



# International Fiction Book Club

Javier Marías – *Berta Isla*

Monday 19 October, 6.30pm by Zoom

The October of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 19 October at 6.30pm.

We discussed *Berta Isla* by Javier Marías, translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa, and published in paperback and eBook by Penguin Books.

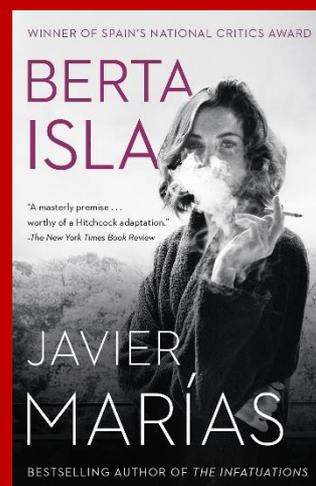
## About the Book

*For a while, she wasn't sure that her husband was her husband. Sometimes she thought he was, and sometimes not ...*

*Berta Isla* is the story of a spy's wife and the way in which we can only ever know a fraction of even those closest to us.

'The most subtle and gifted writer in contemporary Spanish literature' *Boston Globe*

'No one else, anywhere, is writing quite like this'  
*Daily Telegraph*



We chose *Berta Isla* because it is one of the leading Spanish novelist's most enjoyable and accessible novels. At first sight oblique, it is concerned to get at the truth of experience by looking at life as though at the back of the weave rather than the pattern in the carpet.

If you haven't read anything by Javier Marías yet, we hope you will try *Berta Isla*. We were delighted Margaret Jull Costa, one of the great translators of contemporary Portuguese and Spanish fiction, could join us for the discussion.

**Sam** Margaret, welcome. It's great that you could join us for this discussion. *[In the event, the internet connection let us down so the discussion took place by email instead. BS]*

**Stephen** Marías uses the spy story to explore much bigger existential themes than such stories usually do. In translating a piece of work, and focusing on the individual words and phrases and narrative arc, how does the translator also keep an eye on the bigger picture as well as the minutiae so that the translation achieves the author's original intention? And how hard is it to find an equivalent English idiom for Marías's slow, reflective Spanish so that nothing is lost in translation?

**Margaret JC** I think it's the minutiae that make a book what it is, that give it its tone. I do need to read through my translation many times – nine or ten – before I feel that I entirely inhabit the text and that it

**'I do read my translations many times – nine or ten – before I feel I entirely inhabit the text'**

reads as a convincing text in its own right and not just a kind of dull, personalityless simulacrum. As to the long sentences, I genuinely don't find them that difficult. I actually prefer long sentences to short. In fact, with a writer who uses short sentences, I often feel a temptation to run two short sentences together! I love Henry James and Joseph Conrad and have translated a lot of nineteenth-century authors, particularly the wonderful Portuguese novelist, Eça de Queiroz, as well as that other lover of long sentences, Saramago, so I'm pretty used to them, which really aren't anathema to the English language, which is so splendidly flexible.

**Erika** There is a Proustian quality, it seems to me, to Marías's long and convoluted sentences – would you agree? And they must sometimes be difficult to bring into English. Did the author highlight any such intention, or would you in the case of noticing such stylistic similarities refer to the English translation of Proust (or other relevant work) to inspire your translation? In those cases do you then discuss adjustments or changes to the original text with the author?



Margaret Jull Costa

**Margaret JC** I hope I've answered the first part of your question above. As to a Proustian quality, I have to say that Proust's sentences are even longer than Javier's, but like Javier's sentences (and the long sentence is the norm in his work), they take you on a whole thought process, with all its ins and out, digressions, ifs and buts. As I said in answer to Stephen's question, I don't find this a problem and so, no, I don't discuss that with Javier.

**Jo** I was in awe of the work you must have put into translating those enormously complex and long sentences. Were you tempted to (or maybe even with some of them, did you) break them down into a few smaller, more manageable sentences, to make them more accessible to the reader, or would that have been a step too far in changing the style of the book and going against Marías's intentions?

**Margaret JC** As I've said, I don't consider the long sentences to be a problem, and certainly wouldn't break them down into shorter ones. Would a translator of Proust do that? It's so much part of Javier's style. I presume you ask this because you found the sentences hard work. I hope not, but...

