

# On being comfortable in a creative no man's land



Writer and critic Jorge Carrión on understanding your creative process as something inherently mixed up in the business of living, the evolving role of the cultural critic, and why bilingualism—and experimenting across forms—is the future of media.

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As told to Camilo Garzón, 3715 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Identity](#), [Independence](#), [Promotion](#).

**What kinds of things, from your experiences living in Spain and Catalonia since you were a kid, made you interested in creative writing and to also look for a kind analytical purpose in your life?**

I come from a humble family. My father worked at a telephone company. My mother worked at home and neither of them finished high school. So there were practically no books in my house and we lived in an outside neighborhood of a small peripheral city. I would say that the first thing that stimulated me in this line of work was to try to cross the border that separated the neighborhood from the city center. Because the rest of the city is where the only bookstores and the only libraries were, what stimulated me to grow was the search for books. Even the kiosk where I bought superhero comics was also on that border between the neighborhood and downtown.

That said, I had a kind of universal and classic learning process: I was the boy who searched for the books I didn't have, and in them is where I finally found, for example, the idea of taking trips, of traveling. In my family we did not travel, or did not fathom the idea of going abroad. It was in books where I learned that this was a possibility. What my childhood and my neighborhood did have as particularly Spanish or Catalan, was that my parents were Andalusian immigrants in Catalonia and that neighborhood was an immigrant neighborhood. So I would say that the contrast between the Andalusian culture and the Catalan culture, migration, mixing, those for sure are elements that were in my childhood and that I have loved since then and that for me are very important. I do not understand literary creation without mixing, without travel, without hybridization and without dialogues between cultures.

**Of your fiction books, one notable example is the tetralogy you made: *Los muertos*, *Los huérfanos*, *Los turistas* and *Los difuntos*, where there are several of these issues that you mention and that reflected your upbringing. But what kind of influence made you want to do these narratives as a tetralogy instead of, for example, a collection of short stories? What was the reason for the format of these to become a tetralogy?**

Regarding the tetralogy, I thought I had not explored the issues of identity and migration that I have worked on in my previous non-fiction books, but in fact, these were also there. And it is not by chance that most of the characters in all my books have two names, or discover that they have another name, or that they do not remember what their name is. Because I am always divided between Jorge and Jordi, between my Spanish name and my Catalan name. I believe that the link between an experience or a reading with a genre or a form is a mystery. From my trip to Egypt, some experiences became fragments of non-fiction, and other fragments and experiences became *Los turistas*, or fiction then.

The trigger for the whole writing adventure came while I was in the Middle East, reading a novel called *See Under: Love*, by David Grossman, which is a novel about the Holocaust, told in a postmodern sentiment, as if it were a dictionary. I had been watching many television series, particularly *The Sopranos*. And somehow, to be traveling in countries like Israel, to be reading that novel, and to be thinking about television as fiction, that mixture made me think of a story that had to do with talking about the memory of the dead and the wars in the language and conventions of TV shows. I can't exactly rebuild the creative process from back then. I only know that it was those three factors, remixed, for that project to emerge. And once I wrote *Los muertos*, I was hooked. I believe that the key to all the projects that matter to me is that obsession, it's that commitment, and I was obsessed above all with the secret main characters of *Los muertos* who are Mario Álvarez and George Carrington. So I decided to write three more novels that kept exploring more about how the idea and project of *Los muertos* had been brewed in the first place and what its consequences had been.

