



Susana Moreira Marques

Scholar-Practitioner Q+A . . .

An Interview with Susana Moreira Marques

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Susana Moreira Marques was born in Porto, northern Portugal, in 1976, and currently lives in Lisbon. She worked for the BBC World Service and lived in Great Britain for a number of years, where her work was published in newspapers such as the *Guardian*. Her career as an author—the designation she likes to use for people who engage in writing, as it is the term that puts aside any differences between journalist and writer—has undergone different phases. She has worked for national newspapers such as *Público* and *Jornal de Negócios*, and more recently she has been with the Portuguese national public radio, RDP, where she hosts a weekly *crónica*. Moreira Marques's work with the BBC until 2011 allowed her the freedom to research and reach different publics and outlets in places as varied as Hong Kong and Australia.

Moreira Marques is a person whose demeanor is as graceful and observant as her writing. Elegant and delicate, she produces powerful texts based on information acquired through immersion research, handling difficult topics such as migrants' rights, sickness, and death, as well as easygoing texts that can be read on her blog, Bay Window,¹ which she wrote for two years about her experiences while living in London. As an observer, her gaze comes from the outside, but she allows her senses and feelings to gather impressions that

allow her to write within her own construction of mood. While all writing involves making a wide range of choices, Moreira Marques's reflects the delicateness of topics and her own response to them. In her point of view Moreira Marques is exact, yet unobtrusive. Characters and stories appear in a manner that neither imposes on them nor on the reader. The latter has the freedom to read and interpret at will, and the former are handled with respect for their individuality. The stories always have an author's touch in the ordering and rendering of events and, invariably, they become Moreira Marques's stories.

Isabel Nery and Alice Trindade interviewed Moreira Marques at her home in Lisbon, on April 9, 2018.

Isabel Nery and Alice Trindade: In 2012, you won the Journalism Prize for Human Rights and Integration, promoted by the Portuguese Media Office and the Portuguese UNESCO Commission, for a series of reports, titled *Novos Portugueses* (The new Portuguese).² You were also awarded a prize, *Jornalismo Contra a Indiferença* (Journalism against indifference) for the same series by *Assistência Médica Internacional* (International Medical Assistance). In 2016, you were given an Honorable Mention for a series of texts, "Armas e Bagagens" (All packed up), "Quando as palavras libertação e independência conspiraram" (When words, liberation, and independence conspired), and "À procura de um território comum" (In search of common ground), published in *Jornal de Negócios*.³ How did the translation of your book *Now and at the Hour of Our Death*⁴ change your work?

Susana Moreira Marques: As strange as it may seem, I've traveled more with the book and had more events with the English translation than with the Portuguese one. I've had more invitations to dialogue with other authors. In Portugal the book had wonderful reviews, but it didn't make it to festivals and conference circuits like the English version.

Nery and Trindade: Could that be because it deals with the issue of death?

Moreira Marques: Yes and no. In England, I went to several events where authors also published on the same topic. In Portugal, festivals usually don't include nonfiction. Besides, they are rather closed, inviting the same authors. In Portugal, if you don't write novels you are not considered a writer. You are just a journalist, which is a level below the writer. In English the word *author* includes everything, from fiction to history. Even festivals have a different mindset. They are book festivals, not literary festivals, as in Portugal.

Nery and Trindade: How was the reception of your book at the Edinburgh festival?

Moreira Marques: The Edinburgh International Book Festival is where I launched the book in English in 2015. It's the largest book festival in the

world, with 800 authors in three weeks. They call all kinds of writers. Some were doctors, some were writers, and some were people who had written memoirs. But also, musicians, philosophers, and politicians. One of the issues they focused on was old age and dying. In some cases, I was invited to talk because of the subject, but also about the writing, the relation between literature and journalism. Other events were about writing from reality. The process of writing fiction and nonfiction was part of the literary discussion in a way that doesn't happen in the Portuguese-speaking world.

Nery and Trindade: The mixture of literature and journalism in this genre was probably something that you didn't think of. For you, is this book journalism, literature, or both?

Moreira Marques: It's a difficult question. When I wrote it, I wasn't thinking in those terms. I was thinking of doing the best book I could. I was aware that I had material that was very rare and special and that I could write something that could be special as well. What I had in mind was to do something that could live longer than an article. Because the subject was so strong, though not that explored, I knew it was exceptional. In that sense it can be seen as literature.

