

2003, VOL. 41, NO. 2

# Bookbird

A JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

*Special Issue:  
Children's Books as Best-sellers*

INTERNATIONAL BOARD ON BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

*iBbY*



# BOOKBIRD

MAY, 2003

VOL. 41, NO. 2

SPECIAL ISSUE:  
CHILDREN'S BOOKS AS BEST-SELLERS



Cover art by Stina Wirsén for Sara Kadefors's *Långlördag i city* (A long Saturday evening in the city; Stockholm: Bonnier Carlsen, 2001). Turn to page 25 for the White Ravens 2002 article and to page 33 for a book review.



The Hare character, known as Kalulu and other names, features in many folktales from East and West Africa. These tales were retold by the slaves in the southern states of the USA and so, later, the Brer Rabbit tales were born.

To the Reader	2
What If the Classics Had Different Names? (A Poem) <i>J. Patrick Lewis</i>	4
TO THE POINT: CHILDREN'S BOOK AS BEST-SELLERS	
A Best-selling Picture Book by a Brand New Author: A Consideration of the Celebrity Factor <i>Patricia Austin</i>	6
Otfried Preussler and Michael Ende: Two German Best-selling Authors <i>Horst Kunnemann</i>	15
Hogwarts and the Austere Academy: Reviving the School Story <i>Michael Payne</i>	20
The White Ravens 2002	25
Other Voices	
Mariasun Landa's Literary Universe, Or the Awakening of Basque Children's Literature <i>Mari Jose Olaziregi Alustiza</i>	35
Technological Developments in Nonfiction Publishing <i>Margaret Scanlon and David Buckingham</i>	41
Regular Features	
Focus IBBY <i>International Children's Book Day 2003 • Books for Africa • The IBBY-Asahi Reading Promotion Award 2003 • IBBY Membership News</i>	44
Author Spotlight: An Interview with Jane Yolen <i>Eva-Maria Metcalf</i>	52
International Children's Books of Note	56
Professional Literature	59
The Australian IBBY Encouragement Award for Children's Literature	62
News and Announcements	inside back cover

## Mariasun Landa's Literary Universe, Or the Awakening of Basque Children's Literature

*Mari Jose Olaziregi Alustiza*

### Introduction



Photograph by Aitor Bayo.

Mariasun Landa is, aside from Bernardo Atxaga, the author whose work has been translated most often in the context of current Basque literature. Together with Anjel Lertxundi, Landa was one of the pioneers in modernizing children's literature in the Basque language. Such rejuvenation allowed the introduction of fantasy in our tradition and made it possible for Basque literature to open up to Western literary currents such as critical realism. For those who have never heard of Basque, ours is a pre-Indo-European language—in other words, one of the oldest languages in Europe. Today, about 700,000 people can speak Basque, and our small country, the Basque Country, is located on both sides of the border between France and Spain, on the Atlantic Coast. The Basque Country covers a surface area of 20,664 square kilometers (approximately 7,978 square miles) at the western end of the Pyrenees of the Bay of Biscay. Today it consists of seven districts, which for political and administrative purposes, form part of two different European countries: Spain and France. That means that the Basque Country is a nation, a group of people of the same culture and language, but not an independent state. About one hundred companies publish around 1,500 new titles in Basque every year, for both adults and children, and we have a media infrastructure comprising television, radio, and newspapers. We believe Basque to rank 30th on the list of the languages most frequently used on the Internet, and, even though we may be better known to foreign readers for the Guggenheim Museum and the San Fermín Fiesta in Pamplona, our small country enjoys an intense cultural life.



### Biography and Early Work

Mariasun Landa has published twenty-five titles, some of which have been translated into Spanish, English, French, and German. She is one of the most interesting authors on the current Basque literary scene. Her works belong to the narrative genre and are aimed at the 8-14 age group. She wrote her first stories and poems when she was twelve or thirteen and, even at that early age, as with *10 in Little Women*, she knew that she wanted to be a writer. After receiving a Philosophy degree in Paris, she decided to come back to the Basque Country in the 1970s and start learning Basque.

During those years, fundamental changes took place in Basque society, and the socio-cultural breakthrough initiated in previous decades was consolidated. I am referring to industrial and economic development, to the unification of the Basque language and, among other events, the strengthening of the *ikastolas* (Basque schools) movement. In 1974, Landa started teaching in several *ikastolas*. It was her readings of the Italian writer Gianni Rodari that influenced the fantasy embraced by the author in her first writings. Her first book, *Amets uhinak* (Dream waves; Donostia: Elkar, 1982), fully belongs to this modality. It is a set of stories with different subjects and literary styles, two of which are particularly outstanding: "Txaf planetak" (A planet called Txaf) and "Ascensore luherrak" (The naughty elevator), both stories very close to Rodari's "El país con el 'des' delante" (The non-country) and "Ascensor para las estrellas" (Elevator to the stars) included in Rodari's *Cuentos por teléfono* (Tales by phone; Barcelona: Juventud, 1983).

