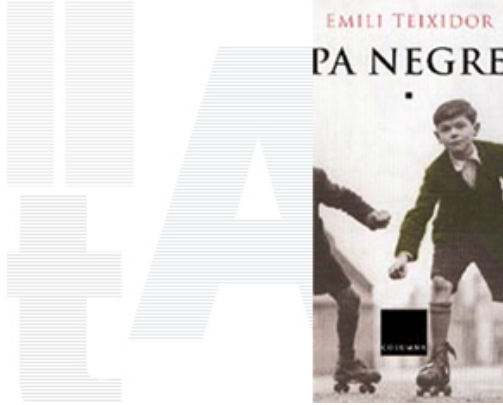


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Pa negre

Oriol Izquierdo

I must admit that it is especially gratifying for me to be able to speak in praise of [Emili Teixidor](#), author of *Pa negre* (Black Bread), which was published last year and which the jury of the [Lletra d'Or](#) Prize has deemed worthy of this exceptional distinction that we have the honour and the duty to uphold.

I am sure my fellow members of the jury will forgive me for my confessional tone because Emili Teixidor is something of a teacher for me and not just because, as with so many other children of the 1960s, in my early reading as a child and adolescent I discovered the stories and characters in the novels he wrote for young people. Chance also saw to it that I made my publishing debut with one of his novels, *Retrat d'un assassí d'ocells* (Portrait of a Bird Killer) and that thenceforth we would establish a relationship that I would be so bold - if you will permit me, Emili - to call friendship. Emili was also in publishing then and, thanks to him, I learned a few tricks of the trade that, for the moment, I'll keep to myself, if you don't mind.

This book, *Retrat d'un assassí d'ocells*, which was published in 1988, was the forceful start of the opening out of a literary universe that, with *Pa negre*, has culminated in a work that, let me put it like this, is a modest masterpiece. This literary universe had begun to take shape in 1979 with the collection of stories entitled *Sic transit Gloria Swanson*, and it was still unfolding in 1999 with his book *El llibre de les mosques* (The Book of the Flies), which was awarded the Sant Jordi Prize.

It might seem that I am saying that [Emili Teixidor](#) is always writing the same novel, telling the same story. Perhaps he is. But I don't mind because his narrative voice seduces me and because this universe attracts me as the void sometimes draws to its edge those of us who suffer from vertigo: it is the attraction of what we should reject, the suction effect of the mirror that gives us back a less appealing image of ourselves, the monster that we conceal within. Emili Teixidor's voice has the same effect as this mirror.

Pa negre is set in the harsh times that followed the Civil War, in an atmosphere of mists and rural and industrial drama, a drama in which personal memories, stories and sometimes legends taken from here and there are all intermingled. He constructs a mythical territory set in the region of Osona, which is not just a physical space. It is the moral space of the child who glimpses the adult world, and the moral space of the adolescent, the space of his initiation into life, its secrets, its mysteries, its gift and its pain.

This time, Emili Teixidor decides to adopt the standpoint of Andreu, an innocent and unaware narrator who is virtually without parents for his father is in prison and his mother always in the factory, and who tries to create a haven for himself in the world that surrounds him and in which he has had the good luck - and what a paradox it is - to come under the protection of a couple named Manubens until he chooses, whether consciously or not, whether painfully or not - at least for the reader - between security and rebellion. However, this is not the moment to be spelling out details of the story but rather to focus on one of the elements that, for me (and I am not alone in this), makes the book a very singular one. The power of its language. And the essential, nuclear role this language has in the

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evolution of the character and in the process of his moral growth. The power of the language, the stylistic texture of the novel. The narrator himself says it: "For the first time I understood the venom that words can contain and how they get inside us even though we don't want them to." The reader can experience this from page one. I am not the only one who thinks so. Ponç Puigdevall remarked on it (*El País*, 20 November 2003): "Emili Teixidor manages to make the whole novel seem to brim with sound and fury". Julià Guillamón has commented (*La Vanguardia*, 12 November 2003), "Teixidor knows what he is talking about and his use of Catalan is sensational as he distances himself from it, attributing its most characteristic touches to the grandmother because the narrator has moved out of his own social class and confronts a reality that no longer exists". Again, [Joan Triadó](#) (*Avui*, 18 December 2003) points out without in any way stating the obvious: "Writing, is the art of language."

It is by means of this torrent of words that Teixidor re-creates once again the inevitably happy world of childhood. Inevitably happy even if it is of a dark, brutish and at times sordid or moth-eaten sadness. The world of childhood, of discovering the world, of reality, which is to say life, pain, pleasure and language.

As the novel closes, the protagonist says goodbye to his mother who has made a great effort to come to see the school where he is a boarder. "As she walked down the grey, semi-deserted street on her way to the station, I closed my eyes so as not to see her. I can still see her, deserted, all alone in that cold little visitors' parlour at the Piarist school, a poorly-furnished room?" Like him, like Andreu, how often have we closed our eyes to what we wish to forget and yet have been unable to stop seeing it? Is it not this contradiction that defines us as the voluble and frail humans we are?

