

A Death in Barcelona

Crime novel recalls Franco's Spain

Suspended Sentences

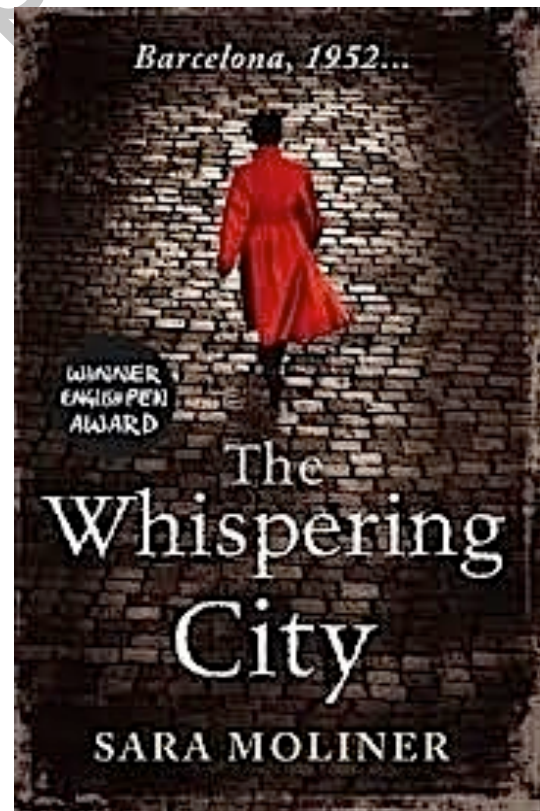
by Jim Napier

Barcelona, Spain, 1952: a thief picks a lock and enters a house, only to encounter a woman lying dead on the floor, beaten and then strangled. The house has been ransacked. The man flees, certain only that he doesn't want to be any part of it.

The victim is Mariona Sobrerroca. The widow of a wealthy man, Jerónimo Garmendia, the case is certain to attract public attention.

Before long journalist Ana Martí receives a call from her editor: he wants her to cover the story. *La Vanguardia* has been handed an exclusive by the police in an effort to control press coverage. A Eucharistic Congress is to be held in the city in a month's time, and Joaquín Grau, the public prosecutor, wants it solved before then. Inspector Isidro Castro is in charge of the investigation, and Martí is told to work closely with him, in effect publishing only the official police account of the case. Not an unusual turn of events in 1950's Spain.

Still, Martí is surprised by her assignment. Normally such prominent stories would go to Carlos Belda, a man of some experience who covers the police beat. Was the journalistic plum due to her editor's friendship with her father? One thing is certain: Belda will be angry when he learns she'd been handed the plum assignment. He is not nearly so angry as Inspector



Castro, though, when he learns that an inexperienced reporter usually assigned to cover fashion and social events has been handed the case. He is openly contemptuous of her, and tells her so. Then he lays out the rule by which she will be allowed to work with him: she will work only from his notes.

But the fledgling reporter is determined to cover the story her own way. Thus begins a many-layered tale that includes not only a murder, but also a cat-and-mouse game between a headstrong reporter who senses her opportunity to move up and a police detective used to getting his way, played out against the intrigues of the shadowy world of Barcelona. It is a well-structured tale that can be

enjoyed on many levels, not least in the authors' ability to paint a revealing portrait of everyday life in Franco's Spain.

Employing multiple points of view and an informed awareness of Spanish life, *The Whispering City* is the first novel of writing duo Rosa Ribas and Sabine Hoffman, and augurs well for their future work. There are several less-than-felicitous writing errors, but they are of little consequence; most readers will enjoy a well-told tale that could mark the debut of an intriguing series featuring the odd-couple duo of Ana Martí and Inspector Isidro Castro.

The Whispering City is published by Abacus/Little, Brown.

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

