by

MANUEL VÁZQUEZ MONTALBÁN
Poet, playwright, essayist, and novelist **MANUEL VÁZQUEZ MONTALBÁN** (1939–2003) was one of modern Spain’s greatest writers. A politically active leftist as a young man, he was jailed under Franco for four years for supporting a miners’ strike. As an adult, he also became a gourmand, and wrote often about food. His **Pepe Carvalho** series—set in Montalbán’s native Barcelona—has won international acclaim, including the Planeta prize (1979) and the International Grand Prix de Littérature Policière (1981)
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Perhaps Manuel Vázquez Montalbán’s masterpiece: a combination white-knuckle investigation and moving psychological travelogue. Pepe quickly learns that “Buenos Aires is a beautiful city hell-bent on self-destruction,” and finds himself on a trail involving boxers and scholars, military torturers and seductive semioticians, Borges fans and cold-blooded murderers.

And despite the wonders of the Tango and the country’s divine cuisine, he also knows one thing: He’ll have to confront the traumas of Argentina’s past head on if he wants not only to find his cousin, but simply stay alive.
The tango, particularly the Argentinian version, features prominently in *The Buenos Aires Quintet*.

Montalban’s regular use of well-known dancers and locations are part of what lend the books the unique experience of feeling both exotic and familiar.

The passage below, for example, highlights some of the tango’s more romantic and revered characters ...

“Carlos Gardel was a myth in Barcelona. So were Irusta, Fugazot and Demare.”

“I've never even heard of them. Although I might not look it, I'm from the rock generation. Tango always seemed to me like Argentina for export. It's only recently I've got closer to it. In fact, I often go to a place called Tango Amigo, perhaps because the presenter and the singer are friends of mine. Adriana Varela. Have you heard of her in Spain?”

“I don't keep up with these things. As far as tango goes, I didn't get much beyond Gardel and Discepolo. The one who did reach Spain is Cecilia Rosetto, who’s a wonderful actress. I hope to see her here.”
A pair of eyes glances furtively at the proof on the sign: 'Behaviour Laboratory. The Spirit of New Argentina'. The man walks as though stealth has become second nature to him. Rats and chemical retorts, but on the wall the surprise of a huge poster. A cow with a beautiful young girl proudly pointing to it:

ARGENTINA WILL ONCE AGAIN BE THE WORLD'S MILCH COW: FOUNDATION FOR A NEW ARGENTINA

The eyes come to a halt on the poster. They're part of a haggard face twisted with pent-up anger. The mouth mutters through its teeth: 'A New Argentina'.

All at once the man's rage spills over. He lashes out around him. Knocks over the retorts and test tubes, flings open the rats' cages. The animals emerge into the larger prison of the room. Fascinated, he pauses to contemplate the results of his unleashed power. One rat seems to be seeking him out, and he picks it up carefully, almost affectionately: 'rat, my little sister'.

He puts it into his torn jacket pocket and slips out of the laboratory just as lights start to go on and voices can be heard shouting: 'What was that?' 'What's happening?'

The loudest voice belongs to a man who's Fat with a capital F. His face, chest and stomach are mounds of blubber and forgotten acres of flesh.

His face is theatrically old, so it seems only natural he should ask pessimistically: 'What d'you know about Buenos Aires?' Betraying neither pessimism nor optimism, Carvalho responds: 'Tango, the disappeared, Maradona.' This answer only increases the other man's despondency: 'Tango, the disappeared, Maradona,' he repeats.

Carvalho looks out on to a Barcelona roof terrace. The old man is sitting in an armchair; behind him the city fills the horizon as if the more he gazed at it, the more it grew. The older man seems to be having trouble finding the words he's looking for. Beyond the window blinds, two middle-aged women are whispering and glancing surreptitiously at them. Carvalho is stuck in a cane chair like something from an Emmanuelle film, although it looks as if it were left behind by a being from outer space rather than a Filipino.

'For the sake of your father's memory, nephew, go to Buenos Aires. Try to find my son, Raul.' He points to the two women spying on them from the roof terrace.

