



## Written Lives

*Javier Marías , Margaret Jull Costa (Translator)*

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An affectionate and very funny gallery of twenty great world authors from the pen of "the most subtle and gifted writer in contemporary Spanish literature" (*The Boston Globe*).

In addition to his own busy career as "one of Europe's most intriguing contemporary writers" (*TLS*), Javier Marías is also the translator into Spanish of works by Hardy, Stevenson, Conrad, Faulkner, Nabokov, and Laurence Sterne. His love for these authors is the touchstone of *Written Lives*. Collected here are twenty pieces recounting great writers' lives, "or, more precisely, snippets of writers' lives." Thomas Mann, Rilke, Arthur Conan Doyle, Turgenev, Djuna Barnes, Emily Brontë, Malcolm Lowry, and Kipling appear ("all fairly disastrous individuals"), and "almost nothing" in his stories is invented.

Like Isak Dinesen (who "claimed to have poor sight, yet could spot a four-leaf clover in a field from a remarkable distance away"), Marías has a sharp eye. Nabokov is here, making "the highly improbable assertion that he is 'as American as April in Arizona,'" as is Oscar Wilde, who, in debt on his deathbed, ordered up champagne, "remarking cheerfully, 'I am dying beyond my means.'" Faulkner, we find, when fired from his post office job, explained that he was not prepared "to be beholden to any son-of-a-bitch who had two cents to buy a stamp." Affection glows in the pages of *Written Lives*, evidence, as Marías remarks, that "although I have enjoyed writing all my books, this was the one with which I had the most fun."

## Written Lives Details

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## Alejandro Saint-Barthélemy says

Tanto en su comentario sobre Rimbaud como sobre Mishima (sobre todo este último) Marías se deja en ridículo, como artista y como lector:

1) Rimbe, sus superdotes y su crueldad son indivisibles, y si se dedicó más a leer, escribir, vagabundear, drogarse, los idiomas y «el piano» que a escalar en el mundo de las letras, es porque fue Arthur Rimbaud, no Pere Gimferrer o algún poetastro o poetisa hipster contemporáneo de nuestra jodida España, y estaba a otras cosas (lo intentó con su carta a Banville para publicar en su periódico y poco más [de su arribismo de aldeano genial habla bien Michon en « Rimbaud le fils »]). Se tiene la sensación de que Marías, catedrático muy culto y muy bueno en su oficio como artesano y novelista al uso, envidia el talento genuino de Rimbaud (esta dicotomía la leí en el diario de Gide y me marcó indeleblemente: «Leyendo el sexto canto de Lautréamont me doy cuenta de que mis libros son el producto de la cultura y los años; quizás no haya nacido para esto»).

2) Lo de Mishima tiene más delito aún (aunque juega a la misma crítica del genio), pues Marías desconoce (eso parece) un par de cosas muy importantes: la relación epistolar de Mishima y Kawabata durante veinticinco años y que el propio Kawabata consideraba a Mishima mejor escritor que él, así que eso de que Mishima se fue a darle la enhorabuena a Kawabata por el Nobel resentido, bueno, que todas las envidias sean educadas y provengan de alguien considerado superior por el propio y supuestamente envidiado, Dios mío, y qué bien nos iría. Mishima fue un narcisista de cuidado, pero, al contrario que Marías, no fue un mero escritor conocedor de su oficio, sino un chiflado genial lleno de talento y ante cuyas obras como «El marino que perdió la gracia del mar» o su tetralogía «El mar de la fertilidad» uno no puede evitar rendirse lleno de admiración y asombro ante tal despliegue de inteligencia, profundidad, belleza y calidad literaria. No haber leído a Mishima, Rimbaud, Mann, etc., sería una mancha en cualquier expediente literario; no se puede decir lo mismo de Marías (o cualquier otro escritor hispanoamericano de los últimos decenios, piedras de sentido común más sosas que la una jugando a artistas).

El problema que tiene Marías con escritores narcisistas, ególatras, megalómanos... me parece muy pueril, pues todos esos pavos reales tenían de veras motivos para pavonearse, y es que, por mucho que estar atascado en el ego de uno sea ulteriormente siempre necio, al menos es racional, y cuando no, uno no es un gran artista narcisista sino un fatuo sin talento (ese tipo de ego sí que es insoportable y no el de un Rimbaud o Joyce).

