

There is life after a rich and productive UN Career

A HUMAN RIGHTS VETERAN EVOLVES INTO
AN ACCOMPLISHED NOVELIST



TEXT ALFRED DE ZAYAS,
UN SOCIETY OF WRITERS

Historical novels are necessary to make us understand historical realities through the perspective of fictional characters that tell us as much about history as about ourselves. Frequently we can identify with the *dramatis personae* of a well-written novel whose plot does not betray the historical context but instead makes it more immediate by highlighting the motivations and emotions of the characters.

As a professor of history at the Geneva School of Diplomacy, I can confirm that many history books are awfully tedious and necessarily incomplete, because the historian has to make a selection and sometimes by omitting crucial facts and events, the narrative becomes “*fake history*”. That is why I tell my students that history is a kind of “*political fiction*”, which does not always observe the seven C’s of history-writing: chronology, context, coherence, comprehensiveness, causality, comparison and *cui bono* (who stands to gain from an event, conflict, war, or from a particular interpretation thereof – Cicero *Pro Milone* and also *Pro Roscio Amerino*, § 84, 86).

Literary fiction also entails a selection of facts, but by interweaving them with human experiences, it passes a message at a different level of cognition. Indeed, the human person may forget chronologies and names of places, but will remember certain emotions prompted by vicariously experiencing, by internalizing the joys and woes of fictional characters. Sometimes fiction is far more interesting than reality, more meaningful to the reader, and immensely more entertaining than history textbooks.

Life after a rich and productive UN career can reveal itself as more creative and exciting. The novel being introduced here was written by a colleague from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Carmen Rosa Rueda Castañón, a superlative jurist and committed professional. When she returned to Spain, her homeland, she started a new career as an author. She has flourished. Her experience il-

lustrates that of many UN retirees who have joined academia, engaged in journalism, gone on to discover other facets of themselves. Indeed, we all have latent talents that cannot always be nurtured during our working careers because of the pressing schedules and general lack of time. However, our encounters with diplomats and politicians, our official missions to other countries, our day-to-day exchanges with colleagues provide us with a fountainhead of experiences that can be channelled into literary ventures.

Carmen had a very good mentor, Mirta Teitelbaum, former OHCHR staff member, wife of the prolific human rights defender Alejandro Teitelbaum, and a known essayist in her own right, author of fascinating short stories, many of which were published in literary journals, including the UN literary magazine *Ex Tempore*, under the name Sofia Brey¹ Mirta and Carmen were colleagues at OHCHR and it was Mirta who first discovered Carmen’s literary flair and encouraged her to write texts other than reports and draft resolutions.

Carmen has made excellent use of her retirement and last November 2023 she published her first novel *Mariposas negras sobre fondo rojo* – Black butterflies on a red background².

The title is well chosen. It refers to a historical event during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Thirty-two years ago, on the night of 25 to 26 August 1992, the Army of Bosnian Serbs fired direct artillery grenades at the Sarajevo City Hall, where the University Library was located³. The famed library burned and the pieces of scorched paper wafted in the air like butterflies. To deplore were many civilian deaths, which is much more tragic than the loss of books and manuscripts, reminiscent of the burning of the great library of Alexandria in 48 BC. It is the madness of war that brings immense suffering to humanity, whether in Dresden on 13/14 February 1945, Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, Nagasaki on 9 August 1945, at the inferno of Baghdad and Fallujah in 2003 or the Gaza and West-bank bombardments of 2024.



Another calamity of the Bosnian war was the destruction of the Mostar Bridge, also known as the Stari Most ("Old Bridge"), a 16th century Ottoman landmark that had stood for 427 years before it was destroyed on 9 November 1993 during the Croat-Bosniak War. It was reconstructed after the war following the establishment of a committee of experts by UNESCO in 1998. The Old Bridge was rebuilt with Ottoman construction techniques using local limestone and inaugurated on 23 July 2004.⁴

Carmen Rosa presented her novel at the *Salon du livre de Genève* on 8-9 March 2024 and again at the Albatros bookstore on 19 April, introduced by Dr. Gustavo Gallón, the current Ambassador of Colombia to the UN in Geneva and former UN Rapporteur on Haiti. The book can be obtained in Geneva at the Librería Albatros, in Plainpalais, Charles-Humbert 6.⁵

I do not intend to give away the plot of the novel, because I want the reader to discover this fine work of literature in all of its facets. It is not just a memoir of the war in Bosnia, which Carmen experienced in her capacity as OHCHR staff member, not just a story of war crimes and accountability, of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague (ICTY, page 139ff), of Bosnian refugees in Switzerland and the process of their integration, it is also a story of a real woman, Milena, who was received by a Geneva family and helped in the process of overcoming the trauma of losing her sister Marija during the bombardments of Sarajevo. Her foster family in Geneva put her in contact with a psychiatrist, Dr. Wollenweider (p. 80 ff), a wise and mature woman, survivor of civil war and the Argentinean junta regimes. The ex-

changes with the psychiatrist are particularly interesting, as we begin to understand the predatory in us, *homo homini lupus* (Plautus, man is a wolf to other men). This is the story of a young Muslim woman who was in love with Dragan, a Serb from Bosnia, but who eventually married Jacques, a young man from Geneva, who was madly in love with her. They had a child, a girl, Emma, who goes to school in Veyrier. Carmen also has a daughter, and her experiences at educating a child are clearly reflected in these pages.

As a professor of international law at GSD, I particularly appreciated Carmen's analysis of the legal issues involved – not in legalese, but in understandable language. She describes tense moments during the proceedings before the ICTY and the arguments pro and con punishment. We understand how young soldiers come to commit war crimes, how each of us is capable of atrocities if placed in specific situations and driven by war psychosis. We read about regret and contrition, but also about failure to come to grips with one's own guilt.

From the literary standpoint, I laud the elegant Spanish employed by Carmen in her novel. Spanish is also my mother tongue, but I could never write so beautifully. As far as literary devices, Carmen uses the flashback method and some very useful "Introspecciones" which facilitate the reading and help the reader grasp the deeper meaning of things. At the end the novel offers a cartographic annex with useful maps of the region, so that the reader can see where Sarajevo, Mostar, Banja Luka, Visegrad, etc. were located, where the frontiers between the República Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina lay, where Slovenia, Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro lie in relationship to each other.

I read the novel in one go and loved it. The book has significant potential for the film medium, since the situations are real and one can easily identify with the characters and share their emotions. That is what good art is all about: Inspiration, yearning, catharsis, love. The Spanish original deserves translation into English, French, German, etc. //

1 www.extemoire.ch

2 Carmen Rueda Castañón, MARIPOSAS NEGRAS SOBRE FONDO ROJO, Ediciones Velasco, Oviedo 2023.

3 <https://lithub.com/30-years-ago-tonight-sarajevos-national-library-was-burned-to-the-ground/>

4 <https://www.rferl.org/a/mostar-bridge-30-years-destroyed-restored/32677921.html>

5 <http://www.libreria-albatros.ch/>