My nieces have got me in their clutches. I don't want them to end up with what by rights belongs to my son. Who knows where he might be. I thought he'd got over the death of his wife, Berta, and his daughter's disappearance. That all happened in the years of the guerrilla. He went crazy. He was caught as well. Though I've been a Republican all my life, I wrote to the King. For my boy's sake, I asked for things I've never asked for in my
life. I made deals I would never have made. And finally I got him here to Spain. Time is a great healer, they say. Time doesn't heal a thing. It just adds more weight. You're the only one who can find him. You know how to: you're a cop, aren't you?'

'A private detective.'

'Isn't it the same thing?'

'The cops guarantee order. All I do is uncover disorder.'

Carvalho gets up, walks out on to the terrace and looks down at the city. Its jumbled roofs offer him a proposed merger of the old and new Olympic Barcelonas, the last stores in Pueblo Nuevo, and Icaria, the Catalan Manchester, just waiting to be demolished, then the outskirts of the eclectic architecture of the Olympic Village, and beyond it, the sea. When his uncle's voice drifts out to him, Carvalho can't help but smile.

'Buenos Aires is a beautiful city hell-bent on self-destruction.' Carvalho's father had always told him his American uncle had a way with words. 'I like cities that destroy themselves. Triumphant cities smell of disinfectant.'

He goes back inside to face the old man.

'So, will you do it? I don't really understand what you meant about private detectives, but will you go?'

'Welcome to Buenos Aires. We know you come here because Argentina is up for sale to foreigners. But it's not only the Japanese who are buying us: even the Spaniards are here, although Spain itself is for sale as well. It's being bought by the Japanese.'

He unstraps the watch from his wrist and starts to auction it. 'I'm not asking a million pesos for it, not even a thousand, not even a hundred, not one.'

He falls to his knees, sobbing. 'Take it from me, I beg you, just take it. We Argentines love people to take our watches, our sweethearts, our islands. So we can write tangos about it afterwards!'

The presenter rushes round the room compulsively offering his wristwatch to different members of the public, who react either with hollow laughter or dismay at this face dripping with make-up and eyeliner. The spotlight follows the presenter until it paralyses him, as if he suddenly felt there were no point trying to give away the watch any more. The presenter looks down at it as though it has become a viscous, strange object, then all at once apparently realizes he's in the middle of an audience, and nonchalantly asks them: 'By the way, what d'you know about Buenos Aires?'

Outside his window he can see the Ramblas, looking even darker than usual. The statue to Pitarra he's finally got used to. Pitarra, my old friend. His face twists in a
grimace of disgust as he stubbornly asks himself who he is, where he came from, where he's going to. The Llompart file is on the desk in front of him, and in his mind's eye he can see the scene from two days earlier. He signals to the doorman, and the Moroccan understands perfectly, even though he's probably not all that intelligent and knows there may be only five thousand pesetas in it for him. Hands over a key. The stairs and the corridor bring back the memory of every stinking rotten boarding house he's visited here in the armpit of the city. By the top step he's out of breath. He puts it down to the mixture of tension and disgust that is the only way he can keep up this crotch-sniffing role of his. But it's too late to back out now. Here's the door. The number in chipped porcelain. 'Better get it over with.'

He thrusts the key into the lock and, as if a curtain is torn in front of him, a terrified woman of an age to know better covers her flabby nakedness with the bedcover. A red light on the wall. A wardrobe door ajar. Carvalho switches on the main light. He's carrying a camera. He opens the wardrobe door. A nude, bald man. One hand covering his sex. Carvalho takes a picture.

Someone knocks at his door and the memory fades. That will be Llompart, come to sniff the crotch of his wife's lover. Carvalho sits behind the typical desk of a typical private detective; on the far side of the desk sits a man with the look of a typical deceived husband, depending of course on how deceived husbands look around the world. What could a deceived husband in New Zealand look like? Carvalho spreads the photos out in front of him. Photos taken when he burst into the room: the half-naked woman, the wardrobe, the ridiculous lover trying to hide. Senor Llompart's face crumples as though he's about to cry. But he doesn't. Instead he spits: 'Whore!'

