

## Books

Canetti's Passion  
for Immortality

Elías Canetti — La Pasión por la Inmortalidad — the Passion for Immortality, Francisco Blanco Figueroa, Editorial Katún, México, 1986.

Francisco Blanco Figueroa, currently the Editorial Coordinator of the magazine *Universidad de México* (University of Mexico), and author of *Obra literaria I y II* (*Literary Work*), as well as of a book on John Locke, recently published a book on Nobel Prize winner Elías Canetti and his work, in Editorial Katún.

The book deals with Canetti's childhood and youth, and then goes on to discuss aspects of his major works: *Act of Faith*, published in 1935, *Masses and Power*, *Kafka's Other Trial*, *Voices From Marrakesh*, *The Province of Man* and finally, *Theater*. The author's free-flowing, direct style serves to bring out the substance of each of these works by the prize-winning Bulgarian writer.

We find here information on crucial events in the early years of Canetti's life that somehow

shaped the world view of this author whose philosophical insight has gained international recognition. His father died when he was seven years old, and the child developed a life-time love-passion-jealousy relationship with his mother which was often strained. From the time he was very young, this child who wanted knowledge above anything else developed a disproportionate passion for books. The character in *Act of Faith* who sets fire to his library and sacrifices himself with it, somehow symbolizes Canetti's love for the written word to the point of paroxysm.

In *Masses and Power* Canetti takes an outright stand against power, outlining the issue and describing the powerful in such a way that they may be cornered and questioned. Susan Sontag expressed her point of view on the matter in her article "On Elias Canetti": "Trying to understand power from the point of view of the mass instead of using concepts such as *class* or *nation*, is to insist on a non-historical understanding of the issue. Hegel and Marx are omitted, not because Canetti's self-confidence is such that he decided not to mention the usual names, but because the implications of Canetti's approach are distinctively anti-Hegelian and anti-Marxist."

For his part, Canetti explains that, "(...)What I wanted was to take into account everything that could lead me to new lines of thought. (...) I purposefully did not quote these two authors (Freud and Marx) because I wanted to study the most urgent phenomenae of our time without applying previously existing concepts." He adds that, "I would give anything to be free of the habit of seeing the world from a historic viewpoint..." The scientist-philosopher protests against death-ridden history and against death. Thus, it can be said of Canetti that he is a conservative in the literal sense of the term. As Blanco Figueroa indicates, he rejects death.

In *Kafka's Other Trial*, Canetti analyzes Kafka's letters to his sweetheart Felice, as no other literary work had such a profound emotional impact on the Nobel Prize-winner. Surprised by the intimacy of those letters that openly dealt with an extraordinary spiritual experience, Canetti found in Kafka a rejection of power from the point of view of the individual, using self-destruction as a means of rejection.

Canetti deals with his impressions

of a trip he made to Morocco in 1954 in *Voices From Marrakesh*, and one of his obsessions is with blindness. In his article "The Cry of the Blind" he explains the deep impression those invalids made on him. Blanco Figueroa quotes this article extensively, capturing the elegantly precise tone, kind and sometimes pitiful, in which Canetti expresses unfamiliarity, interest and even discomfort at the sight of the Moroccan blind.

*The Province of Man* is based on a selection of notes taken by Canetti between 1942 and 1972. Written in a bold literary style, as Blanco Figueroa notes, these notebooks allowed the author to keep his sanity as he worked on *Masses and Power*. The texts Canetti selected for this book are an invitation into his realm of thought. Among the issues he deals with are death, writing, God and power.

*The Wedding* is a crushing play, to use Blanco Figueroa's term, which unmasks the conventionality and falsehood of family life and shows how a wedding really responds to the interest of joining two families for reasons of social status, economic convenience, etc. *The Consciousness of Words* reproduces Canetti's speech on Hermann Broch in which he speaks of the writer and his role. Canetti considers the true writer to be a vassal of his times even if he has to go against current values.

