

Bécquer Seguí. *The Op-ed Novel. A Literary History of Post Franco Spain*. Harvard UP, 2024. 298 pp.

In 2011, Spanish newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo* became a battleground for what was eventually known as the “Caso Rico.” This debate, described in detail in Bécquer Seguí’s engaging book, was born from an op-ed column in *El País* by famed author Francisco Rico, in which he denounced the recently imposed smoking ban but claimed that he himself had never been a smoker, thus giving credence to his position that the ban was more about impinging on individual freedom than anything else. The public was duped, while those who knew Rico were aware of his pack-a-day-plus habit. Novelist Javier Cercas chimed in defending Rico in his own op-ed column stating that Rico had a right to express himself as he pleased. Arcadi Espada lashed out against this kind of untruthful journalism in his column in *El Mundo* and the situation escalated into a long-standing debate between Cercas and Espada about the issue of mixing fact and fiction in novelistic writing.

Cases like these abound in Seguí’s study of what he calls the op-ed novel: novels written by prolific journalists that question the boundaries of historical truth, personal politics, and narrative freedom. The authors analyzed in the book include Antonio Muñoz de Molina, Javier Marías, Javier Cercas, Almudena Grandes, and Fernando Aramburu. I refer to the authors analyzed and not their works, primarily because what comes to the surface in the analysis of their op-ed columns and oftentimes resulting novels is precisely the attitude they take towards historical material and their own opinions of it. This study is not a traditional literary analysis with an overarching theoretical framework, but rather case studies of how and why authors choose to rethink the novelistic form.

Seguí delves into his analysis with much the same ambiguity as his subjects approach journalism and fiction. *The Op-Ed Novel* is a delightful departure from traditional criticism and uncovers juicy political sparring between high-profile authors carried out on the pages of Spain’s daily newspapers. Rather than offering conventional literary analysis, the book neatly accomplishes in a metatextual way what the celebrated authors aim to do in their writing: blur the lines between genres and break with tiresome, random divisions between fact and fiction. Seguí does so by connecting political debates and grievances aired in newspaper columns to the authors’ literary production where these same debates are addressed, problematized, and rarely resolved.

Take Javier Cercas, for example. His blockbuster novel *Soldados de Salamina* (‘Soldiers of Salamis’) features a protagonist named Javier Cercas who is researching a novel on a specific event during the Spanish Civil War. This mode of self-representation in fiction has been called autofiction and reveals a certain creative license such as: what are the limits to an author incorporating himself into the narrative as a character? What is the difference between historical literature and

history? Who writes history for that matter? Cercas's novel has been questioned for its veracity and fabrication of historical events, and he has always defended the right of the author to revisit history through the novel. One should remember that several of the novels studied in Seguí's book, including Cercas's, were written during the polemic years of the recovery of historical memory that sought reparations to Republican families who suffered tragic losses during and after war and initiated the campaign to identify individuals in the mass graves throughout Spain. Seguí points out that the authors in question, most notably Cercas and Almudena Grandes with her tome on the civil war *El corazón helado* ('The Frozen Heart'), take opposing political sides with Cercas trying to be impartial in his representation of the suffering of both sides during the war and Grandes landing firmly on the liberal side in defense of the Republicans who suffered exponentially. Hayden White and his insistence that the historical text is a literary artifact comes immediately to mind and would be appropriate to incorporate in the discussion.

Several key questions come to the forefront of Seguí's study: Why do novelists write for papers? To sell books? To sell their brand? To distinguish their writing and show they can do both? Sometimes the debates and quarrels between authors that emerge in the op-ed pieces in competing newspapers seem like macho posturing with the accusations and rebuttals exchanged between these very public writers. They prize and prioritize their public persona perhaps even more so than their craft as a writer. One of the more intriguing chapters dismantles Fernando Aramburu's novel *Patria* ('Homeland'); the result of an op-ed piece written by Aramburu for *El País* titled "La paz de Euskadi" ('Peace in the Basque Country') five years before the publication of the novel. The international success of *Patria* cannot be overstated as Seguí notes. The novel superficially appears to be an objective rendering of ETA violence seen by both sides, yet Seguí skillfully argues and ultimately proves that this is not the case. Through close readings, he convinces us that there are deep-seeded class issues at work in the novel and that the ties to Basque nationalism are rendered as emotional and not borne of political conviction. It is risky to take on an award-winning and much-beloved novel, but Seguí succeeds in showing the political bias implicit in the narrative construction of the novel's characters.

The Op-Ed Novel is a fascinating read that delves into the uniquely Spanish phenomenon of best-selling authors as op-ed writers for the dailies. Seguí weaves together the journalism and novelistic production of the authors mentioned while never confusing the two. This book is required reading for scholars of twentieth and twenty-first century Spanish history, politics, and literature as well as those interested in journalism and the various forms of the novel it inspires.

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