By now his face is contorted with laughter, not tears. The more he studies the photos, the louder he laughs. 'My wife's a whore, but a stupid one. Now I've got these photos she won't get a cent out of me when we divorce.'

As if by magic he brandishes a chequebook, and a MontBlanc fountain pen probably given to him by his wife on Father's Day. 'How much do I owe you?'

'Two hundred thousand pesetas.'

He doesn't like the price. He doesn't like Carvalho. He doesn't like the photos. He frowns. He pauses in mid-flourish of his pen. He looks down at the photos, then at Carvalho, as if weighing their worth.

'Shit!'

'Regaining your honour is an expensive business.'

'What honour are you talking about? You're not giving me back my honour; on the contrary, you're showing me what an asshole I am.'
'But you're doing well out of it. You pay me two hundred thousand pesetas, but your wife'll be left without a bean when you get the divorce.'

'That's true.'

So he signs contentedly, and hands over the cheque with a smug feeling of self-satisfaction. Then he leaves, thanking Carvalho profusely for his professional expertise. Standing by the window again, Carvalho is on the point of wallowing in his nausea once more, but Biscuter interrupts him. When he pulls back the sliding curtain separating the office from the kitchen, his look of a superannuated foetus only serves to increase Carvalho's sense of melancholy. Biscuter's reedy eunuch voice grates on his ears, and he's annoyed by the way he wipes his hands on a dishcloth that's begging to be put out to pasture.

'Has he gone?'

'He thought it was expensive. He wanted to avoid paying anything to his wife, and paying me as little as possible.' 'There are a lot of cheapskates in this world, boss.' 'Cheap's the word. All he's interested in is leading the old cow off to the slaughterhouse, and he's managed to catch her out. Now he'll hitch up with a young heifer who'll bleed him dry. Nobody believes in anything in this society of ours. Everything is corrupt. When there's no morality left in society, what can we private detectives do? Take it from me, Biscuter.'

'This is dreadful, boss. We haven't got a single customer. No work at all.'

'I've got work.'

'Since when?'

'Since this morning. But not here. In Argentina. Buenos Aires.'

'So we're going to travel, boss!'

'I'm going to travel, Biscuter. If! take you I won't make anything on the deal.'

Carvalho looks through some papers. Finds his passport in a drawer. Biscuter can't believe his eyes. 'Just like that you tell me? Without sorting things out with Charo? Before you even try what I've cooked for you?'

'Charo. Did she phone?'

'No. But she sent you a radio as a present, d'you remember? And you didn't even respond. Maybe you should make the first move.' 'I prefer the second one.' But his eighth sense, his guilt complex, tells him he's going too far with Biscuter. He softens his voice and his gestures, and goes over to the little foetus, stiff as a board from hurt pride. 'Let's see what you've made.'
'Aubergines with anchovies, a seafood hollandaise sauce, and to top that culinary monument a poached egg with a spoonful of caviar.'

'A real crisis menu.'

'It's lumpfish caviar.'

'Lead on, Biscuter. Argentina can wait.'

One of the advantages of living in Vallvidrera is that you can say goodbye to a whole city with a single glance, as if it were someone forced to attend a ceremony. In the days when he still did so, he had read, possibly in a book by Bowles, that the difference between a tourist and a traveller is that the one knows the limits of his journey, while the other yields to the open-ended logic of the voyage. Buenos Aires. For now, a one-way journey with the return vaguer than ever, just like in the days when travel was more important to him than life. His landscapes and his characters all destroyed. Bromide dead, Charo in voluntary exile, Biscuter left as his only connection with what had once been the fragile ecosystem of his close friendships. Above all, Barcelona after the Olympics, open to the sea, scored with expressways, the Barrio Chino being pulled down with indecent haste, the aeroplanes of political correctness circling the city, spraying it to kill off its bacteria, its historic viruses, its social struggles, its lumpen, a city without armpits, robbed of its armpits, a city turned into a theatre in which to stage the farce of modernity.

