

“Spanish Fly By Night” (December 1988, p. 36); review of *City of Marvels* by Carlos Mendoza

At one point in *City of Marvels*, Onofre Bouvila, the main character, declares that we poor People have only two alternatives: honesty and the pain of humiliation, or wickedness and the pain of guilt. At the time he is the richest man in Spain, and while he thinks himself evil, the world is more evil still. He feels no guilt for the crimes he’s committed in his rise from minor hoodlum to feared businessman with a fortune made from munitions in the First World War. The chronicle of Bouvila’s meteoric career is paired with a history of Barcelona, the setting for most of the book, and it is quickly apparent that Bouvila plays a secondary role to the city. While Barcelona’s secret life could not be revealed without a leading character like him, Bouvila could not exist without Barcelona. The city is most aptly the source for Mendoza’s title, and it is a magic creation, the ‘real’ Barcelona made mythic in a manner that will have some people re-reading Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Both writers show elaborate care for the settings of their works, at times even more care than they show their surreal characters.

Characterization certainly doesn’t concern Mendoza. In the year 1887, when the novel begins, Onofre Bouvila is thirteen, and when the novel ends in 1929 he talks and thinks in much the same fashion as when first introduced, even after his varied experiences in the intervening years. His feelings are expressed primarily through the sympathetic narrator, who regards indulgently Bouvila’s pursuit of success, an attitude which differs sharply both from the mocking, ironic tones used when describing politicians and royalty, and from the detached and restrained manner when Bouvila’s father and brother are the focus of attention. Most characters are stereotypes such as the Barcelona mayor who believes an angel visited him with the solution to his city’s housing troubles. The ‘angel’ was in fact the devil who claimed the man’s soul after he killed himself in despair because no one would support his fantastic and unworkable Enlargement Plan for Barcelona. Several thumbnail sketches like that lend minor characters a touching and amusing humanity, making one wonder if in keeping characterization to a minimum, Mendoza has missed opportunities for fruitful exploration. What he does relate often tantalizes the reader, but violent death cuts short most characters’ lives.

*City of Marvels* is perhaps too long for the comic material to be sustained, but Mendoza must be congratulated for writing an entertaining book which suffers little in translation. To précis his novel would be to reduce it to a series of escapades, inadequately acknowledging Mendoza’s most vivid creation, *his* Barcelona, a city besieged by war, pestilence, freakish climatic conditions, racketeering and appalling poverty. Such things, to paraphrase John Dos Passos, provide a good breeding season for the fiction of Mendoza.