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Barcelona and Madrid

Abstract

Suggested readings for the Penn Alumni travel trip to Barcelona and Madrid. See the Library Guide for this bibliography [here](#).

Keywords

barcelona, spain, madrid, bibliography, penn, alumni, travel, fiction, film

Disciplines

Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature

Comments

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Alumni Travel Bibliography
Barcelona and Madrid

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Madrid and Barcelona can sometimes be reduced to stereotypes, the two polar opposite metropoli (not unlike Moscow-St. Petersburg, Beijing-Shanghai, Sao Paulo-Rio de Janeiro. et al.), one a coastal city, polyglot and mercantile, often unruly or subversive; the other the landlocked center of a bureaucratic monarchy. Neither of those have been useful images, although regionalism and even football keep the idea of rivalry alive. Still, each is distinctive and both have become ever more popular tourist destinations since the end of the Franco regime in the 1970s, both with “scenes” that attract the young from around the world.

Guidebooks and histories provide context and orientation. Any visit can be enriched, however, by in depth analyses of aspects of urban culture and fictional accounts that convey the “feel” of a place. One kind of writing that appeals to many travelers is an account by another traveler. While not confined to the two cities, *Spain: True Stories* (edited by Lucy McCauley; San Francisco: Travelers’ Tales, 2002) contains many short pieces, easy and enjoyable to read. The writers include Gabriel García Márquez and Barbara Kingsolver among others.

For an entertaining introduction to Madrid’s cultural life and history there is Elizabeth Nash’s *Madrid: A Cultural and Literary Companion* (New York: Interlink, 2001). Robert Hughes’s *Barcelona* (New York: Knopf, 1992) might be too long for some, but, besides covering the art and architecture, his area of expertise, Hughes provides an excellent explication of Barcelona’s history and culture. A more succinct picture by Barcelona writer Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, heavier on politics and cultural nationalism, is *Barcelonas* (translated by Andy Robinson; London; New York: Verso, 1992).

There may be as much fiction set in Barcelona as in Madrid, but there does not appear to be a collection in English for Barcelona that is anything like the excellent *Madrid Tales* (Helen Constantine, ed. Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, c2012), a collection of stories with Madrid settings selected and translated by the prodigious translator Margaret Jull Costa. It includes some of the greatest Spanish writers starting with 19th century giants Benito Pérez Galdos and Emilia Pardo Bazán through to Carmen Martin Gaité and Javier Marías. Costa gives the reader a variety of characters and touches many parts of the city from landmarks to working-class districts in stories that are comic, tragic, or strange.

A young American writer, Ben Lerner, in his award winning *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Minneapolis : Coffee House Press, c2011), provides a view of trendy Madrid, as well as politics and history, from the vantage point of an outsider, a poet on fellowship, who is in Madrid ostensibly to write a research-informed poem about the Civil War.

Spaniards write crime novels, thrillers, and variations on the genres. A dystopian Madrid is the setting for Rafael Reig's *A Pretty Face* (translated by Paul Hammond; London: Serpent's Tail, 2007), whose main character is the ghost of the children's book author murdered at the beginning. A Javier Marías "psychodrama" (as some have described it) set in Madrid is *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* (translated by Margaret Jull Costa; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997).

Notable fiction set in Franco-era Madrid include *Winter in Madrid* (New York: Viking, 2008) by C. J. Sansom, which describes British secret service efforts to keep the Spanish out of World War II. Madrid itself is richly described, as is the political environment of the period. Camilo José Cela's *The Hive* (translated by J. M. Cohen; New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953) was too controversial to be published in Spain in 1951. It describes over 300 characters struggling against the poverty and misery of 1942 Madrid.

No fictional detective has covered Barcelona more intensively than Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's sophisticated gourmand Pepe Carvalho. The novels are wonderful and there are plenty of them. A few are *Buenos Aires Quintet* (translated by Nick Caistor; London: Serpent's Tail, 2003); *The Pianist* (translated by Elisabeth Plaister; London; New York: Quartet Books, 1989); *Murder in the Central Committee* (translated by Patrick Camiller; London: Serpent's Tail, 1999). There have been reprints and they are easy to find online, if not in your local library. Yes, the detective gets to travel in some cases, for example, to Buenos Aires.

George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938) might not be the best guide to today's Barcelona, but it shows what a city in the on the precipice of revolutionary change felt like. Like most of Orwell's non-fiction it is powerful, direct prose.

The Time Of The Doves (translated by David H. Rosenthal; Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1986) is, in some respects, the canonic Catalan novel of the 20th century. Written in 1962 by exiled author Mercè Rodoreda, the novel traces a woman's struggles through and after the Civil War. It was made into a film in 1982 directed by Francesc Betriu under the title "La Plaza del Diamante" (the title of the original Catalan book is *La Plaça del Diamante*, which refers to the Barcelona location near where Rodoreda's character lives).

Some other notable fiction with a Barcelona setting includes Eduardo Mendoza's *The City of Marvels* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), which takes place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; Juan Goytisolo's *Marks of Identity* (translated by Gregory Rabassa; New York: Grove Press, 1969) is about an exile's return to the city; Carmen Laforet's *Nada* (translated by Edith Grossman; introduction by Mario Vargas Llosa; New York: Modern Library, 2007), is set in the postwar city; a widely praised novel set in medieval Barcelona is Ildefonso Falcones de Sierra's *Cathedral of the Sea* (translated by Nick Caistor; New York, Dutton, 2008).

For the traveler who wants to see the cities in film, Madrid is the setting for most of Pedro Almodovar's films, and Barcelona figures in his "All About my Mother." The 2002 French film "L'Auberge espagnole" concerns young people from all parts of Europe studying and living in Barcelona. Alejandro González Iñárritu's "Biutiful" (with Javier Bardem) takes place in an unattractive Barcelona. Woody Allen's "Vicky Cristina Barcelona" (also with Bardem) shows a prettier Barcelona. English director Ken Loach's "Land and Freedom" covers some of the same ground depicted by Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*, culminating in the betrayal of the Republican cause by the Communist Party.