'I'll see everything more clearly from Buenos Aires.'
Barcelona detective Pepe Carvalho’s radical past catches up with him when a powerful businessman—a patron of artists and activists—is found dead after going missing for a year.

In search of the spirit of Paul Gauguin, Stuart Pedrell—eccentric Barcelona businessman, construction magnate, dreamer, and patron of poets and painters—disappeared not long after announcing plans to travel to the South Pacific.

A year later he is found stabbed to death at a construction site in Barcelona. Gourmand gumshoe Pepe Carvalho is hired by Pedrell’s wife to find out what happened. Carvalho, a jaded former communist, must travel through circles of the old anti-Franco left wing on the trail of the killer. But with little appetite for politics, Carvalho also leads us on a tour through literature, cuisine, and the criminal underbelly of Barcelona in a typically brilliant twist on the genre by a Spanish master.
Pepe Carvahlo is always ready to solve the next big case, but not before indulging one of his favorite passions: food. Above, squash blossom fritters, a Carvahlo favorite, as evidenced on page 16 of *Southern Seas*. Should readers wish to emulate Pepe’s refined tastes, his recipe for this dish is below.

**Squash Blossom Fritters (Buñuelos de Flor de Calabaza)**

18 Squash Blossoms  
Oil for frying (I'm assuming olive oil, since it's Spain)  
60 grams of butter  
2 chopped onions  
100 grams of bread crumbs  
3 egg yolks  
3 tablespoons of chopped parsley  
1 tablespoon of grated lemon rind  
Salt and pepper  
125 grams of flour  
15 grams of melted butter  
15 centiliter of light beer  
1 egg white
1) First, prepare the dough. Sift the flour and salt in a bowl, add the melted butter in the center, work the flour, and add the beer little by little. Let this mixture settle for an hour.

2) Melt the other portion of butter and fry the onion without browning it. Move this into a bowl and add the bread crumbs, egg yolks, parsley, lemon rind, salt, and pepper. Fill the blossoms with this mixture.

3) Whisk the egg white until a stiff peak forms, then add it to the dough just before frying.

4) Immerse the stuffed flowers in the dough and put them in the hot oil. When they're golden brown, remove them from the flame with a skimmer or slotted spoon and drain them over absorbent paper.
Excerpt from *Southern Seas*

Viladecans was wearing a gold tiepin and platinum cufflinks. He was impeccable from head to foot, starting from his balding pate which shone like a dry riverbed confined between two banks of white hair. Judging by the care with which the lawyer periodically brushed his hand back over the surviving undergrowth, it had recently been trimmed by the best hairdresser in the city. At the same time, a diminutive tongue moved with relish across a pair of almost closed lips.

‘Does the name Stuart Pedrell mean anything to you?’

‘Rings a bell.’

‘It may ring several. It’s a remarkable family. The mother was a distinguished concert pianist, although she retired when she married and subsequently only performed for charity. The father was of Scottish origin, and was an important industrialist before the war. Each of the sons is a public figure in his own right. You may have heard of the journalist, the biochemist, the educationalist, or the building contractor.’

‘Probably.’

‘I want to tell you about the building contractor.’

He placed before Carvalho a set of local press cuttings mounted on file cards: ‘The body of an unidentified male has been found on a building site in Holy Trinity.’ ‘The body has subsequently been identified as that of Carlos Stuart Pedrell.’

‘Pedrell had parted from his family a year ago on the pretext of a trip of Polynesia.’

‘Why “on the pretext”? Did he need a pretext?’ ‘You know the language journalists use. The embodiment of impropriety.’
Carvalho tried to embody impropriety in his mind, but failed. Viladecans launched into a resumé of the situation, peering over folded hands that had been cared for by the finest manicurist.

