



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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Soldiers of Salamis:
Javier Cercas and the
Truth of Betrayal

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Soldiers of Salamis: Javier Cercas and the Truth of Betrayal

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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It is said that history is written
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But *Soldiers of Salamis* questions
that old adage.

Cercas's novel is concerned with how memory becomes narrative, how stories emerge, are retold, and persist over time, and also how secrets are passed on, revealed, or lost to posterity.

It may be the winners whose stories are most seldom told, whose secrets they take with them to the grave.

Perhaps it is only treachery that takes us to the heart of the matter; the real can only be betrayed.

Cercas praises the forgotten heroes who march for countries and causes that are not their own. It is on them, the ones who cross the lines and fight for other sides, that civilization depends.

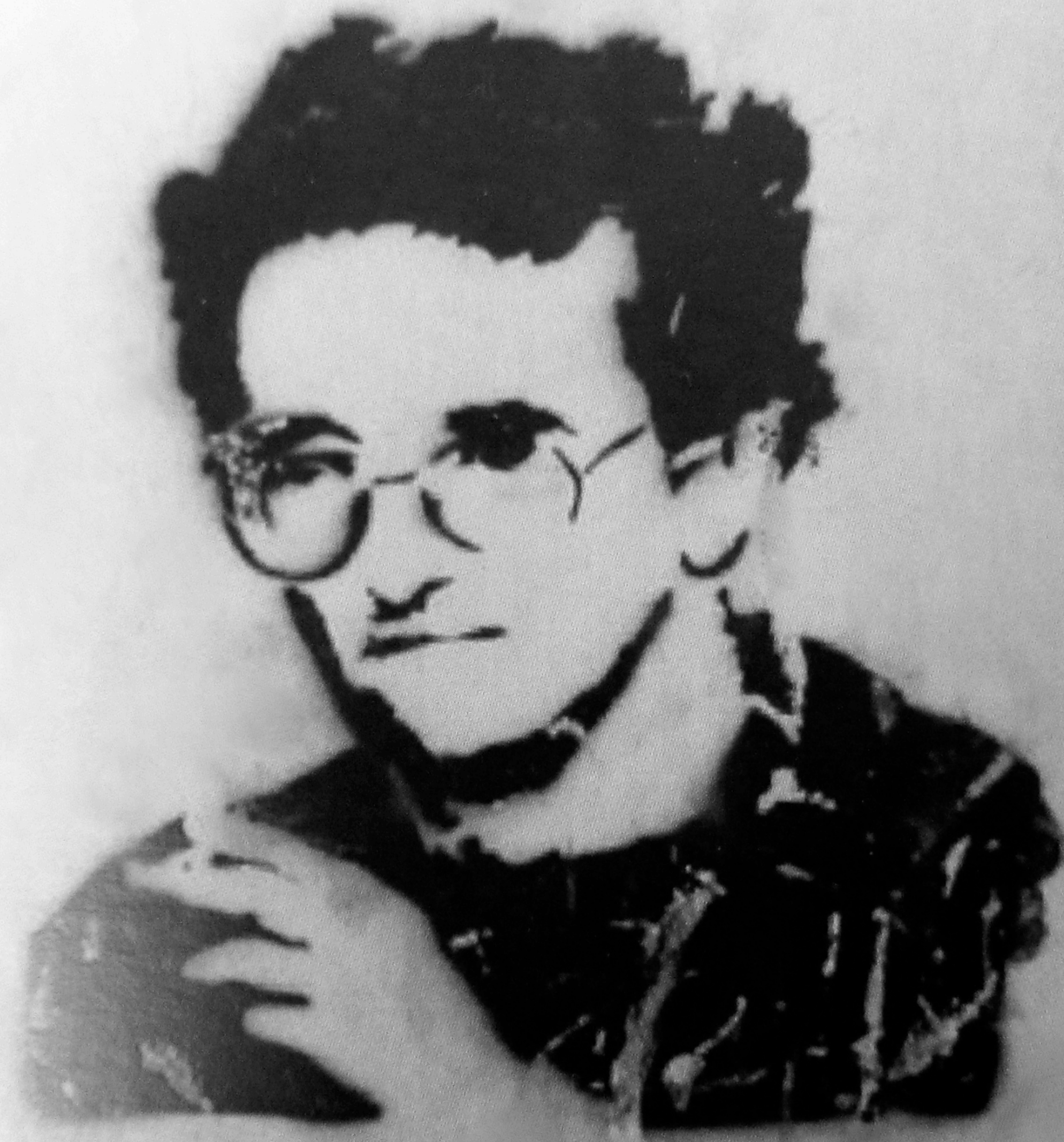


A REAL TALE?

