

SPANIEN
Sprühende Kreativität
*Ehregast der
Frankfurter Buchmesse 2022*



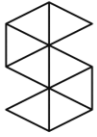
19.–23. Oktober 2022
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Antonio Muñoz Molina **Inaugural Speech, 18 October 2022**

One of the benefits of ageing is that one gains a valuable sense of perspective across time. Thirty-one years ago, Spain was a guest country for the first time at this Frankfurt Book Fair, and I was among the Spanish writers who took part in it. Those of us who came to Frankfurt in 1991 had enjoyed complete creative and political freedom for at least fifteen years, and it had been five years since our country's incorporation into the European community. Enough time has passed since then for an entire generation to come of age, free of the shadow and burden of dictatorship, and no longer dazzled by the novelty of democracy, but bereft as well of many of the certainties we took for granted in 1991. Back then, the reunification of Germany had just taken place, and the hope as well as the gradual reality of a democratic system were becoming attainable for the citizens of the old communist regimes, even in Russia and the former Soviet republics. A half oblivious, half utopian presumption prevailed that the universal realm of freedom was spreading across the world, and that this would add new voices to the polyphony of literature as well as rescue others that were buried by persecution and neglect.

Yet, in 1991, Salman Rushdie had already spent two years in hiding from a death sentence issued by fanatical imams, and it was either perilous or entirely impossible to exercise one's freedom of expression and liberty of conscience beyond the sphere of the liberal democracies. Thirty-one years later, Salman Rushdie, a remarkable example of a free man and a fearless writer, recovers from a criminal attack on his life, while in many countries, those devoted to the craft of telling things as they are or imagining them as they might be are facing censorship, persecution, murder. I am aware of how privileged I am to work as a writer in a democratic country, within the hospitable expanse of the European Union.

I and other Spanish writers now in our sixties and early seventies came to the craft of literature in our youth just as our country was attaining democracy. We had a whole world to portray, and found, to our surprise, a new community of readers who turned out to be avidly interested in our books, as well as foreign publishers and audiences



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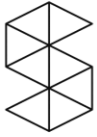


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that broadened the reach of our literature. We were practically the first Spanish writers to be limited by no other constraints than those imposed by their own talent.

I am speaking, of course, primarily about male writers. A major difference between the Spanish literature that came to Frankfurt in 1991 and the one here today is the emergence of women, who have always formed a majority of the reading public, and are now beginning to enjoy the standing they deserve in publishers' catalogs and the broader literary ecosystem. There is no greater diversity than the one arising from a free use of the imagination, a sovereign exercise of one's powers of invention, observation, memory, and invective. The greater the number of people—men or women, of whatever birthplace, background, class, or sexual orientation—who have access to a quality education, the larger and more diverse will be the group of those who choose to express their creativity through the arts. More and more voices have come into Spanish literature in the past thirty-one years, and thus more and more worlds. Many things that were once kept silent or said only in a whisper are now emphatically declared, striking even a note of defiance in proclaiming the irreducible particularity of each individual life, given that the expressive forms taken by literature can be as varied as those of desire or personal identity. I do not know if Spanish literature as a whole is better or worse now than thirty years ago, or even freer. What I do know, and celebrate unreservedly, is that it is much more diverse and pluralistic in every possible way. It is so, for instance, because of the vibrant works being written throughout the country in languages other than Spanish that are nevertheless as much our own, and because our Iberian Spanish is being enriched more and more by Latin American writers who either publish in Spain or have taken part in the great emigration that came to our country in the past few decades and is now present in every aspect of Spanish life.

This is yet another of the momentous changes to have taken place in Spain over the last three decades. Nearly six and a half million immigrants have arrived in that period, 14% of the current population. They have come from Latin America, Morocco, China, Eastern Europe. A country that thirty years ago was almost completely homogeneous is now among the most diverse in Europe. This sea-change is starting to be reflected in our literature, which increasingly includes voices that recount the immigrant experience. As a writer, and reader, this fills me with hope. It will be the children of immigrants who impel a new era of Spanish literature. It is happening already all across Europe and is one of the best possible antidotes against the old European



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ghosts of nationalism and xenophobia. Public education and social justice are the necessary conditions for talent not to be stunted. Public education, social justice, good libraries, and the highest possible degree of religious freedom and freedom of expression.

There is no just cause whose defense can require censorship or justify coercion. Amidst the ruin and carnage unleashed across Europe by religious war, Michel de Montaigne exercised his freedom of conscience and a critical inquisitiveness allied to a spirit of irreverence, a mocking mistrust of dogma, a taste for the pleasure of civilized conversation: all the rare European gifts that just a few years later Miguel de Cervantes would turn into the dazzling fiction of Don Quijote de la Mancha. The sense of irony, the pleasure that Michel de Montaigne and Miguel de Cervantes took in life itself as well as in the imagination and the act of storytelling, are gifts as precious for literature as they are for civic life. The moment we cease to defend them or cravenly agree not to exercise them fully is the moment we begin to lose them. My work as a writer, my life itself, are inseparable from my condition as a free citizen of Spain and Europe. In these deeply uncertain times, plagued as they are by uncertainty, fear, and menace, nearly the only certainty we possess is in the integrity with which we do our work, as well as in our daily commitment to the civic values on which it rests.

Translated by Guillermo Bleichmar