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Literary news about Pere Calders in Lletra, the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) virtual space for Catalan literature

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## Pere Calders



### Pere Calders, Writer

Joan Melcion

Born in Barcelona in 1912, Pere Calders is another example of a Catalan author wrenched onto unforeseen pathways by the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939. At the end of that conflict, and after being interned in a concentration-camp, Calders went into exile in Mexico, where he remade his life. To speak about Calders is to speak about a great short-story writer in Catalan. He is an exceptional narrator: agile, unpredictable and subtle. His stories, often impregnated with a realism touched by magic and mystery, make believable the unbelievable. Calders's gaze is always ironic, though never caustic or embittered.

**The Rediscovery of Calders at the End of the 1970s**In the autumn of 1978, there were two events that decisively marked the public recognition of Pere Calders. On 27 September was the official premiere of *Antaviana*, a stage adaptation of Calders' stories in a performance by the theatre company Dagoll Dagom and, a little over a month later, the book, *Invasió subtil i altres contes* (Subtle Invasion and Other Stories) was published ten years after the appearance of his previous book, which contained formerly unpublished writing (*Tots els contes*, [All the Stories, 1968]). Popular success, which had always eluded him, now became a faithful travelling companion for the literary work one of the most beloved and loveable Catalan writers of the twentieth century.

Pere Calders i Rossinyol (Barcelona, 1912-1994) had just turned sixty-six and had retired from his professional obligations at the publishing house Editorial Montaner i Simó not long before. Although *Antaviana* and *Invasió subtil i altres contes* revealed the magic of Calders' fiction, the writer already had a long - and also chequered - literary career behind him, after its public inauguration in 1936. Five collections of stories (*El primer arlequí* [The First Harlequin, 1936]; *Cròniques de la veritat oculta* [Chronicles of the Hidden Truth, 1955]; *Gent de l'alta vall*, [People from the High Valley, 1957]; *Demà, a les tres de la matinada* [Tomorrow at Three in the Morning, 1959], and the anthology *Tots els contes*, 1968), four full-length novels (*La Glòria del doctor Larén* [Doctor Larén's Glory, 1936], *Gaeli i l'home déu* [Gaeli and the God Man, 1938], *L'ombra de l'atzavara* [The Shadow of the Agave, 1964], and *Ronda naval sota la boira* [Naval Patrol in the Mist, 1966]), and one novella ([Aquí descansa Nevares](#) (Here Rests Nevares, 1967), along with a book of war reports (*Unitats de xoc* [Shock Brigades, 1938]) and a biography of [Josep Carner](#) (1964), had already endorsed him as an established writer of sweeping register.

It is no accident that the belated recognition of Calders' work should have come at the end of the 1970s. This is in keeping with a certain historical logic that, even if it is difficult to distinguish causes and effects, offers us an approximation to some of the keys for interpreting this singular fictional universe.

**Writer of Cultural Normality** Calders' formative background was a cultural setting that aspired to normality. In the 1930s, still affected by the successive waves of [Modernism](#) and [noucentisme](#), this normality seemed to be within the grasp of the country, so much so that Calders and his young peers, although they considered themselves direct heirs of the more recent and judicious tradition of

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noucentisme, were not in the least dismayed by the much more breakaway proposals of the members of the artistic and literary avant-garde, who already had a diverse and significant presence in the Catalan cultural panorama of the time. As an "adolescent artist", Calders felt part of a generation that had deliberately distanced itself from realist referents -often represented, from the biased standpoint of noucentisme as a too crudely realistic ruralism- declaredly tending towards the civilised values of noucentisme with regard to its forms of expression but with a certain critical reserve about the moral values imposed by its spirit. In brief, this was a generation that, without renouncing critical reflection on human foibles and contradictions, began to feel that it was free of "sacred patriotic missions", and it had a greater commitment to the formal quality of a creative work than to the reforming effect that the work might have had in its immediate social setting.

Such proposals, translated into a particular Calders style of literary code, resulted in a singular and very clearly delimited narrative corpus with regard to its approach, its themes and its style. It is an oeuvre that, as heir to that period and its premises, was not easily assessed in all its plenitude until the country and its readers regained the steadiness of a certain normality that was at least comparable to that which had existed at the time when Calders started out as a writer.

