Eminent Maricones

Manrique, Jaime

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I didn’t set out to write this book. Soon after Manuel Puig died, I felt compelled to write down what I remembered about him as a way of clarifying what he had meant to me. In bits and pieces I composed the memoir included in this volume. But two years went by after its completion before I took any steps to get it published. In the meantime Reinaldo had died. Unbeknown to me, *Eminent Maricones* had begun to take shape.

The title is, of course, an allusion, and a kind of homage, to Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*—a book that affected my evolution as a writer. But I chose the bilingual title because it sums up what I am—a bilingual, bicultural writer—and because of the oxymoronic quality it acquires when these two words stand next to each other. *Maricón* is a word used to connote something pejorative; by implication a maricón is a person not to be taken seriously, an object of derision. Without exception, maricón is used as a way to dismiss a gay man as an incomplete and worthless kind of person.

The three writers who take up most of this book were maricones—homosexual men whose destiny was their sexual orientation. Their lives are a history of the evolution of the homosexual condition in the twentieth century, just as the subjects of Lytton Strachey’s book are a compendium of the imperialism of the Victorian age. Now, in retrospect, as this book comes to its conclusion, Puig, Arenas, and Lorca, by virtue of the lives they led, the nature of their achievements, and the substantial contributions they made to altering, and expanding, the consciousness of our culture, seem to me to be just the opposite of what a maricón is to supposed to be and is supposed to do. Puig, Arenas, and Lorca chose to live homosexual lives and to write homosexual works, when to do so was an incredible transgression. By doing what they did, by being true to who they were, they opened the path for all the Latin homosexuals who have followed in their footsteps. And they did it, it now seems clear to me, by standing in defiance of
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two of the great evils of our century: intransigent Marxism-Leninism and totalitarian fascism. One normally doesn’t think of maricones as defining their lives in opposition to forces of this magnitude. Thus Lorca’s murder, Arenas’s suicide, and Puig’s death in exile stand in crystal clear opposition to General Franco’s fascistic forty-year regime in Spain, Castro’s iron rule of almost four decades in Cuba, and the thousands who were “disappeared” by the Argentinean military in the 1970s. In their works these writers (in addition to being artists of the first rank, supreme innovators) not only spoke for the oppression of the marginal but had the cojones that many heterosexual writers lacked. And thus I arrived at the true meaning of Eminent Maricones—loca, patos, jotos—who achieved true eminence by the courageous audacity of their examples.

I want to make one final connection. The City of New York played an important role in the lives depicted in this volume, including mine. Lorca came to accept himself as a gay man in New York. After his visit to the city he wrote his most original and daring works. It was in New York that Puig escaped from the death threats he received after the publication of The Buenos Aires Affair, the first of his novels to deal with homosexuality and politics, his major themes. And it was in New York that he wrote Kiss of the Spider Woman, one of the few truly great works dealing explicitly with homosexuality and Marxism. It was also in New York that Reinaldo Arenas wrote, at the end of his life, some of the most beautiful poems by a Latin American author in the twentieth century. And it was here that he dictated, in a rage, an autobiography that is one of the most liberating works ever written and a document that serves as an indictment of what Latin American Stalinist forces, and Fidel Castro, did—not just to homosexuals but to all those who dared to be different, to dissent. Essentially, Lorca, Puig, and Arenas were that—dissenters, not joiners; visionaries, not conformists. They sought not to ally themselves with the status quo. They saw it as a force to be mistrusted because they understood that originality and true daring always inspire a desire to crush, to cage, to destroy.

It seems ironic that men whose lives ended tragically stand, in the end, as victors, as some of the most accomplished citizens of their time. Lorca I met on the page, but Puig and Arenas, whom I was privileged to know intimately, are among the noblest human beings I’ve ever met. They were unflinching in their beliefs, and their beliefs were tied in with the destiny of those who were oppressed and suffered persecution in their nations. Ultimately, they were engaged writers who defy the definition of what a maricon is supposed to be.

This book also turned out to be an autobiography of sorts. There’s much of my life that it’s not in these pages, but what there is of it—my
intellectual formation, my relationship to a few of my most important mentors, the dark night of the soul I experienced after Manuel and Reinaldo died—is also meant to be read as a triumphant statement. From my earliest childhood to today (I'm in my late forties as I write these pages) my life has been a struggle to find dignity in being a maricón. It is to Lorca and Puig and Arenas that I must give thanks. Their examples have made my path less uncertain. And it is thanks to them, to what they achieved for me, so that I could be free to not censor myself, that I can say that, as I write the last lines of this book, I am a fulfilled human being. I laugh nowadays. Often and with gusto. The world I live in is one of light and not one of darkness, and I want this book, in whatever small ways, to be an inspiration to all the maricones—and heterosexuals—who dream of being men and women capable of taking on whatever kind of windmill stands in their way. Because maricones, as the lives depicted in this book attest, can be the fiercest people.