Nery and Trindade: Kevin Kerrane, who writes about literary journalism, says literary journalism is "news that lasts."⁵

Moreira Marques: I wanted to write something enjoyable to read, that I would like to read as a reader. When the book came out, almost all reviews mentioned the fact that it had a mix of genres. It was journalism, but it had oral history and diary style. But this mixture wasn't on my mind. I was just looking for the right way to tell it, and it came naturally like this. Maybe this happened because this mix was already in my universe.

Nery and Trindade: How so?

Moreira Marques: I read journalism, fiction, and poetry. I've always struggled with language, trying to make a piece that was not just information but that could convey something through language. It was a part of me already. Maybe it was kind of condensed in the book. One journalist from *Expresso*, José Mário Silva, did a very good review of the book.⁶ He told me that he used to read my pieces in *Público*,⁷ and this was surprising. I would not be able to publish something like this in *Público*. But I had been thinking and writing like this, sometimes just for myself, for a long time.

Nery and Trindade: How did those other articles prepare you to write this book?

Moreira Marques: It was more the style. I wrote a piece about an elderly surrealist artist who lives in Paris, for *Colóquio Letras*.⁸ I spent a lot of time with her. I slept in her house. I felt I had the time to get to know her. I could

do that kind of work that you don't get to do for a newspaper. In terms of structure it was also very fragmented, which was possible because it was for a literary magazine.

Nery and Trindade: Immersion reporting is often said to be a literary journalism technique, like anthropological work.

Moreira Marques: Yes. People will see my book as they want: journalism or literature. I understand that some people still don't have a clear notion of what literary nonfiction can be. A writer told me: "Your book is a novel." What he meant was that my book didn't sound like journalism, but like literature. If under the title I had put the word "novel," people would have accepted it and the problem would have been solved.

Nery and Trindade: Except, you did write journalism. Did you at any time refrain from writing something that didn't happen exactly like that?

Moreira Marques: I didn't do the field work as if I was to write for a newspaper, because I knew I was doing a book. I knew I wanted another kind of depth and relation with those people.

Nery and Trindade: Do you remember any constraints while doing field work that you wouldn't have if you were doing a novel?

Moreira Marques: No. The constraints were more in the writing process, not in field work. If they do come in the field, they are in your mind. I didn't do field work as a regular reporter, not with that mindset.

Nery and Trindade: How are the mindsets different?

Moreira Marques: I was working with a completely different time frame. I wasn't in a hurry to get the information. The first time I met people I never recorded anything. Every day I got a lot of information I knew I wouldn't use. But it was part of the process for people to get to trust me and engage. At the beginning people saw me as another health professional. They wanted to complain and talk about doctors. I needed to go through all that. I also talked a lot with the doctors to know the cases they had, to be able to choose. It's completely different from the story for a newspaper where you need to fit information into an expected output.

Nery and Trindade: So, time would be the biggest difference you felt in the field?

Moreira Marques: Yes. I wanted to go in a more anthropological way. Before I started to do journalism, I worked in cinema for some years. I spent a lot of time with people who worked in documentaries. I did a documentary on *retornados*,⁹ returnees, families from Angola and Mozambique. It's not a good film—I was young—but it was a good experience. Looking back, I came out of it with the clear idea that people who worked in documentary film do a lot of field work.

Nery and Trindade: Time is usually an issue for journalists. How long did you have to do your book?

Moreira Marques: Almost a year. For field work, one month. Because I got the money from a Gulbenkian¹⁰ fellowship, I could, for the first time, write a story where I could spend time with the people involved. I've always suffered with lack of time in journalism. I had a built-up desire to do something not in a rush. It's possible to write a book in two weeks. All the writers are different and if you're honest in your writing, that's not a problem. But this is not how I want to work, because of the superficiality it entails. If you read a 6,000-word piece in the *New Yorker*, you see that it couldn't have been done in two weeks.

Nery and Trindade: You state in an interview for the newspaper *Público* that your occupation consists of "positioning words on a piece of paper."¹¹ How do you go about it? Tell us some of your writing habits.

