


A portrait of Carlos Ruiz Zafón, a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark jacket. He is sitting at a table with his arms crossed. The background is a blurred lattice pattern.

Carlos Ruiz Zafón

BY JESSICA TEISCH



With *The Labyrinth of the Spirits* (reviewed on page ZZZ), Spanish writer Carlos Ruiz Zafón draws his beloved four-book saga, *The Cemetery of Forgotten Books*, to a close. Returning to the Catalan gothic and the seductive nature of Barcelona, the magic and mysteries of literature, and love and tragedy during the Spanish Civil War and its Francoist aftermath, Ruiz Zafón—generally regarded as the most read Spanish author since Cervantes—ties up diverging plotlines and clarifies mysteries first presented in *The Shadow of the Wind* (2004).

“What I want is that these stories are arranged as a labyrinth with different points of entry,” Ruiz Zafón told the *Independent* (UK). The novels in the historical quartet each possess a different tone, a different texture, but Fermín Romero de Torres, a beggar and former Republican agent, remains center. “He’s always been the moral centre of the stories. He’s the guy who holds the truth in his hands. Fermín is also in many ways an homage to the picaresque tradition of Spanish literature. He’s been holding a secret which can take us to the heart of this labyrinth.”

The 2004 *New York Times* review described *The Shadow of the Wind* as “Gabriel García Márquez meets Umberto Eco meets Jorge Luis Borges’ for a sprawling magic show, exasperatingly tricky and mostly wonderful.” The Catalan author’s work, however, is far more complex, lush, and melodramatic than that description lets on. Each novel is a nested doll of a tale, a guide to the winding streets and edifices of Ruiz Zafón’s native Barcelona, as well as a tale of passion, revenge, and ever-expanding mysteries. While the novels are about books, reading, literature, and the mechanics of storytelling, they also incorporate different genres, from the noir thriller to the historical novel, love story, fantasy, and comedy of manners. In his hands, Barcelona provides an enchanting, mysterious, and romantic setting in the spirit of Dickens’s London or Hugo’s Paris. Ruiz Zafón also draws on West Coast noir authors, including Raymond Chandler, and cinematic influences from Hollywood.

Born in 1964, Ruiz Zafón had a lucrative stint in advertising before turning to writing. The success of his first book in 1993, *The Prince of Mist*, a prize-winning young adult novel, allowed him to fulfill his dream of moving to Los Angeles, where he became a screenwriter, somewhat unhappily, in Hollywood. Although he sets his fiction in Barcelona, he has written the majority of his novels in Los Angeles, while still maintaining a home in his native city. And despite his immersion in Hollywood, he is adamant that his intricate, carefully engineered novels will never be made into films. “To adapt it would be a betrayal of the work,” he says. “If you touch it, it will explode. Nobody can make it better because nobody knows how it was put together. A lot of devices, they’re pushed to the limit. It’ll explode” (*Washington Post*).

YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Marina

A Gothic Tale (1999, 2014)

A cult classic in Spain and an international best seller, Ruiz Zafón’s gothic novel touches on themes of madness, doomed love, and scientific experiments gone awry. With a gritty atmosphere, ample action,

chilling horror, and bittersweet romance, *Marina* is, deservedly, a young adult classic.

In the late 1970s, Oscar Drai, 15, disappears from his boarding school in Barcelona's old quarter and wanders into a dilapidated mansion in the outskirts of the city, occupied by Germán Blau, an eccentric portraitist, and his ethereal daughter, Marina. Oscar falls for Marina, who, one morning, takes him to a hidden cemetery to witness a monthly ritual: a woman dressed in a velvet black veil places a single rose upon an unmarked grave. Following the woman through the back streets of Barcelona, the teens embark on an adventure that embroils them in 30 years of corruption, mystery, and tragedy. "From the very first page, this beautifully written work of historical fiction is impossible to put down," wrote *School Library Journal*. "With elements of romance, mystery, and horror, none of them overwhelming the other, this complex volume that hints at Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* manages to weave together three separate stories for a cohesive and eerie result."

THE MIST TRILOGY

The Prince of Mist (1993, 2010)

♦ EDEBÉ PRIZE

With his earnings from *The Prince of Mist*, his first book, Ruiz Zafón fulfilled a childhood dream: to go to Los Angeles and see the world of cinema. The first in a trilogy, the novel gives insight into the preoccupations—father-son relationships, coming-of-age, romance, loss of innocence, and, of course, good versus evil—that eventually led to *The Shadow of the Wind*.

