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Heard in the Dark

writing and criticism by Rosie Clarke

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DAY: APRIL 17, 2015

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I have just about recovered from the excitement of the past few days. Who would think that sitting down and listening could be so exhausting? Just kidding, I remember my 'Introduction to Logic' lectures in undergraduate philosophy. Yesterday I met and caught up with my old colleague from Dalkey, Cailin, who now works for Oneworld Publishing, who are putting out Atticus Lish's

PEN/Faulkner award-winning debut 'Preparation for the Next Life,' which I am super keen to read.

Then followed three hours of seminars, each diverse and fascinating in their own ways. The LBF is a great way to experience rapid, immersive exposure to writers, theories, concepts and movements in person, rather than via blogs (as informative as these can be), reviews or journal articles.

First up was 'Breaking Misconceptions of Magical Realism: Reinventing Mexico's Literary Legacy,' featuring Jorge Volpi, Christopher Domínguez and the fantastic Juan Villoro. The three writers argued the obsolescence of magical realism in Latin American literature, the fetishization of Mexico through fixation of this outdated genre, and whether Latin American literature requires a degree of magical realism in order to avoid being "harrowing journalism disguised as literature". For me, Villoro was the star, with his wildly entertaining anecdotes regarding the innate surrealism in experiences of Mexico. However, most significantly is the question of if we, as outsider critics, should reject national labels. Magical realism, for example, stems from the foreign gaze, rather than the fact that reality in Mexico is 'magical;' Latin America is considered a "themepark of the absurd," where travellers expect to find outrageous and exciting things. Our obsession with otherness is what enables the label of magical realism to remain adhered to Mexican literature, despite its obsolescence.

I scurried down to the Literary Translation Centre for a panel discussion on 'Where are the Women Writers in Translation,' featuring Joanna Walsh, Katy Derbyshire, Carmen Boullosa and A. M. Bakalar. Obviously, as a woman not only working with translated literature but also as a critic, I am extremely interested in this issue. Asia began, proposing that the main issue facing women writers in Poland is that 'women's literature' does not receive the same critical coverage as books by men. Poland, being a patriarchal society, continues to promote stereotypes about women, and for those writing outside the genre of 'women writing for women,' so to speak, struggle to gain recognition as writers independent of their gender.

Boullosa, whose novel 'Texas: The Great Theft' is out on Deep Vellum (one of my favourite indie presses), talked about the male-dominated Latin American literature scene, revealing she had only read women in translation rather than other female LA writers until quite a late age, as the exposure for women writers in LA happened much later, via U.S. interest. For her, the issue is of LA women writers gaining respect alongside their male contemporaries. She wondered if the crises in LA had in any way restricted the number of female writers working, or achieving success.

Joanna Walsh, who is very active in promoting women writers both in English and in translation and runs the Twitter tag #readwomen, discussed the potential of social media to promote the work of women writers, and also for the

development of a women's translation prize. Walsh raised the point of the role of translators in bringing books to the attention of publishers, encouraging a proactive stance in combating this problem.

I was left with lots of ideas, and names, of people to explore both for my own reading practice and for *Asymptote*. Since starting my work there, I have become extremely concerned with the lack of representation of women writers, and am considering pitching a women-only issue—considering we are predominantly a journal of translation, this would mean engaging with female-identifying writers who also work in languages other than English, which I think could be very exciting for us.

Finally, I attended a very moving seminar on 'Machismo and Mexico's Experience of Feminism,' featuring the incredible Lydia Cacho, who is just so amazing and inspiring. She talked about the "endemic scale" of violence against women, not just in Mexico but worldwide, and how there is a resistance to discussing State machismo, and how this all stems from the construction of masculinity from a young age.

If we do not address the ways boys become men, we will never solve the problem of violence against women.

The corruption of the media is a huge problem to raising awareness of the issue of femicide and violence against women, as is the crisis of the press regarding human rights issues as a whole. We are reminded that, in the UK, most instances of (white) femicide, kidnapping and rape receive widespread media coverage, whereas in LA countries, this is very uncommon, and violence against women is systematically covered-up by the State. Furthermore, there is a challenge facing men that *are* trying to "discover new ways to be men" but living in a patriarchal, machismo society.

So, how do we create a counter-narrative? Cacho suggested a few, simple ways to react: write about women, and not just women in positions of power—*normal* women, indigenous women, women without voices. Fight with women for rights, respect, and safety. And finally, build a community of feminists, where ideas can be exchanged without fear, and young girls have a safe space to learn about their options.

All in all, very inspirational, and an opportunity for me to check my privilege as a white, British woman.

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