

historian Rodrigo de Zayas, who calls it the first episode of state-sponsored racism in modern Europe.

Benmalek sets his novel in the last, doomed generation, reduced to poverty and ignorance—their rites, style of dress, books, and language banned, their men excluded from all but menial work. Reinventing the Spanish picaresque novel, he creates a tough, resourceful heroine, María/Aisha, a beautiful crypto-Muslim orphan kidnapped and sold into slavery at thirteen in 1576. Her buyer is a Seville painter lubriciously obsessed with her virginity. In his house, she falls in love with a young singer about to be made a castrato for the greater glory of God and the papal choir. When she tries to rescue this kindred victim by sleeping with him, her outraged owner rapes and discards her. Finding herself pregnant, she marries a much older man, a kind of biblical Joseph figure, and the couple in a remote hamlet where the dauntless María schemes to save her son from the looming catastrophe, committing blackmail, adultery, and murder in the process, and then suffers agonies of remorse. Unlike his sardonic, amoral Spanish models (Quevedo, Lazarillo de Tormes), Benmalek endows his heroine with a tormented inner life. In the end, guilt and grief drive her to behavior so outrageous it lands her in the torture cells of the Inquisition.

Oddly enough, this is the most “religious” of Benmalek’s books, because although María loses the charmingly naïve syncretic faith of her childhood—when she prayed alternately to the Virgin Mary and Aisha, the Prophet’s youngest wife—and although, as the noose tightens around her community, she comes to believe (protoatheist) in “a cruel God, as firmly as she believed in the existence of rapacious wolves,”

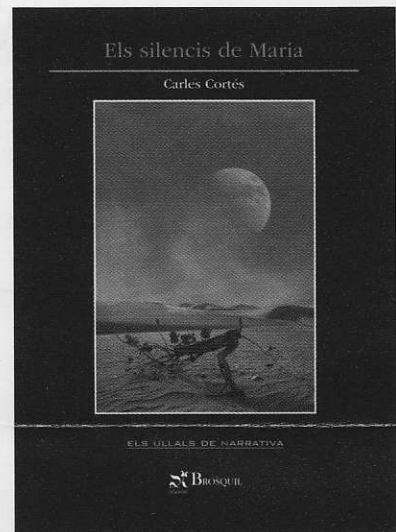
in her worst moments, she recalls scraps of Koranic legends learned in childhood. Not always helpful—they neither enlighten nor console—they are the scraps of a wisdom that is transmissible but no longer serves. (Recall Walter Benjamin’s use of these terms in his reflections on Kafka.) In a novel overfull of blood and guts and other bodily fluids liberally, brutally spilled, of shrill quarrels, raucous joys, and unspeakable violence, María’s brief moments of recollection are like embedded poems.

By a cruel irony this highly intelligent novel about the mad quest for religious purity aroused controversy in Algeria, 99.5 percent Muslim and bristling with religious vigilantes. Some even accused it of blasphemy. It will not be published there anytime soon. It has been translated into Spanish and Portuguese; an English version would be welcome. (*Editorial note:* See Benmalek’s story “Eve” in the January 2008 issue of *WLT*.)

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Carles Cortés. **Els silencis de Maria.** Valencia. Brosquil. 2008. 222 pages. ISBN 978-84-9795-383-2

In his third novel, Carles Cortés, a professor of Catalan literature at the University of Alicante, uses a variety of voices to tell the interrelated stories of Hèctor, Maria, and Laura. Hèctor speaks to himself, to Laura, and to his cellmate, weaving a psychological study of a disturbed mind. After an introduction to the protagonist, his ambivalent situation and odd place, other speakers/characters intervene: first, the young woman, Laura, who comes to visit him every week; then, diaries and letters that explain some of the late Maria’s thoughts and experiences.



While he awaits judgment, the reader learns that controversy surrounds the accusation of murder with which he has been charged: Hèctor does not try to prove his innocence, and his daughter Sandra believes he is guilty, but others find an accidental death more likely. The novel has some characteristics of the crime genre and cites Raymond Burr’s role as Perry Mason: a defender of innocent, framed victims.

