

# **Magic, Vitality, and Tristesse in the Barcelona of the Early Franco Era**

Two Successful Spanish Novels Shed Light on the Political and Social Reality in the Catalan Metropolis after the Beginning of the Fascist Dictatorship  
(working title)

Benedikt M. Helfer

## **Executive Summary**

Lizard Tails arguably is one of the most gripping novels of Barcelona-born Juan Marsé in which he, as in his earlier narratives, perpetuates the memory of his Catalan hometown in literature. The novel is set in the Barcelona of 1945, a metropolis marked by the traces of poverty, hunger, and dictatorship; a city in which the henchmen of the regime chase their opponents, and life and survival are impossible without sacrifice.

Víctor Bartra, a former republican and resistance activist, is one of the opponents of the regime. Running from the police head over heels and with a bottle of liquor in his hand, he slides down into a gorge at the back of his house on the slope of mount Tibidabo – not, however, without getting a cut in his backside. The resistance activist leaves behind Rosa, his pregnant wife, and David, his son.

The real protagonist of the novel is David, a fourteen-year-old sensitive boy who works for the photographer Marimón and spends his free time catching lizards or going to the pictures with chubby Paulino Bartolet. David is very attached to his mother and does everything to protect her – especially from inspector Galván. The boy is infuriated with the ‚cop‘, a regime snoop who hunts his father and shamelessly pays court to his mother.

In his father, David sees a hero who once fought for the ideals of freedom and is now on the run. But the boy has another hero – a pilot of the Royal Air Force, whose photograph adorns the wall above his bed. In his Spitfire, he was shot down by the Wehrmacht, only to be arrested at the burning wreck of his plane.

When the inspector, at his mother's request, takes David's dog Chispa to be put down, the boy's contempt towards the policeman turns into hatred – he believes that the policeman shot the dog on his way through the gorge to avoid having to go to the vet. When Galván again visits his mother's house, he accuses him of having killed the dog, whereupon the accused leaves the house in distress and does not come back for several weeks.

However, he does return to the house to find Rosa unconscious on the floor. The inspector arrives just in time to drive her to hospital, where the young woman gives birth and then dies. The years go by, but one day David meets the destiny he could not evade. It is a destiny which moves the reader although he would never have suspected it.

The plot of the novel Lizard Tails unfolds on two levels, the ‚physical‘ and the ‚metaphysical‘. The second level – the level of young David's thoughts and fantasies, of voices and sounds, impressions and pictures – is arranged next to the level of actual events.

At some times, the transition from one level to the other is imperceptible and soft; at others, however, it is abrupt and startling. This way, the reader is challenged and drawn into a labyrinth of confusion and dazzlement where orientation is very difficult.

David falls victim to this labyrinth. Things he experiences blend with things he imagines, the real world blends with the unreal – the world in which the boy has innumerable conversations with his runaway father, the shot-down pilot, or the dead dog. David becomes a tragic figure which is no longer able to differentiate between appearance and reality and finally perishes, still imprisoned in the labyrinth.

Lizard Tails tells of the sufferings of a boy who lives in a world of magic. In this world, he hears voices, the laws of physics are suspended, and the gorge especially acquires a supernatural significance.

Lizard Tails is not an attack on the regime; rather, the book poetically glorifies the struggle for existence in the backyard milieu of a large Spanish city ridden by poverty, misery, and dictatorship. The characters are no prototypes; they are weak individuals deeply rooted in their needs: Rosa's character is not that of a young, brave wife who protects her husband fighting in the underground and resists the state's attempts at ensnaring her. She is a needy, pregnant woman who tries to make her life secure. In the inspector, she sees the man who promises her protection. Víctor neither represents the liberty idol of the Left, nor does he idealize the resistance against dictatorship. He is a womanizer and a bigmouth, a loser with blood on his bum and liquor in his stomach. Nor is Galván a regime henchman, informer, or misanthrope. He is a respectable police officer who is caught up within the constraints of his job, does his duty, and treats Rosa in an all-too-human way.

Lizard Tails is a very recommendable book. It is the work of one of the great authors of contemporary Spanish narrative art.

There is another book set in the capital of Catalonia: *The Shadow of the Wind*, the most recent and remarkable novel by Carlos Ruiz Zafón – another author who was born in Barcelona.

Once again, the year is 1945 when bookseller Sempere lets his eleven-year old son Daniel in on an outrageous secret. In an old building, a graveyard of forgotten books, every book has its own soul and its own story. And every person who enters this place for the first time must adopt one book which, from then on, accompanies him. He alone is responsible for making sure that the book lives on.

It does not take Daniel long to make his choice: *The Shadow of the Wind* by Julián Carax is the book he takes with him, which he begins to read on the same day and whose plot will mysteriously combine with the events of his own life.

And indeed, the boy discovers that the people whom he encounters are part of an extensive web of events which captivates him more and more and, in a gloomy and ominous way, determines his fate.

Not before the end of the story does the reader sigh with relief – shocked and uneasy, but with the feeling of having witnessed the fulfilment of an inescapable destiny that descended on him with the force of an ancient tragedy and almost drew him into its vortex.

The Shadow of the Wind is many things at a time –a love story and a detective story, a story of destiny, and a political accusation of a regime which stirs up emotion to this day. It is a work which brings the reader neither relaxation nor amusement. On the contrary, it is directed by a cold hand that grips your heart, a work in which the thought of death is omnipresent. It is a work which casts a spell on the reader. And it is a work masterfully written by an author who knows full well how to build up suspense to an unbearable level.

Juan Marsé and Carlos Ruiz Zafón are two well-known names in modern Spanish fiction. With Lizard Tails and The Shadow of the Wind, they have perpetuated the memory of their hometown – a city whose magic, vitality, and tristesse in this rather bleak period of its history must not be forgotten.