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## Julià de Jòdar



### Julià de Jòdar

Manel Ollé

Julià de Jòdar first became known in 1997 with *The Angel of the Second Death*, the first volume of a trilogy entitled *Fate and the Shadows*, which received wide critical acclaim and was awarded the Premi Ciutat de Barcelona ("City of Barcelona Prize"). *The Man who Loved Natàlia Vidal* won the distinguished Prudenci Bertrana Prize in 2003.

Julià de Jòdar (Badalona, 1942), has a degree in Chemical Engineering (1964) and another in Modern and Contemporary History (1973). He studied theatre at the Adrià Gual School of Dramatic Art, where he worked in Ricard Salvat's group in different productions, including Salvador Espriu's *Ronda de mort a Sinera* (*Death around Sinera*, 1965). Since then, he has worked in publishing. He was actively engaged in the anti-Franco struggle in the student movement, in radical trade-unionism and with the pro-independence Catalan left. In 1984, he unsuccessfully presented a two-hundred-page novel, *La pira dels dies* (*The Pyre of the Days*), for the Josep Pla Prize. The book was not published but would subsequently serve as a quarry of germinal material that Julià de Jòdar would mine, re-write and probe ever-deeper over twenty years so that it expanded and crystallised into the more than a thousand pages of the trilogy *L'atzar i les ombres* (*Chance and Shadows*), which is indubitably one of the landmarks in contemporary Catalan fiction.

The trilogy *L'atzar i les ombres* explores the process of the shaping of moral conscience in a boy, Gabriel Caballero, the son of immigrants who are living in a neighbourhood that spreads out from the crossroads of Guifré and Cervantes streets in Badalona (both of which really exist in the Gorg neighbourhood), in the wake of three bloody events that agitated the calm, stagnant waters of peace in Franco's times. Along with text-book realism, the book also displays a hybridisation of genres, including dreams, apparitions, sub-genres, songs, symbols and psychoanalytic introspection. With his roots in the wellspring of oral history "the boy who took over from Aunt Eulògia", Gabriel Caballero, protagonist and narrator, plagued and challenged by conflicting versions and documents, explores the memories and mirages of an adolescent who invents himself as he is being moulded by the family, the neighbourhood, the factory and his specific experience of History with a capital H. We witness the moral apprenticeship of someone who is writing a trilogy in which he explores the paths of imagination and memory. As the trilogy advances, we see how all this casts light on a process where, starting out from biographical data, someone can construct fiction that at once contradicts itself and aspires to forge literary truths.

Julià de Jòdar writes as both myth-maker and analyst, superimposing and bringing into dialogue different senses in this series of novels concerning acquisition of knowledge but that also constitute social frescos. His novels combine his ability to tap into the heartbeat of post-war Badalona and an exigent and radical approach to writing that draws on the techniques and resources of modernity (fragmentation, polyphony, fiction-truth dialectics, poetics, the monologue, the essay, the viewpoint) as well-honed instruments of knowledge and of verbal restitution of complexity faced with simplifying discourse. It is at this felicitous fulcrum that the evocative and cognitive powers of writing are balanced with the unusual result of a first-rate novelistic project.

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The first part of the trilogy, *L'àngel de la segona mort* (*The Angel of the Second Death*) (1997) takes the reader back to 1956, focussing on the mythologized resonance of the revolutionary violence of the Civil War in a fourteen-year-old adolescent who lives with his working-class family, consisting of a castrating mother and a father who is just a ghostly presence. Even as the memory of a baker who died at the hands of an anarchist firing squad still resounds, a new bloody event shows the precariousness of the post-war order with all its renunciations and betrayals in the depths of a defeated neighbourhood. The world here depicted is dispossessed, governed by the laws of repressed desires, obliteration of memory and moral paucity, tacit pacts and taboos. In its distance-runner's prose, the novel reflects on the guilt, goodness and truth.

The second part of the trilogy, *El trànsit de les fades* (*The Movement of Fairies*) (2001), describes the awakening of desire through a sentimental drama. The choral centre-stage is ceded to a group of embittered, desired or ill-loved women who evoke the moral climate of the closing years of the 1950s. Julià de Jòdar returns to his characters, milieus and settings of *L'àngel de la segona mort*, situating the events of this book in Easter Week 1957, a year after the first part of the trilogy ends. In this second volume, Gabriel Caballero is an adolescent who is starting to feel the pangs of desire. The plot is the pretext for bringing together the different strands of the story in a tangle that has the feel of a newspaper serial: there is a murder, as in the previous novel, but in this case it is closer to a crime of passion with vaudeville touches. To speak of desire at the end of the 1950s is more or less the same as it is to speak of illusion and repression. In Julià de Jòdar's novel, the women live under the moral hypocrisy of the Franco regime with a little more dignity and a little more ability to project their desires than the men, who being closer to the official discourse do not find it easy to escape the duplicitous strictures of the time.

The reader is quickly apprised of the details of the crime but Julià de Jòdar's concern is to escort us through the weft and warp of the tragedy's plot. With careful doses of historical references, grounding them in the specific geographical area of the neighbourhood, he steers clear of the diorama effect and schematisation: the amalgam of names and surnames of different origins is stylised in a filtered image without documentary pretensions. The period of the IMF-sponsored *Stabilisation Plan* is reconstructed in miniature through three or four micro-climates -the grocer's shop, with the warehouse and its back room, the dressmakers' workshop, the textile factory and the itinerant theatre company- playing with the evocative power of a number of highly specific references: certain objects, twists in the story, projections of the imaginary of the period, famous actors, songs ? The elements of popular culture, material culture, the dialects of the time and specific, real-world places, are employed with artistic aims. He achieves both the precision of the miniature and projection with a discourse and symbolic mesh that tend to universalise his references.