### Literature and Female Roles

The author's concern for the roles and stereotypes transmitted by literature has been obvious throughout her literary career. Of the twenty-five books that

Landa has published so far, sixteen feature women as protagonists. This presence of the feminine goes beyond sheer tokenism, as Landa proposes a series of characters who subvert sexist stereotypes. Thus, we can find female lion tamers, women such as Partxela, a kind of modern Basque Mary Poppins, who would rather do artistic painting than attend to household chores. Finally, we must note the latest release by the author, *Cuando los gatos se sienten tan solos* (When cats feel so lonely; Madrid: Anaya, 1997), where the main character's mother resumes her acting career without hesitation, even at the expense of her marriage. In short, in these texts, Landa speaks about the need to fulfill personal achievement, even though that very often implies giving up a stable relationship within the sphere of marriage. I stress that most of the female characters who decide to fulfill their personal wishes either live alone (as Partxela), get divorced (legally), are separated (as in the case of Maider's mother in *Cuando los gatos se sienten tan solos*) or widowed (like the main character in *Mi mano en la tuya* [My hand in yours; Madrid: Alfaguara, 1998]).

### Critical Realism

Writers belonging to the critical realism literary movement try to denounce social injustice by resorting to fantasy or humor. Christine Nöstlinger is undoubtedly one of its most internationally acclaimed representatives. I refer to Nöstlinger because she is an author for whom Landa feels strong admiration.<sup>1</sup> That is why Landa, in her latest story, has decided to give us an intertextual wink-and-nudge and show us her admiration for the Austrian author in the paratext itself. The story in question is *Amoma, zure hoidi* (Granny, your hoidi; Donostia: Erein, 2000), which paraphrases the title of Nöstlinger's *Dear Granny, your Sun* (Madrid: SM, 1987).

The publication of *Karmenxia and the Little Ghost* (1984; trans. Linda White; Reno: University

### Biography and Early Work

Mariasun Landa has published twenty-five titles, some of which have been translated into Spanish, English, French, and German. She is one of the most interesting authors on the current Basque literary scene. Her works belong to the narrative genre and are aimed at the 8-14 age group. She wrote her first stories and poems when she was twelve or thirteen and, even at that early age, as with *10 in Little Women*, she knew that she wanted to be a writer. After receiving a Philosophy degree in Paris, she decided to come back to the Basque Country in the 1970s and start learning Basque.

During those years, fundamental changes took place in Basque society, and the socio-cultural breakthrough initiated in previous decades was consolidated. I am referring to industrial and economic development, to the unification of the Basque language and, among other events, the strengthening of the *ikastolas* (Basque schools) movement. In 1974, Landa started teaching in several *ikastolas*. It was her readings of the Italian writer Gianni Rodari that influenced the fantasy embraced by the author in her first writings. Her first book, *Amets uhinak* (Dream waves; Donostia: Elkar, 1982), fully belongs to this modality. It is a set of stories with different subjects and literary styles, two of which are particularly outstanding: "Txaf planetak" (A planet called Txaf) and "Ascensore luherrak" (The naughty elevator), both stories very close to Rodari's "El país con el 'des' delante" (The non-country) and "Ascensor para las estrellas" (Elevator to the stars) included in Rodari's *Cuentos por teléfono* (Tales by phone; Barcelona: Juventud, 1983).

### Literature and Female Roles

The author's concern for the roles and stereotypes transmitted by literature has been obvious throughout her literary career. Of the twenty-five books that

Landa has published so far, sixteen feature women as protagonists. This presence of the feminine goes beyond sheer tokenism, as Landa proposes a series of characters who subvert sexist stereotypes. Thus, we can find female lion tamers, women such as Partxela, a kind of modern Basque Mary Poppins, who would rather do artistic painting than attend to household chores. Finally, we must note the latest release by the author, *Cuando los gatos se sienten tan solos* (When cats feel so lonely; Madrid: Anaya, 1997), where the main character's mother resumes her acting career without hesitation, even at the expense of her marriage. In short, in these texts, Landa speaks about the need to fulfill personal achievement, even though that very often implies giving up a stable relationship within the sphere of marriage. I stress that most of the female characters who decide to fulfill their personal wishes either live alone (as Partxela), get divorced (legally), are separated (as in the case of Maider's mother in *Cuando los gatos se sienten tan solos*) or widowed (like the main character in *Mi mano en la tuya* [My hand in yours; Madrid: Alfaguara, 1998]).

