

The patron saint known to the English as George

is also that of another dozen or so countries, including Russia, Portugal, Georgia, Lithuania, Djibouti and Catalonia. Here, at least, the day assigned to this maiden-saving myth is celebrated without a smidgen of jingoism. Far from waving any national flags, for example, each Catalan citizen simply gives a book to at least one person he or she loves, be it husband, wife, daughter, son, boyfriend, girlfriend, auntie or whatever; on top of which, the males (only) buy roses for all the women they know who might appreciate one. April 23, then, sees the centre of Barcelona chock-a-block with street stalls stacked high with volumes for which people reach and grab as if the printed word really was going out of fashion; and on the metro and buses, even the staidest of besuited office workers can be seen gingerly bearing scarlet roses upright by their prickly stems.

Last year on Sant Jordi's Day, Catalonia's 700-odd bookshops sold 20 million euros worth of titles in Catalan and Spanish (in roughly equal numbers), representing nearly 8% of total yearly sales; in the same 12-hour period, Catalan language publishers grossed 34% of their annual turnover.

The following Monday, April 27, Enric and Màrius and Bernat and Jordi – all of them involved in the writing business, one way or the other – sat down to their more or less regular monthly lunch, chatting even before they hit the chairs about the events and consequences of this latest book-and-rose day. By the time pudding was served, however, they had subject-hopped so swiftly that Sant Jordi was no more than a faint memory. When the coffee came, they finally bothered to ask each other what they themselves were getting up to. I sat back – being the fifth diner – impressed by the sheer abundance and quality of their output, both past and present.

Enric (Gomà) is one of the pioneers of the home-grown soap opera in the Peninsula, into which he introduced the form back in 1993 through his work for Catalan-language TV: despite the language 'barrier' his products were noticed and emulated throughout both Portugal and monolingual Spain; the long-running soap he is working on now for Catalan Public TV gets regular audiences of about a million per episode; he is also a well-known writer of children's books, contributes two satirical articles a week for a major newspaper and Time Out Barcelona respectively, and is the founder and internet coordinator of a bizarre collection of overheard snippets of street conversation, in half a dozen languages and with 470 contributors around the world.

Màrius (Serra) is a novelist, columnist and wordplay expert, whose crosswords for *La Vanguardia* have become a national institution, and whose latest book, "Quiet" ("Still"), an account both moving and unsentimental about life with his paralysed son, is currently a major best-seller here, with 25,000 copies sold in Catalan and 3,000 in Spanish (a Korean edition will be out soon).

Bernat (Puigobella) is a publisher with an encyclopaedic knowledge of Catalan, Hispanic and Anglo-American literature whose finds include Joan-Daniel Bezsonoff from French Catalonia, Haruki Murakami, and two novelists who have yet to bring up a blip on the cultural radars of UK and US publishers: the German Juli Zeh and the Italian Niccolò Ammaniti. Among the books he is openly happiest about having published is "Animals tristos" ("Sad animals"), which was written by the person sitting beside him: Jordi (Puntí), who acquired his first readers back in 1998 when he published a well-received collection of stories called "Pell d'armadillo" ("Armadillo skin"); four years later, he upped his literary ante to the point where not many other contemporary Catalan writers could see him, with the said "Sad animals", his second short-story collection which has since gone into French, German, Italian, Croatian, Spanish and Portuguese.

This post-Sant Jordi lunch was, as it happened, partially a celebration of Jordi's completion of his first novel ("Maletes perdudes" = "Lost Luggage"), written in Barcelona, Munich, New York, Berlin, Copenhagen, London and Tuscany over the previous six years: a book which the few who have read extracts of it talk about - with a glint of privilege in their eyes - as being objectively outstanding.

The coffee over, I felt my fun being spoiled by intimations of unreality, as it dawned on me for the umpteenth time that all I had to do was take a train ride out of Barcelona for a

few hours in either direction – into monolingual Spain or equally monolingual France and all the countries beyond – and I would be in a world which didn't so much as suspect the existence of the one in which these four people wrote and published. And even they – all this talent concentrated to the nth degree like a drop of Fairy Liquid in an old British TV ad – made up but a dash of the current Catalan cultural universe, of the plethora of products now being generated in song, poetry, fiction, theatre, TV and drama, that happen to have the Catalan language as their trampoline.

So how can it be that if I – or anyone else – pops out of Catalonia and goes to any European capital, say, our local cultural news is (usually) met with reactions ranging from a dismissive 'connais pas', to suspicious frowns or veiled references to the supposed provincialism and even 'nationalism' (whatever that might exactly mean) of all things Catalan? How is it, indeed, that most of the planet never so much as even peeks at the sheer quality of so much Catalan culture today, at its international potential?

The reasons are no doubt many and varied, but one long-term foreign resident, the Argentinian journalist Patricia Gabancho, believes firmly – as do increasing numbers of Catalans, if the statistics are anything to go by – that the area will remain bereft of any serious cultural recognition on any level, unless its political profile is raised considerably.

No wonder, given this state of affairs, that the best-selling non-fiction book in Catalan on Sant Jordi's Day was "Crònica de la Independència", a hypothetical journalistic account of what would happen were Catalonia to obtain independence. Author, Patricia Gabancho.

Oddly enough, none of my four table companions mentioned the book (although they all know and respect Patricia's work). Perhaps Catalonia has simply got to the stage where people now take for granted that foreign residents – writing in Catalan as a second language – can produce highly successful books dealing with controversial local issues, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Which, like Catalonia itself, it very nearly is.

MATTHEW TREE has published two novels, a collection of short stories, and six (heterogeneous) works of non-fiction. In English, he has completed a novel and an autobiographical rant and is currently on the last lap of a new novel. He has lived in Barcelona since 1984.