‘This is how things happened. I’ve known my friend—and he was, I must tell you, a really close friend—since we were at a Jesuit school together. Recently he was going through a sort of crisis. Some men, especially men as sensitive as Carlos, find it hard to adjust as they pass forty and see fifty looming up. That’s the only reason that I can find, why he should spend months and months on a plan to abandon everything and head off to some island in the South Pacific. Suddenly the project picked up speed. He let the business side of things drop and disappeared without trace. We all assumed that he’d taken off for Bali or Tahiti or Hawaii, or some such, and that he would soon be back. But the months passed, and everyone had to face up to the fact that he was apparently gone for good. So much so that Señora Stuart Pedrell moved to take charge of the business.

‘Then, in January, came the report that Stuart Pedrell had been found dead, here in Barcelona, stabbed, on a building site in Holy Trinity. We now know that he never reached Polynesia. But we’ve no idea where he was and what he was doing for all that time. That’s what we want you to find out.’

‘I remember the case. The murderer was never caught. Do you also want to know who killed him?’

‘Well, if the murderer comes to light, well and good. But our real concern is to find out what he did during that last year of his life. You must understand, there are a lot of interests at stake.’

The office intercom announced that Señora Stuart Pedrell had arrived. The door opened almost at once on a forty-five-year-old woman who gave Carvalho an ache deep in his chest. She entered without so much as looking at him, and imposed her slim, mature figure as the only presence worthy of attention. Her face had dark, striking features that were showing the first painful signs of age. Viladecans’s introductions merely allowed her to accentuate the distance between
herself and Carvalho by means of a curt ‘How d’you do’. As Carvalho replied, he
was staring so intently at her breasts that she felt obliged to check with her hands
to make sure there was nothing wrong with her dress.

‘I was just filling in Señor Carvalho on the background.’ ‘I’m glad to hear it.
Viladecans will have told you that I require discretion at all costs.’

‘The same discretion with which the case has been reported in the press. I see
that none of these stories carries a photo of your husband.’

‘That is correct.’

‘Why is that?’

‘My husband went off at the height of a personal crisis. He wasn’t in his right
mind. On those rare occasions when he calmed down a bit, he would grab anyone
who cared to listen and tell them the life story of Gauguin. He wanted to be a
Gauguin too. Leave everything and go off to the South Seas. Leave me, his
children, his business and his social world—everything. A man in that state of
mind becomes easy prey, and if too much had been said about the case, all kinds
of unscrupulous characters could have come out of the woodwork.’

‘Did you come to some understanding with the police?’

‘They did all they could. So did the Ministry of External Affairs.’

‘External Affairs?’

‘There was a possibility that he had actually set off for the South Seas.’ ‘But he
hadn’t?’ ‘No,’ she replied, with a certain satisfaction. ‘And you’re pleased about
that?’ ‘Yes I am, a little. I got fed up with the whole business. More than once I
told him: “Stop talking about it. If you’re going to go, then go!” He was suffocated
by his money, you know.’
‘Mima ...’

Viladecans tried to cut her short.

‘Everyone round here feels suffocated. Everyone except me. When he went, I was finally able to breathe properly. I’ve worked hard. I’ve done his work as well as he ever did it. Better, in fact. Because I’ve done it without complaining all the time.’ ‘May I remind you, Mima, that we’re here for a very special purpose.’ But Carvalho and the widow were looking each other up and down, as if to gauge each other’s capacity for aggression.

‘In other words, you have a certain attachment to the job.’

‘Laugh if you like. A certain attachment, yes. But not a very great attachment. This business has shown me that no one is indispensable. But then we are all usurpers in the positions we hold.’

Carvalho was troubled by the dark passion emanating from those black eyes, from the two lines that curved round a mature and knowing mouth.

‘What exactly do you want to know?’

‘What exactly did my husband do during that year? A year when we all thought that he was in the South Seas, but when he was God knows where, doing God knows what. I have an eldest son who’s turned out like his father—and, what is worse, who is going to inherit even more money. Another two are probably at this minute doing motorbike trials on one of the hills around here. I have a daughter whose nerves have never recovered since her father’s body was found. And a young son whom the Jesuits have expelled from school. I have a great many things that I need to keep an eye on.’

‘What do you know so far?’