¿Por qué la literatura hispanoamericana es tan mala? ¿Por qué todo el mundo lee al chalado de Houellebecq (o, mejor dicho, por qué es tan bueno) y a la mayoría de doctores letrudos hispanoamericanos no?

César Aira (creed a Vila-Matas cuando dice que la mejor literatura de habla hispana sale de Argentina y no de Hispanoamérica) da en el clavo:

*Muchas veces me he preguntado por qué hay tan pocos escritores realmente buenos. Esa escasez no debería darse por sentada. Creo que se debe a que un escritor (un artista, en general) necesita tener al mismo tiempo dos cualidades opuestas e incompatibles: ser inteligente y razonable, y estar loco. Lo primero es necesario para aprender a escribir libros, que no es tan fácil como parece, para hacerlos publicar, y hasta para organizar su vida de modo de poder seguir escribiendo. Pero para que valga la pena tiene que haber esa chispa de locura, o al menos de rareza, de la que puede salir lo nuevo. Es muy difícil que las dos cosas se den en el mismo individuo. O es sólo inteligente y razonable, en cuyo caso escribirá convencionales libros inteligentes y razonables; o será sólo loco, y no podrá llegar a escribir. Cuando es las dos cosas*

*superlativamente, hay un Kafka.*

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### **Hakan T says**

Javier Marias, geç ke?fetti?im ama ne yazd?ysa zevkle okudu?um bir yazar. Kurmaca olmayan bu kitab?, baz? ünlü yazarlar?n s?rad??? bir ?ekilde kaleme al?nm?? k?sa ya?amöykülerinden olu?uyor. Sevdi?iniz baz? yazarlar?n i?nelenmesine de haz?rl?kl? olun. Ama bunun akademik bir kitap olmad???n? da hat?r?n?zdan ç?karmay?n. Sonuçta, keyifle okunan ama kesinlikle hafif/s?? olmayan, edebiyata ilgi duyanlar?n duyars?z kalamayaca??, birçok ilginç bilgi de edinebilece?i, yeni yazarlar ke?fetmenizi de sa?layabilecek bir kitap.

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### **Yücel Batu says**

Yakla??k iki senedir bekletti?im bir kitapt?. Her yaz mutlaka bir toplu biyografi kitab? okumaya çal???yorum. Aç?kças? kitab?n yazar? Javier Marias olunca beklenim biraz yükseltti. Bu nedenle üç y?ld?z veriyorum.

Geçen sene Elliot Engel'in Oscar Nas?l Wilde Oldu isimli derlemesini okumu? ve çok be?enmi?tim. Bu tarz, toplu biyografi kitab? okuma niyetindeyseniz öncelikle onu tavsiye ederim.

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### **Lee says**

Enjoyable little book of portraits of mostly very famous writers. Took me longer than I thought it would since I usually read it in bed and usually put it down and turned off the light before pushing on to the next writer. I liked how Henry James and Ford Maddox Ford and Oscar Wilde and others were strung through the text, like a Bolano book about real writers. Not too much to say about it since it doesn't really present an argument etc other than stray, not so immortalized moments in the lives of these writers. Makes me want to read Djuana Barnes and James and Ford Maddox Ford and Emily Bronte and Robert Lewis Stevenson.

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### **Ben Winch says**

I enjoyed this. I think Marias is in his element here. It's frequently funny and sometimes moving, and what's more it's *straight to the point*. For example, from the end of the Oscar Wilde piece:

He lies in the Paris cemetery of Pere Lachais, and on his grave, presided over by a sphinx, there is never any shortage of the flowers due to all martyrs.

Now that's beautiful. That's a homage. It's graceful, not flashy, not indulgent, and it gets the point across. I don't even like Wilde much and it choked me up. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, take the piece on Joseph Conrad – it's downright hilarious:

Conrad was so irritable that whenever he dropped his pen, instead of picking it up at once and

carrying on writing, he would spend several minutes exasperatedly drumming his fingers on the desk as if bemoaning what had occurred.