**You are a fiction and nonfiction writer, and also a cultural critic. You are a creator and a critic, and both of these disciplines inform each other. Do you see a rapport between the two?**

I think you don't decide who you are. One just has to assume what one is. And since I was very young, I have written both fiction and creative essays, as well as cultural and critical journalism. And it is by thinking from the perspective of libraries, in physical libraries and in *Barcelona: Libro de los pasajes* as well as in *Contra Amazon*, I think that I have finally found the way in which I feel more comfortable, which is in the midst of this no man's land, between the essay and the narrative, and being in this gap and making it as wide as possible. And also in *Los muertos* and in *Los huérfanos*, I evidently worked on that kind of format. The kind of essay that is narrative, and of the narrative that is essay-ish. In my case, I could not be thinking, reading, or living otherwise. Somehow an artist, a creator, a writer, a journalist, eventually acquires a method, a routine, and that is the routine that defines them in creative terms. And mine is made up of constantly reading, watching movies or television series, reading comics, viewing contemporary art exhibitions, traveling, and being constantly writing with these types of sources and cross-readings. So the natural thing when you think and live like this is also to write in that crossed-way and across frontiers.

**You have collected many things and for a long time. Among those, for example, are collections of bookmarks and photos. How much do you think this has influenced the projects you choose? Or how much is it that this collection of interests is something that chose you?**

This is a question that I think no one has ever asked me. Indeed, your poetry and your personal projects have a lot to do with your files and archives, especially if you dedicate yourself to fiction. But I would say that the archive also has to do a lot with your fiction. And in my case there is a large archive of 25 years of travel that is full of memories, experiences, and photographs, but also full of objects and of several boxes full of memorabilia that I have brought with me from bookstores from all over the world. From bookmarks to postcards, to photos, to books and notes. I have many cloth bags that they give or sell in bookstores, paper bags, library business cards, and even authentic freaky objects such as the air freshener perfume they use in the Luxemburg bookstore in Turin, which is an exclusive air freshener perfume for that bookstore. That is, in that bookstore there is an exclusive smell that is not in any other bookstore in the world.

But, of course, there are more private collections, more private archives, and these inform, as you say, concrete books. For example, in *Barcelona: Libro de los pasajes*, in addition to all the books I bought about the history of Barcelona or the architectural form of the passages, I have photographs of all the passages of Barcelona, because not all of them appear in the book. There are almost 400. About 100 appear in the book, but I was physically in all of them. Because until I felt that all the spots in the collection were marked as "been-there," I did not feel comfortable to start writing this book.

Behind each book of mine there is a library and bibliography section and there are some physical library collections of mine that I have derived in creating a text. But then I saw that some of these textual collections had no continuity and that it didn't make sense to continue cultivating that textual collection. But the books I kept collecting throughout the years did almost always result in a book. Now I am writing a travel story and I am reading and consulting books that I have bought for over 20 years. So you're absolutely right, that both archives and collections are part of my creative process.

**A book concentrates or focuses on different topics and has a specific way of including and excluding elements, akin to a library. Libraries, like books, are also sometimes defined by the way things are included, and also by the things their owners decide to exclude.**

Yes, you could read each book as a sort of selection, or as a small constellation that represents a greater one found in all these archives, all the photographs, all the books, all the cultural objects that you have read, consulted, or lived to create that book. Each small diversity is a small aleph, from a galaxy of texts.

**I wanted to focus for a bit on cultural criticism. You are one of the people in Latin America and Spain who is referenced as one of their most important cultural critics. Do you see cultural criticism as a form of resistance, in some creative sense, while in search of truth or beauty?**

I believe the role of the cultural critic is to guide and to connect. I believe less and less in the destructive cultural critic who is positioned in a place of moral superiority and is able to judge from there. I feel closer to the figure of the cultural critic who builds bridges, creates links, and connects cultural objects that the reader has not seen connected. I believe that my readers are waiting for my writings to create or present some new sense to something they consume and to also see how I ignore traditional boundaries. Obviously, some readers seek guidance because the production of books and television series is so monstrous that we all need clues about what is most interesting to read or watch.

But beyond that, which is relatively easy, I think it is interesting to create sets of content. That is, making several cultural objects, several art forms, to be understood as a possible constellation. In that sense, what I love about what I practice in the criticism of the present, is precisely its constant mutation. You are always wrong, because everything you write is provisional. And over time, the book format allows you to rescue those texts which have not expired, that have not been wrong as much as others, and catalog them. This is what I did in *Teleshakespeare* with my television reviews that I expanded and extended with new texts, but that at the base were a set of texts that had been already published.