**Narrative Approach** Calders must be considered primarily as a narrator, which is to say a storyteller. At a time in which the conventional form of the narrative genre par excellence, the novel, was in crisis (the realist novel and the psychological novel), Calders was testing a twofold solution to his narrative needs. On the one hand, he was writing stories (a genre that, in its flexibility, is not so tied to the laws that have defined the model of the traditional novel) and, on the other, he was working on a demystifying response -that was close to parody- to the conventional novel. This dual approach crystallised in the first two titles he published, both of them, significantly, in 1936: *El primer arlequí*, a collection of eight stories, and *La Glòria del doctor Larén*, a novel that, in its plot, looks something like a caricatured approximation to the Bovaryesque theme of adultery. *El primer arlequí* sets out on a narrative course that would be continued and refined in subsequent titles (*Cròniques de la veritat oculta*, *Demà a les tres de la matinada*, *Invasió subtil i altres contes*, *Tot s'aprofita (Everything is Used)*, *De teves a meves (From Yours to Mine)*, *Un estrany al jardí (A Stranger in the Garden)*, *El barret fort... (The Sturdy Hat)*, etc.) and that, in fact, consolidated the image of Calders as a short-story writer. All this extensive production of short stories highlights the author's desire to construct a story on the basis of pure fiction without the shackles of having to offer a faithful translation of the immediate reality (only in a few stories are there references to specific settings -and, when they appear, they are of distant, if not exotic, places - or physical descriptions or psychological portrayals of the characters).

In the series of novels that was initiated by *La Glòria del doctor Larén*, but still more in his most ambitious work, *Ronda naval sota la boira*, Calders goes even further to manifest, quite explicitly, the mechanisms of constructing narrative fiction understood as an artifice that, far from being able to reproduce reality, is only able to represent an image of a specific - and partial - perception of reality.

**The Recurrent Narrative Theme: Perception and Representation of Reality** In *La Glòria del doctor Larén*, the story of a doctor who has been cuckolded by his wife takes two opposite directions depending on the point of view from which it is presented: edifying when told by the benevolent and idealist narrator, and a paradigm of human stupidity when related by the cynical one. The narrators perceive the reality differently and use the narrative resources that seem most apt in either case, to represent it to suit his own convenience. The trap that is inherent in trying to portray reality becomes evident.

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This theme appears, more or less explicitly in all Calders' narrative work, to the point that his deliberate playing with confusion about reality and the different human ways of trying to represent it becomes the mainstay of his literary construction. He uses forms of representing reality that may go from scientific interpretation to a mythological imaginary by way of the conventions of the prevailing moral order. Hence, his literary corpus reveals a proliferation of references to scientific inventions and devices, technological advances and revolutionary discoveries (the scientific representation of reality), and his fictitious universe is populated by a host of creatures (ghosts, spirits, angels, magicians, extra-terrestrial beings...) and fabulous or supernatural (the mythological representation) phenomena (miracles, disappearances, splitting into two, materialisations of desires...), while the conventions, norms and rules that regulate human conduct (the codified representation of reality) often have a decisive - and distorting - role in the unfolding of the plot.

**Irony as Style** Calders the writer, true to this premise, is aware that in constructing a story -whether it is patently fictitious or based on real events- he is simply representing his own perception of reality, a perception that, behind the evident and superficial appearance of things, also grasps their surprising and obscure aspects, while nonetheless offering only a partial and fragmentary reading. The result of all this is that the writer submits himself to a voluntary process of stripping transcendentalism from the act of representing his view of reality in literary form: he takes an ironic distance. In doing so, he makes of irony his hallmark and most effective literary tool.

When, at the outset of the story "Reportatge del monument de Sonilles" (Report from the Sonilles Monument), the narrator declares, "I am somewhat uneasy in always presenting myself as the protagonist of improbable stories. However, I trust I shall give to my confessions such a great tone of sincerity that people will have to believe that I am reasonably truthful", or, when in the "Instructions for Reading this Book" that introduce the novel *Ronda naval sota la boira*, he warns us that "the events described in this book really happened", he is clearly inviting us to read something that is ironic in tone, and irony always demands complicit participation by the reader and an effort of decoding through distancing.

This complicity is what gives us the main key to interpreting Calders' fiction. Behind the apparent affability of the narrator, and beneath the subtle and often humorous treatment of the interrelated plots, and veiled by openly imaginary settings, the collusion that is established from the standpoint of irony makes it possible to glimpse an acute and profound reflection on the more absurd features of the human condition.