In 1943, to escape an unnamed wartime city, eccentric watchmaker Maximilian Carver relocates his family to the coast. The teenage children—Max and Alicia—find a haunted old home, sold when the previous occupants' young son drowned a decade earlier. Soon they become involved with the local lighthouse keeper's grandson, a ghostly sunken ship, an overgrown garden with lifelike statues, mysterious homemade movies, and a villain on the prowl. "In gorgeously translated prose, Ruiz Zafón maintains a sweet, believable relationship among the characters when dealing with mundane concerns (a conflict over cleaning out a room full of spiders could be taken from any contemporary family film), but still conveys a sense of adventure and danger," wrote *Publishers Weekly*. "The bittersweet ending suits the theme and setting, offering both hope and tragedy without any pretense of fairness."

The Midnight Palace (1994, 2011)

Narrated from a perspective years after the events described in the novel, this moody and atmospheric supernatural thriller is somewhat predictable, with its haunted houses,

runaway trains, fires, and demons—but genuinely menacing and gory. Like *The Prince of Mist*, it plays with themes that appear in Ruiz Zafón's adult fiction, including love and grief, heroism and evil, and the bonds between family and friends.

In 1916 Calcutta, an evil, shadowy figure, Jawahal, kidnaps twin infants Ben and Sheere and murders their parents. Rescued by a British officer, Sheere grows up with her vagabond grandmother. Ben, meanwhile—ignorant of his sister's existence—is left in an orphanage for his own protection. When the twins approach age 16, Sheere's grandmother knows that Jawahal has returned and visits Ben's headmaster to warn him of impending danger. The twins reunite, and, with a secret society of orphans in the old, burnt-out abandoned mansion of the title, they uncover the secrets of their heritage and Jawahal's real identity. "It's fast-moving and never hesitates, and it quickly sketches the eight young people who inhabit its pages as quirky and likeable individuals," commented the *Guardian* (UK). "It's also a story about stories: tales from the past are woven into the narrative in an elegant way, with the whole book framed by the narrative of the last surviving member of the group."



The Watcher in the Shadows (1995, 2013)

A chilling thriller with elements of magical realism, the third novel in this loose trilogy is deliciously dark, sans graphic violence. Filled with fantastical mechanical toys, twisting passages, a sinister forest, and an eerie diary, this nostalgic and menacing novel falls outside typical tropes. "A well-written, well-crafted tale full of unique characters with full personalities," wrote *Tor*. "In a world of YA fiction where characters are either Edward and Bella or Harry Potter and Katniss Everdeen, Irene and Ismael are a much-needed breath of fresh air."

In 1937, Irene Sauvelle, 14, her younger brother, and their widowed mother, Simone, relocate from Paris to the sleepy coast of Normandy, where Simone has been hired as a housekeeper at Cravenmore, an isolated mansion home to a famous but reclusive toy maker and his wife. When Irene meets the orphan Ismael, a romance develops. Soon, however, a brutal murder shatters the family's newfound peace, and Irene and Ismael discover terrible secrets and demonic hauntings from the past. "Carlos Ruiz Zafón's prose flows like ink, the details of this wonderfully scary and mysterious book so perfectly linked—truly what I like to call a masterpiece," wrote the *Guardian*. "After all, how can you catch a murderer that lives in the shadows, a place visible only to those trying to run from something that is theirs—their past?"



THE CEMETERY OF FORGOTTEN BOOKS CYCLE

“I don’t think I really write about books, but rather about people, stories, language, ideas,” Ruiz Zafón told the *Independent*. “The four books in the cemetery of forgotten books quartet are indeed very related to the world of

readers, writers, booksellers, publishers and everybody in the orbit of literature, but they try to tackle on the classic themes of literature. They aspire to be about life.” Ruiz Zafón was inspired by the idea of the fictional Cemetery of Forgotten Books—a hidden labyrinth in an old palace in Barcelona that contains books forgotten and almost destroyed, a place to preserve memories and ideas and