Moreira Marques: In the case of the book, first I read about the subject, palliative care. I read nonfiction but also novels or even history that could be references for me. I invited a photographer to come with me, because the first edition had photography. I went to Trás-os-Montes¹² for the first time in June 2011. I stayed for two weeks, then went back later in the summer for a week and in autumn for another week.

Nery and Trindade: Was that deliberate?

Moreira Marques: Yes. I wanted to be able to follow people through time. I also like the idea of seeing things through the seasons of the year. The landscape, but also the atmosphere. If you go in August, it's completely different because of the *festas*.¹³ The first trip was to do a reconnaissance. I met a lot of people and traveled a lot around the villages. I was shadowing the doctor, going where she was going and talking to whoever she was talking to. I was aware that, as families who were dealing with their losses and the different stages of illness and grief, they would feel different things and say different things. I wanted to follow the process. This is why I decided not to go for a month in a row.

Nery and Trindade: How did you decide to write about this topic?

Moreira Marques: I lost two of my grandparents in 2010. They both died alone in the hospital, and this is something that is very hard to forgive yourself—the people you love dying alone. My grandmother was like a second mother to me. She brought me up, so it was quite hard to deal with her death, with the way she died, and the lack of support and information from doctors. That made me very aware of all the difficulties, silences, and taboos that surround dying.

Nery and Trindade: You were influenced by your own experiences, as it often happens with literary journalism.

Moreira Marques: By coincidence, a very good friend of mine, whom I met in London, was working in palliative care. She started researching in this area, at a time when the Gulbenkian Foundation decided to support projects on the topic. I interviewed the director of the foundation's health department, Jorge Soares, a doctor and a scientist. He told me about the project in Trás-os-Montes and in the Alentejo.¹⁴ He sent me a lot of information and told me he always wanted to do something about the project that could remain. So, I made a proposal to write a book. That was that. It fell from the sky. Everything was easy from the very beginning.

Nery and Trindade: Did you try to publish the story in any mainstream media?

Moreira Marques: That's a funny story. I tried a prepublication, but I was told that it wasn't fit to be published in *Pública*. They told me it was too literary, and they couldn't publish it. I've always been a collaborator for *Público*, but I think that if I had been a writer, instead of a mere journalist, they would have published it.

Nery and Trindade: So, it was only published in book form?

Moreira Marques: Yes.

Nery and Trindade: Was it because of the topic: death?

Moreira Marques: I don't know. Yes, in a way. The first thing my editor told me was that it was not going to sell. Anything about death doesn't sell.

Nery and Trindade: She prepared you for failure?

Moreira Marques: Yes, basically.

Nery and Trindade: So, the difficulties didn't come only from the topic but also from style?

Moreira Marques: Yes. But they don't mind if it's a writer. If it's a journalist they will ask, "Why are you writing in the first person? Who cares about what you think?" There were a couple of pieces that I wanted to write differently, for instance, using the first person, and it was a struggle. I had to fight.

Nery and Trindade: Would it be different if newsrooms knew more about literary journalism in Portugal?

Moreira Marques: Yes. But in recent years I think that has changed. Nowadays I read more carefully written pieces. I think journalists today can communicate with other journalists and read them. You are not confined as in the past. We have very good journalists.

Nery and Trindade: What do you feel about literary journalism in Portugal and in Portuguese language? Some people say there is no literary journalism in Portugal. Despite that, are there any influences from other authors you would like to share?

Moreira Marques: I was influenced by readings, but also by journalists

who I have met and inspired me, like Alexandra Lucas Coelho and Paulo Moura. They were wonderful influences because I could see that the journalism they were doing was lived with such passion and engagement with the world, and that interested me. It was beautiful and romantic. The way they did it made me think that I could do it as well. It wasn't the kind of journalism that I had studied at school.

Nery and Trindade: Portugal is described as a poet's country. Can that also contribute to this lack of interest in nonfiction?

Moreira Marques: Maybe. I was never very good at writing news. I wrote about everything, from politics to sports, but I know I'm not a very good news journalist. I don't get a thrill from breaking news. My thrill is to tell stories.

Nery and Trindade: Did your experience at the BBC have an influence on that?