The typically ironic style that characterises Calders' literature is not, then, pure formal contrivance, but his literary essence itself. It is an essence that is displayed with clockwork precision in each of his works, from the simplest captions of his cartoons through to his extensive fictional oeuvre.

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## A selection of texts

### Text

 **WEB: "Invasió subtil" (Subtle invasión)**

The short story.

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< <https://lletra.uoc.edu/en/author/pere-calders> >

<http://www.xtec.es/~evicioso/garrotxa/invasio.htm>

 **PDF: Performances of Modernity**

Article by Assumpció Bernal in *Caràcters*, num., 14 (January 2001) on the exhibition and symposium about Calders.

<http://www.uv.es/caracters/pdf/CARACTERS-14.pdf>

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## Bio-bibliography

### Biography

 **WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia**

<http://www.grec.cat/cgi-bin/hecangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0013538&PGMORI=E>

 **WEB: In Wikipedia**

Brief biography in the free encyclopaedia.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pere\\_Calders](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pere_Calders)

 **VIDEO: Pere Calders in *Retalls* [Clippings]**

Biographical profile on this writer in the programme *Retalls* [Clippings] on Canal 33.

[http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p\\_id=683](http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p_id=683)

 **VIDEO: "Pere Calders: l'home dibuixat" [Pere Calders: the Drawn Man]**

Documentary on Calders's life and work in the programme *El meu avi* [My Grandfather] on Televisió de Catalunya.

[http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p\\_id=645](http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p_id=645)

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### Bibliography

 **WEB: Works in the Biblioteca de Catalunya**

[http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search\\*eng/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Calders+Pere&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D](http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*eng/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Calders+Pere&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D)

 **WEB: The author in The European Library**

<http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/search/%28%22creator%22+all+%22calders+pere%22%29.query>

 **WEB: The author in the Congress Library (US)**

<http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>

 **WEB: The author in the COPAC Catalogue (UK)**

<http://copac.ac.uk/search?&au=Pere+Calders>

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## Comments on the author

### Criticism

 **WEB: Pere Calders in AELC (Association of Catalan Language Writers)**

Includes biography, works, prizes, interviews, fragments of some of his works and links.

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[http://www.escritors.cat/autors/caldersp/pagina.php?id\\_sec=1618](http://www.escritors.cat/autors/caldersp/pagina.php?id_sec=1618)

 **PDF: Chronicles of the Hidden Truth**

Information about the book and its author in the Catalan Modern Classics 2017 booklet, by Institut Ramon Llull.

[https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://llull.cat/IMAGES\\_2/quadern-modernclassics-frankfurt-def.pdf#page=8](https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://llull.cat/IMAGES_2/quadern-modernclassics-frankfurt-def.pdf#page=8)

 **WEB: Pere Calders**

Writer's page in the space "Cataluña desde los trópicos. Las letras catalanas del exilio en México" [Catalonia from the Tropics. Catalan Literature in Exile in Mexico].

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/exili/esp/noms/pcalders/index.html>

 **WEB: Calders in exile**

lletrA page devoted to this topic.

<https://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/tema/exili/>

 **WEB: Pere Calders in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus**

Biography, links and transcription of articles on this author.

[http://www.ducros.cat/corpus/index.php?command=show\\_news&news\\_id=307](http://www.ducros.cat/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=307)

 **PDF: "Virtuts i limitacions de la biografia ?**

... com a gènere", review by Jaume Aulet in *Caràcters*, num., 4 (June 1998), referring to *Pere Calders, veritat oculta*, by Agustí Pons.

<http://www.uv.es/caracters/pdf/CARACTERS-4.pdf>

 **WEB: "Calders. Els miralls de la ficció"**

A great deal of information about the exhibition that was co-produced by the CCCB (Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona) and the Institució de les Lletres Catalanes, and supervised by Jordi Castellanos and Joan Melcion.

<http://www.xtec.es/~jducros/Pere%20Calders.html>

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## Miscellaneous

 **WEB: Exhibition at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona**

A very detailed website created in 2000 by the Humanities Library at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, with biography, images, databases, Internet resources, etc.

<http://ddd.uab.cat/pub/expbib/2000/percal/>

 **WEB: Calders on Video**

Information on the video *Pere Calders, la mirada subtil del narrador* (Pere Calders, the Subtle Gaze of the Narrator). Order form.

<http://www.ictisp.com/~ge382930/Calders.html>

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