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< <http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/author/merce-ibarz> >

Mercè Ibarz



In the City of Works

Enric Sòria

Mercè Ibarz (Saidí, 1954) is author, journalist and cultural critic. She has published works of fiction and biographies and writes regularly on art and photography for the

newspaper La Vanguardia.

A la ciutat en obres by Mercè Ibarz appears to be, within her writing as a whole, the prelude to new music, both in the variety of themes and the registers it presents and in its revealing a new direction within the author's literary evolution.

This latter assertion will probably require me to clarify a few points. Mercè Ibarz is a seasoned writer. Since her long-ago essay on the history of ETA in 1981, she has produced numerous articles and essays in a wide range of publications and among her books are a biography of [Mercè Rodoreda](#) (1991, 1997) and a notable study (1999) on *Tierra sin pan* (Land without Bread), Luis Buñuel's

hair-raising film. To stick to her works of fiction, in 1993 she published *La terra retirada* (The Withdrawn Land), a book that is both attractive and difficult to pigeonhole but that is somewhere between evocation, a story and a report, in which she describes the past and present of the village where she was born, Saidí, in the Baix Cinca region, in the frontier area between Aragon and Catalonia. This is a bit of the country that is often both overlooked and looked down upon, which has undergone an accelerated transformation of its world that has not always been entirely in its best interests and which is now in a disoriented limbo between the market economy and unproductive subsidy, a marginalised, isolated, yet nonetheless, beautiful and vital land. The intermittent trips back home to this withdrawn country by the protagonist-narrator are at once journeys back to the past, which she evokes very vividly, and confrontation with the difficulties and worries of the present, with a feeling that is somewhere between uncertainty and coming to terms with the present, which she sometimes resolves by words of denunciation. She pulls it all together in language that is rich, enormously precise and full of flavour, which to me, at least, is very close and familiar.

The story, understood as the unravelling of the vicissitudes of individual or collective experience, with both crux and denouement, is reduced to a minimum of precise details: characters that become presences, words and fears, a few illustrative anecdotes, all of it suspended in the void or parenthesis that life now is (in the eyes of the main character) in this nucleus or centre of her world of memory, which has become, in everyone's eyes, a periphery, an excluded land.

Mercè Ibarz's second work of fiction, *La palmera de blat* (The Palm Tree of Wheat) (1995) retrieved the same characters, places, circumstances and protagonist-narrator, but now with a less evocative and more determinedly narrative tone. After this, there was a lull for seven years during which she did not publish any work of fiction, but this silence was broken this year with her *A la ciutat en obres*. It is not as if there is no continuity between the earlier works and this one. Even at first glance, some relationships are evident. First of all, she establishes a highly articulated and defined first-person voice. This is narrative that is drawn from the standpoint of the most exigent individuality, even though

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the writer's gaze attentively captures (and denounces when necessary, as I have said) the changes in collective life. But her gaze, in these books is the distant one of a witness. A witness who is, so to speak, a participant at a distance. Withdrawn too, in a certain sense. It is not the flow of a free consciousness, like Joyce's, but the voice of somebody who assiduously observes, takes note and reflects on what she has seen. Both in her early books and in some of the stories of *A la ciutat en obres*, it is no coincidence that the voice that speaks to us is that of somebody who works as a journalist.

Yet this, the constitution of a voice that reflects on the collective experience, but from its own marked individuality, is not the only thing the three books have in common: there is also, for example, the importance of the landscape - rural or urban, it doesn't matter - in its own right as a space where life is lived, and also for its symbolic value as the motor of evocations and reflections, somewhere between limitless and what is to come next, as a sign of another underlying or imaginable reality. In the detailed wanderings of Mercè Ibarz's characters, there is something of the initiatory journey, as if visible landscapes were the key that would open up the way for us into the invisible, though much more real and significant, landscapes, interior lands, this personal, labile territory, between sleep and wakefulness, where people's dreams, memories and hopes come to nest. It is a realm, this inner land, that we can only enter one by one, but it is a land that seeks to be shared. After all, it might happen that this land also has its own life, in some sense, and what it has to say to us we can only listen to with all our attention and intuition wide awake.