Viladecans and the widow looked at each other. It was the lawyer who replied.
‘The same as you.’

‘Wasn’t there anything on the dead man that might give us a lead?’ ‘They’d emptied his pockets.’ ‘This is all they found.’ The widow took from her bag a crumpled page from a diary.

Someone had written on it with a felt-tip pen: più nessuno mi porterà nel sud.
Barcelona’s new soccer star is receiving death threats and Pepe Carvalho, gourmet gumshoe and former political prisoner under Franco, is hired to find out who’s behind it.

Pepe Carvalho is set to retire. Content to live out the rest of his days enjoying the best food and wine Catalonia has to offer, his plans are put on hold when an executive from Barcelona’s world-famous soccer team pays him a visit. “The center forward will be killed at dusk,” reads the note the executive gives to Carvalho.

With that, the detective, former communist, and one-time employee of the CIA, must find out where this note is from. Is the threat real? Is it the work of one person? Or is it one of the real estate moguls tearing Barcelona apart in their battle over the most important properties of Catalonia?
Detective work is tough business. Some claim it might even drive a man to drink. In Pepe Carvalho’s case, it’s not the business, but an insatiable thirst, that leads him to some of Barcelona’s most notorious watering holes. Using the handy map above, follow in Pepe’s footsteps as he fortifies himself en route to the next case.
For Carvalho, the cocktail trail through Barcelona meant starting at the Boadas, near the Ramblas, with the lady of the house looking beautiful against a backdrop of drawings by Opisso, a nostalgic landscape of a city which by now was definitively nostalgia. He had already explored a route which took in the Gimlet, the Nick Havana and the Victory Bar in search of the perfect dry Martini; sometimes he would arrive at the Ideal in the middle of the afternoon, when the place was half empty, and anybody who felt it like could get drunk with the full complicity of the barmen or in the company of the bar’s owners—father and son—each equally expert in purveying cocktails both ancient and modern, and the nostalgia or modernity that went with them. At lunchtime and during the early evening, the Club Ideal tended to be full of well-heeled Barcelona señores, or heterosexual couples made up of aggressive (and aggressed) executives, and their emancipated three-timing wives, for whom the executive himself represented at best only the third in the line of possibilities. By eight o’clock the bar had broader range of flora and fauna, and from his particular corner Basté de Linyola could enjoy a degree of anonymity thanks to the noise of conversation, the numbers of people, and the subdued lighting as he sat below a portrait of the bar’s owner in the uniform of some old seawolf of the English admiralty. Basté de Linyola was a politician in transit, en route to his own nothingness, and the new glories looked somewhat askance at him. His face did not fit with the most powerful football club in the world, in the same way that it would look odd to have Gorbachev as world president of the Rotary Club. It was only a matter of time before Carvalho caught up with Basté, looking relaxed and master of his corner, and consuming a low-alcohol cocktail which Gotarda senior had purveyed with a literary flourish. Carvalho ordered a Martini, looking forward to the prodigy of absolute taste, the chimera which Martini offers as a Platonic ideal, conscious that the secret of its perfection will never be entirely discovered.

‘I have to tell you that this encounter is rather ill-advised.’ Nevertheless he was smiling. ‘Wasn’t Sito a good enough go-between?’
‘Who’s Sito?’

‘Sito Camps O’Shea. His real name is Alfonso, but they’ve called him Sito ever since he was a kid. His father is a good friend of mine. And I am honoured by that friendship. Camps y Vicens. Do you know the name? Building constructors.’

‘I’m afraid not. I had to meet you, though. This business is beginning to look like an optical illusion. It only exists in the fact of the anonymous letters. There’s nothing that suggests that Mortimer is actually going to be killed. Don’t you have some other centre forward that they might want to kill?’

‘We have others, but not really in the assassination league. If they do end up killing Mortimer, it’s going to make real problems for us. The club is just coming out of a difficult period and we’ve had to work hard to win back the confidence of the fans and the public. This is the most powerful club in the world, but only for as long as it has a hundred thousand members. If its membership were to fall to seventy thousand, it would be a giant with feet of clay. It’s dependent on the money that those hundred thousand pay at the start of each season. If our annual income took a downturn, it could be disastrous.’