In *ELIAS CANETTI, Passion For Immortality*, Blanco Figueroa helps the beginner discover the Bulgarian writer in an accessible manner, using numerous well-selected quotes of the works he is reviewing. Death is the central issue picked up in Blanco Figueroa's reading of Canetti, whom he tries to understand in his passion for immortality and his hatred of death.

Blanco Figueroa concludes that, "Canetti's passion is for immortality. He struggles against death through literature without losing sight of the fact that death's greatest ally is power, the study of which has taken up a great part of his life. Canetti's work is not yet complete. He is still alive and in search of final victory. The immortality that comes from literature is the greatest assurance that death has been defeated."

The virtues of Blanco Figueroa's work, oddly enough, at times constitute a weakness. The book is useful both to beginners and to those previously caught up by

Canetti, but although structuring the analysis around the concept of death is valuable, we often had the feeling that greater analysis of the passages quoted would have been enriching, which is not to say the author should have written a philosophical essay.

Blanco Figueroa's purpose was to stimulate interest in Canetti's work, and this he does beautifully. Essays are easily discouraging for many readers and don't necessarily awaken their interest in directly approaching the work the essay deals with. If Mr. Blanco sought to shed light on the Nobel's work by providing a guiding thread to its understanding, he managed to do so. But we are left hungering for greater interpretation and analysis. Although his sober style is definitely a virtue, by the end of the book we somehow feel we've read a succession of excellent quotes that require more in-depth analysis. This review reflects the situation: we deal more with Canetti's writing than with Blanco Figueroa's essay on it.

Despite certain limitations, *Passion* is an agreeable book, easily and quickly read, that can stir up interest in the works of the prize-winning Bulgarian author, even though it does lack the depth and wealth that Canetti should ideally generate in an essayist.★

Pantxika Cazaux

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## The True and Marvelous Story of María Sabina, Mushroom Priestess.

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La otra vida de María Sabina  
(María Sabina's Other Life), by  
Juan García Carrera.

According to her godson and translator, this is the real, desolately marvelous story of the woman who once lifted her feet from the ground and flew beyond the clouds, higher than anyone had ever gone before. She knew the beauty of light as she climbed on the rays of the sun, went seven times around the Lord Sun, husband of the moon, and bathed in sweat returned to tell the story. She visited the ocean, and knew it for a very solitary place where she saw the dead eating and other

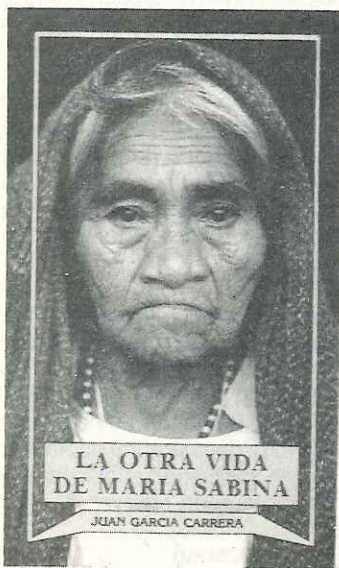


## odds and ends

mysteries that frightened her, but with the help of the wind and mushrooms she crossed the width and breadth of it and then said, "How good it feels to reach the other side of the ocean."

She was born two months before her time in Río Santiago, on a day so cold there was nobody out in the streets. She was named María Sabina Magdalena García in honor of the immaculate Virgin Mary Magdalen, and was so small and thin that she fit into the palm of her father's hand.

She herded goats from the time she was very little, and listened to the ancestral conversations of her elders. While chasing a run-



way lamb when she was seven years old she saw some "hard flowers", the mushrooms that would eventually lead her to fame and solitude.

She picked the "hard flowers", chewed them and knew peace. María continued to wash the dishes, sweep out the house, spin silk thread and hoe the earth. Like God, on Sundays she took a little rest.

After eating mushrooms -she called them little things, wise children- María would sing, dance, whistle and cry, and remember things she knew about even though she had never experienced them. She also raised chickens and picked coffee, owned six mules and sold fabric.

