

## Pioneering novelist

Narcís Oller (1846-1930) was born in Catalonia's southern city of Valls but he lived most of his life in the capital Barcelona. He worked for many years as a court attorney (procurador): legal details feature in several novels, including *The Madness*. He translated literature, such as Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Turgenev among others, to Catalan.

Oller was the first great novelist in Catalan since Joanot Martorell 400 years earlier. While his contemporaries Àngel Guimerà (born 1845) and Jacint Verdaguer (born 1845) were leaders of the Catalan literary resurgence in theatre and poetry, respectively, Oller was the leading novelist. All three belonged to a generation that was consciously remaking Catalan as a literary language.

In fact, Oller started writing romantic novels in Spanish, but switched in 1877 to Catalan. Until his generation, Catalan speakers tended to write in Spanish. It was the example and success of Verdaguer that persuaded Oller, against the advice of Spain's preeminent novelist Pérez Galdós, to switch to Catalan. Galdós considered Catalan a naive, uncultured language. It was "absurd" to write novels in Catalan, as novels require "extremely rich and flexible diction." With admirable forbearance, Oller responded that Catalan was his language and it

would be "false and ridiculous" to write in another. "Don't you think that language concretises the spirit?" he asked Galdós.

His first major novel *La papallona* (The Butterfly, 1882) described an orphan girl's struggles. The 1885 introduction by Zola to the French translation led critics to place Oller firmly in the naturalist tradition, despite *La papallona* being more romantic than naturalist. Oller shares with Zola the fatal decline of his main character. He shares too the detailed observation of people's conduct and circumstances that is characteristic of naturalism, but Oller is more humorous, more optimistic and looks more at the emotions and motives of his characters. Really, he was only in part a 'naturalist' writer.

*La papallona* was followed by *L'escanyapobres*, *The Moneylender* (1884), about two misers whose passion for money destroys them; then *Vilaniu*, the name he gave to his native Valls, in 1885. His most famous novel *La febre d'or*, *Gold fever* (1892), tackles the money-lust and speculation of the newly rich bourgeoisie in the 1870s.

Oller wrote theatre and many short stories, but his last major novel was the stylistically sophisticated and psychological *Pilar Prim* (1906), a study of a young widow's struggles to survive her family's greed and suitors' attentions.



### THE MADNESS

Narcís Oller

Translator: Douglas Suttle

#### Introduction:

Andrew Dowling

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"...the one really gifted Catalan novelist of the late nineteenth century... [Oller] created a public for a type of novel which reflects the most serious tendencies of contemporary realism."

Arthur Terry

one in sight that only he can find Prim's killers. Everyone agrees he's been unhinged by Prim's death. At the same time his sister Adela escapes his control and marries. Then, in furious stubbornness, Serrallonga decides to marry a peasant girl, because it will disinherit his sisters. And so... on to the fateful end.

### Shots on the Rambla

Right from the first page, Oller makes readers aware that the friends are living through turbulent times: "There had been shots fired on the Rambla the night before... there were likely to be more that night." Looked at through the political lens, it is the narrator and Armengol who seem, if not fully mad, at least highly irresponsible, callow and callous. They spend their time lolling about in cafés and playing silly jokes while the queen is overthrown, Prim is killed and the Carlist war rages. Might Serrallonga's politically impassioned reaction be healthier than this foppish middle-class passivity? To add to this reviewer's prejudice, the weak-minded narrator then marries in a rather sickly romance "little Matilda."

Though Serrallonga's story is what structures the book, it is the social context, the glistening Rambla cafés, the clothes, the conversations between Giberga and the two friends, and the intrusions of political life that make the book so attractive, so realist. *The Madness* is no dense, nineteenth-century tract. Rather, it's lively and witty: a tragedy, but written in a light, sometimes comic key.

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