



Interview ▶ We talk to the writer Laura Casanovas, winner of the 2023 Carlemany Award for t



Laura Casanovas

Writer and teacher of Catalan

«When someone tells me that they liked my novel, I feel that there is also a piece of me that has captivated them»

EL PERIÒDIC
ESCALDES-ENGORDANY
@alexmonteroo97

Born in La Seu d'Urgell, settled in El Ges for fourteen years with her family and graduated in Catalan Philology, Laura Casanovas Borrell would define herself as a great lover of books. This year she won the Carlemany Prize 2023 with her second novel, *Les estrelles de Lilith*, and from EL PERIÒDIC we were able to talk to her about this milestone, as well as her passion for writing and her literary career, among many other topics.

–What do books mean to you?

–For me, books and reading are my great passions. I am a great reader and I think that reading makes us wiser, freer, and more critical, but above all happier. Encouraging reading is synonymous with promoting the happiness of people and of society as a whole. As a teacher of Catalan, I always encourage people to read and, in addition, I am in two reading clubs: LiterArt in Escaldes-Engordany and another in Canillo.

–Where does this passion for the literary world come from?

–From a very young age there were many books in my house, but there weren't many children's books because it wasn't the usual. I looked at adult novels and wished I could read them all, a wish that over time I have been able to fulfill. Since I was able to start doing it for myself I haven't stopped and I still keep intact the illusion of being told stories.

–What led you to make to writing?

–I started writing diaries at a very young age, writing what happened to me and what I felt. I never taught them and never will, but I was like that from 11 to 35. There came a time when, I don't really know why, I wanted to enter a children's story competition that was held in La Seu d'Urgell and I ended up winning it. I think that literary contests have a very good function to encourage people to write, since otherwise it is very difficult to start. You can keep writing and show it to your friends, but if you then enter a competition and see that your project is liked, you are much more encouraged. Later came my first novel, *Un estiu a la fi del món*, and seven years later, *Les estrelles de Lilith*. As you

can see I read a lot, but I'm not prolific at all!

–I imagine, however, that writing short stories is not the same as writing a novel.

–The truth is no. At the time I decided to write my first youth novel, I had a sweets shop in front of a high school in La Seu, during a four-year break from my work. Many students came to the store and told me their stories, and I advised them as best I could. It was from contact with all of them that I made the decision to write it. I guess it's the process that everyone goes through, as starting to write a novel directly is very hard. On the other hand, if you have previously written short stories it is already a challenge that you present to yourself.

–The novel *A summer at the end of the world* won the 46th Ciutat d'Olot Award for Young People's Novel. What is it like to receive such a warm award?

–It encouraged me a lot. It's a book that has brought me a lot of luck, because many times a novel published so long ago goes straight to the book shredder, but it didn't happen with this one. I have had the



«Books and reading are my great passions. I think that reading makes us wiser, freer and more critical, but above all happier»

enormous fortune that in many schools and high schools in Andorra and Catalonia they read it as compulsory reading and invite me to some talks, in which I take advantage, since I have a microphone and 50 teenagers in front of me, to try to get the message of «Read, you will be happier and better people!»

–And when writing, do you follow any kind of pattern?

–No... I'm a pretty messy writer. I write a lot on impulse, maybe in a month I can write every day for three hours and then spend half a year without writing a single line. When I have a good idea that I enjoy, I do, but I also don't have a method to follow. I am not a professional writer who is in front of the computer from early morning until noon, but I do it when I feel like it and when I really have time.

–Let's talk about *The Stars of Lilith*. What can you tell us about it?

–I wanted to write a new novel with a young girl, but I also had the idea of writing a policewoman. In addition, I wanted to set it in Andorra, since I am from El Ges, a small town near La Seu d'Urgell, but I have been working in Andorra for 14

years and I feel part of this country too. In the end I had the happy idea of bringing the two novels together, through two stories that intertwine with each other. The plot of *Les estrelles de Lilith* emerged from two conversations: one with Reverend Ramon of Canillo, who I am a good friend of and he explained to me that exorcisms still take place today; and another with a friend who works at the Ministry of Culture, who sent me a couple of books on satanic sects to document myself. It's a subject that fascinated me so much that from here I started creating a series of crimes related to satanic events.

-What is it like to bring two such different plots together?

-Don't think it's difficult. Young people are propitiatory victims for the sects and the story of *Les estrelles de Lilith* comes together because the protagonist girl, who arrives in Andorra because her mother has fallen in love with a policeman from the country through Tinder and who assures that this «is the safest country in the world». Just the day they arrive, a crucified man appears on Pic del Carroi. One day I looked at it and thought: «what would happen if...», which is a fact that Stephen King used to say a lot, who always starts his novels with «what if...». It was easy to square the two plots because the protagonist of the police plot is the partner of the girl's mother. This is good for the novel, because it can appeal to both youth and adult audiences.

-The book has been awarded the Carlemany Prize for the promotion of reading 2023. How did you receive the news?

