

## THE BESTSELLER

# Sánchez Piñol: "Are books products of culture or just consumer products?"

The best-selling Catalan author of *La pell freda*, Albert Sánchez Piñol talks to *Catalonia Today* about his highly-regarded, award-winning fantasy novel, its long-awaited sequel and the trials and tribulations of the literary world in Catalonia and Spain

NEIL STOKES

Spending a year stranded on a desert island with a human fish and a hairy Austrian in an old lighthouse which is attacked nightly by vicious monsters does not sound like much fun. Albert Sánchez Piñol, however, is hardly complaining. Sánchez' first novel, *La pell freda* (Cold Skin), in which an ex-IRA man gets more than he bargained for when he chooses self-imposed exile to escape his past, exceeded all sales expectations when it made the international big time. So far translated into 24 languages and with a film deal on the way, *La pell freda* is a bestseller in the best sense of the word. Unusually for a book that has caught the eye of markets outside Catalonia, *La pell freda* has been a success on its own merits, without the helping hand of generous institutional sponsorship.

Indeed Sánchez came across as an independent sort of guy when we met to talk about his novel, Catalan writing and the publishing industry. You won't generally find Sánchez' views padding out papers or magazines ("I'm not interested in writing articles or opinion columns") but the novelist who "never hides from journalists" says, "I'm also a citizen and if you ask my opinion I'll give it".

It didn't take him long to do just that, but first he provided his own angle on his phenomenally successful novel. "There is no greater thing than the reader's imagination," he told me, and in *La pell freda*, Sánchez provides readers with plenty of leeway for letting their imaginations run wild. The mysteries surrounding the underwater quasi-human race of the characters in his story are purposely left unexplored in what the writer calls "a debate on the other". "Between them and us is fear," says Sánchez, "but when fear is put aside, other stuff appears. It is only when they achieve absolute proximity that we realise that what they want is exactly the same as humans."

One thing that the humans and the monsters in the story share is an automatic recourse to violence to solve their problems. By introducing what he calls "fantastical elements", Sánchez attempts to shine a light on human behaviour by comparing it with a race far removed from humanity. "What interested me," he said, "was to expose the symbolic resources employed in human conflicts, where the first step is to de-



Albert Sánchez Piñol's first novel, entitled "Cold Skin" in English, has been translated into 24 languages / ANDREU PUIG

humanise the adversary and turn him into a beast." It is a simple but compelling idea and both critics and fans alike point to *La pell freda*'s minimalist simplicity as the novel's main distinguishing feature. "*La pell freda* seems simple but it isn't," insists Sánchez. "The sophistication of the book is in what the reader doesn't see. For example, the three (only) characters holed up inside the lighthouse are very carefully elaborated." One thing a reading of the novel makes clear is that whether or not you believe the author achieves his aims, *La pell freda* shows the author's refusal to pay lip-service to the conventions of Catalan literature by producing a highly original work of fantasy with a peculiarly global appeal.

This explains Sánchez' decision to use a burned out Irish republican as a main character. "Before, he was defending an island against invaders [the British] and when he is on the desert island he takes up the opposite role," says the author. Yet, Sánchez also points out that his choice of protagonist, "reveals the structural weaknesses of literature in this country." Sánchez does not flinch from criticising the Catalan literary scene. "I don't know anywhere in the world where a reader would say, as has happened to me, that, I didn't know it was a Catalan book because the main character wasn't Catalan."

"This is a very hypocritical country," he told me. "Since I was 10 I have heard people say that this

is a bilingual country, but it isn't. It really isn't. And in literature this can be seen even more clearly. There is a community of writers [in Catalonia] who write in Catalan, and a community of writers who don't. That's it, end of story." More than being angry about the politically-informed confusion that leads to distinctions between Catalan writers, writers in Catalan, Catalan writers who write in Spanish etc., Sánchez appears bemused: "This is a very strange country. No literature in the world has these problems," he says. "The French have it very clear: it's French literature if it's written in French. If someone lives in your country for 30 years but writes in Arabic, then it's Arabic literature. There's nothing to

argue about. Except here we are still arguing about these things."

As Sánchez points out, the thorny issue of what makes a Catalan writer and whether Catalan literature should be seen as part of Spanish literature is because "this debate has other objectives beyond the cultural ambit". The political to-ing an fro-ing over the limits of Catalan national identity naturally informs all aspects of society and literature is no different. "The one good thing about this hypocrisy," says Sánchez, "is that it avoids civil war. If people really started talking about this they would be at each other's throats. But that day is drawing near," he predicts, "and I wouldn't be surprised if it happened in Frankfurt." In 2007, the Frankfurt Book Fair will present Catalan as the highlighted culture, which could open a can of worms for Catalan/Spanish literary culture.

As the success of *La pell freda* is likely to make the novel into one of the most translated Catalan books of all time, Sánchez is particularly well placed to comment on the significance of a Catalan literature outside of Spain. "All my life people have told me that it would be better not to write in Catalan because it limits the book's potential markets," he says, "but you can't say that about *La pell freda*." In fact, the novel's success, particularly if it does make it to Hollywood, leaves domestic literary bickering far behind, although Sánchez appears unfazed by all the attention. "All that about it being a commercial success is relative. I don't let it worry me because it's something I can't control," he says. "Once the writing is finished, the book becomes a product."

Sánchez admits to being puzzled about how the publishing industry is to cope with such fierce competition from other mediums, from film to the internet, at a time when more books are being published than ever before. "There is a contradiction. Are books products of culture or consumer products? Publishers want them to be seen as the same thing, which is where the contradiction lies," he told me. "It's all very strange because of the principle that if a lot of people like it, it must be bad. What does cult author mean? That not many people read him. The writers' guild must be the only professional association in the world where it's considered better not to sell much."