### Critical Realism

Writers belonging to the critical realism literary movement try to denounce social injustice by resorting to fantasy or humor. Christine Nöstlinger is undoubtedly one of its most internationally acclaimed representatives. I refer to Nöstlinger because she is an author for whom Landa feels strong admiration.<sup>1</sup> That is why Landa, in her latest story, has decided to give us an intertextual wink-and-nudge and show us her admiration for the Austrian author in the paratext itself. The story in question is *Amara, zure hoidi* (Granny, your hoidi; Donostia: Erein, 2000), which paraphrases the title of Nöstlinger's *Dear Granny, your Sun* (Madrid: SM, 1987).

The publication of *Karmenxia and the Little Ghost* (1984; trans. Linda White; Reno: University

the ghost that only she can see. As was the case in *The Nutcracker* by E.T.A. Hoffmann (in *The Tales of Hoffmann*; London: Penguin, 1990), or in the well-known story *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi (1883; New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1993), all the toys in Karmenixa's room come alive. The rest of her life is silence or lack of communication, which brings us to the only possible way out: Karmenixa's attempt to escape. The story's dramatic ending reminds us that the book we have before us has nothing to do with the syrupy and "light" approach in recent children's literature.

Landa repeatedly has said that childhood can be a very harsh period and that children are not angels "dropped from a lost harmony."<sup>7</sup> Trying to reflect this real children's world, which is far from idyllic, is in fact an attempt to recover the child we all carry inside. In order to explain the importance and therapeutic value that this return to childhood has, Landa quotes William Wordsworth's line: we return to childhood in order to grasp "lapses of time," that is: a place in the time of childhood experiences where we can seek refuge and cheer ourselves up.

## Humor

The features described above could perhaps give an excessively critical and somewhat pessimistic idea of Landa's literary universe. Nothing could be further from the truth, because if anything characterizes the author's literary approach, it is the humor and deep tenderness underlying her stories. Bernardo Atxaga defined Landa's humor as "Oriental, more Japanese than any other Basque writer's. The poetics of detail is how I would describe her point of view."<sup>8</sup>

*The Dancing Flea* (trans. Linda White; University of Nevada Press, 1990; Eng. version), translated into Spanish, Catalan, German, and English, is a clear example of what we are saying. The story tells the adventures of a flea called Rusika who,

wishing to be a ballerina, decides to travel to Russia. The narration is developed in the third person and is full of ironic-humoristic winks to the reader. The message is crystal clear: "It is worth taking risks in this life," and therefore, one must dare to take the Big Jump. The ironic and humoristic side of the story is reinforced by the array of settings and characters that the venturesome flea gets to know, among them the Stevenson pub, characters like the sirens or Caruso, the dog, the meaning and relevance of whom are explained to the reader.

*Julieta, Romeo y los ratones* (Julieta, Romeo and the mice; SML, 1994) also has its share of humor. In a surprising plot, Julieta, a self-indulgent salesgirl with a sweet tooth, falls in love with Romeo and decides to go on a diet. This love affair annoys the mouse colony living in the house, so they devise a plan to put an end to the food rationing. Julieta's idealism and romanticism contrast with the disappointment and concern of the mice, who do not understand her new attitude, the result of which forces them to eat a few miserable lettuce leaves instead of delicious cakes. All ends well for both the lovers and mice, but the author's underlying ironic-feminist approach is once again revealed when, on seeing a mouse, Romeo flees terror-stricken and Julieta "saves him from the wild beasts" (110).

## *Itoldi* (1988): Minimal Aesthetics at the Service of a Great Text

The publication of *Itoldi* (Erein, 1988) brought about a new turning point in Landa's literary evolution. This work, probably the author's best, was included for its literary quality in IBBY's Honour List. But *Itoldi* is also important for another reason that, in the case of children's and young readers' books, should not go unnoticed. For the first time, Asun Balzola, the renowned illustrator from Bilbao, began to illustrate Landa's texts. Landa and Balzola form a quasi-perfect tandem where

the ghost that only she can see. As was the case in *The Nutcracker* by E.T.A. Hoffmann (in *The Tales of Hoffmann*; London: Penguin, 1990), or in the well-known story *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi (1883; New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1993), all the toys in Karmenixa's room come alive. The rest of her life is silence or lack of communication, which brings us to the only possible way out: Karmenixa's attempt to escape. The story's dramatic ending reminds us that the book we have before us has nothing to do with the syrupy and "light" approach in recent children's literature.