The Labyrinth of the Spirits

By Carlos Ruiz Zafón, translated from the Spanish by Lucia Graves

THE STORY: In 1959, in Franco’s Spain, Alicia Gris, a scarred 29-year-old who was orphaned during the Nacionales’ bombing of Barcelona in 1938, agrees to investigate one last case for the Spanish secret police: the whereabouts of Minister of Culture Mauricio Valls, the brutal Montjuic Prison governor who maneuvered himself into the highest echelons of Franco’s government. Alicia, who as a young child had been pulled into Fermín Romero de Torres’s world, soon uncovers a rare, banned book by Victor Mataix hidden in the minister’s office. Her discovery soon leads her and her police partner, Juan Manuel Vargas, to the Barcelona prison that imprisoned several writers and which Valls directed during World War II—and to a web of untold atrocities. Alicia must also confront her own complex past, including a return to the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. The story, of course, circles back to the fate of bookseller Daniel Sempere and his family.



Harper. 816 pages. \$37.50. ISBN: 9780062668691

Bustle



“A mystery, a love letter to books, and a magical adventure all wrapped up in one, this book is a masterful work of literature that will invigorate your love of reading.”

Daily Mail (UK)



“Neither too geeky nor too highbrow, his genre-mashing novels provide a high-definition, alternative account of Spain’s turbulent 20th-century history, with added Hollywood blockbuster thrills.” CLAIRE ALLFREE

Guardian (UK)



“Amid the game-playing with known and unknown stories, Zafón has a serious and angry political intent. ... Zafón is also a fine describer of city sights—vividly depicting both the touristic and obscure parts of Barcelona and Madrid—and his storytelling is impressively architectural.” MARK LAWSON

Kirkus



“Ruiz Zafón clearly has had a great deal of fun in pulling this vast story together, and if one wishes for a little of the tightness of kindred spirit Arturo Perez-Reverte, his ability to keep track of a thousand threads while, in the end, celebrating the power of storytelling is admirable.”

Library Journal



“All is not as it appears and the ingrained character of violence, lies, and silence that defined the actions of the police and the government for almost four decades lead to a surprising ending. ... At approximately 800 pages, this book is a commitment, but it is one well worth making.” TERRY LUCAS

Publishers Weekly



“Fans of complex and literate mysteries featuring detectives with integrity working under oppressive and corrupt regimes will be well satisfied.”

Irish Times



“The book unfortunately rarely challenges or questions its setting (Franco’s Spain), and the human travesties and injustices of history (imprisonment, child trafficking) come close to being plot devices rather than points for complex debate. The story has a sense of the fantastical, however, and in this way exists outside of time, despite its historical setting.”

SEAN HEWITT

CRITICAL SUMMARY

Zafón brings the reader full circle in this magical novel, completing the story he began with *The Shadow of the Wind* and creating “a satisfying conclusion to a grand epic” (*Kirkus*). Like its predecessors, *The Labyrinth of the Spirits* is an exquisite mix of mystery, historical fiction, police procedural, political thriller, fantasy, and romance (though here Zafón largely forgoes the magical realism). In sumptuous, evocative detail, Zafón brings the streets of Spain, his love of books, and the atrocities and conspiracies of war to life. Despite some drawn-out scenes and dialogue, through impeccable plotting he improbably pulls myriad threads—both from this novel and the previous three, spread out over different timeframes—together. And Alicia, “a fragile but ferociously formidable, vampire-like seductress, is unforgettable” (*BookPage*). With this magnificent closing, the tetralogy together represents “a colossal achievement” (*Guardian*). ■

one where visitors can choose only one book during their lifetime—while living in Los Angeles, where the closure of wonderful local bookstores led him to thinking about the destruction of memory, history, identity, and ideas.

The Shadow of the Wind (2001; 2004)

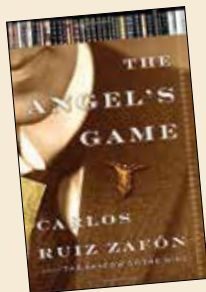
Ruiz Zafón's first adult novel, written when he was living in Los Angeles, sold millions of copies worldwide and earned more than a dozen awards both in the United States and abroad. "If you thought the true gothic novel died with the 19th Century, this will change your mind," Stephen King wrote in *Entertainment Weekly*. "Shadow is the real deal, a novel full of cheesy splendor and creaking trapdoors, a novel where even the subplots have subplots."