**Alex** How far can a translator ‘interfere’ with or ‘intervene’ in the text?

**Margaret JC** The translator is really trying to channel the original language into English without interfering or intervening, but just moving from one language to another is, inevitably, both an interference and an intervention. But that’s the paradox of translation really, in that a translation aims to be a mirror image of the original text, but since it has to pass into another language and through the consciousness and sensibility of another person (i.e. the translator), that’s impossible, and perhaps not even desirable. Those annoying concepts of the translator as traitor (*traduttore traditore*) or that what’s lost in translation is the poetry, don’t seem to apply to actors or musicians, maybe because a translation is fixed there on the page and can’t change depending on the day and time of the performance. Musicians, actors and translators are all interpreters of someone else’s notes or words, and every performance, rendition, will be different.

**‘Those annoying concepts of the translator as traitor ... don’t seem to apply to actors or musicians’**

**Margaret M** As a translator myself and as an enthusiast for period slang, could you tell us if there were any particularly tricky expressions to translate that involved finding appropriate historical equivalents?

**Margaret JC** Nice to meet a fellow translator! Nothing springs to mind from *Berta Isla*, but I do remember having to come up with an English equivalent for the rap song (or is it hip-hop?!) improvised by the splendidly idiotic De la Garza in *Your Face Tomorrow III*. And in *A Heart So White*, I did consult my ex-teacher at Leeds, Loreto Todd, about producing a convincing English equivalent of Cuban patois.



Javier Marías.  
Photograph © Klaus Holsting

**Kate** The author speaks good English and has worked as a translator himself. Did he have a role in the translation at all? And if so, was that helpful or did it pose an additional challenge for you?

**Margaret JC** The first Javier novel I translated was *All Souls* in 1991, and Javier did read through the whole of that translation and send me his comments on it. This was a rather daunting experience, as you can imagine, but he has left me alone since, and I know that he does trust me to do a good job.

**Sam** Marías has worked as a literary translator and many of his protagonists are translators. Translation is a major theme in his works, in which his narrators muse on the nuances of English and Spanish words and expressions and ponder how to render them in one language or the other. Does Marías’s sensitivity to the subtleties of language affect how you approach the task of translating his work?

**Margaret JC** His sensitivity to linguistic nuances and subtleties is really what makes him such a fascinating writer and is what lies behind those long sentences, which are often dissections of thought processes and, inevitably, of the language used in putting those processes into words. That sensitivity is precisely what makes his work so enthralling to translate, challenging me to be equally sensitive and subtle.

**Bill** A translator is often a writer's closest reader and you have translated a great many of Javier Marías's novels. I wondered, could you tell us why you think Marías has devised the oblique, slow-moving style he adopted in the trilogy *Your Face Tomorrow* and also, in a more relaxed way, in *Berta Isla*. What advantages does it bring him? I was thinking, for example, that another novelist might have played the scene in which Ruiz Kindelán threatens Berta by threatening her baby for tension and drama, but Marías does not. He seems to be after something else.

**Margaret JC** I agree that a good translation is the closest possible reading of a text, and that is what I love about translation. As to why Javier adopted this style of writing, you would have to ask him that, but when you look at the authors he has translated – Sir Thomas Browne, Conrad, Faulkner, Nabokov, Sterne – that might give a clue! As to the scene you mention, I can't honestly say what Javier was wanting to achieve – a translator may need to get inside a writer's head, but not to that extent! What he does achieve, I think, without the drama, is a sense of Berta's almost incredulous response to the Kindelans' cool, casual approach to making such a threat.

**Bill** Well, sadly, that's all we have time for. I'm so sorry the internet let us down this time, but we are extremely grateful to you for answering the questions we would have asked had all gone as planned! And good luck with whatever you translate next.

*Margaret Jull Costa's prize-winning translations include works by Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa and Nobel Prize-winning novelist José Saramago, Basque novelist and poet Bernado Atxaga, and Spanish novelists Carmen Martín Gaité, Alberto Barrer Tyszka and Javier Marías.*

*Sam O'Donoghue is Lecturer in Spanish in the Department of Languages and Cultures (DeLC) at Lancaster University and, with Litfest Trustee Bill Swainson, is convenor of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club.*

## Next Meeting

The next book to be discussed at the Litfest International Fiction Book Club on **Monday 16 November at 6.30pm** is *A Whole Life* by Robert Seethaler, translated from the German by Charlotte Collins, and published in paperback and eBook by Picador.

'For all its gentleness a very powerful book' **Jim Crace**

'A lovely contemplation of a life in solitude' **Ian McEwan**

'Charlotte Collins' translation is a great triumph' **Sunday Telegraph**

We will be joined by Charlotte Collins for this session.

If you would like to register to join the Litfest International Fiction Book club, please email Bill Swainson at [litfestbill@gmail.com](mailto:litfestbill@gmail.com).