Landa repeatedly has said that childhood can be a very harsh period and that children are not angels "dropped from a lost harmony."<sup>7</sup> Trying to reflect this real children's world, which is far from idyllic, is in fact an attempt to recover the child we all carry inside. In order to explain the importance and therapeutic value that this return to childhood has, Landa quotes William Wordsworth's line: we return to childhood in order to grasp "lapses of time," that is: a place in the time of childhood experiences where we can seek refuge and cheer ourselves up.

## Humor

The features described above could perhaps give an excessively critical and somewhat pessimistic idea of Landa's literary universe. Nothing could be further from the truth, because if anything characterizes the author's literary approach, it is the humor and deep tenderness underlying her stories. Bernardo Atxaga defined Landa's humor as "Oriental, more Japanese than any other Basque writer's. The poetics of detail is how I would describe her point of view."<sup>8</sup>

*The Dancing Flea* (trans. Linda White; University of Nevada Press, 1990; Eng. version), translated into Spanish, Catalan, German, and English, is a clear example of what we are saying. The story tells the adventures of a flea called Rusika who,

wishing to be a ballerina, decides to travel to Russia. The narration is developed in the third person and is full of ironic-humoristic winks to the reader. The message is crystal clear: "It is worth taking risks in this life," and therefore, one must dare to take the Big Jump. The ironic and humoristic side of the story is reinforced by the array of settings and characters that the venturesome flea gets to know, among them the Stevenson pub, characters like the sirens or Caruso, the dog, the meaning and relevance of whom are explained to the reader.

*Julieta, Romeo y los ratones* (Julieta, Romeo and the mice; SML, 1994) also has its share of humor. In a surprising plot, Julieta, a self-indulgent salesgirl with a sweet tooth, falls in love with Romeo and decides to go on a diet. This love affair annoys the mouse colony living in the house, so they devise a plan to put an end to the food rationing. Julieta's idealism and romanticism contrast with the disappointment and concern of the mice, who do not understand her new attitude, the result of which forces them to eat a few miserable lettuce leaves instead of delicious cakes. All ends well for both the lovers and mice, but the author's underlying ironic-feminist approach is once again revealed when, on seeing a mouse, Romeo flees terror-stricken and Julieta "saves him from the wild beasts" (110).

## *Ibaldí* (1988): Minimal Aesthetics at the Service of a Great Text

The publication of *Ibaldí* (Erein, 1988) brought about a new turning point in Landa's literary evolution. This work, probably the author's best, was included for its literary quality in IBBY's Honour List. But *Ibaldí* is also important for another reason that, in the case of children's and young readers' books, should not go unnoticed. For the first time, Asun Balzola, the renowned illustrator from Bilbao, began to illustrate Landa's texts. Landa and Balzola form a quasi-perfect tandem where

But I do not think that the use of such narrative strategies is the only resource that explains the intensity of the feelings that are described. Most of the time, the child's world and the feelings of loneliness, misunderstanding, and sadness present in it are reflected as micro-worlds where adults' interference upsets the children. Described with short brushstrokes, the young characters in *Holdé* surprise the reader with the precociousness and intensity of their feelings. These are beings who convey an amazing—since it is unexpected—child experience. For Landa, childhood can be anything but obvious and simple.

I complete this analysis by discussing the stories that, together with *Holdé*, make up the *Cuadernos secretos* (*Secret copybooks*; Madrid: Edebe, 1984) volume—that is, *Ainhoa* and *Alex*. Both stories have obvious similarities: they are told in the first person and show us some rather peculiar characters who start the narration by stating that they are waiting. Ainhoa is waiting for the arrival of her little nephew, and the girl's expectations and curiosity reveal the psychological impact that this event has on her. Alex, in the hospital, is waiting for his friend Nina.

The protagonist and narrator in *Alex* is an anti-adventurer, an atypical male character whom even the schoolteacher criticizes and calls "Awkward Alex." As with Karmentxu, the main character in *Karmentxu and the Little Ghost*, Alex is special and endowed with certain "powers": he can often predict the future. One day, while Alex is playing chess with Nina, a little girl who walks with a limp, a thief tries to catch them unawares but Alex confronts him. Having, much to his regret, become a hero, Alex writes to Nina and declares his love for her.