“This is a work of fiction. [. . .] Where real-life historical figures and public figures appear, many of the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.”



Rafael Sánchez Mazas



ROBERTO BOLAÑO



Javier Cercas

Cercas the narrator tells us that he has just turned forty in 1994 when his story begins (making his year of birth 1954), is divorced, childless, and missing his recently deceased father.

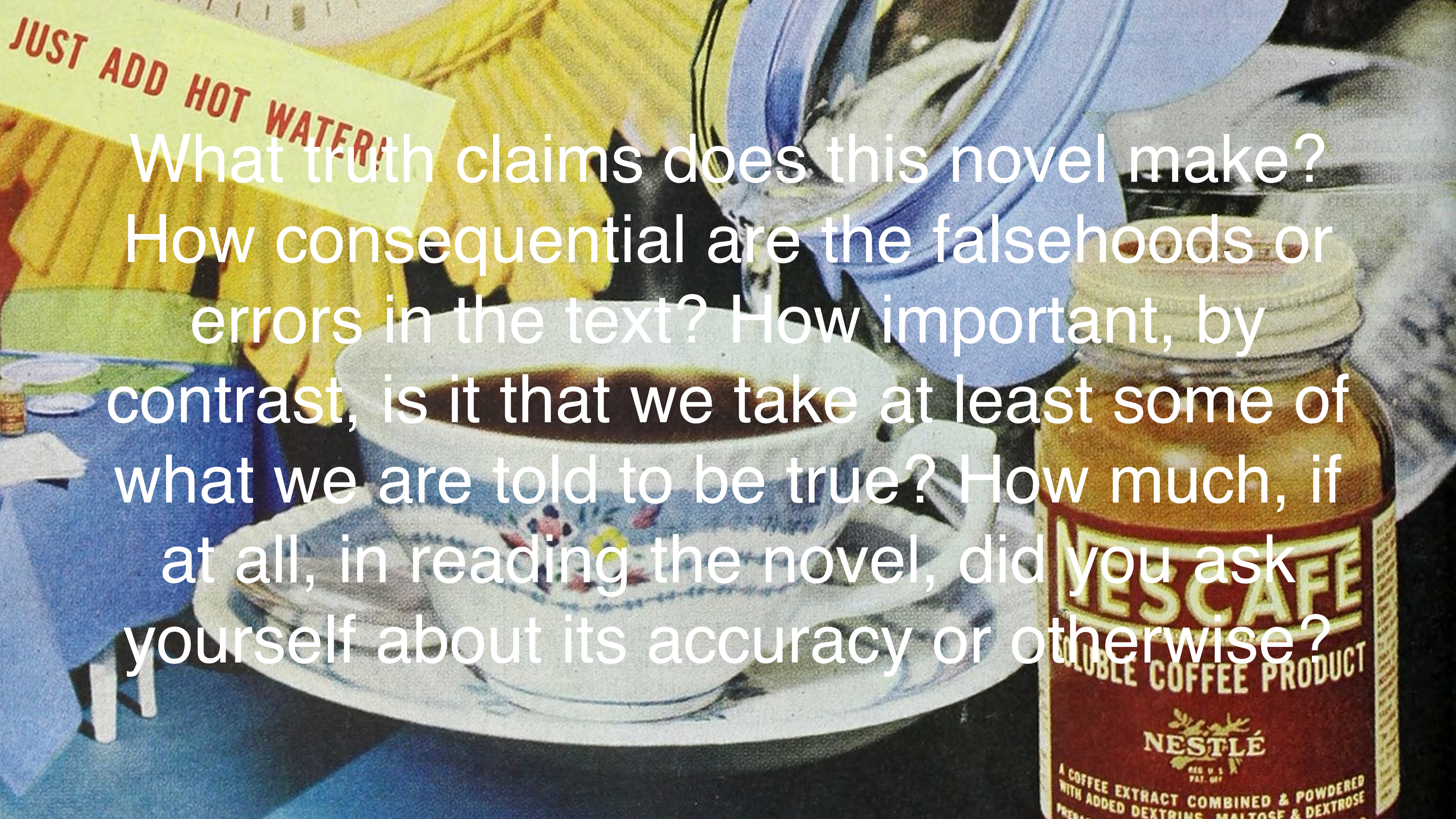
Cercas the author, by contrast, was born in 1962, is married with a son, and, at least when the book came out, his father was still alive and well. Moreover, he never met Miralles (whose first name was Enric, rather than Antoni or Antonio, as the book has it), who died in 1991, long before Cercas began researching and writing his book.