‘I thought the police told you there’s nothing to worry about.’

‘Quite right. And we’re not worrying. You’re a “just in case” people around. We live in a society that is falling apart. Everything appears to be balanced and under control, but chaos is just around the corner. People don’t believe in something. And societies that have lost their beliefs are the kind of societies where you get crazed killers running around.’

‘Are you suggesting that we’re going to start seeing irrational, motiveless killings, like in the United States?’

‘Why not? We already have psychiatrists and private detectives, so I don’t see why we can’t have mad murderers too. And here it could be even worse, because at least in the USA they still put up an appearance of believing in God. They go to church on Sundays, and feel themselves part of a chosen people. But you don’t
have that in Spain. Religion of any kind, whether political or otherwise, has disappeared. The only thing that we have left, by way of communion of the saints, is nationalism.’

‘Is that what makes you a nationalist?’

‘It’s the most gratifying thing that a person can be, and the least concrete, particularly if you are, as I am, a non-independist nationalist. Politics is a curious thing in Catalonia. We have a situation where power is shared between socialists who don’t believe in socialism, and nationalists who don’t believe in national independence. The whole thing’s ripe for lone operators to take over, and when you look at the like of young Camps O’Shea, the prospect becomes even more alarming. That man has no conscience, no epic memory, no life-project other than going out and winning, without even knowing what he wants to win at, or whom he wants to beat.’
At a meeting of the central committee of Spain’s Communist Party, in a room both locked and guarded, general secretary Fernando Garrido is stabbed to death. But the Party refuses to believe it was an inside job.

They turn to former member Pepe Carvalho. But he’s soon out of his depth in unfamiliar Madrid, where he spends nearly as much time investigating the chorizo, lamb-kidneys, and tripe, and the uninspiring selection of wine on offer, as he does murder.

With time out for his signature book burning (Engels’s The Housing Question), cooking (shellfish risotto), and an ill-advised bajativo (cognac, crème de menthe) inspired romp with Gladys, Pepe Carvalho leads a wry and cynical tour through the labyrinth of post-Fascist Spanish politics amid violent jostling for power.

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When Antonio Jauma, a director of the multinational conglomerate Petnay, is murdered, his widow seeks out private investigator Pepe Carvalho, who had met and forgotten the playboy executive after their single chance encounter—back when Carvalho still worked for the CIA.

Jauma was a “womanizer,” according to a friend, “of the least pleasant sense,” and the police have decided that the murder is the work of an unhappy pimp. But Carvalho doggedly pursues his own phlegmatic investigation, with time out for his signature book burning (Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reasoning; Sholokov’s And Quiet Flows the Don), cooking (leek soup and a freshly-caught steamed turbot), and running with his girlfriend Charo, whose last name he can’t remember.
Pepe Carvalho’s “Other” Indulgence

For reasons that are as complicated as his many love affairs, Pepe Carvahlo occasionally is inclined to take from his library certain books he feels are worthy of the flames. The Buenos Aires Quintet sheds some light on this peculiar practice.

“He threw in the rubbish bin a pile of unsolicited mail that he found in his letter box, and lit the fire with Eugenio Trias’s Philosophy and Its Shadow. He calculated that he would have to slow down with burning his library. He still had some two thousand books to go: at one a day, they would last six years or so. Intervals between books would have to be introduced, or he would have to go out and buy more—an option that was not attractive. Maybe he could play for time by splitting the various volumes of Brahier’s Philosophy and the Pléiade classics collection. It hurt him to burn the Pléiade classics, because they had such a good feel to them. Sometimes he would take down a volume or two, just to feel them, before returning them to the jumble of the bookshelves and erasing the memory of how, once, he had thought it enriching to read them.”
Detective Pepe Carvalho, who resembles his author in more than politics, is a distinct personality. Once, when Montalbán was asked just how much of Pepe was him, he replied: "We have fairly common political, historical and family (personal) experiences, but he's taller and more handsome than me, and has become a total nihilist. I haven't yet."

