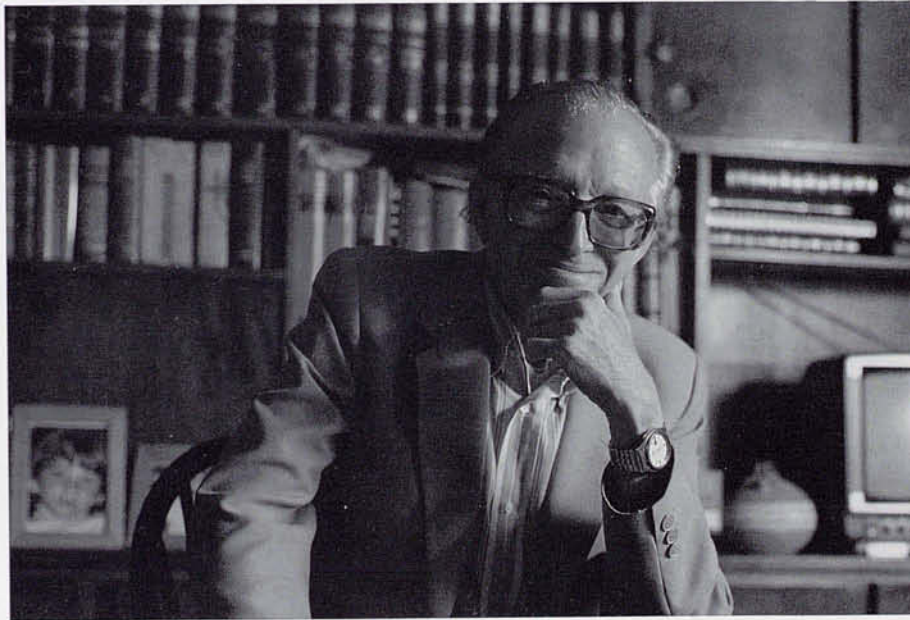


# PERE CALDERS

PERE CALDERS GOES THROUGH LIFE IN THE GUISE OF A BANK-CLERK, TOTALLY UNOBTRUSIVE, NEVER MAKING BOMBASTIC SPEECHES, NEVER AROUSING ANGER, DETERMINED NOT TO STAND OUT. BUT BEHIND HIS SIMPLE, ALMOST COMMONPLACE APPEARANCE, LIE SOME OF THE MOST UNUSUAL, INDIVIDUAL AND EXPORTABLE WORKS IN THE WHOLE OF CATALAN LITERARY HISTORY.

VICENÇ VILLATORO JOURNALIST



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Pere Calders (b. Barcelona 1912) owes his reputation primarily to his collections of short stories, with their unusual, astute brand of humour and their power of imagination. *Cròniques de la veritat oculta*, *Invasió subtil i altres contest*, *Demà a les tres de la matinada* and *Tot s'aprofita* comprise some two hundred tales, some of them extremely short. They have been made into films, television scripts and a series of theatrical sketches, *Antaviana*, acted by the **Dagoll Dagom** company, which has scored one of the greatest successes in Catalan contemporary drama. This same humorous and occasionally tender conception of literature is present in Pere Cal-

ders's novels, especially *Ronda naval sota la boira*, but his work also has a more realistic vein that is more closely linked to the events of his own life. In 1936, the year the Civil War broke out, he had already started out on his career as a writer with *El primer arlequí*. He had an artistic background too, having studied at the *Escola de Belles Arts*, and at this stage in his life he was better known as a caricaturist for magazines like *L'Esquella de la Torratxa*. He took part in the Civil War as a topographer, and experience he relates in *Unitats de xoc*. After the Republicans were defeated by Franco's troops in 1939, he had to go into exile, spending twenty-five years in Mexico, and this

experience is reflected in his books: *L'ombra de l'atzavara*, *Gent de l'alta vall* and *Aquí descansa Nevares*. On his return to Catalonia in the 1950s, he met with a cool reception. Public recognition came later – with the *Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes* in 1986, for instance – and with its translations of his works into other languages, from Spanish to Japanese.