Ha! I can just see it. So too when Henry James is pontificating so long and intently to two friends while out walking his dog that he doesn't notice the dog has circled the three men several times with its long leash and trapped them. Or the 'black mass' in the piece on Laurence Sterne, during which a baboon 'leapt onto the shoulders of the celebrant, Lord Sandwich, and was assumed to be the Devil himself'. Rilke's obsession with noblewomen, Joyce's terror of storms, Mann's meticulous recording of bowel movements in his journal – the details Marias focuses on here are almost all telling, like little keys to hidden parts of biographies too often told in 500-page tomes as indulgent as Thomas Mann's diaries. (God, it's hilarious when some young American praises *Death in Venice* to the skies and Mann, trying to be modest, says, 'After all, relatively speaking, I was still a beginner. A beginner of genius but still a beginner.')

In many ways, this resembles Borges – his brief essays on writers, or the biographical portraits from *A Universal History of Infamy*. But whereas Borges – in those pieces – is too often epigrammatic, Marias never taunts us with riddles or *too much* brevity. The telling detail is his speciality. His 7 pages on Lampedusa, for instance, give a balanced and touching portrait of that introspective man, based mostly around his daily routine of reading, browsing the local bookshop and sitting for hours outside a certain cafe, his habit of carrying several books with him in a rucksack with cakes and tobacco wherever he went, and his kind, meticulous education of a younger friend (who went on to become a respected critic) in English literature via a series of essays which he sweated over (he described his piece on Byron as 'an utter abomination') and never seems to have considered publishing. With lightness and deftness Marias makes this look easy, something which I have rarely seen done before (Antonio Tabucchi's piece on Antero de Quental is similar, but even Tabucchi pulled off this feat only once), and which I therefore must presume is anything but easy.

This is fun. It's a breeze. It's thought-provoking and educational. Only one thing troubles me: if he can write like this why doesn't he do it more often? After recently having finished *All Souls*, I looked at *The Dark Back of Time* and it appeared like quicksand, a glut of words saying (at least judging by the first chapter) far less than a few well-placed phrases in this little gem of a book, and sucking me quickly into a kind of infuriated questing 'Tell me more! Quickly!' attitude of reading which I did not relish. Contrast that with his epitaph on Kipling:

He was admired and read, but perhaps not very loved, although no-one ever said a word against him as a person.

Or with his piece on Joyce, in which after detailing at length one of Joyce's many interrogations of his wife Nora concerning her sexual practices ('I have been trying to picture you frigging... How do you do it? Do you stand against the wall with your hand tickling up under your clothes or do you squat down on the hole with your skirts up... Do you come in the act of shitting or do you frig yourself off first and then shit?') – in which after all of this and more Marias writes:

No-one can deny that Joyce was a scrupulous man with a love of detail.

Senior Marias, as an Anglophile you'd know the saying: brevity is the soul of wit. And judging by *Written Lives*, when you're not trying to break the record for the most subordinate clauses in a sentence, you're a witty man. Bravo, sir. Now, show us again how it's done?

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### Fionnuala says

*Written Lives* is extremely readable, mostly interesting and just a little disturbing.

Javier Marías is so cunningly selective about the details of the various writers' lives he examines in these brief pieces that the portraits he reveals are quite artfully and quite thoroughly distorted. And speaking of distortion, I must mention André Carillho's cover art: three clever and funny caricatures of Oscar Wilde, James Joyce and R L Stevenson in suitably sepia tones.

The penetrating insights in *Written Lives* vary from tender to coolly objective, from stealthily critical to openly disparaging. But even when Marías is tender, there is ruthlessness beneath. He is like a sadistic lover, having his wicked way with this group of writers, some of whom he may love, but surely, only a little. He mentions Giuseppe di Lampedusa's advice to his nephew: "Cave obdurantionem cordis" (beware the hardened heart, or something similar). The phrase strikes me as a very suitable warning to Marías himself.

The final essay, *Perfect Artists*, a sort of addendum to *Written Lives*, is quietly excellent and almost free of any irony or desire to humiliate (I say 'almost' because he implies that these artists are 'perfect' because they are dead). In this final essay, Marías examines a set of images of a selection of writers, some of whom already featured in *Written Lives*. His analysis of these images, his ability to draw intelligent conclusions from the position of a hand, the direction of an eye, is simply brilliant.

Marías admits to omitting Spanish authors but gives a very vague excuse for this omission. Maybe he is afraid of hometown ghosts?

