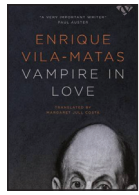




READING ROOM



Author Q&A: Enrique Vila-Matas

VAMPIRE IN LOVE

(& Other Stories, £12.99 hardback, £7 ebook)

An effeminate, hunchbacked barber on the verge of death falls in love with a choirboy. A fledgling writer on barbiturates visits Marguerite Duras's Paris apartment and watches his dinner companion slip into the abyss. Spanish author Enrique Vila-Matas's short stories, spanning 30 years of his career, have been translated into English for the first time by Margaret Jull. They are ironic, offbeat and very concerned with the relationship between writing and art.



Do short stories allow you to do something different from novels? There's certainly a sustained playfulness throughout this collection.

Play is central to all my writing. A great friend of mine, also a writer – Sergio Pitlor – said that every time I got too close to realism, he had the feeling I was playing with dynamite.

In *A Permanent Home*, your protagonist talks of "believing in a fiction that one knows to be fiction, aware that this is all that exists". Do you mistrust notions of reality or just like to subvert them?

When you write fiction, you have not only to believe in it yourself, you also have to make it credible to the reader. The art of fiction is based on that paradox. Or is that simply how we exist in the world, always balanced on that same paradox? Simultaneously dead and alive? As for reality, I would say that there are as many realities as there are points of view.

Someone in love is both "vampire and martyr", you write in the title story. Is love always about extremes?

In love there are always two opposing poles, happiness and unhappiness. However, I think that when I said that someone who's in love is both vampire and martyr, I was simply making an allusion to the sometimes very Christian nature of the city in which the story is set – Seville.

Did you consciously set out to be literary as a writer – in the sense of invoking and discussing other authors – or did it develop naturally?

I think I feel a certain sympathy for other writers, especially the ones who are suicidal, alcoholic, mad or doomed, because they're the writers I like best. I've always tried to write like them, to create an equally tragic vision of the human condition and of how close we all are to the edge of the abyss, but without having to suffer intellectually as they did and without ending up as another Pale King.

What does the urban landscape offer you as a writer?

Anyone who knows me knows that I find the beauty of the countryside positively soporific. In the city, on the other hand, I feel that I come face to face with poetry. I still remember the misty winter morning in New York when I realised there was no reason to dismiss the green jewel shining among the branches just because it was a traffic light.

What does a writer hope for from their translator?

I want a translator to respect the voice in my books, which is always a rather humble, helpless, modest voice. I realise that my voice, so full of quotations and cultural references, can – if translated too "academically" – appear pedantic. That's the great danger.

KEVIN GOPAL

OFF THE SHELF ESSIE FOX

My first three novels were inspired by Victorian paintings, with fairy tale or gothic themes that I then wove through my stories too. But nothing has ever inspired me so much as a five-second scrap of film I saw on YouTube late one night.

It wasn't entirely random. I was looking for Theda Bara, a vampish Edwardian actress whose dark-eyed gaze had captured me while I was walking through the Brighton Lanes – I'd looked through the glass of a window front and seen an old silent movie still. The film, as I later discovered, was called *Cleopatra* and released in 1917, a lavish and risqué production that caused a sensation in its time, with thousands employed to help create exotic costumes and studio sets. How I desperately wanted to see that film, but every reel had been destroyed in a fire years before. All that remained were those precious five seconds, and the black and white stills that, thankfully, have been preserved and are now online.

It was an extra bonus to discover that *Cleopatra* was based on a book I'd read and loved. H Rider Haggard's *She* (Oxford World Classics, £7.99) is a rip-roaring Victorian adventure tale, with more than a touch of feminist power, where an English explorer in Africa discovers an ancient exotic queen who possesses the gift of eternity.

If fantasy is not your thing, then try an Edwardian classic that has also influenced my work, LP Hartley's *The Go-Between* (Penguin Classics, £9.99), a heartbreaking story of love and loss in which social and class restrictions ruin many lives.

For more factual explorations of that 'other country' of the past as imagined in *The Go-Between*, I recommend Max Arthur's *Lost Voices of the Edwardians* (Harper, £11.99) – a fascinating record of the memories of those who lived, and often suffered terribly, in the early 20th century.

Finally, I'd recommend two books about directors. First, *A Life in Movies* by Michael Powell (Powell, £20) – so much more than an autobiography, it's a beautiful poetic read transporting the reader through space and time. And then Peter Ackroyd's *Hitchcock* (Vintage, £8.99), which is an intriguing character analysis of this great master of suspense, who learned so much of his craft during the age of silent film.

***The Last Days of Leda Grey* by Essie Fox (Orion, £13.99), about an enigmatic silent film actress, is out 3 Nov**

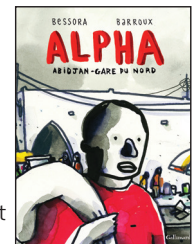


ALPHA: ABIDJAN TO GARE DU NORD BESSORA AND BARROUX

(The Bucket List, £16.99)

This summer, we were bombarded with images of migrants on perilous journeys to Europe. They were at first shocking and always upsetting, but the sheer volume of them, and the blanket media coverage, left many onlookers saturated and desensitised. Belgian author Bessora here tells the true story of one man in a simplified but nevertheless affecting account. Her words are brought to life with ink illustrations by French artist Barroux and the result is a timely graphic novel intended for young people but equally valuable for adults.

In desperation, Alpha leaves his home in Abidjan. He is on the trail of his wife and son, who left months before with Paris's Gare du Nord, where a relative works in a hair salon, in their sights. We follow Alpha throughout his 18-month trek across Africa and a nail-biting journey across water. We are rooting for him in the face of a rising sense of hopelessness and dread. Despite the illustrations and simple language, there are no storybook endings here.



ANTONIA CHARLESWORTH