Few writers in the world have done so much to escape notice: no eccentricities, no outburst, perfect politeness, an image of certifiable normality. But equally, few writers in Catalonia have been so unsuccessful in this respect: Pere Calders has probably been translated more often into other languages, gran-

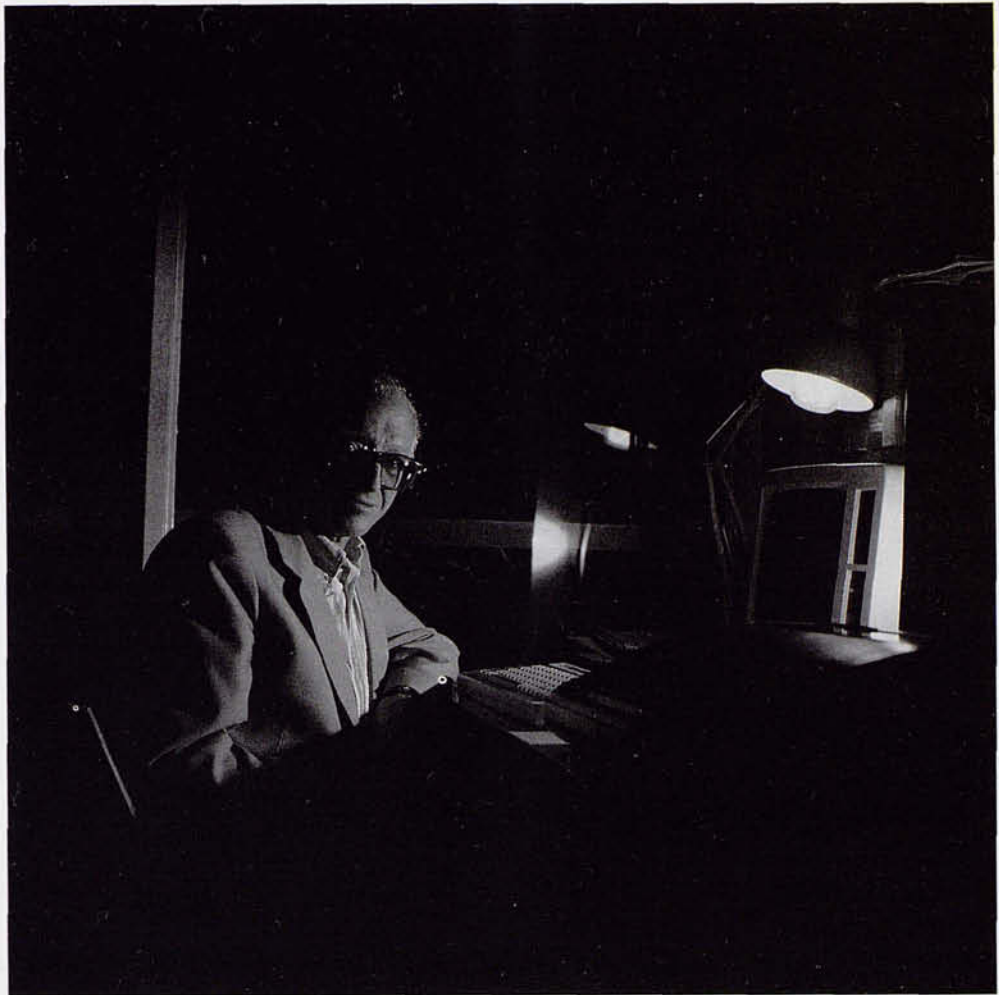


ted more interviews, received more visits from hoards of gossiping schoolchildren than any other living Catalan writer. But his great discretion shields him from gossip. When you ask him, for example, who his favourite authors are, trying to drag a name out of him is harder than extracting a tooth.  
*-In seventy-four years my tastes have changed. There have been times when I was very interested in Italian literature,*

*and others when I preferred English or French literature. I'm a disorderly reader. Even in the physical sense of the word: I have books all over the house. One journalist who came to see me only looked at the books in the living room. He reported that I hadn't very many and they were all bad. He may have been right.*

*-But surely you could name one or two?*

*-I could name a lot. The first books I remember making an impression on me were Les rondalles del poble and El tresor del vell cavaller which I read as a child. Later, when I came to read famous authors, I tended to prefer their lesser, shorter works. Capote's Breakfast at Tiffany's or Henry Miller's Devil in paradise. And of course I like the bookds that everybody likes. I don't know... Crime and punishment for ins-*



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tance. Once when I was compiling a card index of books for a dictionary at the publishing house where I worked, I had to do Crime and punishment. And I got the feeling that, if you make a quick summary of it, just relating the outline of the plot, it sounds like a kind of vulgar serial. Which just goes to show that a genius can make an extraordinary novel out of the most commonplace, primitive materials.