Under Franco's dictatorship in 1945 Barcelona, Daniel Sempere, the son of a bookseller, discovers a rare novel, *The Shadow of the Wind*, by Julián Carax, an obscure author, in a mystical labyrinth called the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. When the adult Daniel realizes he may hold one of Carax's last books in existence—one he must protect for life—he starts to investigate the writer's history, only to find whirlwind romance, supernatural intrigue, and political strife left over from the Spanish Civil War. As Daniel tries to uncover the mysteries of Carax and his novels, his path crosses with a strangely disfigured man, a beautiful blind woman, and others with dark secrets to keep. The result is a mix of fantasy and reality in which the written word exerts its power on an unforgiving world. (★★★ Sept/Oct 2004, and yes, we admitted at that time that we underrated it.)



The Angel's Game (2008)

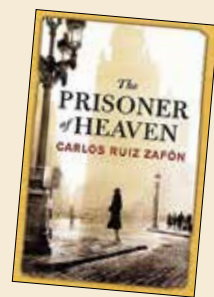
This prequel to *The Shadow of the Wind*, set in Barcelona in the 1920s and 1930s, sold well, though it garnered mixed acclaim. Still, Zafón knows how to tell a story: the novel meshes forbidden love, magical realism, religion and ideas, literature, and gothic horror in a compelling tale. The Cemetery of Forgotten Books and Barcelona's architecture, slums, and modernist leanings become characters in their own right. Fans of *The Shadow of the Wind* will relish this prequel; after all, storytelling—the heart of the novel—is "the master [Zafón] serves, and the devil he knows" (*New York Times Book Review*).



In the 1920s, David Martín, a down-and-out writer in Barcelona, is forced to write a series of beloved, sensationalist pulp novels about the city's dark underbelly instead of the lofty literature he craves. Then, after he contracts a fatal illness and his true love marries his mentor, David meets a mysterious French publisher, Andreas Corelli, who proposes to pay Martín a fortune to write a mythical story that may create a new religion. At first excited, Martín grows wary, as he discovers dark secrets about Corelli and his publishing house—sinister mysteries. Soon, the tragedies start to pile up. "Its magical qualities require a certain suspension of disbelief ... but what are books for, if not to stretch the limits of imagination?," asked the *Seattle Times*. "It may give you nightmares, but if this book was meant to be a testament to how a book can engage the imagination like nothing else, Zafón's mission can be truly called accomplished." (★★★ Sept/Oct 2009)

The Prisoner of Heaven (2011; 2012)

The third novel in the cycle has a somewhat unfinished (and melodramatic) story line and a slender, "middle book" feel. Nonetheless, it's a must-read for fans who want to return to the world of Daniel Sempere. "Much of the novel's appeal is that of time-travelling tourism, strongly flavoured with literary nostalgia—for a time when a bookshop could be a city's cultural nerve-centre, when a paper-based bureaucracy could be outwitted, when bohemian scribblers could afford to eat world-class crème caramels, and even when money could be 'cursed,'" wrote the *Guardian*. "But beneath the sugared surface there is also political anger."



Years have passed since the events that took place in *The Shadow of the Wind*. Now, in late-1950s Barcelona, Daniel Sempere is a grown man, married to his childhood sweetheart, Bea, and celebrating the birth of their child, Julian. To add to their happiness, Fermín Romero de Torres, Daniel's close friend, is engaged to be married. All is as it should be, until a stranger with a porcelain hand walks into the Sempere bookshop and purchases a copy of Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*. His appearance compels Fermín to share a story that takes him back to the darkest days of Franco's regime, to the infested prison cells at Montjuic Castle, and to the mysterious prisoner who once resided within its walls. (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2012) ■

IF YOU LIKE CARLOS RUIZ ZAFÓN, YOU MIGHT LIKE ...

THE CLUB DUMAS

By Arturo Perez-Reverte (1996, translated from the Spanish)
Set in the world of antiquarian booksellers, this novel follows a middle-aged book hunter in modern-day Spain. Hired to authenticate a “missing” chapter from Alexandre Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers*, as well as a medieval book with instructions for summoning the devil, he becomes embroiled in a plot involving the occult.

NIGHT TRAIN TO LISBON

By Pascal Mercier (2004, translated from the German)
A Swiss professor of classical languages becomes drawn to a philosophical Portuguese book written 30 years earlier; he travels to Lisbon in search of both the author and a mysterious woman, both of whom may change his life. The meditative novel spent 140 weeks on the German best sellers lists.