I should like to add, to digress for a moment, that this Catalan-speaking hinterland in Aragon, which is the visible landscape of Mercè Ibarz's first two fictional works, with its harsh climate, its great now-polluted rivers and its ploughed physiognomy, constitutes a world of extraordinary richness and it endows this country that flows towards the sea with internal variety and depth, qualities that cannot be underrated by any criteria. This is a land that deserves a literature that makes it abidingly inhabitable. The fiction of [Jesús Moncada](#) is an example of the validity of landscape as literary source. Mercè Ibarz explicitly cites a great novel by Ramón J. Sender, *Crónica del alba* (*Chronicle of Dawn*), the first and finest volume of which is devoted to a landscape that is very close to hers and, in some sense, symmetrical: the part of Aragon that borders Catalan-speaking territory. Ibarz does well to cite this book, which probably has the most vivid pages in Spanish literature that are concerned with the rural world, its ghosts and its fascinations. Between Sender's borderland area of Aragon that adjoins the Catalan-speaking territory in *Crónica del alba* and *Réquiem por un campesino español* (*Réquiem for a Spanish Peasant*) and the withdrawn land of Mercè Ibarz there is a proximity that is not merely topographical, and it alerts us to the literary and, at bottom, experiential possibilities of this all too often forgotten world.

Among the features that bind Mercè Ibarz's three books, and by no means the least important, there is also her naturalness of tone, the well-crafted ease of expression of the voice that speaks to us in all three of them in an expressive, clear, never over-elaborate, tone, with its measured doses of irony and its way of portraying suggestive or revealing details with meticulous precision. Notable, too, are certain continuities of detail, for example the treatment of old people, who appear in Mercè Ibarz's narrative as figures that are at once strange and admired, resistant witnesses of harsher times that were also, in some sense, more human. Repositories of experience and also of fortitude, her old people are self-oriented and, in their way, wise: they are presences that bring order to the world, to the next one, like the proud old people of *La terra retirada* and the strong blind woman in "Fragilitat de les parets" (Fragility of Walls), or to this world, at least, like the old woman with the street dog in "El contracte" (The Contract), who acquires the immobile, and somehow majestic, relief of a soothing totem.

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But the differences between *A la ciutat en obres* and the previous books also leap off the pages. First, is Ibarz's determined adherence to a genre, the medium-sized story which, in Catalan and for many years, was unjustly considered as a secondary form of fiction in comparison with the slightly tyrannical pre-eminence of the novel. Each story in this book is perfectly delimited, framed in an anecdote that, through details and suggestions, some explicit and some veiled, keeps revealing its true sense, like a kind of symbolic, artistic foundation of a category. Now, her pleasure in narration is more wide-ranging and more intensely experienced, the prose is more vivid, the nuances she captures more fleeting. Her articulation of observations, reflections, anecdotes, apparently fortuitous circumstances - sketched in a single graphic sentence - memories and connections, is much more consistent, precisely because, at first sight, the touch is lighter. References to social or political problems are more acute, subtler, and melancholy is sifted through the labyrinth of meetings and misunderstandings, personalised and turned into a story. Hence the authenticity of this voice that moves through life and analyses it is greatly enhanced.

Then again there is the setting. The title prepares us for that. The stories of *A la ciutat en obres* are set in Barcelona, the city that is being constantly made and unmade. The city of memory and of oblivion. The misleading city of reencounters and metamorphoses. We know it, or we think we know it, its streets, avenues, houses, offices, its Modernist greenhouse and Sant Antoni market. This is the Barcelona of the Eixample middle class, which has forgotten the Modernist dream and which both ignores and transforms the city. Mercè Ibarz's stories are like three sips of this ocean. Like three initiatory explorations.