—Since most of your output has been made up of short stories, it's not surprising that you appreciate other people's. I expect you identify with them.

—Not deliberately, at any rate. I just like them. It's not the authors' fault, it's mine. One of the reasons why I favour short stories is that they let you know when they've dried up, when there's nothing more to be squeezed out of them. Novels don't.

—Let's go back to names. What work of literature has made you think "I would have liked to write that"?

—That's never happened to me. I've always thought that imitation was a waste of time. The author you imitate is already doing it, better than you.

—Let me put it another way. While you are reading, have you ever had a feeling of kinship with another author, as though you both belonged to the same family?

—Well obviously I feel akin to authors who write in the same language. That is the basic affinity. And then there are those who strive for concision, those who shun anything transcendental, and those who want to take a more human

view of things. Nihilism is something I particularly avoid.

Calders has often been referred to as a humorist. But he himself denies this. They also say he writes tales of fantasy. He disagrees even more strongly. He claims that all the strange things he relates really happen to him. But that must be an exaggeration. Some of his stories may begin like something by Kafka, *Metamorphosis* for example. But his irony and good humour would give them a very different ending.

—I don't expect you like Kafka, do you?  
—Some things I like very much. Others not at all. I like *Metomorphosis*.

—Your work is always so good-humoured, and even tender in a way, that one almost gets the impression that your life has been a quiet one.

—It has been very eventful in fact. My works may be a reaction to that. A kind of escape. I don't think the term "escapist literature" is necessarily a pejorative one. There is nothing wrong with a writer or reader escaping into a more congenial reality using such a legitimate means.



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In the eventful life-story of Pere Calders, the Civil War and the years of exile in Mexico were important turning points. He has written about the Civil War, in *Unitats de xoc* for example, and about exile in *L'ombra de l'atzavara*, both of which are directly connected to his personal experience. But generally speaking this experience has had a more indirect influence on his work.

—What was the longest journey you had made before the war?

—*I'd been to Montserrat.*

—Had you ever thought of choosing to live in Mexico?