Maria’s story is beautifully narrated through the journals and letters she writes during her first marriage to Hâfèz, when she lives in Dubai with several other wives and children. As she tries to learn of her adopted culture, she studies the Koran as well as Arabic poetry; here, Cortés introduces poems of Hamda Jamis and Zubaida Basir, lending a delicate lyricism to the work, which he enhances with images of the desert, the sun, and the moon. But alas, the marriage fails, and Maria returns to her home without her daughter and is unable to maintain contact with her. A few historical references orient the reader—concentration camps, the military coup of 1982, the minority status of cultures without a state—but this intriguing

novel is one of interwoven secrets and searching: for identities, missing loved ones, self-esteem, and the solution to mysteries.

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Fatou Diome. **Inassouvies, nos vies.** Paris. Flammarion. 2008. 271 pages. €19. ISBN 978-2-0812-1353-1

The latest novel by the author of *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003; see *WLT*, September 2004, 83) and *Kétala* (2006) is set in Strasbourg, where Fatou Diome has been living since she left Senegal in 1994. The narrative is based on a plot device that has both literary and cinematic antecedents: the narrator, Betty, is fascinated by the lives she surreptitiously observes through the windows of the apartment building situated across the street from where she lives. In fact, this apparently solitary young woman refers to herself as "Betty la Loupe" (magnifying glass), describing in detail the results of her daily periods of scrutiny to her readers. A mixture of voyeurism and sociological observation, her curiosity leads her to focus on an old woman who lives by herself, who seems to lead an active, independent life, and whom Betty decides to name Félicité. The two women sometimes cross paths in the street, on the way to neighborhood shops, but Betty's attempts to make contact with the object of her inquisitive gaze remain ineffectual.

It is when Félicité is shipped off to a nursing home by insensitive relatives that Betty decides to call on the now-embittered senior citizen. The initially awkward encounter between the younger African narrator and the older French retiree soon becomes an unusual but real friendship, which allows both women to

reveal something about their backgrounds and to share stories about Félicité's former neighbors. Predictably, their cross-cultural connection will eventually be cut short by Félicité's death. Shocked by the way in which the old woman had been abandoned by her relatives, Betty recalls the loss of those who were important in her own life. Increasingly depressed, she "disappears," leaving only words and music in her empty apartment.

The narration is frequently punctuated by exclamations similar to the title ("our lives are unsatisfied, unappeased") with the narrator/magnifying glass emphasizing that there is always some type of emptiness at the heart of every individual existence. This form of literary repetition functions as a musical refrain, intensified by the references to the kora, a twenty-one-string instrument used by West African *griots*. Diome's authorial voice is often heard commenting on the storyline or providing asides on various social or political issues. Some of these tangents degenerate into ranting sessions that detract from the novel's exceptionally high stylistic level and should have been removed at the editing stage. A central theme is the difference between African and European attitudes toward elders. Diome, who was raised by her grandmother, contrasts their traditionally respected place in African communities with the European practice of isolating old people within specialized institutions. For Diome, this form of internal banishment not only punishes those who deserve dignity during their final years, it deprives the following generations of the knowledge and stories accumulated by elders. Whether or not this lack of generational division is still characteristic of increasingly urbanized

African societies, Fatou Diome's keenly perceptive novel resonates with a strong, clear voice.

Edward Ousselin
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Jean Echenoz. **Courir.** Paris. Minuit. 2008. 142 pages. €13.50. ISBN 978-2-7073-2048-3

The long-distance runner, we are often told, is a lonely figure. Yet "Émile," the protagonist of Jean Echenoz's latest novel, does not seem to fit that mold. Though by no means a backslapper, he nonetheless functions well enough among others, becoming, eventually, not only a productive but also a revered member of his society. By the same token, Echenoz's book does not quite fit the mold that we usually imagine for the novel. Like *Ravel* (2006), which immediately precedes it in Echenoz's oeuvre, it is slightly askew with regard to the conventions of the genre, leaning distinctly once again toward biography. For Echenoz's "Émile" turns out to be the Czech athlete Emil Zátopek (1922–2000), who famously came to dominate long-distance running during the mid-twentieth century. His preeminence was such that he was able to win the five-kilometer race, the ten-kilometer, and the marathon at the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, becoming as a result an international idol. At one point in his career, Zátopek held eight world-record times in all the classic distances, from five kilometers on up. Along the way, Echenoz paints the portrait of a man who is both proud and exceptionally driven, but one who is nonetheless generous in his dealings with others and complaisant with regard to the demands of his discipline, even when his performances begin to wane.