A la ciutat en obres is a collection, which is not very voluminous but very dense, of three stories set in this territory of citizens: "En un mar vegetal" (In a Vegetable Sea), "Fragilitat de les parets" and "El contracte". There is no need for us to think that the protagonist-narrator is the same in the three stories. She might be three different figures with a lot of points in common. In all three, she is an active woman, young but already endowed with a considerable baggage of memories, which sometimes go back to a youthful anti-Franco struggle and the febrile marasmus full of expectations that was the Transition period that followed. She lives in the Eixample neighbourhood, not far, it seems, from the Passeig de Sant Joan. The first story calls it the "The graceless avenue leading to the Ciutadella [Citadel] Park" [in contrast with the graceful Passeig de Gràcia on the other side of the neighbourhood]. In the third story she has to zigzag over a lot of ground to get to the Sant Antoni market. In "Fragilitat de les parets", she lives in an old house, also in the Eixample, a house of abrupt and disproportionate dimensions and with poorly done, but consoling, hand-crafted decorative touches. In this story, the house is being restored, at least on the outside and the workers go about their task behind the scaffolding that is shrouded in camouflage-like fine green mesh. In this story, "The contracte", the protagonist is a woman married to a man who is intelligent and ironic, like herself. The woman in the second story, "Fragilitat de les parets", apparently lives alone. As far as we can make out, she once shared her flat with a woman friend who has now died. We also know the jobs of the neighbours with whom she is in contact, but not her own. The women of the first and third stories are, so to speak, freelance journalists. And the variable insecurity of their trade both stimulates and bothers them.

The second story deals, *inter alia*, with the cautious birth of friendship among neighbours, precisely because the walls are fragile, like the insulating limits of individuality. Salt damp is part of their lives. The first and third stories, however, tell us about friendship over time, about lost friends and those that are hard to recover. It describes the errors that are multiplied with time and that become misunderstandings or that strange mixture of inextricably united betrayals and loyalties that, whether we like it or not, friendship becomes over time. Then there are the difficulties of reencounters, which

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require their own rituals, the establishment of renewed complicity in order to revive the old friendship. But friendship can also be a vivid memory, a focus that illuminates the vast screen of the past. The most joyful pages of the book, the ones that transmit happiness, are those that evoke shared memories of friendship.

In all three stories we submerge ourselves in a world of subtle contacts between images, evocations and symbols, somewhere between reflection and association in a world that has room for myth and also daydreams. In order to understand how Mercè Ibarz brings together in her stories reality and dreams, fantasy, memory and premonition, it may help to pay special attention to the first one, "En un mar vegetal", in which the familiar settings of Barcelona are transformed by a kind of process of associations that, little by little, reveal themselves as a cosmopolitan territory that is at once familiar and exotic, glimpsed as if through a dream-like veil, so that Barcelona might be at once Natal, the Brazilian city of dawns, or Filipino rice paddies, or a landscape that is closer to Braque's cubism than to the Olot School [of painters], or a symbolic space like that of sixteenth-century maps, "when the cartographers populated unknown lands with their drawings of fierce lions", and where wakefulness and dreams are interpenetrated. [?]

Again, in the universe Mercè Ibarz explores in this book, many doors have been left open as if on to paths leading through narrative consisting of details and reflection. Perhaps the buildings have their own music, as words indubitably do. These stories, then, have the feeling of a prelude or overture. They form part of a new piece while at the same time hinting at its existence. Mercè Ibarz has written that whether words do or do not make sense at first sight, they serve as a guide if the narrator is competent. In this case she is, without a doubt. Words and their subtle associations are what guide the author, and us with her, through this curious changing labyrinth, ours and everyone's, that is the city. Mercè Ibarz draws for us one of its possible maps.

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A selection of texts

Text



WEB: Una relat de Febre de carrer

Transcripció d'un fragment de la narració "D'aquest costat del claustre". A Vilaweb Lletres (12/09/2005) .