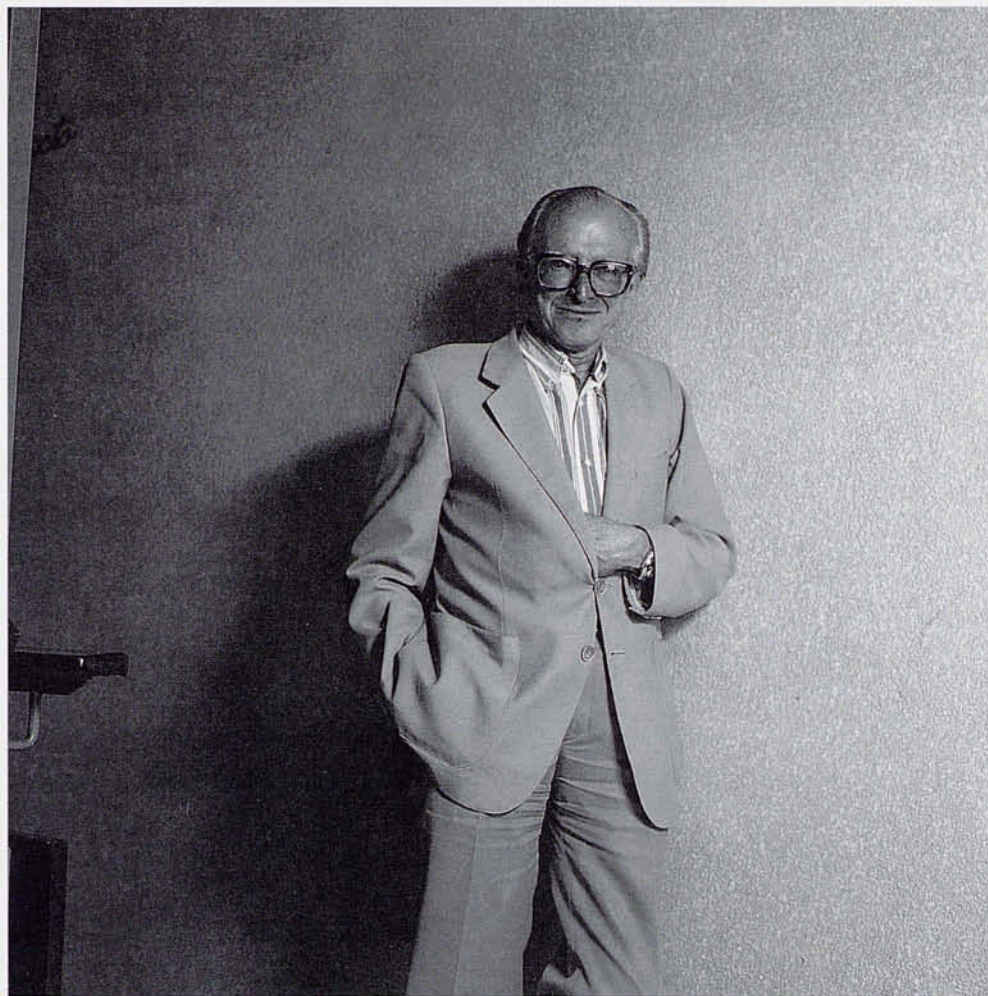
—*In those circumstances one couldn't choose. The choice was already made. Only Mexico would accept refugees without asking too many questions about their ideological background. I had always thought of Mexico as an attractive country, somewhere completely different and exotic. But I had no choice. During the first few days in France, rather too optimistically perhaps, they handed out cards asking us which country we would like to go to. Some people started to write "Canada" or "Switzerland"... But in the end there was no alternative.*

—If you had never been farther than Montserrat, Mexico must have come as a shock.

—*Of course it did. Mexico seemed like a dream country, where people did the strangest things as though they were perfectly natural. It takes some getting used to. But actually while I was in Mexico I lived in a Catalan atmosphere, both at home and at work. And I went there when I was young, with all the inquisitiveness of youth, and that helps. But even so, after I'd been there for twenty years, every time I told a taxi driver where I wanted to go, he invariably said "You're Catalan, aren't you?". Just because of my accent.*

—And what would you have written on those cards asking where you wanted to go?

—*To Catalonia. Despite all its drawbacks. But Catalonia was one of the few places we knew perfectly well we couldn't go back to yet.*



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It is no wonder that Pere Calders was already thinking about coming back to Catalonia and that, many years later, he did in fact return, although General Franco was still in power, and the Catalan language was still being persecuted and the literary options he represented—a sort of "magical realism", if one must use a label—were not fashionable among Catalan intellectuals either. When he came back to Catalonia, nobody took much notice of him. The fame, the recognition and the prizes didn't come until much later.

—Your stories don't appear to have any particular setting. I mean, the action doesn't take place in any easily recognizable location.

—*There aren't many descriptions, either of scenery or of characters. But every time my works have been adapted for the cinema, or television or the stage, they guessed what I meant, they were just as they should be. As far as the scenery is concerned, it's difficult to give a comprehensive answer. I've published over two hundred stories. But I've always imagined them taking place in a Catalan setting.*

—Catalan literature is very little known internationally and you are one of the few Catalan authors who have had at least a few works translated.

—*It would be a miracle if Catalan literature were better-known abroad, considering the abnormal situation we have had to endure. I don't think all the Catalan works that deserve to be translated have yet been translated. Bit by bit things get done, but not nearly as much as should be done. Because the works already available in translation are arousing curiosity. You feel very flattered when some Ukrainian or English or American student comes to talk to you about your works. Flattered, but also envious. Envious that their universities can send people all over the world to study even the most exotic literatures.*

Pere Calders goes through life in the guise of a bank-clerk, totally unobtrusive, never making bombastic speeches, never arousing anger, determined not to stand out. But behind his simple, almost commonplace appearance, lie some of the most unusual, individual and exportable works in the whole of Catalan literary history. ●