María married three times and each time she returned to her solitude with the memory of the beatings she received from the husband in turn. She had sons and daughters and grandchildren and was finally alone again with only the mushrooms and the misty Mazatec mountains for company.

She was over half a century old when, after eating 30 pairs of "little things" God personally handed her a book and said: " This book is full of wisdom. It contains truth, life itself and all kinds of secrets for healing. The world is yours, there's no turning back. You are to blame if you don't appreciate this book."

As a good Catholic she loved God and the saints and prayed a lot, yet she was still alone.

But the worst was yet to come, and it arrived in Huautla, Oaxaca, in the form of Gordon Wasson, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Zimmerman-Dylan and many other unknowns from strange and distant lands. María entered 30 years of sleepless nights after Gordon Wasson deceived her and taped her ceremonial chanting. She was accused of being a witch and of selling marijuana. She outlived her former husbands and some of her children and grandchildren.

She continued to communicate with mushrooms, "landslide, Saint Isidore, Little Birds." Films and profits were made out of her life, her songs were recorded and her face was photographed. People wrote books, articles, poems and theses on her and even named a restaurant after María without asking her permission. Many who were looking for some kind of truth, for healing secrets or profits sought her out, found her and used her. And then she'd be left alone again with her sadness and a sense of injustice.

She ended up completely alone, wearing rags and going barefoot, ill and with flies buzzing round her, sleepless and tormented because she had shared her ancestral priesthood with strangers.

And then a Mazatec student arrived at her side, and for four years, between 1981 and 1985, became her helper, translator, godson and adopted grandchild. On the evening they began their friendship, the would-be accountant says María Sabina said to him: "God greets you when you visit this place... Everything is as it was before, no one treads here anymore."

In July 1986 Juan García Carrera, who left accounting for journalism, published 5,000 copies of *The Other Life of María Sabina* out of his own pocket, "without exhibitionism... for the knowledge of Mexico and the world who heard the echos of the renowned mushroom woman."

In his introduction, dated in Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca, García Carrera says he writes in good faith. He says he never intended to write a book, but "the chain of injustice, exploitation, manipulation, trickery, etc..." compelled him to tell the story, with his godmother's knowledge.

The subtitle to *The Other Life...* could well be *A report on infamy, sadness, hunger, rage and forsakenness*. The author is categorical when he states that María Sabina ceased to be alone when he arrived. "Our friendship grew and she was happy talking to me," despite the fact that the wise woman continued to eat "tortilla with salt and chiltepe chili." Among them they spoke in the Mazatec language.

*The Other Life...* is written in wild, violent language, and could also be called *María Sabina and her Godson-Translator, Alone Against the World*. There's a passage in the book that perhaps sums this up:

"When María remembered the ingratitude of the authors who churned out books about her life I felt compelled to include a page against those who exploited and defiled her magic world. It's not my intention to attack them, no. I only wish to remind them that the mushroom priestess is still on her feet. This is the real María Sabina, what is left of her. She was no longer the same person they visited when she was still strong and lucid, in full possession of her senses and capable of pleasing and amusing people who had the devil in them. Since her chanting was recorded she no longer chants; she doesn't ingest mushrooms because they've all disappeared; she no longer conducts "highs" because the trips finished her."

The book is organized into 16 disorderly chapter and contains 15 melancholy black and white photographs, and is a trip that leaves you sleepless and with a lingering sense of bitterness. *The Other Life of María Sabina* is a voyage back to the hell and the glory of a desolate sadness that comes to an end at two forgotten moments.

The first is when this humble 96 year-old Mazatec woman dies of chronic acute bronchitis, kidney ailment, moderate dehydration, malnutrition, hypochronic anemia and old age.

The second is when Juan García Carrera, her godson, translator, adoptive grandchild, ethnic

brother and now biographer, is overcome by tears:

"I went to her side immediately. I wanted to give life back to her. I placed my ear next to her heart and the touch of her cold body shook me. I held her hands very tightly and tears flooded over me."