<http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/lletres/lilibre?llibre=1513586>



WEB: Notes sobre el documental

Article de Mercè Ibarz a la revista de comunicació audiovisual *Formats*.

<http://www.iua.upf.es/formats/formats1/d02ct.htm>



PDF: Entrevista

Reflexions de Mercè Ibarz a la revista *Paper de vidre*.

http://www.paperdevidre.net/pdf_pdv/n39.pdf



WEB: A story from Febre de carrer (Street Fever)

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Transcription of a fragment of the story "D'aquest costat del claustre" (From This Side of the Cloister). At Vilaweb Lletres (12/9/05) .

<http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/lletres/lletra?llibre=1513586>



WEB: Notes on the Documentary

Article by Mercè Ibarz in the audiovisual communications review *Formats*.

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Bio-bibliography

Biography



WEB: A la Hiperenciclopèdia

http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0257899



WEB: Fitxa al "Qui és qui a les lletres catalanes"

<http://cultura.gencat.net/ilc/peq/FitxaAutors.asp?nom1=Ibarz&cerca2=Cercar&quinform=form1&NRegistre=1&idregistre=8704>



WEB: Mercè Ibarz a l'Institut Ramon Llull

Nota biogràfica dins l'espai dedicat a la Fira Internacional del Llibre de Guadalajara 2004.

http://fil04.llull.cat/cat/02protagonistes/Ibarz_MerceESP.shtm



WEB: The author in the Who's Who of Catalan Literature

<http://cultura.gencat.net/ilc/peq/FitxaAutorsuk.asp?nom1=Ibarz&cercauk2=Search&quinform=form1&NRegistre=1&idregistre=8704>

Bibliography



WEB: Què hi ha a la Biblioteca de Catalunya

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Ibarz+Merc%C3%A8&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D



WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques universitàries catalanes (CCUC)

http://ccuc.cbuc.cat/search*cat/a?SEARCH=Ibarz+Merc%C3%A8&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=23



WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques públiques

<http://argus.biblioteques.gencat.cat/iii/encore/search/C|S|Ibarz+Merc%C3%A8%7COrighresult|U1?lang=cat&suite=pearl>



WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres

<http://www.llibres.cat/ca/detall-autor/ibarz-merce>



WEB: Articles de l'autora (Traces)

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<http://traces.uab.cat/search?f=author&p=Ibarz%20Merc%C3%A8&sc=1&ln=ca>



WEB: Articles sobre l'autora (Traces)

http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=ca&p=Ibarz%20Merc%C3%A8&f=keyword&action_search=Cerca&c=Traces+%3A+base+de+dades+de+lengua+i+literatura+catalanes&sf=&so=d&rm=&rg=10&sc=1&of=hb



WEB: Works in the Biblioteca de Catalunya

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*eng/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Ibarz+Merc%C3%A8&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D



WEB: The author in The European Library

<http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/search/%28%22creator%22+all+%22Ibarz+merc%C3%A8%22%29.query>



WEB: The author in the Congress Library (US)

<http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>



WEB: The author in the COPAC Catalogue (UK)

<http://copac.ac.uk/search?&au=Merc%C3%A8+Ibarz>

Comments on the author

Criticism



WEB: Pàgina de l'AELC

Inclou biografia, premis i publicacions.
<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/ibarzm/>



WEB: L'autora al Corpus Literari Ciutat de Barcelona

Biografia, enllaços i transcripció d'articles sobre Ibarz.
http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=1292



WEB: Mercè Ibarz. Guia de lectura

Elaborada per Francesc Gil i M. Josep Simó (SEDEC), l'any 1999, i revisada i ampliada per Rosa Clar l'any 2008.
<http://www20.gencat.cat/docs/CulturaDepartament/ILC/Documents/Arxiu/Merce%20Ibarzfeb09.PDF>