In case I've put anyone off reading *Written Lives*, here's a little snippet about Emily Brontë to whet your appetite: *Afterwards, she went down to the living room and there, sitting on the sofa, she died at two o'clock in the afternoon, having refused to go back to bed. She was only thirty years old and she wrote nothing more.*

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### leighcia says

Sometimes you have to know when to put a book down. This book is one of those books that I didn't really want to stop reading but decided that I should, because it didn't really have anything substantial to offer. It would have been mildly entertaining but probably not worth my time. I spotted this in a bookstore and it seemed interesting – a collection of brief 3-5 page biographies or snapshots of famous authors, revealing their strange habits and tendencies. I read about 2-3 biographies and found them amusing, but not particularly enthralling or illuminating. This book is more a collection of pleasant magazine reading to pass your time before diving in something more engaging.

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### Mike Puma says

Ah, Javier, you wonderful bastard—so well-read, so capable an author, so Marías-ish—so capable of *doing* what you write about (I'll come back to that).

In *Written Lives*, Marías paints brief portraits of many well-known authors, weaving in information that is less well-known, creating wonderful stories that supplement the biographies most of us will never read. Aspects of lives are emphasized, humanizing (or dehumanizing) these artists, in forms that will linger, haunt, and inform our reading of said authors, probably, forever.

But, you don't care about that...the beauty...you're anxious for the salacious, the morbid, the gossip, and, honestly, that'll be more fun to write about anyway.

In the book's Prologue, JM states:

"Far from being a hagiography, and far, too, from the solemnity with which artists are frequently treated, these *Written Lives* are told, I think, with a mixture of affection and humour. The latter is doubtless present in every case, the former, I must admit, is lacking in the case of James Joyce, Mann, and Mishima."

And with that in mind:

### **James Joyce and His Poses:**

As a young man, he was already rather pompous and full of himself, concerned with what he would write and with his early (and, later, perennial) hatred of Ireland and the Irish. When he had still written only a few poems, he asked his brother Stanislaus: "Don't you think there is a certain resemblance between the mystery of the Mass and what I am trying to do? I mean that I am trying in my poems to give people some kind of intellectual pleasure or spiritual enjoyment by converting the bread of daily life into something that has a permanent artistic life of its own...for their mental, moral, and spiritual uplift." When he was older his comparisons may have been less eucharistic and more modest, but he was always convinced of the extreme importance of his work, even before it existed.

"Even before it existed"—nice, huh? He goes on to say:

"James Joyce appears to have been one of those artists who so ostentatiously adopt the pose of genius that they end up persuading their contemporaries and several generations more that they not only are geniuses, but that they always—indubitably and irremissibly—were. In keeping with this pose, he was famous because he did not care whether people read him or not..."

Now I'll wager you thought JM was going to dredge up Joyce's coprophilia, in fact, there's merely a mention of it. If you absolutely must know more about JJ's interest in Nora's dirty knickers, you'll just have to read the Letters.

### **Thomas Mann in His Suffering**

What seems certain is that the one area in which Thomas Mann never raised a laugh (not even a forced one) was in his private life, at least to judge by his letters and diaries, which are dreadfully serious. The latter, of course, were only published in 1975, twenty years after his death, and once you have read them, there seems to be only three possible reasons for their delay: to keep people waiting and give himself airs, to prevent people from knowing too soon that he couldn't keep eyes off young men, and so that no one would know the trouble he had with his stomach, and how fundamental to him these vicissitudes (his stomach's, I mean) were.

As one might imagine, JM then seems to have some fun giving multiple examples of TM's boy fetish and intestinal turmoil documentation and proving that TM was a gasbag both figuratively and literally. 'Nuff said.

### **Yukio Mishima in Death**

The death of Yukio Mishima was so spectacular that it has almost succeeded in obliterating the many other stupid things he did in his life, as if his previous non-stop exhibitionism had been merely a way getting people's attention for the culminating moment, doubtless the only one that really interested him. That, at least, is how we must see it, as coming from his deep-rooted fascination with violent death, which—if the victim was young and had a good body—he considered to be the height of beauty.

