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Donna Jacobs
donna.jacobs55@gmail.com

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Booklover — Experimental Imagination

Column Editor: **Donna Jacobs** (Retired, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC 29425)
<donna.jacobs55@gmail.com>

Boxwood is defined as the hard, tough, fine-grained wood of the box shrub or tree that is often used by woodcarvers for carved blocks, games, musical instruments, or tool handles. The word is referenced over 20 times in **Camilo José Cela's** 211-page novel entitled *Boxwood*. The references include: 1) the hope of building a house with boxwood beams (most of the references), 2) bird's wings containing nerves of boxwood, 3) pyres built from boxwood, 4) a box carved from boxwood, 5) a boxwood violin, 6) the poisonous nature of boxwood, 7) boxwood would be a "more noble and luxurious" wood for a witch's broomstick, 8) boxwood built boats, 9) boiling boxwood splinters as a remedy, and 10) a boxwood handled axe.

All of these references are randomly inserted into the text of this work, described on the book cover's front flap as a "non-novel." Are you intrigued?

Imagine you are in the presence of a storyteller, who is long in memory, disregards validity, loves folklore and superstition, and has plenty of stamina to tell the story. This might give you a glimpse into what to anticipate from **Cela** in this piece divided into four sections: "Marco Polo Sheep (When We Give Up Rugby For Good)"; "Annelie and the Hunchback (When We Give Up Tennis For Good)"; "Left-Handed Doña Onofre (When We Give Up Fishing With Forbidden Skills For Good)"; and "The Keys of Cibola (When We Give Up Cricket For Good)." The reader learns of shipwrecks, cargo lost, the antics of the local residents (the story is set in Galicia Spain, **Cela's** homeland), the mermaids who take care of the fishermen, the folk remedies that quite frankly can make one nauseous to read the ingredients and preparation, gossip village tidbits, the whales, the octopus recipes, the many lives lost at sea, religion, saints, ghosts, and superstition all strung together in a stream of minimally punctuated words — the last fourteen pages of the book contains one phenomenal sentence. But we never quite learn why the four activities are given up for good.

Camilo José Cela was awarded the 1989 **Nobel Prize in Literature** "for a rich and intensive prose, which with restrained compassion forms a challenging vision of man's vulnerability." He was born in 1916 in the parish of Iria Flavia, Padrón, Galicia, Spain. He initially pursued a law degree before writing professionally became his career choice. His writing style is described as being influenced by Spanish realism and English/French contemporary writers, but moves increasingly toward the experimental as time progressed. His 1988 novel *Christ versus Arizona* is a story of a duel told in a single sentence that runs for over a hundred pages. *Boxwood* contains many long sentences of seemingly randomly connected information

and would most definitely fall into the realistic experimental category for me.

My orange post-it notes identifying potential passages to illustrate this experiment litter the book from the very first page, as the book opens with: "Celso Tembura, the sacristan, whose friends call him Barnacle while others have dubbed him Winkle and he doesn't take it amiss, guts scad and broils little birds better than anyone...he has flat feet, bushy eyebrows and a fitful mind, well, he stutters you see, Celso also sings Portuguese fados and Oporto tangos tunefully and will cook a slap-up feast to order, the harder the wind blows over the sea the better for everyone..." and off you go. Interspersed in this stream of consciousness are short exchanges between what presumably is the reader and narrator. Three pages in, one of the first of these sets the tone:

"Isn't this getting a little jumbled?"

"Just a shade jumbled."

"Like life itself?"

"Yes, though I try not to say so."

But we continue: "...it is improper for widows to drink too much coffee, some elderly seafarers say that mermaids were the first lace makers in Camariñas, that they copied the patterns from seaweed and starfish and the transparency of waters where cormorants have just dived, there are scarcely any mermaids left these days and Camariñas folk have lost their fondness for wooing them..." this leads into a discussion about a "revolutionary, republican bunch and didn't give a toss about the sermon, they challenged everything, upset the whole appercept and, of course, wound up with their souls in damnation...at times you can watch them loafing about with the Holy Company of souls along the banks of the river Maroñas, which are shady and overgrown, eerie and lonesome, when **James E. Allen** gave up rugby because he was getting on in years, his Norwegian uncle **Knut Skien**, who was also my uncle, took him off to hunt Marco Polo sheep..." — maybe a hint of explanation for the section title?

But not before we learn that "...the sailing ship *Bella Edelmira* sank with her cargo of cookies on the Fusisaca rock which the tides cover and show north of Roncudo point, three sailors perished, not by drowning but when the foremast split and struck their heads, the Sedes sorcerer cures cataracts by beseeching assistance from **St. Peter** and **St. Rufina**, Hail Mary full of grace conceived without sin..." and that "last year **Vincent** won 286,414,866 pesetas in the lottery, a real fortune, the com-

bination which reaped such rich rewards was as follows: 6,14,16,20,26,30, all even numbers, which goes against the law of nature, the state of nature, the inertia and even nostalgia of nature..."

And yet:

"I insist on telling you, I'm growing tired of drawing it to your attention that this is very muddled and confusing."

"No, it is not even sort of muddled or sort of confusing, it is going its own way in orderly fashion, please understand that it is not my fault that it is beyond you."

"All right, I won't gainsay anyone for it isn't worth the trouble."

The winding narrative leads us to:

"...**Maria**, who wrote poetry and could cook a decent meal, when I was awarded the **Nobel Prize** they made an unforgettable stew for me and I've kept a bone from it as a memento, the smell of food lingered on the bone for perhaps six or seven years, **Celia** was the first woman in Spain to acquire a heavy goods vehicle license, she got it on April 19, 1932, her father rebuilt a truck..." onto the description of birds, a feast and of a "ceramic plaque which states: in this house on Langosteira beach in Finisterre, the writer **Camilo José Cela** spent the summers from 1984 until 1989..." a diversion of busts, sculptors, open air art leads to "...Finis Terrae is the final smirk of the chaos of man facing into the infinite, which is all very fine, my cousin

Irene, a committed poet, helped me to compose it, as well as an inscription which reads: on Monday, eighth of June nineteen eighty-eight, Feast of St. Sallustian, Don Ernesto Insua Oliveira, Mayor of Finisterre, unveiled this monument in honor of **Camilo José Cela**, the first Galician to be awarded the Novel [sic] Prize, in memory of his lengthy sojourns at this end of the earth..." and onto more detail about Doña Onofre.

Finally as this non-novel draws to the period... "**Knut Skein** took my cousin **James E. Allen** off to hunt Marco Polo sheep, life has no plot, when we believe that we are going to one place to perform certain heroic deeds the compass wavers wildly and carries us helter-skelter wherever it wishes: to the schoolyard, the brothel, the clink, or directly to the graveyard, also death begins to weave its disorienting, bewildering dance, the bagpipe drones with a hoarse sound, why in my family have we not been able to build a house with boxwood beams?..." 🐼

