



Senyoria (1991) by Jaume Cabré is a breath-taking novel of intrigue, dealing with the law and human justice, and a well constructed and well structured narrative with characters who seem more real than fictitious. It is also a tribute to Barcelona.

It is set in Catalonia at the last months of 1799 - a time of change and a time of crisis. At the end of the eighteenth century, the whole of Europe was feeling the effects of the French Revolution. The collapse of the ancien régime was near. And Catalonia was suffering the full effects of the repression by Philip V, victor in the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1714), who had abolished all the Catalan institutions and openly persecuted its language. This transformation also had an effect on culture, with the arrival of Romanticism, the artistic and spiritual movement that caused such a profound upheaval not only in art but in society too. All this historical and cultural framework is present throughout the novel.

The list of characters is long and varied: tragic, dramatic and comic figures, and people from different social classes - all beautifully characterised by (among other traits) the language they use. Even certain historical figures appear, living a fictional life in the novel. The main character in Senyoria is Don Rafel Massó, civil judge of the Royal Courts of Justice in Barcelona, a complex personality and a symbol of a world that was beginning to decline. An amateur astronomer - the whole novel in fact is written in heaven - and permanently disgruntled, Don Rafel is tormented by a murder he committed accidentally a long time ago that still weighs on his conscience. In order to preserve his powerful position and the place in society he worked so hard to obtain, he has no hesitation in sending an innocent young man, Andreu Perramon - a Romantic poet and a symbol of the new era - to his death. The antagonism between Don Rafel and Andreu - confirmed by their very names (Rafel being the name of an archangel and Andreu having its roots in andros, the Greek word for man), which occupies the first part of the novel, gives way in the third part to the antagonism between Don Rafel and Nando Sorts, a young musician who has now replaced the poet.

The book is divided into three parts of uneven length. The first part, which is the longest, tells a story that begins in Barcelona in the evening of 11th November 1799 and ends in the morning of 20th December that same year. It also relates a parallel story that takes place in Mura, a remote village, on the 2nd (All Souls Day) and 3rd November. At certain moments, reference is made to another story that happened two years earlier. In addition, there is a further story, that of Nando Sorts, who leaves Barcelona for Malaga on 12th November; this is told in the form of letters. The second part is very short, and in only three chapters explains the keys to the first part. The action begins in Mura on 4th November and finishes in Barcelona in the afternoon of 11th November - in other words, the end of the second part links with the start of the first part. The third part continues the main story from the first part, and runs from 20th December 1799 to 1st January 1800. It is here that all the threads finally converge in Barcelona.

In its style, Senyoria is a genuine masterpiece. The combination of different registers - from the most cultured to the most vulgar via the extremely colloquial - and of different forms of language and dialect, used always to great effect; the mastery of linguistic and literary resources; the use of an agile and original narrative technique, for example by interposing words from the characters into the narrator's discourse; and an absorbing and action-packed plot, make this book a truly pleasurable experience for readers of widely differing tastes.

Translated by Joanna Martinez