Following a description of Mishima's incredible paranoia of being poisoned, even while fantasizing of cannibalizing a young, athletic friend (apparently his friend wasn't perceived as poisonous), we learn:

This erotic fascination with manly bodies tortured, dismembered, flayed, butchered or impaled had marked Mishima since adolescence. He was immodest enough as a writer to ensure that posterity was kept au fait with his ejaculations, from which one must deduce that he lay great store by them, and so we are obliged to know that he had his first ejaculation while contemplating a reproduction of St. Sebastian whom Guido Reni had painted pierced with arrows.

JM goes on to relate the contortions YM went to when he heard that the Nobel had finally been awarded to a Japanese writer.

He organized his return from a tour to coincide with the date on which the decision would be announced, and reserved a VIP suite in a downtown hotel. However, when the plane landed and he was the first to emerge, laughing and smiling, he found the airport plunged in gloom because the prize had gone to some wretched Guatemalan. A year later, his depression only deepened: the Nobel prize did, at last, go to Japan, but to his friend and teacher Yasunari Kawabata. Mishima opted for a bit of reflected glory; he rushed to Kawabata's house so as to be the first to be seen congratulating him and at least appear in the photos.

Poor bastard.

Lest one think all the entries in *Written Lives* are author bashing, legend busting diatribes, most are favorable even while exploiting some of the authors' individual quirks. Among the authors included: Faulkner, Conrad, Dinesen, Henry James, Conan Doyle, Turgenev, Nabokov, Rilke, Lowry, Kipling, Rimbaud, Djuna Barnes, Wilde, Sterne, Emily Brontë, et al. Additionally, there is an essay including a sequence of author portraits which JM interprets in the manner that Deza might in the Your Face Tomorrow sequence (I said I'd get back to that). Very nice.

4.5 stars, rounded down, because there weren't more authors, covered or exposed.

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**Jonfaith says**

Written Lives is a twisted triptych, composed of disparate elements, forces which may be at cross-purposes. The first section is a series of slim portraits of established authors. Marias tends to judge favorably on those not burdened with self-importance. He likes the quiet ones, those that shunned self-promotion and didn't think of themselves in terms of immortality. this section has a certain commonality with Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts but more geekily indulgent than James's masterful assemblage: Marias doesn't profess a moral agenda.

The middle section concerns a handful of female authors (there are a number of women in the first section) most of whom I was unaware. Outside of Emily Bronte, most of these people are footnotes in the history of letters. This section proved more evocative, at least to me - it was rather expository.

The final element was an essay on the portraits of authors. This coincides with Sebaldian photographs on every page. This may be the kernel of an abandoned book: an inquiry along the lines of Susan Sontag.

Written Lives was a satisfying diversion, sufficiently steeped with anecdotes for future larding and bereft of anything too harsh.

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### **Deniz Balc? says**

Büyük bir yazarla ba?ka büyük yazarlar?n g?ybetini yap?yormu? hissini ya?at?yor bu kitap. Marias seçmesinde, özellikle ?uan hayatta olmayan yazarlar? ele alm?? ve onlar? bir roman karakteri gibi i?leme?. Yazarlar?n pek bilinmeyen yönlerini dokunulmazl?klar?n? ortadan kald?rarak esprili ama di?er yandan dokundurun bir dille anlatm??. Ancak Yukio Mishima'ya yazd??? bölüm beni ciddi anlamda sinirlendirdi:) Bu kadar zavall? bir yorumu yapt??? için hayal k?r?kl?na u?rad?m da diyebilirim. Zaten oldukça öznel olan metinlerde, özellikle Joyce ve Mishima özelinde, bana kal?rsa k?skaçl?k net bir ?ekilde hissediliyor. Listeye Dostoyevski, Proust, Tolstoy, Goethe, Woolf gibi yazarlar? almamas?n?n sebebinin de onlar? kötüleme konusunda elinin kolanun ba?l? olmas? oldu?unu dü?ünüyorum. Mann ve Mishima bölümleri gibi yerleri saymazsam güzel bir kitapt?.

?yi okumalar!

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### **MJ Nicholls says**

My alternative to pumpkin soup and pop-culture clichés on this, The Halloweenshire of Hollowness. Bitesize essays on a limousine of luminaries, plus some titbits on unknown promiscuous darlings of the demimonde. The final essay, 'Perfect Artists' is an illuminating gloss on famous author portraits. Marías plucks out the pertinent data and serves his musings in a coulis of wit and irony. A charming ickle stocking filler for the literate pater in your life. See Mike's review for some scrumptious selections. Published in the Brattish Isles by Canongate, who sometimes sprout a set of balls and print something original.