“I’m lying” (13).

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But he also invites us to play a guessing game to separate out fact from fiction.

What truth claims does this novel make? How consequential are the falsehoods or errors in the text? How important, by contrast, is it that we take at least some of what we are told to be true? How much, if at all, in reading the novel, did you ask yourself about its accuracy or otherwise?



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**“This book is the fruit of extensive reading
and long conversations.”**

We have a double narrative. On the one hand, there is the story of a relatively minor incident from the civil war.

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On the other hand is the story of how Cercas pieced that tale together

“It’s not a novel [. . .]. It’s a true tale. [. . .]
It’ll be like a novel [. . .]. Except, instead of
being all lies, it’s all true” (74, 75).

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It’ll be like a novel [. . .]. Except, instead of
being all lies, it’s all true” (74, 75).

“It’s a story with real events and characters.
A true tale.” (192).

“Same difference. [. . .] All good tales are true tales, at least for those who read them, which is all that matters.” (193)

“You’ll have to make it up. [. . .] The interview with Miralles. It’s the only way you can finish the novel.” (197)

“You’ll have to make it up. [. . .] The interview with Miralles. It’s the only way you can finish the novel.” (197)

“My book wasn’t meant to be a novel [. . .] making up the interview with Miralles would amount to a betrayal of its nature.” (197)

Invention is cast as treachery, while
to be “true” takes on that word’s
connotations of loyalty or steadfastness.

“Reality always ends up betraying us, it’s best not to give it the chance and betray it first. The real Miralles would only disappoint you [literally, deceive you]. Better to make him up: the invented one will surely be more real than the real one.” (197)

Writing is rendered a battle of betrayal and counter-betrayal, whereby it is not truth (fidelity) that leads to the real, but subterfuge (perfidy) that gives us the really real, the heart of the matter!



BETRAYAL AND BEING

The themes of loyalty and betrayal, honour and cowardice, responsibility and dereliction of duty, are woven through *Soldiers of Salamis* such that at times it is hard to tell them apart. In almost every case, treachery requires fidelity as much as truth depends upon deceit.

Sánchez Mazas is the architect of the grandest of betrayals. He was “more responsible for the victory of Francoist arms than all the inept military manoeuvres of that nineteenth-century general who was Francisco Franco” (54). Yet that enterprise required discipline and loyalty.

Sánchez Mazas kept his allegiance to Franco even when the general reneged on his radical ideals, in “a veritable coup d’état in reverse” ensuring that “the fascist revolution they’d dreamt of was never going to happen.” (146)

Loyal to a fault, the writer kept his mouth shut and frittered away his declining years, betraying himself and his own potential as a writer in the process. Hence he “won the war but lost literature.”

“Over the years she was endowed with a saint’s halo, or made into a fairy godmother to the desperate people of the region, whose families came in search of protection for the indiscriminate victims of a post-war period that in those days no one could have imagined would last so long.” (143)

Long-lasting loyalty is founded
on shared perfidy.

“This anonymous defeated soldier [. . .]
calls out loudly without taking
his eyes off him:

““There’s nobody over here!”

“Then he turns and walks away.” (118)

It is this moment, this brief but considered
dereliction of duty, that drives
the narrator's entire investigation.

“We’ll never know [. . .] what passed through [the soldier’s] mind when he looked [Sánchez Mazas] in the eye [. . .] but sometimes I think, if we managed to unveil one of these parallel secrets, we might perhaps also touch on a much more essential secret.” (24)

“The soldier’s look doesn’t express compassion or hatred, or even disdain, but a kind of secret or unfathomable joy, [. . .] something that eludes words the way the water in the stream eludes stone, because words are only made for [. . .] saying the sayable, when the sayable is everything except what rules us or makes us live or matters or what we are.” (118)

“The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the essence of the thing.” (Spinoza)

“I would prefer not to.”
 (“Bartleby, the Scrivener”)

There is nothing negative about this refusal;
it is a joyful affirmation of power even in
the shadow of the Spanish Republic's
inevitable downfall.

There is nothing negative about this refusal;
it is a joyful affirmation of power even in
the shadow of the Spanish Republic's
inevitable downfall.

It is the secret, inexpressible snatching
of victory from the jaws of defeat.


“In the window appears an endless and
burning desert and a lone soldier,
carrying the flag of a country not his own,
of a country that is all countries and
only exists because that soldier raises
its abolished flag.” (246)

Cercas celebrates Miralles as a type of unknown and unknowable hero, whose contributions remain forever secret, who ensures that history does not end badly, or at least that it does not end entirely, because there are always more stories to be told.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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