Besides bringing the reader back to relive an abolished time, Julià de Jòdar knowingly puts his novel on the line with every sentence he writes, enveloping the events with a prose that has its own distinctive texture, a chronicler's prose that conveys other voices while making them its own in a polyphony of nuances. He gives sense to the story by dispensing information that offers clues and unfolds the events, processing them while, at the same time, looking at them from a distance and bestowing on them the appropriate accent. The chronicler is, in brief, the inventor of the verbal and imaginary worlds that we see him traverse.

The trilogy *L'atzar i les ombres* closes with *El metall impur* (*Impure Metal*) (2005), winner of the Sant Jordi Prize. In this third episode, we see Gabriel Caballero leaving his neighbourhood and heading for the big city to enter the masculine world of work. The novel describes a rite of passage, a baptism of fire in a suburban foundry, located near the mouth of the Besós River. The book fuses the mythical

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power of an alchemist's crucible and the hyper-real, burnt-out clarity of oxides and metallic dust motes drifting in the air of an industrial site where dangerous rituals are being enacted. This initiatory progress of Gabriel Caballero towards the adult world launches the voyage of a narrative hull that sparkles with suggestions and that is conveyed by means of a range of registers that go from dialogues full of vivacity with insertions of verses and popular sayings, through to an essay-style digressive prose that incorporates into a discourse, which is essentially literary, all kinds of historical, psychological and anthropological details without slowing the thrust of the story with leaden detail but rather enriching its moral texture. This is the crafting of literature with ideas that move, assail the characters and give rise to situations that always end up as burning questions. *El metall impur* could be defined as a powerful and sophisticated tool for introspection, delving into the dynamic relationship that is established between memory, identity and the interplay of historical and family tensions. Here, the neighbourhood and the factory are presented as both mirrors and shapers of the Ego.

Julià de Jòdar plans his novel around a few scenes that are picked up again and that develop like sprouting seeds, taking on sense, emotional and symbolic power, reasons and reflexes. First, there is the footpath that runs along the railway line from Guifré and Cervantes streets through to the other side of the Besòs River, to the zone where the foundry has been built, bounded by the areas of La Catalana, La Mina and the Camp de la Bota, and constituting the setting for much of the story. Along this route is encoded Gabriel Caballero's initiatory flight from the maternal enclosure. People suddenly appear along the way, marking with visionary uncertainty his passage through a suburb of vacant lots, dirty beaches, industrial walls, rat-infested building sites and abandoned railway stations: an old hermit, a seductive Gypsy girl from the Camp de la Bota (where Franco's executions had once been a daily event), who offers him a bullet she has found there, the Badalona-Chinese magician, Li Chang ? The hub of the novel is an accident at the foundry, home to all the tensions of an industrial world in transformation at the beginning of the decade of *desarrollismo* (*development*): with Franco-supporting factory owners, foremen who are Catholic admirers of Pujol and Porcioles, clandestine unionists, ambitious workers ? Julià de Jòdar constructs fiction and its opposite. The manuscript of *El metall impur* is found in the *Encants* flea market by senyor Lotari, the main character in the first story of *Zapata als encants* (*Zapata in the Flea Market*) (1999), who tries to verify its contents and the names it mentions, filling the novel with photographs and documents from the archives. The quest for the factual truth behind the storytelling is thus introduced. Paradoxically, the confirmation that the narrator is not reliable, that he invents things and twists the facts, only reinforces that veracity and imaginative impact of the story.

Besides the three books of the trilogy *L'atzar i les ombres*, Julià de Jòdar has published two other novels. The three interlinked stories of *Zapata als encants* (1999) gather together bits of the broken memory of the city of Barcelona through its throwaway materials: letters, papers that have been dumped, and grotesque stories. As a metaphor for the squandering of collective heritage, the flea market of the *Encants* is the place where sons and daughters sell manuscripts and objects they should preserve. The detritus that sifts through the novel is cultural and sentimental. The book speaks in a mordantly satirical tone of a time of utopias and impostures. It links tragicomic events, full of names and references that take us back to the world of the progressives, and the anti-Franco culture and politics of the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies.

In 2003, Julià de Jòdar was awarded the Prudenci Bertrana Prize for his *L'home que va estimar Natàlia Vidal*, a novel of implacable artistry that offers no concessions, made up of fragments and obsessions, and full of forthright opinions on matters like the 2004 International Forum of Culture, the Barcelona School, the Nova Cançó movement ? The novel constructs the story of an *amour fou* around the death of a prestigious woman theatre director with echoes of a stage production of one of

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Ibsen's works. It is a carnival of mirrors and of drifting voices (in diary fragments, letters, from beyond the grave, monologues ?) posing more questions than supplying answers, with wrenching, bitter humour and moments of lyrical intensity. The husband of the deceased director, Alexis Robles, who is also one of her actors, locks himself up at home with the corpse and the remains of his wrecked existence for four weeks. The objects in the messy bedroom both provide the means for an exorcism of the heart and depict the Catalonia of the last days of the dictatorship and the transition. The novel can almost be read as a *roman à cle*, with recognisable characters who are more or less based on Fabià Puigserver, Joan Manuel Serrat, Guillermina Motta...

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## Bio-bibliography

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**WEB: Articles de l'autor (Traces)**

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## Comments on the author

### Criticism



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### Miscellaneous



**WEB: Literatura i pintura**

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## Comments



**PDF: "Saviesa narrativa"**

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