WEB: Mercè Ibarz on the Lletra website in Catalan

Including more resources and reading suggestions.
<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/noms/merceibarz/index.html>



WEB: AELC Page

Includes biography, prizes and publications.
<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/ibarzm/>

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WEB: Mercè Ibarz in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus

Biography, links and a transcription of articles on this author.

http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=1292



WEB: Mercè Ibarz. A Reading Guide

Prepared by Francesc Gil and M. Josep Simó (SEDEC), in 1999.

http://www.xtec.es/lic/centre/professorat/prof_lleng_gust.htm

Miscellaneous



PDF: "Vides literàries"

Emili Teixidor s'apropa a Mercè Ibarz com a biògrafa de Mercè Rodoreda, al diari *Avui* (03/03/05).

<http://www.traces.uab.es/tracesbd/avui/av03748.pdf>



WEB: "Furiosa abeja literaria"

Ressenya, a *El País*, de l'estudi *Mercè Rodoreda. Exilio y deseo*, de Mercè Ibarz (09/04/05).

http://www.elpais.es/articulo/elpbabens/20050409elpbabens_5/Tes/Furiosa%20abeja%20literaria



WEB: Assaigs i reportatges

Recull d'articles de Mercè Ibarz sobre cinema, art i literatura.

<http://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/autor?codigo=122835>



PDF: "Vides literàries" [Literary Lives]

Emili Teixidor discusses Mercè Ibarz as the biographer of Mercè Rodoreda, in the newspaper *Avui* (03/03/05).

<http://www.traces.uab.es/tracesbd/avui/av03748.pdf>



WEB: "Furiosa abeja literaria" (Furious Literary Bee)

Review in *El País*, of the study *Mercè Rodoreda. Exilio y deseo* (Mercè Rodoreda. Exile and Desire), by Mercè Ibarz (9/4/05).

http://www.elpais.com/articulo/ensayo/Furiosa/abeja/literaria/elpbabens/20050409elpbabens_5/Tes



WEB: Essays and Reports

A collection of articles by Mercè Ibarz on cinema, art and literature.

<http://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/autor?codigo=122835>

Comments



PDF: Equipo Crónica, el pop incómodo.

Text sobre l'equip Crònica.

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/uploads/lletra/noms/merceibarz/pdf/incomodo.pdf>



WEB: Entrevista amb Mercè Ibarz

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< <http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/author/merce-ibarz> >

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http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/noticia?p_idcmp=1517195



PDF: "Exploro una Barcelona oculta...

... i quotidiana, supervivent". Lourdes Domínguez entrevista l'autora, a *l'Avui* (11/07/02). Parlen sobre el llibre *A la ciutat en obres* i el procés d'escriptura.

<http://www.traces.uab.es/tracesbd/avui/av04707a.pdf>



WEB: Mercè Ibarz a Catalunya Ràdio

L'autora parla de *A la ciutat en obres*, al programa Ex-Libris de Catalunya Ràdio.

http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p_id=18849



WEB: Interview with Mercè Ibarz

On the occasion of the publication of the book of short stories *Febre de carrer*, on *Vilaweb* (14/9/05).

http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/noticia?p_idcmp=1517195



PDF: "Exploro una Barcelona oculta... (I Explore a Secret Barcelona, ?)

... i quotidiana, supervivent" (? an everyday, survivor Barcelona). Lourdes Domínguez interviews the author in *Avui* (11/7/02). They discuss the book *A la ciutat en obres* (In the City of Works) and the process of writing..

<http://www.traces.uab.es/tracesbd/avui/av04707a.pdf>

The author 2.0

Blogs of blogs



WEB: La blogosfera diu...

http://blogsearch.google.es/blogsearch?hl=ca&ie=UTF-8&q=Mercè+Ibarz&lr=lang_ca



WEB: The blogosphere says...

http://blogsearch.google.es/blogsearch?hl=ca&ie=UTF-8&q=Mercè+Ibarz&lr=lang_ca
