

## *Mejor que ficción: An Anthology of Spanish Language Literary Journalism Attempts to Prove that ‘Crónica’ Is Actually “Better Than Fiction”*

*Mejor que ficción: Crónicas ejemplares*. Edited by Jorge Carrión. Madrid: Almadía, 2022. 525 pp. €24.95; USD\$35.48.

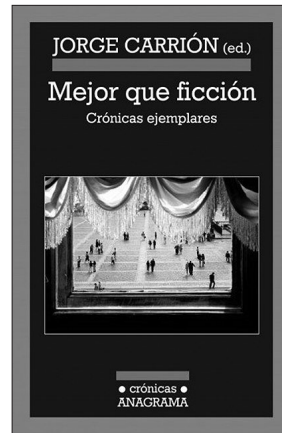
Reviewed by Roberto Herrscher, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Chile

Two decades ago, the masterful Argentine *cronista* Martín Caparrós retraced the journey that Henry Morton Stanley had taken one century earlier in search of the famous explorer David Livingston, who had disappeared in the heart of Africa. Between Zanzibar and Tanganyika, among the descendants of those who escaped being sent as slaves to America, Caparrós found the key word for his *crónica*, which bears the title of “Pole Pole in Zanzibar” (“Pole Pole. De Zanzibar a Tanganyica”).

“*Pole pole* seems to be basic Swahili *Weltanschauung*. It could be translated as ‘take it easy, living life without constraining oneself to the forced rhythms of modern culture, re-establishing a way to peaceful resistance,’” writes Caparrós in the midst of his journey, which leads him to sit under a huge tree to hear the sad, surprising conclusion of one of his sources: that in his view, the descendants of those who were taken to America as slaves have in general a much better life than those who escaped and live in today’s Africa (449).

But Caparrós’s slow-flowing text could itself be described as “*pole pole journalism*: elegantly written and paced, adjusted to its own needs, an act of peaceful resistance to the speedy news of important deeds and famous people one sees in today’s mediascape. That pace—and the way it allows for listening to what others want to say, not what they answer to the febrile questions of the reporter—is what gives us the priceless monologue of the African elder who compares the lot of his town with the life of plenty and laughter that he sees on U.S. TV. “We would be better off had we been taken as slaves,” the wrinkled man gloomily ponders (476.)

Caparrós’s text is the last in the anthology, *Mejor que ficción* (Better than fiction), which journalist, essayist, novelist, podcaster, and professor Jorge Carrión compiled in 2012 for the publisher Anagrama, the most prestigious nonfiction editorial company in Spain. After almost four decades of bringing to the Spanish-speaking public the best classics and latest surprises in nonfiction, Jorge Herralde’s Editorial Ana-



grama finally came up with an anthology of Spanish and Latin American examples of *crónica*, which showed the vitality and width of a genre at the peak of its success and prestige.

The volume, published in Barcelona, introduced to Spanish readers to literary journalists already famous across the Atlantic. To take a few examples, Leila Guerriero penned a meticulous profile of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team. Juan Villoro wrote a luminous narrative essay on the postmodern and perennial Japan. Alberto Salcedo Ramos offered one of his hilarious profiles of rural Colombia. And Pedro Lemebel lent an example of his pop, baroque, poetic, and poignant prose on the luck of poor gay folk in Chile.

The 2012 edition also brought to the fore new voices who came not from literary ambition but from the depths of the newsroom. These included Venezuelan reporter Maye Primera's heartbreaking report on misery in Haiti, Alberto Fuguet's curious interview with a seedy seller of copied DVDs who fancied himself a cultural crusader, and Edgardo Cozarinsky's pilgrimage to Tangier in search of his idol Paul Bowles, which led him to unearth an army of ghosts that come to life in a burnished, silky style.

But there was more. Unlike the competing *Antología de crónica latinoamericana actual* (Anthology of current Latin American *crónica*), which the larger publishing house Alfaguara distributed at the same time (this one the handiwork of Colombian poet Darío Jaramillo, featuring many of the same authors from the New World), Carrión's list included Spaniards such as Jordi Costa and Guillem Martínez.

