to replicate the often appalling methodologies we had suffered as students. Still, we were very much exploited, while stupidly believing that the university loved us for our academic distinction.

Sánchez Ferrer gives a particularly good account of how this exploitation created a moral debt with us, which resulted in the endogamic system lasting in Spain since the 1980s. I didn't know that *catedráticos* often moved from one university to the other, with the result that Madrid and Barcelona attracted the best and nothing much happened in the smaller provincial universities. With the new law, mobility was reduced to make sure all universities had quality staff, while at the same time international mobility for research purposes was encouraged, if not made mandatory by the universities. Hence, my year in Scotland.

Sánchez Ferrer does not comment on this, but the lack of mobility also perpetuated the power of certain *catedráticos*, who could be despotic, over the Departments and drastically diminished the chances of escaping them. I said that university teachers tend towards anarchy, and the most anarchic ones were always the old-style *catedráticos*, who knew nothing could force them to change their ways. Besides, they were given priority to head Departments over tenured teachers in inferior categories (*titulares*). When I became head of Department, still a recent *titular*, I broke the implicit rule by which the *catedráticos* ruled in practice, telling each successive head what to do. And I paid quite a high price for it. Now it is generally understood that *catedrático* is a personal title connected mainly with the capacity to conduct research and lead teams, not to dictate how a Department must be run.

I'll stop here or will end up writing a book instead of a post. My deepest thanks, once more, to Sánchez Ferrer for illuminating a central period in the history of the Spanish university, and for helping me to understand how I stand within it. I never intended this post to be only about me and my personal circumstances, but to send an invitation to other university teachers to consider how their careers are conditioned by political decisions leading to specific legislation.

Have a lovely summer break, if the heat allows it. I'll meet you again in September!

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