THE MASTER AND MARGARITA

By Mikhail Bulgakov (1973, translated from the Russian)
Written during Stalin’s reign, Bulgakov’s dark, classic satire of Soviet life, philosophy, and religion, with a story-within-the-story, takes place in 1930s Moscow and in ancient Jerusalem. There’s the Devil (disguised as a black magic expert), the Master (an institutionalized author of a censored manuscript involving Pontius Pilate and the crucifixion of Jesus), and the Master’s muse, Margarita, who makes a Faustian bargain.

THE THIRTEENTH TALE

By Diane Setterfield (2006)
A popular English novelist tells her life story to a naïve bookseller. A haunting tale of a ruined English estate, a deadly fire, wild twin girls, a governess, incest, passion, and a ghost emerges. In this gothic story of lies and family secrets, the truth transforms both women. (★★★★) Jan/Feb 2007)

THE HISTORIAN

By Elizabeth Kostova (2005)
A grad student in the 1950s, Paul gets hooked on the story of Dracula. When his dissertation advisor, who suspects

that Dracula is still alive, vanishes, Paul embarks on a quest to find him. Years later Paul, disappears again; this time, his daughter, the narrator of *The Historian*, wants to know the truth about both Dracula and her father’s vampiric passions. (★★★★) Sept/Oct 2005)

THE NAME OF THE ROSE

By Umberto Eco (1980, translated from the Italian)
In 1327, English friar William of Baskerville travels to a Benedictine abbey in Northern Italy, where the monks are suspected of heretical leanings. Once there, a half dozen monks are mysteriously murdered. The plot revolves around the abbey library, the lost manuscript of the second part of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and more. The “more” kind of sums it all up.

THE GARGOYLE

By Andrew Davidson (2008)
A mysterious sculptress of gargoyles visits a severely burned porn star and claims to know him. She distracts him from his pain with fantastic tales of passion and adventure—and finally shares with him the story of their own romance in medieval Germany. (★★★★) Nov/Dec 2008)

THE BOOK OF LOST THINGS

By John Connolly (2006)
At the onset of World War II, 12-year-old David grieves the death of his mother, the hasty remarriage of his father, and the birth of an interloping stepbrother. He takes refuge in his books, which have begun to whisper to him, and, in his dying mother’s words: stories are real.

THE FORGOTTEN GARDEN

By Kate Morton (2008)
When, in 1913, a small girl arrives alone in Australia, she has nothing but the clothes on her back and a rare volume of dark fairy tales. Taken in by the dockmaster, she is told the truth about her past on her 21st birthday. She sets out to discover her real identity, a quest that leads her to a manor on the Cornish coast in England and long-held family secrets.

THE LITTLE STRANGER

By Sarah Waters (2009)
In this tale of ghosts and family secrets, Dr. Faraday is summoned to a manor in Warwickshire. The once-grand Georgian estate he remembers from boyhood is now a crumbling heap. As the doctor delves deeper into the lives of the manor’s troubled family and witnesses unnerving occurrences, he struggles to reconcile his scientific beliefs with a sinister, irrational force. (★★★★) SELECTION July/Aug 2009)

POSSESSION

By A. S. Byatt (1990)
In this academic mystery and historical novel, literary scholars Dr. Maud Bailey and Roland Michell are studying a pair of Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. Parallels emerge between Ash and LaMotte’s relationship in the 19th century and Bailey and Michell’s in the 1980s. Byatt weaves in letters and poems, all written in a pitch-perfect imitation of Victorian style.

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

By Geraldine Brooks (2008)
In 1996, an Australian rare-book expert starts to conserve the 14th-century Sarajevo Haggadah, a priceless illuminated Jewish text. When she finds artifacts in the pages, she determines to unravel the book’s mysteries. Her inquiries take her back to the Spanish Inquisition, 15th-century Seville, 17th-century Venice, and through World War II and the Bosnian War. (★★★★) Mar/Apr 2008)

AN INSTANCE OF THE FINGERPOST

By Ian Pears (1998)
This dense novel is one of ideas and political intrigue, Rashomon-like deceptions and self-deceptions. In 1663 Oxford, Dr. Robert Grove is found dead, possibly murdered. His former servant and alleged mistress, Sarah Blundy, is accused and hanged. As four witnesses tell their version of events, they shed light on the political, religious, and intellectual turmoil of the Restoration era. ■