Interestingly, for these mainly Barcelonan writers, the search was not outward but inward, back to their childhoods in dictator Francisco Franco's gray Spain. They introduced dark humor to their depictions of kitsch development in a country that saw itself as European but was closer to the Third World than to France or Germany. It was the "how" more than the "what" that shone in these pages, with word games that played with the language of stiff newspapers and pedantic academics.

In the ensuing decade it so happened that *crónica* became a standard journalistic mode of storytelling. Every newspaper and magazine now had their narrative journalism sections, and even Carrión himself blossomed both as an analyst (in English, for *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*; in Spanish, for *El País* and *La Vanguardia* in Spain and *Infobae* in Argentina), and as a *cronista* himself.

Carrión now writes about podcasting and has created his own podcast series, *Solaris*, which won an Ondas (the main Spanish prize for radio). He analyzes nonfiction comics and teams up with an artist to bring into existence the comic book *Los vagabundos de la chitarra* (The vagabonds of scrap). And three of his twenty books have English language versions: *Bookshops* (McLehose Press/Biblioasis), *Against Amazon* (Biblioasis), and *Madrid: Book of Books* (Ivory Press), all three translated by Peter Bush. He has written a handful of novels as well. The last one, *Membrana*, brilliantly portrayed a technological dystopia. It is to the point where one must wonder whether Carrión still believes narrative journalism is "better than fiction."

"We live in documentary times," he says, replying to the question posed. "Over the years *crónica* has been canonized (Svetlana Alexievich won the Nobel Prize; Elena

Poniatowska the Cervantes, a Spanish-language Nobel), while the public has grown accustomed to digital nonfiction (series, podcasts, digital stories, reality shows, overblown selfies). I still think that writing nonfiction is harder than writing fiction. And I believe that some true-life characters, like Vladimir Putin, for example, are more complex and harder to grasp than literary characters.”

With these ideas Carrión approached the new Mexican publisher Almadia to propose a new version of *Mejor que ficción*, with five additional texts and a second prologue aimed at all Spanish-speaking countries. The anthology now boasts twenty-five *crónicas* written by authors from seven different countries—Argentina, Chile, Perú, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Spain. And, significantly, the five new authors are women: three Mexicans (Marcela Turati, Cristina Rivera-Garza, and Eileen Truax), one Ecuadorian (Sabrina Duque), and one Cuban (Mónica Baró). With this attempt to be more inclusive, the gender playing field is a little more even: ten out of twenty-five (forty percent), instead of the five out of twenty in the first version (twenty percent).

Reading the new edition from beginning to end, the feeling is at once exhilarating and disconcerting because of the sheer variety and dispersion of voices, stories, and treatments. But if these texts have one thing in common, it is the playful—and sometimes painful—slowness with which all these stories move forward. It is as if each author tried to follow to the bitter end the intricate path of a character, an event, a group. There are no common formulas, just *pole pole*.

Of the five new stories, only Duque’s does not feature horror prominently. Her text is a precise, poetic profile of a sound artist who creates landscapes for listening and cannot bear noise. All the others are about women who are killed by men, or refugees, or political massacres. In the case of Mónica Baró, it is the tragic story of those who believed in Castro’s revolution in Cuba and were forced to demolish their own homes to make way for the road that took the dictator’s remains to his final resting grounds.

The old introduction and the new prologue are inspiring and erudite to read. They give way to twenty-five stories jumbled in happy confusion, not following any chronological, geographic, or thematic order. In other words, the reader may not want to seek meaning in their exact placement. We travel from a personal anecdote to the explanation of a perverse economic system; from the style of a newspaper of record to that of a personal memoir; from an explosion of emotional, poetic prose to the austerity of facts and voices, where the feelings are left to us to decipher.

And there is no prevailing tradition or “voice,” as one sees in *The New Yorker*, *Gatopardo*, *Etiqueta Negra*, *El Malpensante*, or the Sunday magazine of *La Vanguardia*. And perhaps that is what ‘*pole pole* journalism’ should look like: an escape from the fast lane of current news to find what one was not looking for or expecting.

Is it better than fiction? Who knows, because fiction today has also spread its margins and embraced tools and voices from journalism and the arts and sciences, as Carrión well knows and practices. But, as Jorge Luis Borges once said of an imaginary map, this book may well cover a field as vast as the territory it attempts to describe.