Or take what I did now with *Contra Amazon*. What I have done there is to select 17 texts about bookstores and libraries around the world, but in the beginning I had more than 40 writings. Of those 40, 20-something seemed to me to be more about context, more about current events, and were more circumstantial. So it made no sense to give them a second life in a book format. And by arranging the ones I chose in a certain way, I invited the reader to rediscover what they could or could not read back in the day, in a context that gives these texts a new life.

**Yes, the way in which the reader then arrives at something like *Contra Amazon* is seeing something they already knew, but in a new way that you present to them. There are people who have criticized you, who ask why is it that you sell the book against Amazon on Amazon. Why do you think these people are shooting at the messenger? Why do you think they like to see this controversy as something that is "not right," simply by selling a criticism of Amazon through Amazon?**

Well, first, I think it is interesting that *Contra Amazon* has been published on paper, because most of the texts were written for digital media and were read on screen and with hyperlinks. And now it's read on paper, without links and without being connected to a device. And I think that it not only gives the book another meaning by being anthologized and with a prologue, it also gives it another meaning altogether to be read while resting and in paper format. This has also to do with the meaning of the book, which in effect is that it is a book that bets and gambles on pause, on disconnection, on paper, on the book format, on the crafts of bookmaking and on a certain humanistic tradition of what is the book object.

On the other hand, I think those who are surprised that the book is sold on Amazon have not thought of two things. One, that the book being sold on Amazon is important, because if I get *that* book to be the last book that someone buys on Amazon, the book will make much more sense there than if someone buys it at the bookstore. Because it is a book that wants to convince those who are compulsively buying online that it is not always the best option.

And secondly, there are those who may not know the world of books, the publishing world. I do not sell the book

on Amazon. I sold the rights of my book to Galaxia Gutenberg, a publishing house. From there they entrusted all of its books to a distributor and the distributor is the one that facilitates the books to Amazon. So at the time that I gave the book rights to a publishing house, which is my trusted publisher that has published all my books, I do not have to interfere with the mechanisms of editorial distribution, because that is not my job. My job is to write and defend my book, but it is not to interfere with the distribution or publication of it.

**Let me ask you about another part of your working life. You are the director of the Master's Degree in Creative Writing at the Pompeu Fabra University - Barcelona School of Management. How much has your teaching influenced the way you not only write, but also the way you associate with other collaborators?**

I started as a teacher, then I joined as coordinator. Since four years ago, I am co-director of the program with José María Micó, a poet, translator, and university professor. And something interesting happened at its tenth anniversary party when I saw so many alumni and students gathered, and when I saw so many books published by alumni—I realized that this was an important project, as important to me as my books, or as my articles, or as the exhibitions that I have curated, or as the collections of books that I have directed in publishing houses. It is a project of performative character, very dynamic, very alive, and it does not stop growing because now we have more than 500 alumni, especially from Spain and Latin America, but also from other countries in the world.

Recently I was reading some texts by Ramón Gómez de la Serna. He has two books about Café Pombo and I would say that the Master's Degree in Creative Writing would be the 21st century version of that kind of cultural institution that is so important for the life of a city. And I believe that Barcelona, as the city of the boom, as a city of publishing houses and newspapers and bookstores and literary agents, has in this Master's degree one of its main sources and agents of dialogue, both with new talent from home and with Latin America. It constantly forces me to be rereading contemporary classics, and it constantly forces me to be talking to people much younger than me. I think that is very good for my own work, as I think it allows me not to lose connection with the present. And I would say that writers that do not teach or do not work in journalism tend to write in monologue, they tend towards isolation. And precisely in my case, both the cultural criticism of the works of the present, as well as the inter-generational and Iberian-American dialogue with students and alumni of the Master's degree, allows me not to fall into this temptation of the monologue and to always be open to the *other* and to the dialogue.