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## **Mark says**

"[Yukio Mishima] was immodest enough as a writer to ensure that posterity was kept au fait with his ejaculations, from which one must deduce that he lay great store by them; and so we are obliged to know that he had his first ejaculation whilst contemplating a reproduction of the torso of St. Sebastian whom Guido Reni had painted pierced with arrows. It is therefore not surprising that, as an adult, he was given to having artistic-cum-muscleman photographs taken of himself, and that he appeared in one of them in the same garb, that is, with a coarse white cloth knotted loosely about his loins and with a couple of arrows stuck in his sides, his arms aloft and his wrists bound with rope. This last detail is not without importance, given that his favorite masturbatory image (which he was also kind enough to record) were armpits, very hairy and, one fears, very smelly. This famous photograph must, therefore, have served his narcissism well."

And so on and so on and so on. (Plus: I never thought I'd find someone who put as much stock in author photos as I do.)

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## **M. Sarki says**

A thoroughly enjoyable read that held much promise. I was looking ever so forward to the last section being right up my alley with Javier Marías using old postcards and such of authors to gaze at and then muse over what may or may not have been going on that particular day with each of them. But the last section proved to be a bit of a disappointment for me as it did not live up to my perhaps extravagant and unreliable expectations. But I really did like the book as a whole and I shall give it three and a half stars rounded up to four if only because of one very good idea that perhaps needed a bit more fleshing out in order to satisfy me more.

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## **Abigail says**

This is a lovely little book of vignettes. The lives of great (or, at least, greatly interesting) authors are boiled down to two or three page glimpses. Marías' comedic timing is impeccable and welcome in relief to the poignant and sometimes tragic details of each biography.

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## **Sketchbook says**

"Don't blame it on my heart,  
blame it on my youth."

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## **Stephen Durrant says**

While reading Javier Marías' "Written Lives," Italo Calvino's "Invisible Cities" kept popping into my mind. On the surface the two books have little in common, except that each is made up of a series of short pieces.

Marias presents short lives of twenty famous writers (Faulkner, Conrad, Sterne, Dinesen, etc.) and six "fugitive women," all either writers or with strong connections to writers (Vernon Lee, Julie de Lespinasse, etc.), along with a short essay on writers' portraits; Calvino imagines a series of cities, presented as places visited by Marco Polo, each with some highly unusual, exotic quality. I suppose what provokes this apparently incongruous connection is the sense Marias' lives are as incredible and eccentric as Calvino's purely imagined cities. That is, the truth of the human personality is as fully bizarre as even the best wrought fantasy. The Spaniard, Javier Marias, is one of the most original novelists writing today (I particularly enjoyed the novel "Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me"). He is obviously fascinated with the lives of those who have populated the literary world and here explores their strange and often sad lives with considerable humor and sympathy--sympathy, that is for all but the three personalities he says he just could not like: Joyce, Mann, and Mishima. How can one not enjoy a book with insights like the following. On Henry James: "In his zeal for clarity, his speech became utterly oblique and obscure, and, on one occasion, when referring to a dog, and wishing to avoid the actual word, he ended up defining it as 'something black, something canine'" (p.37). On Mann: "According to Thomas Mann, any novel that lacked irony was, by definition, dull, and he, of course, believed his own novels were shot through with it, a rather extraordinary belief for anyone who has read his most famous epics" (p. 64). On Rilke: "Like any good poet, Rilke did a lot of communing, not just with animals, but with the stars too, with the earth, trees, gods, monuments, paintings, heroes, minerals, the dead (especially with women who had died young and in love), and rather less with his living fellow men" (p. 83). And on Malcolm Lowry: "Lowry does seem to have been the most calamitous writer in the whole history of literature, which is no mean feat, given the intense competition in the field" (p. 86). Something delightful and/or troubling can be found on every page. And one ends by feeling mildly grateful to have no literary talent.