-I had such great joy that it is unimaginable. The previous summer I had been on holiday in Germany with my husband, as he was born there, and it turned out to be a coincidence that we went to visit Charlemagne's tomb. I prayed to him «three Our Father» and look, I ended up winning! I was very excited for everything it represents, because I have been working in Andorra for so many years that I already feel part of it. My family and I are a kind of undocumented Andorrans.

-I guess that it motivates to keep

writing.

-Of course! It's an injection of desire, because as a writer it's easy to get deflated when it's such a lonely job. You never know if you're doing it right or wrong and what you write today, tomorrow seems the worst. In addition, the fact that the award is linked to a publishing house like Columna, which distributes throughout Catalonia, and that it is awarded by the Government of Andorra, is also an opportunity.

-Is it difficult to connect with the youth audience?

-This prize has been chosen by a jury of 14 to 16 year old and the first people who read the manuscript were my 17 and 15 year old sons. They both really liked it and assured me that I would get the award. I let myself be advised mainly by my daughter, Maria, who is a great reader and to whom I dedicated the novel. The protagonist, moreover, is also called Maria, is her age... There are also other real characters,

such as Monsignor Ramon playing sausage. It's an imaginary plot, but in a real setting and with small tributes to people I love from the country.

-And how is the feedback from the public?

-The book was published on May 24th and my entire mobile phone gallery is full of photos that people send me buying it. What stood out to me the most, and which I would also highlight, is the central theme of the novel, which is school bullying. A work of fiction must have its plot and its characters, but it must also talk about something. The stars of *Lilith* talks about harassment, but encapsulated in a tone of humor. Hard subjects must be dealt with, but if you want to have an effect on young people you have to do it in a light and fun way. It also happened to me with *A summer at the end of the world*, which dealt with violence against women. They are novels with a lot of humor and a lot of love, the two things that make our lives more livable.

-In addition, you are currently also working on your own blog, where you publishes reviews of various books.

-As I read so much, my family and friends are constantly asking me for advice about my readings, which is why I decided to open this blog. My son, who is a computer geek, made it for me, and aesthetically it was very beautiful. There I put comments on the books I liked the most, but without any pretense of literary criticism and with the aim of encouraging reading, since it makes me so happy that I want the rest to be too. Of course, I'm writing the blog little by little, because I have a big flaw and that's that I'm a pretty lazy person.

-How do you see the current position of writing? Is it recognized enough?

-What happens is that we writers have a bit of a complaining disposition, since we complain that people don't read enough, but what really happens is that they don't read enough of our books. Many times books have been buried, saying that they will end because the cinema, the radio, the

series will come... but they never die completely. I think that during the months of confinement people rediscovered the habit of reading and then a lot of bookshops opened in both Catalonia and Andorra. These are businesses that are doing well these days, but we have to take into account that when people read they want to be entertained, and there are times when quite boring things are published. In addition, when you are in front of a screen your eyes start to water after a few hours, while in front of a story or a novel this does not happen. It is a kind of Zen well-being that can only be enjoyed by people who have been able to discover this wonderful world.

-Also in recent months, several institutions in the country have claimed incorrect use of Catalan. What do you think about this topic?

-The situation is complicated. My job consists of teaching Catalan to adults, both newcomers and people from the country who want

to improve their level. You see people who arrive from Ukraine, Russia or Poland without speaking either Spanish or Catalan and, after a few months, we speak more of the first than the second. I don't know what the solution might be, since I have also met many students who come motivated to learn Catalan, but end up leaving it because they see that they can live perfectly in Andorra without it. With Spanish they can work, go to any establishment... only those who are curious and want to integrate and live well in the country learn Catalan.

-And as a teacher, what do you do to avoid it?

-It's what I tell everyone: you can survive in Catalonia or Andorra just by speaking Spanish, but if you really want to feel integrated you need to know Catalan. Especially for the way we treat people, since when a foreigner comes to us speaking Spanish, we don't treat him in any way, we're just polite and that's it. On the other hand, if a foreigner comes to us and we notice that he has a foreign accent, but makes the effort to speak to you in Catalan, we open all the doors to him. That's why I say it's worth it, because it's extra comfort and friendliness that you'll get in return. I studied philology for the love of the Catalan language and I think that the people who live in Andorra or Catalonia must keep our language alive through the word, so that it survives and is not lost.

-We finish the interview talking about your next projects. What can you tell us?

-I already have a novel for adults half finished, although I still have the whole process of revising, improving and rewriting what is needed. It is a novel that moves away from juvenile plots to focus more on my obsessions and frustrations as an adult, being more myself than ever. In the end, I really love the books I write because they are not an imposed fact, I don't wear a writer's dress, but they are a part of me through which I express myself. That is why, when someone tells me that they liked my novel, I feel that there is also a piece of me that has captivated them. ≡



«You can survive in Andorra or Catalonia speaking Spanish, but if you really want to feel integrated you need to know Catalan»



«When someone tells me that they liked my novel, I feel that there is also a piece of me that has captivated them»

Your leading real estate agency in Andorra.

Our experience guarantees results, realtors since 1988.



(+376) 353 424 / (+376) 379 769

(+376) 747 747

laportella@andorra.ad

Casa Nova Olivet 10 · Ordino

www.laportella.ad