Certain trappings of the Pepe Carvalho novels reflect the classics of old: the rundown office on La Rambla; the partner, Biscuter (compared once to Peter Lorre), who lives behind a curtain in the office; the dishevelled appearance of the two. But Biscuter is actually a complex personality and Carvalho is no Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade. For one thing, he's a gourmet cook and frequenter of top restaurants. (Biscuter also cooks for him, in the kitchenette behind the office curtain.) Any novel, therefore, will take you on a culinary tour of the city where Pepe finds himself, yet another draw. But if he's not enjoying a "Rabelaisian display of crayfish with garlic, squid and tiny octopuses, baby eels, duck paté and slices of kiwi fruit, small lobsters and langoustines" at Casa Leopoldo, he may be taking in a sex scene at Martin's, one of Barcelona’s many gay bars, for although he's not homosexual, Pepe is a bit of a voyeur, and depending on where his cases take him, he’s likely to take advantage of the situation to fulfil his own diverse appetites.

Another Pepe Carvalho idiosyncrasy: he loves to burn books. When asked why, Pepe once commented: "It’s an old habit of mine. For forty years I read book after book, now I burn them because they taught me nothing of how to live." When Montalbán was asked the same question, he replied: "It’s a cultural sarcasm deriving from the supposedly low culture nature inherent in the detective genre."
Moreover, it allows me to play a few small cultural jokes: burning Quijote or The Theory of Life by Engels. On one occasion Carvalho burns an anthology of erotic Spanish poetry whose editors had lacked the good sense to include me."

Pepe Carvalho’s main informant was once a shoe-shine guy in the Barrio Chino named Bromide. He dies along the way and a new one takes over, El Mohammed, indicating the shift of immigrants in the barrio from Murcian and Andalucian to North African, provoking Pepe’s opinion on all that that implies.

Charo is a prostitute who was once Carvalho’s sentimental companion. As do all the characters, she ages through the years. By the 1990s she’s in her forties, and many of her clients are dying of AIDS, so she goes into retirement about then, but the two keep in touch. The middle-aged Carvalho still gets his head turned by young beauties who flit through the cases - and he enjoys sex with some of them - but one suspects that he’d take a fine dining experience over sex any day.

The bars and restaurants he talks about are all quite real. In Barcelona, he mentions some of the finest eating establishments, most quite out of the ordinary budget: La Odissea, Els Pescadors, and the aforementioned Casa Leopoldo, a swank restaurant smack in the middle of the Barrio Chino. He also likes the cocktail bar on La Rambla, Can Boadas, and the more casual Nostromos in the Barrio Gótico. But he could just as easily end up in a dive on one of his cases, so one gets a full tour.

Pepe lives in Vallvidrea on Mt. Tibadabo (as did Montalbán), one of Barcelona’s posher areas, which takes in a sweeping view of the city and the sea. His residence and love of five-star cuisine may seem at odds with his shabby office, leftist politics, and street-savvy manner, but that’s part of what makes him so intriguing, so human. He has a quick wit and ironic, often cynical or sarcastic, attitude that can put people off, but he does get one’s attention. He’ll even tic the reader off at times with the occasional sexist remark, but you won’t want to let go of him; he’s as "moreish" as a rich, rum-soaked chocolate truffle, which he could undoubtedly whip up in a moment’s notice.
It’s heartbreaking to know that Pepe has solved his last case. It is also heartbreaking that his creator is no longer with us to comment on the local, national and international political scene. One wishes Montalbán could have seen the new socialist government form in Catalunya last November. He would certainly have been critical of it as well, but would have welcomed the end of the 23-year hold by the conservative nationalist party. His voice will be terribly missed. But he’s left us so very much. For the English-reading public, it is the Pepe Carvalho novels that are the most accessible of his works. If you haven’t yet discovered him, hours of luscious entertainment await you, and two recent re-releases by Serpent’s Tail are as good a place as any to jump in . . .

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