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### **Jim Fonseca says**

There are many works that are collections of mini-biographies of authors – I recently reviewed John Sutherland's Lives of the Authors. What makes this one different, and intriguing, is that Marias paints each writer with a few quick brushstrokes, making us feel like we know them without having to slog through a 500-page biography. Kipling was marked by his upbringing in India, and was mostly friendless and humorless; well-liked but not loved. Every Henry James was irritated with him. Or the author focuses on the life from the perspective of a snapshot – Isak Dinesen in old age, living alone in her childhood home, smoking like a chimney until her death at age 77; throwing manic-depressive fits of rage. About two-dozen authors are profiled, mainly big-name English and American authors from the late 1800's through the mid-1900's.

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### **Ben Loory says**

picked this book up on a whim at the used bookstore because of the cover; one of the best \$4.95's i ever spent. i tend to shy away from literary biographies (or artistic biographies in general) because they always seem to flatten my heroes down into mean and angry little reality-bound drunkards... either that or blow them up into saints and tell you in endless detail what kinds of dish soap they used and stuff like that. this is exactly neither of those things: instead it's a collection of twenty extremely short, satirical-but-loving portraits in which the genius of the writers is fully embraced and explored but never used as an excuse for

their frankly abominable actions. it's almost like these are character sketches for some of the best (most conflicted) characters ever invented. halfway through it suddenly occurred to me that whoever wrote this book was one hell of a writer, so i turned it over and read on the back that despite the fact that i've never heard of him, this guy javier marias is spain's foremost writer and always in contention for the nobel prize! so on the downside, i'm an ignoramus, but on the plus side, now i have someone to root for when nobel season rolls around next year! pretty excited about that. moving on next to his *A Heart So White*. haven't been this excited about a living writer since sebald died in 2001.

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### **Justin Evans says**

Marias holds a cigarette, that is nearly burned out, between the index and middle fingers of his left hand--if he holds it for much longer, he'll burn his fingers, but perhaps he's too intent on the viewer to really care. That burn would also match well with what looks like an insect bite on the back of his hand. However, it's doubtful that he would care about that, either, since he seems to be wearing the kind of clothes worn by a man who wears the same kind of clothes every day: white shirt, neat but not overly well cared for, and a dark blazer. His left eye squints at us, while his right is slightly more open, and his mouth is held in such a manner as to suggest that he is investigating us intently. This could be sinister, but his white sideburns and ruffled, longish dark hair give the lie to that--in fact, he's waiting for us to accept his offer of a drink. Sit down--let's talk about writers.

This is a charming collection of *jeux d'esprit*--biographies and character sketches. It's as if the spies in *Your Face Tomorrow* were to describe famous writers based on a photograph or two, and some additional biographical information: so, not all that objective, but nonetheless insightful. I was glad to hear that Marias dislikes Joyce, since I dislike him too, but sad to learn that he dislikes Mann, and also to learn that he likes Conrad. I can't help but feel that Marias himself is biased against authors who both i) proclaim themselves geniuses and ii) have elaborate sexual fantasies. Because he dislikes Joyce, Mishima and Mann, but likes many authors who proclaim themselves geniuses (e.g., Nabokov). Maybe if J, M and M had acted more on their sexual urges, rather than writing about them in journals and letters, they would have met with softer treatment.

Anyway, this is for fun, and you should ignore the reviews complaining that it isn't fair, or objective, or scholarly, or wide-ranging enough. It's just for fun.

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### **Tyler Jones says**

I love books like Bolano's *Nazi Literature in the Americas* and *Bartleby and Company* by Villa Matas - books containing mostly fictional biographies - descriptions of lives not lived.

Marias does something in the same spirit here but stays strictly in the realm of the non-fictional. Marias is only happy to pass judgement: Joyce was a pervert, Mann was unbearably arrogant and Mishima spectacularly stupid. Such pronouncements are rare in the rather dry world of literary biography but with the exception of these three authors Marias shows remarkable sympathy for his subjects. Sure, Faulkner was an asshole - but he is portrayed in such a way as to be a *likable* asshole. Everyone who has ever worked in the retail or food service industry can understand his distaste for working in a post office and being "beholden to any son-of-a-bitch with two cents to buy a stamp." Given the Marias treatment, Lowry becomes a *likable*

hideous drunk and Henry James a *likable* pompous windbag.

This is not to say Marias dwells only on character flaws. The lives of Oscar Wilde of Julie de Lespinasse are drawn with touching affection.

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