Moreira Marques: I was also influenced by my readings in London. Not only the papers. It made me think about the way we do things in Portugal. Why can't we use the first person? Who made that rule? I started questioning things. Today my library is half Portuguese and half English. I obviously knew some of the New Journalists but maybe I wasn't aware that the world of literary nonfiction was so large. I read Joan Didion and was completely taken aback. When I read those kinds of things I think: "Wow! I want to do it. I want to be able to write like this." She shows you that you can write about reality and do literature. And that can often be more interesting than literature. In the United Kingdom there is a large market for nonfiction. There are also many good memoirs. I keep discovering things.

Nery and Trindade: We are now in a more mature state of our society, after the dictatorship. Maybe we can think about reality with more detail nowadays.

Moreira Marques: Possibly. A couple of years after the book came out in English, an Australian magazine did a reading list for experimental nonfiction and put me in it. There's a large world of nonfiction out there, and I really think that, right now, nonfiction is pushing more boundaries than fiction. I feel fiction is a bit tired. There's a lot of repetition. Whereas in literary nonfiction there's a sense of newness. That's really exciting. I love that.

Nery and Trindade: Can you give some examples of Portuguese literary journalism authors?

Moreira Marques: Besides Alexandra Lucas Coelho and Paulo Moura, we have some very good things from the 1950s and 1960s, like Raul Brandão's *Os Pescadores* [Fishermen], at a time when people were very preoccupied with reality. Maybe they felt a duty to talk about reality. There's also Bernardo San-

tareno's *Nos Mares do Fim do Mundo* [In the seas at the end of the world].¹⁵ It's a mixture of fiction and nonfiction. We've had literary journalism before, but it wasn't tagged like that. Maybe authors sort of lost that habit, as the novel became the big thing. I often prefer to talk about literary nonfiction than literary journalism.

Nery and Trindade: Researching your published work, it is clear that you have national and international careers, on multiple platforms: you write for *Público*, contribute to *Jornal de Negócios* in Portugal; and in the United Kingdom you worked for the BBC and published with the *Guardian* and *Granta*. Your nonfiction book *Now and at the Hour of Our Death* was published in Portugal and the United Kingdom. You now have a weekly, Thursday radio *crónica* with the Portuguese public radio station,¹⁶ and contribute to the online platform *Buala*¹⁷ that publishes contents from Portuguese language authors. Your journalism is multifaceted, so where do you feel best? Do you have any particular sense of belonging to a specific journalism subgenre?

Moreira Marques: There's a lot of interest in reality. Even in film, you see young filmmakers doing documentary or a mix between documentary and fiction—like trying to catch something that is about to disappear. My book is about dying, but it also ends up being about the dying of places and cultures. A lot of the journalism I have done since has to do with this.

Nery and Trindade: You also have a weekly spot on the radio. Has it been a good experience?

Moreira Marques: Yes. I'm not a radio fan, and I hadn't done radio before, but it's very interesting. Two years ago, I got this invitation from *Antena 1*. I found out that I like to use my voice more than I thought. At the beginning it was strange because there is so little time to do it: about three minutes. But it was quite an experience to feel every word counts. There's a tenderness in radio. I've grown into it.

Alice Trindade is associate professor with ISCSP, ULisboa, serving as vice-dean since 2012 and a member of one of its research centers, the Center for Administration and Public Policies, CAPP. Trindade is one of the founding members of IALJS and served as president from 2010 to 2012. She has most recently published on Portuguese language African literary journalism and the adoption by Angolan journalists of crónica as a tool for active citizenship and engagement, especially since the end of the Civil War in the early years of the twenty-first century. In 2018 she coedited with Andrew Griffiths and Audrey Alvés the volume, Literary Journalism and Africa's Wars, part of a series edited by John Bak at the University of Lorraine.



Isabel Nery is currently working on her doctoral thesis on literary journalism under Alice Trindade's supervision. Nery's research, included in the activity of the Center for Administration and Public Policies, is financially supported by grant no. SFRH/BD/129265/2017, awarded by the Portuguese national funding agency for science, research, and technology—FCT.

Notes

¹ Moreira Marques, Bay Window.

² News on this award may be viewed at the website for the newspaper and news agency, respectively: *Público* and Lusa, <https://www.publico.pt/2012/06/21/portugal/noticia/reportagens-do-publico-premiadas-pela-unesco-1551418>.