I have already described *Pa negre* as a modest masterpiece. Modest, because - let me put it this way - modest is the word for describing the way Emili goes about things, without ostentation, without theatricality. The reader probably begins the book without being aware of this, and continues reading perhaps with the feeling of entering into a series of almost anecdotal stories. Hence, almost without realising it, he or she is all at once in the midst of a story that, in a modest and masterly fashion, recounts the moral drama of a boy who has to choose to become a man. It must be this that makes it possible to say of someone that he or she is a good teacher.

Pa negre is a major novel. It is an exercise of creating the world on the basis of re-creating memory and language, without concessions, without shrillness, while also being, I think, profoundly generous with its readers. A well-deserved Lletra d'Or. The [Lletra d'Or](#) for 2004.

Thank you, Emili, for having shared this *Pa negre* with us.

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at the prize-giving ceremony for the Lletra d'Or Prize of 2004

It's been said..."The stifling times after the Civil War in a vigorously alive country area where the pure chime of the words conserves intact the purity of living battered by the gales of history."

[Pere Gimferrer](#)

"This is one of Teixidor's major works and one of the best Catalan novels of the year."

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Julià Guillamon, *La Vanguardia*

"Emili Teixidor is very close to the state of grace attained by consummate writers."

Ponç Puigdevall, *El País*

"This is a masterpiece."

[Joan Triadú](#), *Avui*

Així comença la novel·la...1.

Quan feia bon temps, des de Pasqua Florida fins a principis de tardor, quan el bosc canviava de color, vivíem a les branques dels arbres.

Ens havíem enfilat a tots els arbres de l'hort dels fruiters, prou forts per aguantar-nos a tots tres i prou baixos perquè hi poguéssim pujar sense escala, però després de provar-los vam triar la prunera vella com a cau definitiu. La prunera o el pruner vell tenia l'enforcadura del tronc ampla, acollidora i fosca com el fons d'una perola, i les tres branques que hi naixien permetien d'instal·lar-nos-hi amb comoditat, repenjar l'esquena i repartir-nos l'espai amb precisió: tocava una branca per a cadascú.

L'entreforc era el lloc comú on ens trobàvem. Les branques, en canvi, eren terrenys privats, cadascú hi guardava les coses que volia, tractava els branquillons com li semblava, penjava cintes o papers a les fulles, collia les prunes per a ell tot sol i no tenia cap obligació de compartir-les amb els cosins, i fins i tot podia no respondre a les preguntes llançades des de les branques veïnes, com si es trobés en una cambra tancada i el fullam fos una paret que no deixava passar les paraules.

Els altres arbres, veïns de la prunera vella, eren pomeres la majoria, alguns perers, pruneres joves amb branques massa primes per suportar els nostres moviments, arbres revells deia l'àvia, amb el brancom espès i de poca alçada. Més enllà de l'hort hi havia un parell d'oms mig corcats i el cirerer a la vora del camí, els roures de la roureda del prat, arran del bosc petit, i el saüquer immens del darrere de la masia, tan alt que mai no havíem pogut comptar totes les branques, ramificades fins a l'infinit, com una xarxa que s'estenia més amunt de la teulada del mas. El saüquer era l'arbre de l'àvia Mercè perquè es veu que les flors que feia eren medicinals, i sempre que podíem deixàvem les finestres del darrere de la casa obertes perquè entrés el perfum de les flors de saüc -la flaire deia l'àvia- i només respirant aquella olor marxessin totes les malalties, que ella en deia malures.

Només la prunera vella tenia les branques prou llargues i fortes per acollir-nos bé. Una casa vegetal amb la fusta rugosa, fosca i revellida d'una cabana al mig del bosc o d'una paret ensutjada de la cuina.

Les pomeres eren massa petites i quan les pomes eren grosses tota la copa penjava cap avall, com el ventre d'una dona prenyada. I quan eren florides, el perfum era massa intens i embafador i les flors massa blanques i atapeïdes. Amb les pereres passava el mateix. Els oms ens feien fàstic o por, tenien el tronc massa vell, brut i foradat, semblava podrit, i el brancom era massa petit per a la grandària de l'arbre, com el ferrer del poble i els homenassos que li portaven els cavalls a ferrar, que feien el pit gros i el cap petit. El cirerer era més acollidor, però el fullam era massa espès i els raïms de cireres massa delicats per a les nostres activitats aèries, les cireres tenyien la roba, les mans i les cames i ens delataven. I a més a més, la seva situació, al costat del camí que arribava a la masia pel

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costat de la cuina i del prat i portava al poble de la mare, el poble de les fàbriques, els feia massa visible als ulls dels grans. Els roures quedaven massa lluny de la casa, tot i que resistien bé les nostres envestides. I el saüquer era inabastable, l'arbre de l'àvia, el prodigi medicinal que restaurava la vida, i el consideràvem gairebé sagrat.

(...)

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bibliography

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