

Millás, Juan José. *Trastornos de carácter y otros cuentos*. Ed. Pepa Anastasio. New York: Modern Language Association, 2007. 137 pp.

Pepa Anastasio has edited thirteen short stories by the novelist and prolific journalist Juan José Millás. Of all of his published collections of stories, she has chosen all but one from *Ella imagina y otras obsesiones de Vicente Holgado*. The remaining one, “Trastornos de carácter,” comes from *Primavera de luto* and provides the title for her anthology. Many of the stories center on Vicente Holgado, a recurring character in Millás’s short narratives, who lives detached from those around him in a state of alienation and mystery. Most of the other selections focus on an unidentified “Ella,” an equally strange and obsessive personality. A twenty-page introduction provides a minimal survey of Spanish fiction since 1940 and of Millás’s writing career along with a lengthier discussion of his short stories. Each story in turn is preceded by a succinct but cogent paragraph that pinpoints its theme and tone. The selections are very short with the exception of one that is at least six times longer than the majority. This structural imbalance is perhaps compensated by the consistency of character, theme, and tonality .

Fantasy figures prominently in Millás’s stories. Like a psychoanalyst, he goes beneath reality, which he considers fragmentary and without order, and delves, instead, into those hidden zones of ideas, emotions, and delirium. Again like the psychoanalyst, he is interested in the concepts of identity and the self. He has stated that the impetus for his writing is a desire to free himself from literal meanings and peer into the other side of reality in search of new ones. Millás’s characters, therefore, are disconnected from others and the world. Everyday, routine reality forms the starting point of his stories, but it is in their private, secret space that his characters find themselves. As the title of his collection *Ella imagina...* suggests, imagination bestows and justifies existence. Imagination creates reality, life, and identity. The results can be humorous, uncanny, or bizarre.

For example, in one story the matter-of-fact tone with which the ever-present “she” speaks diminishes her struggle for happiness down to a mundane level consonant with her insignificant life. More poignant and disquieting is “El clavo del que uno se ahorca,” which narrates the desperate battle of a man with his existential malaise that proves unbearable on Sundays. The lead story recounts the mysterious disappearance of Vicente from his apartment left with both its windows and door locked from the inside. His neighbor suspects that he has disappeared by way of his closet to the path leading to all of the closets in the world, since Vicente had once revealed to him that he had discovered this astonishing phenomenon. Another story tells of a trip not to exotic African destinations but to one’s own pancreas. Even when they provoke a smile, the stories show the restrictions and often the pain imposed by society, normalcy, and logic.

Derived almost entirely from only one of Millás’s many collections, the present anthology offers a limited, albeit representative view, of the author’s total production. This narrow focus creates a coherent and compact whole that underscores well one of the salient features of Millás’s short stories. Additionally, the book fulfills the objective of

the MLA Tests and Translation series to which it belongs. The books in this series are important texts in languages other than English that are published with an accompanying English translation and with the student in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses in mind. Thus Anastasio's collection and the companion volume of translations by Gregory B. Kaplan open up the possibilities for teaching Millás and by extension contemporary Spanish narrative in classes of English or comparative literature. At the same time these books would prove useful for Spanish instructors, in a short story class, a course on fantastic literature, or a translation workshop. The list of works of Millás and the selected secondary bibliography add a scholarly dimension that will be welcomed by graduate students or anyone interested in embarking on the study of one of Spain's major authors.

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