³ Moreira Marques' texts, "Armas e Bagagens" [All packed up], "Quando as palavras libertação e independência conspiraram" [When words, liberation, and independence conspired], and "À procura de um território comum" [In search of common ground], published by *Jornal de Negócios*, as referred to on the UNESCO page of the Portuguese ministry of foreign affairs, <https://www.unescoportugal.mne.pt/pt/premios-concursos-e-bolsas/premios-cnu/premio-de-jornalismo-direitos-humanos-e-integracao>.

⁴ Moreira Marques, *Now and at the Hour of Our Death*, translated by Julia Sanches from the original Portuguese, *Agora e na Hora da Nossa Morte*.

⁵ "News that lasts" is a somewhat frequently quoted paraphrase of Kerrane's quote of Ezra Pound. Kerrane wrote, "the best characterization of literary journal-

ism may ultimately be the definition that Ezra Pound gave for literature itself: ‘news that stays news.’” Kerrane, “Making Facts Dance,” *The Art of Fact*, 20. See also Pound, *A B C of Reading*, 15.

⁶ Mário Silva, “O Livro Feliz” [The happy book]. *Expresso* is a reputable Portuguese weekly newspaper, published in Lisbon.

⁷ *Público* is a Portuguese daily newspaper that used to publish literary journalism pieces in its Sunday supplement, *Pública*, which no longer exists.

⁸ *Colóquio Letras* is a quarterly literary magazine, in press since 1971. See Moreira Marques, “Branças são as madrugada. De olhos abertos com Isabel Meyrelles” [Dawns are white. Eyes wide open with Isabel Meyrelles], 157–77.

⁹ *Retornados*, or returnees, were people who in 1974 and 1975 moved to Portugal from former African and Asian colonies during the various independence processes. An estimated one million people came to Portugal during that time, many of whom had no connection to the “old” country. Socially, sociologically, economically, and in many other respects, this was an unprecedented refugee crisis, whose history is, in a way, yet to be determined.

¹⁰ The Gulbenkian Foundation is a private sponsor for artistic activities and scientific research in Portugal. It is named after its founder, Calouste Gulbenkian, a wealthy Armenian oil entrepreneur who settled in Portugal late in life.

¹¹ Correia Pinto, “A vida em ‘contra-corrente’ de uma escritora e jornalista ‘freelancer.’” [A freelance writer and journalist’s life against the grain]. (All quotes are Nery and Trindade’s translations from original Portuguese texts).

¹² Trás-os-Montes is the northeastern area of inland Portugal where Moreira Marques conducted her research for the book.

¹³ Inland Portugal, and for that matter the entire country, is home to hundreds of thousands of emigrants who return to Portugal for the holidays, usually in August. Traditionally, this is the month for popular celebrations and festivals, religious or otherwise. Villages that throughout the year are scarcely inhabited, and mostly by the elderly, rejuvenate. This phenomenon, which has gone on for decades, sees a steady influx of people swarm into towns and cities all over Portugal, including the islands, and continues to bring almost deserted villages back to life.

¹⁴ Alentejo is the area of Portugal that is situated south of the River Tagus, and directly north of the southernmost province, Algarve.

¹⁵ Brandão, *Os Pescadores* [Fishermen]; Santareno, *Nos Mares do Fim do Mundo* [In the seas at the end of the world]. Santareno is the *nom de plume* of António Martinho do Rosário, a famous Portuguese playwright. Rosário was a doctor and a psychiatrist, who as a young man had been the ship doctor in the Portuguese fleet of fishing boats that headed for months in Newfoundland and Greenland to fish one of the most beloved elements of Portuguese staple diet, codfish. The coastal town of Ílhavo, in the center of Portugal, has a museum dedicated to this craft and the adventurous sailors who manned it.

¹⁶ *Crónica* (Portuguese, for chronicles). Moreira Marques, *O Fio da Meada*. Marques no longer has this radio contribution. In November 2019, after the interview for this piece, the Portuguese Ministry of Culture awarded her a yearlong, creative writing award.

¹⁷ Moreira Marques's writings are available at BUALA. See Moreira Marques. "Author's Articles."

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