**As the word is a primary part and one of the raw materials used in much of your work, what other forms of communication do you like to use, or forms of art, besides words?**

I admire many creators like Alberto García-Alix, who is a great photographer and writes very well. Like Alicia Copp, who is a very good writer and a very good artist. But unfortunately, I am afraid I only have one virtue, which is that I write more or less well. My Instagram and personal photos have no artistic pretension, and for the moment I have not dared to practice any artistic language other than the literary one or the script. I have also written comic scripts and other types of stories, though.

On the other hand, I am very interested in the job of the curator, the job of the coordinator, the prescriber, the DJ. Not a music DJ, because I have no musical culture, but more in terms of both contemporary art and cultural management projects. So aside from writing, I have managed projects and meetings with writers, workshops, courses for the Center for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona, for La Casa Encendida in Madrid, and my work in the Master's degree has to do with that as well. I think this requires a certain talent. And I think that both in the exhibitions that I have curated, in the Master's degree, and in other experiences of this kind, what I apply the most is my experience as a novelist. Because a master's degree or an exhibition, like a television series or a comic, can be created from the tools given by the know-how of bringing about books.

**The *New York Times en Español* recently had declared that they were shutting down operations. Many of your opinions and many of your pieces of cultural criticism were found there. And *El Times* was not only very important for readers in Spanish or anyone interested in reading in Spanish, but also a good way to let a lot of people know about your work. What is the case that can be made to the *New York Times*, but also in other publications, for them to continue diversifying their audiences through other languages?**

The case of the *New York Times* has been very interesting, very strange, and a bit awkward. After three years and after experiencing success, the *New York Times* absurdly decided to close the publishing branch in Spanish coming out of Mexico. But they soon realized their mistake and what they have done is to create a page of news in Spanish that is translated from English and to maintain the opinion section in Spanish. I just returned to writing in the opinion section and I am publishing two articles the same way as I used to publish them before. The first one was about Rosalía and now, we published something that makes me very excited. It is a list, not of the best films of the year, or of the best novels of the year, but of the most outstanding cultural objects of the year, that is: Twitter threads, podcasts, remixes, and Instagram stories, among others. I believe that both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have realized the importance of the market and the audience in Spanish.

In *Radio Ambulante*, which is a pioneering project, a large part of its listeners are Americans and in many cases they are people who want to learn Spanish. That is why, in fact, they have just launched an app to use podcasts to learn Spanish. It is very good to bet on bilingualism or the English and Spanish editions of publications, because I think they are the two most powerful Western languages in the world. I believe that to capture and to broaden audiences, obviously what needs to be done is to experiment with forms that combine text and image without falling into simplifications. Because the younger reader who easily reads stories, watches videos on YouTube, and consumes comic books is no more stupid than the adult reader who reads only text. So, it is not about making very schematic lists or making visual simplifications, but about respecting the reader of all ages, and offering them new stimuli, new graphic, auditory, and sensory forms, with a mixture of images and ideas and text so that the media continues to have influence and seduction power in all age groups.

Jorge Carrión Recommends:

Thinking with a pencil in hand: paper and graphic imagination remain good allies for creativity.

Reading the novels *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *To the End of the Land* by David Grossman, and *El entenado* by Juan José Saer. These three are masterpieces.

Watching the most risk-taking TV shows of the 21st Century thus far, the closest we've gotten, in my opinion, to contemporary art. Some of these are: *Transparent*, *I love Dick*, *The Leftovers*, and *The Virtues*.

Reading really ambitious and original graphic novels like *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, *Las Meninas* by Santiago García and Javier Olivares, or *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* by Emil Ferris.

To follow the Spanish opinion section on the New York Times, where some of the best writers in Spanish have a platform, like for example Martín Caparrós

Name

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Vocation

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