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**Review of Imma Monsó's *A Man of His Word*
(trans. Maruxa Relaño and Martha Tennent)**

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Imma Monsó. *A Man of His Word*. Translated by Maruxa Relaño and Martha Tennent. Madrid: Hispabooks, 2014.

———. *Un home de paraula*. Barcelona: RBA La Magrana, 2006.

Some time following the death of her partner, Catalan writer Imma Monsó asked a friend for “books on the grieving process” because “I want to know what’s in store.” Finally remembering, her friend hands her “two sheets of paper with the title: *The Mourning Process. Guidelines to Evaluate Pathological Grief*”. Disappointed, Monsó asks “Is this all?” To which her friend replies, “You’ll have to fill in the rest yourself” (121). *A Man of His Word*, published originally in Catalan in 2006 as *Un home de paraula*, is the result of Monsó filling in the rest.

Born in Mequinensa, a town that was later flooded to make way for a dam, Monsó burst onto the Catalan literary scene in her late thirties with *No se sap mai* [You Never Know, 1996] and since then she has become one of the best writers in contemporary Catalan literature. Her reputation is due to her novels and short story collections which, unusually for Catalan writers, have been translated into Castilian and have become bestsellers throughout Spain. Her success is due to her ironic take on European society and its values as well as her focus on women’s lives and tender treatment of difficult topics such as cancer. Her fiction has drawn comparisons to the works of Catalan writers, Josep Pla (1897-1981), Jesús Moncada (1941-2005), Quim Monzó (1952) and Mercè Rodoreda (1908-1983), all of whom have been translated into English, as well as to Franz Kafka, J. D. Salinger, Dorothy Parker, Lorrie Moore, Helen Simpson, German writer and author of *The Mussel Feast*, Birgit Vanderbeke, as well as Belgian author, Amélie Nothomb.

A Man of His Word is based in fact – the death of Monsó’s husband, a philosophy teacher, in 2003 – but it is fact made literature. The book has an unusual structure. Monsó divides the chapters into two types: A and B. “The A chapters will be about how we met, us, life with him. The B chapters will be about how I lost him, life without him. This will also serve as a mnemonic device (I’ve been a bit confused lately): A for affection, amusement, acceptance; B for barbarous, brutal, bare, burgeoning” (17). In writing about the death of a loved one there is a risk of crossing the line into sentimentality. Monsó avoids this by employing the third person in the A chapters and by using nicknames. Her husband becomes Cometa, the Catalan word for comet, because he lit up the sky, not just hers, but that of everyone he met. Monsó herself becomes Lot, from *papalote*, meaning dimwit or, in Mexican Spanish, a child’s kite, one of the last of the many nicknames he gave her. Their adopted daughter is called Púlix, an invented Gallic name inspired by the *Asterix* books that Cometa read to her. The B chapters are more immediate and are narrated in the first person. This shift between first and third person seems initially forced but it quickly becomes natural, marking the distance Monsó feels between her experiences of their life together and her life now.

The book’s title plays on Cometa’s integrity – once committed to something he sees it through – and also to the process by which Monsó is able to reconstruct him. Cometa is a man of his word and, now, a man of words. His physical body gone, all that exists is the idea

of him. The flesh made word. As a writer, Monsó has a gift with which she can make sense of her experience. Words enable her “to talk about him, about life with him, about life without him” (13). Words also save her from the depths of despair. The opportunity for suicide is avoided by words that “strip the death wish of its solemnity; words divest you of the energy needed to move from thought to action. [...] By exhausting the subject of killing yourself, you contribute to the feeling you’ve already killed yourself”, she reports calmly (119).

Monsó’s writing is tender and moving, honest and direct. Although she was completely enamoured of her late husband, *A Man of His Word* is not an exercise in hagiography, nor does it fall into self-pity. Monsó uses her trademark humour well at times to resist the maudlin nature of the topic.

A Man of His Word is well rendered in English by Relano and Tennent. The translators favour Venuti’s foreignizing practice, with some Catalan words, mainly food and forms of address, left in the original. It is ironic, however, that in a work originally written in Catalan the language that most appears in the translation is Castilian (Spanish), particularly references to popular Spanish and Latin American songs. An interesting dilemma for translators is raised when Mercè Rodoreda’s classic novel, *La plaça del Diamant* (1962), is mentioned by Cometa. Relano and Tennent use the title of the 1980 English translation, *The Time of the Doves*, by David Rosenthal. However, the novel has been translated into English on two other occasions with different titles: *The Pigeon Girl* (1967, Eda O’Shiel) and *In Diamond Square* (2013, Peter Bush). While the translators perhaps chose Rosenthal’s text because it is better known, Peter Bush’s radical translation published by Virago is most likely to be more readily available to English readers today. It is also the text that more accurately replicates Rodoreda’s style.

Although at least one of her short stories, “The Window”, has previously appeared in English, Monsó’s *A Man of His Word* is the first of her books to be translated into English. It is hoped that Anglophone readers will not have to wait long to read more from a writer whose literary star shines bright.