### Autobiographic Discourse

In line with the female novels studied by Birutė Cipliauskaitė in *La novela femenina contemporánea (1970–1985)* (*The contemporary female*

novel; Barcelona: Anthropos, 1988), the use of the narrative first person is a feature in most of Landa's titles. In this sense, we might extrapolate to the literary evolution of Landa the conclusions in the renowned study by Elaine Showalter (*On Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977). Thus, we could say that recently Landa has evolved from stories where the narrative first person served to make a feminist stance explicit to stories in which a more personal voice (a more "feminine" voice, in Showalter's words) can be heard. Landa's two latest books, *Cuando los gatos se sienten tan solos* (*When cats feel so lonely*) and *Mi mano en la tuya* (*My hand in yours*) are good examples of this.

In these short stories, childhood memories are a literary excuse for the author. As with many other contemporary women writers, memory is the narrative axis around which Landa's pseudo-autobiographical discourse is shaped. The idea is generally accepted that we are only what we remember or, to put it in other words, that the person who has no memory simply does not exist. That is why feminine literature resorts to memory, because women need to remember; they need to know their unknown past.

Maidier is the narrator in the story *Cuando los gatos se sienten tan solos* (*When cats feel so lonely*), Landa's longest and most ambitious short story. It tells of the relationship between Maidier and her cat, Ophelia, a relationship that starts during the marriage crisis that Maidier's parents undergo when her mother decides to resume her career as an actress. Maidier, moving closer and closer to loneliness, seeks refuge in her cat, and when the latter is taken to a farmhouse from which it soon runs away, she boldly decides to go looking for it.

In the book, structured as a flashback, memories start slowly taking shape in Maidier's mind, and that is why chronological ambiguity is a con-



But I do not think that the use of such narrative strategies is the only resource that explains the intensity of the feelings that are described. Most of the time, the child's world and the feelings of loneliness, misunderstanding, and sadness present in it are reflected as micro-worlds where adults' interference upsets the children. Described with short brushstrokes, the young characters in *Holdé* surprise the reader with the precociousness and intensity of their feelings. These are beings who convey an amazing—since it is unexpected—child experience. For Landa, childhood can be anything but obvious and simple.

I complete this analysis by discussing the stories that, together with *Holdé*, make up the *Cuadernos secretos* (*Secret copybooks*; Madrid: Edebe, 1984) volume—that is, *Ainhoa* and *Alex*. Both stories have obvious similarities: they are told in the first person and show us some rather peculiar characters who start the narration by stating that they are waiting. Ainhoa is waiting for the arrival of her little nephew, and the girl's expectations and curiosity reveal the psychological impact that this event has on her. Alex, in the hospital, is waiting for his friend Nina.

The protagonist and narrator in *Alex* is an anti-adventurer, an atypical male character whom even the schoolteacher criticizes and calls "Awkward Alex." As with Karmentxu, the main character in *Karmentxu and the Little Ghost*, Alex is special and endowed with certain "powers": he can often predict the future. One day, while Alex is playing chess with Nina, a little girl who walks with a limp, a thief tries to catch them unawares but Alex confronts him. Having, much to his regret, become a hero, Alex writes to Nina and declares his love for her.

### Autobiographic Discourse

In line with the female novels studied by Birutė Cipliauskaitė in *La novela femenina contemporánea (1970–1985)* (*The contemporary female*

novel; Barcelona: Anthropos, 1988), the use of the narrative first person is a feature in most of Landa's titles. In this sense, we might extrapolate to the literary evolution of Landa the conclusions in the renowned study by Elaine Showalter (*On Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977). Thus, we could say that recently Landa has evolved from stories where the narrative first person served to make a feminist stance explicit to stories in which a more personal voice (a more "feminine" voice, in Showalter's words) can be heard. Landa's two latest books, *Cuando los gatos se sienten tan solos* (*When cats feel so lonely*) and *Mi mano en la tuya* (*My hand in yours*) are good examples of this.

In these short stories, childhood memories are a literary excuse for the author. As with many other contemporary women writers, memory is the narrative axis around which Landa's pseudo-autobiographical discourse is shaped. The idea is generally accepted that we are only what we remember or, to put it in other words, that the person who has no memory simply does not exist. That is why feminine literature resorts to memory, because women need to remember; they need to know their unknown past.

Maidier is the narrator in the story *Cuando los gatos se sienten tan solos* (*When cats feel so lonely*), Landa's longest and most ambitious short story. It tells of the relationship between Maidier and her cat, Ophelia, a relationship that starts during the marriage crisis that Maidier's parents undergo when her mother decides to resume her career as an actress. Maidier, moving closer and closer to loneliness, seeks refuge in her cat, and when the latter is taken to a farmhouse from which it soon runs away, she boldly decides to go looking for it.

In the book, structured as a flashback, memories start slowly taking shape in Maidier's mind, and that is why chronological ambiguity is a con-