

Behind the Mountains, Dying, Alone

Now and at the Hour of Our Death

by Susana Moreira Marques. Translated by Julia Sanches. London: And Other Stories, 2015. Paperback, 128 pp., USD \$13.95.

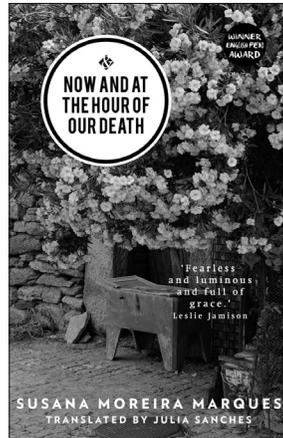
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What genre, one may ask? A mix of lyric reportage, essay, interview, travel diary/notebook, and poetry, *Now and at the Hour of Our Death* does not fit into any defined genre. Some of its features, however—nonfiction with factual descriptions or real events, meditations, and interviews—lead us to believe it to be a Portuguese variety of literary journalism. Filled with detail in a style that avoids cliché and easy emotion, in a style recognizable to literary journalism scholars, it documents a life-changing physical and emotional journey for the author that leaves no reader indifferent or remaining the same: “It was easier to get here than it will be to leave” (16).

Susana Moreira Marques, a Lisbon-based journalist for *Público* and *Jornal de Negócios*, who has also worked for the BBC World Service in London, reveals the true skill of immersion as she moves to a remote, scarcely populated rural area in northwest Portugal, on and off for five months, to accompany a palliative care team and document the experience of life on the death rail or being at its bedside. Leaving all judgment outside, she becomes a villager, a resident, sitting in hot, uncomfortable, or unpleasant places, to just listen. Her book records detailed and intimate confessions of oncologic outpatients.

Moreira Marques goes all the way to death and back, almost a near-death experience, as she witnesses the ordeals of three groups of people: patients suffering and/or dying from terminal illnesses, such as cancer; family members looking after them; and dedicated professionals taking care of them. People fit into two categories—those who are departing or those who remain—and this is a story about their love, their sharing, their affections. Going from one village to another and entering many houses, she watches, listens, and registers the daily lives of real people aware that they or their loved ones are inevitably heading to their end. She takes note of their deep, intimate feelings, emotions, and thoughts in the most severe, lonely, and slow hours of despair as they acknowledge grief and come to terms with death, trying to make it a part of life.



Death, of course, which remains a taboo in Western cultures, awaits us all from the moment we are born. Here it is portrayed as a natural part of our existence from which there is no escape. Life and death go hand in hand and intersect each other. In a tough but tender manner, Moreira Marques demonstrates that writer and reader alike, quite like everyone depicted in her book, has no hope of being ready for death, least of all, if it entails suffering. The process of dying and the grief attached to it is viewed through the sentimental and compassionate eyes of a woman. The author is a sensitive woman who reveals the workings of the minds of the dying, in their words and in the words of their beloved ones, while simultaneously sharing her own feelings through several meditations. The author enters others' intimacy, reacting to what she hears, sees, and feels, taking the reader with her.

Now and at the Hour of Our Death is an intense, enriching book about contrasts. The indignity of death is played out against the backdrop of the beautiful northern Portuguese landscape. The old local population suffers through its final days while young immigrants struggle through winter and summer. A book about the changing of times and the social and cultural world in which they live, the poor living conditions of isolated populations are highlighted through the book's focus on end-of-life issues. Indeed, not only are the older people dying, the rural way of life—even the concept of remote poor communities—is fading away. It is a portrait of a dying, isolated corner of an aged Portugal hit by desertification. The population of Trás-os-Montes (behind the mountains) is aging as young people have been leaving to find jobs in the urban areas or in other countries. The author raises awareness of the ill elderly who are left behind to die alone, and the anonymous medical professionals, true unsung heroes, who minimize their patients' suffering and give them some dignity.

A title is never chosen at random. Portugal is traditionally and predominantly Christian, a religion where death and suffering are accepted naturally as a part of life. *Now and at the Hour of Our Death*, the last sentence of the *Hail Mary* prayer shows that, for these terminally ill patients, now and the hour of our death are the same. When the seriousness of their condition is detected, they begin dying, and the issue of faith is questioned. "But what is frightening is not the thought of the unknown: it is the thought that there may not be an unknown, only an end" (17). Our senses are awakened by this moving book of quotes and observations that is divided into two parts: Travel Notes about Death, a collection of fragmented notes, anecdotes, thoughts, emotions; and Portraits, which are interview transcripts and short case studies.

No ordinary reading experience, the book might be a life-changing experience for the reader, who, once finished, will have now also faced death. There is life and death in the dying and in the surviving, inside and outside the book. The reader becomes more aware that life should be lived more fully, because the memories of these people do not necessarily die with them. The sad, empty, and hollow journey from life to death is counterbalanced by the joy, hope, and beauty of celebrating life. There is a moral lesson, to live and love, fully: "life changes completely from one day to the next, and that's when you realize that there's no use fighting wars, there's no use getting annoyed—life's too short—and it changed my way of thinking, my way of being" (56).