★  
Luis Perdomo Orellana

## Nicaragua's Ethnic Paths



**Nicaragua: Autonomía y Revolución (Nicaragua: Autonomy and Revolution)**, Héctor Díaz Polanco y Gilberto López Rivas, Editorial Juan Pablos, México, 1986.

Héctor Díaz Polanco and Gilberto López y Rivas are Mexican anthropologists who have specialized in ethnic issues. Their book, *Nicaragua: autonomía y revolución (Nicaragua: Autonomy and Revolution)*, allows an insight into how the FSLN and the Revolutionary Government regard Nicaragua's ethnic groups and their situation. Published in Mexico by Juan Pablos Editor in 1986, the book contains testimonies, official statements and documents that illustrate the process Nicaragua has followed in dealing with these issues. It also contains analyses and opinions on the subject by other qualified sources.

The ethnic question in Nicaragua has been the subject of debate for several years now. When the FSLN seized power in this small Central American nation in 1979 the ethnic question was known only to a very few specialists. In general, the existence of different social and cultural groups in the country was practically unknown. The issue was only "discovered" in 1979, particularly what has come to be known as the "Miski-



to problem."

Yet the Miskitos are by no means the only Nicaraguan Indians. Nicaragua is a pluri-ethnic and multilingual country in which different ethnic groups -Miskitos, Sumus, Ramas, Creoles, Garifones and Mestizos- are scattered throughout the vast eastern regions of the country, covering some 50% of the nation's territory. Thus, the Nicaraguan ethnic question is much more complex than just the "Miskito problem", and its roots go back in history to the clashes between Spain and Britain during colonial times.

Most of Nicaragua's ethnic groups live along the country's Atlantic coast, an area that was held by the British Empire for three centuries. This is a fact that determined social and cultural differences between these groups and the rest of the country's population, living mostly along the Pacific coastline colonized by Spain. The British were replaced by the United States during the 19th Century when the local Creole oligarchy proved incapable of staving off either power.

Thus Nicaraguan society was unable to build a national state capable of truly integrating the country's different regions. Instead, what took place was a process of increasing inter-regional disarticulation between the Atlantic and the Central Pacific regions. The process has social and cultural expressions that are further accentuated by existing geographical barriers. This was the complex situation the FSLN inherited in 1979.

*Autonomy and Revolution* contains up-dated, concise and objective information. The documents compiled here will be useful to anyone interested in ethnic issues, in the Nicaraguan situation and in knowing more about the subject that international news agencies have dealt with so extensively. Díaz Polanco and López y Rivas have performed the valuable task of compiling the most important documents dealing with the issue. A variety of original and scientific points of view are laid out in this book, allowing the reader a grasp of the real situation of Nicaragua's ethnic groups.

As early as 1969, in its so-called Historic Program the FSLN referred to a "special plan to favor the Atlantic Coast," which, among other things, called for stimulating "a blossoming of the region's local cultural values that have

evolved from original aspects of its historical tradition." The *Sandinista Popular Revolution's Statement of Principles Regarding the Indian Communities of the Atlantic Coast*, issued jointly by the FSLN and the Rev. Reconstr. Gov., contemplated the region's economic problems and the need to fully develop the Indians' cultural values.

The Nicaraguan government proposed a Regional Autonomy Plan in 1984, both in response to demands posed by the different groups and because internal contradictions pertaining to the ethnic issue had become more acute. The Plan underwent broad-based revisions in which even Indian groups up in arms against the Sandinistas participated. It guarantees the rights of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast and lays the foundations for the respect and development of their specific cultural values within the national framework.

The book includes speeches and articles by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, the National Autonomy Commission, Minister of the Interior Tomás Borge, Luis CarrilloPH'n, Manuel Ortega Hegg, and of course, HePH'ctor LoPH'az Polanco and Gilberto DiPH'pez y Rivas. Three documents from an international perspective are reproduced: the "Manifiesto of Latin American Anthropologists and Social Scientists On the Nicaraguan Ethnic Question", the "Statement on the Nicaraguan National-Ethnic Question", and the "Nicaraguan Government's Report to the IX Congress of the Interamerican Indigenous Institute".

All those interested in political, economic and cultural events in the conflictive Central American region will find valuable material in this book to help them develop an independent and well-informed point of view on the subject.★

Pantxika Cazaux

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## Books Worth Reading

**La casa que canta (The House that Sings)**, by Mariana Yampolsky. Ministry of Public Education.

A narrative and pictorial testimony of popular Mexican architec-

ture, this excellent book uses photography to document the shape and structure of Mexican peasants' homes. The materials used in these buildings are the ones that man has easy access to, and they are so close to Nature they seem to be part of the landscape, to blend into their background. Weathered by wind, rain and sunshine, many of these buildings seem to have been in their place forever.

The builders' tradition and experience determine the techniques that are used; the climate, available materials and usage dictate the form. These buildings have little to do with fashion and much to do with the essential aspects of life. Their dignity and poetic sense have been beautifully captured by Mariana Yampolsky's camera. This is a book to savour through the eyes.



**Arboles y arbustos útiles de México (Useful Trees and Shrubs of Mexico)**, by Anibal Niembro Rojas. Limusa.

Mexico has one of the most contrasting and complex floras in the world because of its diverse climatic, edaphic, geologic and orographical conditions. There are some 20,000 species of vascular plants in the country, many of which are represented by a large number of trees and shrubs. Plants are an invaluable renewable natural resource because of the many products and benefits that can be obtained from them.

Unfortunately, many of Mexico's trees and shrubs are rapidly disappearing, often without having been studied in their role as part of their ecosystem nor in their medicinal or industrial potential usefulness.

*Useful Trees and Shrubs* takes a new look at the country's forests and gathers a considerable amount of information published over the last years on the main serviceable products derived from certain of the most common trees and shrubs in Mexico. The book is aimed at people who wish to broaden their knowledge of Mexican flora and to those interested in the conservation and rational use of plants.



**Peces, moluscos y crustáceos en los códigos mexicanos (Fish, Molluscs and Crustacea in Mexican Codices)**, by Zita Basich. The National General Archive.

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Zita Basich has put together an exhaustive collection of the aquatic fauna depicted in Mexican codex, revealing this specific aspect of the depth and beauty of pre-Colombian art. Molluscs, crustacea and fish are shown, many of which have commercial and food value and are proof of the wealth of the country's central-plateau lakes (the area in which Mexico City is located), its continental currents and extensive maritime areas on both coasts.

The wonderful technique used by the ancient *tacuilos* (designers) makes it possible to identify many viviparous species such as sawfish, catfish, parrot fish and several kinds of leaping fish. The artist's morphological precision has the admirable beauty of conventional design. This material is a valuable addition to the study of ancient Mexico's fauna.



**Animales prehispánicos (Prehispanic Animals)**, by Sonia Lombardo de Ruiz. National General Archive.

The wealth of forms in pre-Colombian culture is one of the most important legacies handed down to us by the Mesoamerican peoples. Their iconographic and hieroglyphic representations contain an enormous variety of motifs that can be used in an updated context to support original and genuinely national designs. This is possible because of their peculiar formal categories.

The material brought together in this book was taken from ceramics, painting, sculpture and architecture. The criteria used in selecting the material was strictly thematic, and it is presented in groupings of analogous motifs, combining the styles of different cultures, regions and time-periods.

The images include forms that can be considered naturalistic, others in which the combination of different species' characteristics produces "fantastic animals", and still others in which symbolic forms are only remotely associated with reality. This later type of image is particularly interesting because the level of abstraction and schematization of the designs; especially the glyphs, is considered modern today. In these designs, animal forms are presented in their transition from pictographic to ideographic glyphs.★