

M. G. Sanchez: An Interview*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.39.2018.319-330>

M. G. Sanchez was born in Gibraltar in 1968. He has written three novels on Gibraltar—*The Escape Artist*, *Solitude House* and *Jonathan Gallardo*—as well as numerous stories, essays, journalistic pieces and works of non-fiction. He lived on the Rock until the age of twenty-seven, when he moved to the United Kingdom to study English Literature. He subsequently took BA, MA and PhD degrees at the University of Leeds, completing his studies in 2004 with a thesis exploring perceptions of “hispanicity” in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature, entitled *Anti-Spanish Sentiment in English Literary and Political Writing, 1553–1603*. Since then he has lived mainly in the United Kingdom, but has also done stints in New Zealand (2004), India (2005–2008) and, more recently, Japan (2014–2016). His writing focuses primarily on matters of Gibraltarian identity, although he confesses to be naturally drawn to “noir” subjects. He has often stated that his intention is to debunk the stereotypes propagated by both the British and Spanish press on the subject of Gibraltar and the Gibraltarians. He believes that the people of Gibraltar have been historically excluded or disregarded from “the discourse of Gibraltar”—and that it is his duty as a Gibraltarian writer to counter this representational void. Writing in the prestigious left-leaning British publication the *New Statesman* in January, 2015, for example, he made the following statement: “Long ago, you see, I came to a simple realisation. And that is that if we don’t start writing about ourselves, we run the risk of being presented to the world solely through the prism of others’ perceptions. Or, to paraphrase the words of the great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe: ‘If you don’t write your own stories, others will write them for you’.” His writing can therefore be seen as a way of redressing the balance of history, placing Gibraltarians and their concerns at the centre—rather than at the periphery—of the ongoing struggle between Spain and United Kingdom over the British colony’s future.

Sanchez’s first publication was *Rock Black. Ten Gibraltarian Stories*, a collection of short narratives set during a particularly unsettled period in the

*The interview with M. G. Sánchez originally appeared in the News Website *Your Gibraltar TV*. The editors are grateful to Mr. Giordano Durante, the editor and owner of the website, for the permission to republish the interview.

British territory's recent history. Dr. Rob Stanton, a lecturer at South University, Savannah in the United States, described the book as "a necessary corrective to a prolonged [period of] silence" (Sanchez, M. G. Sanchez Webpage). His next work came out in 2008 and was a collection of novellas entitled *Diary of a Victorian Colonial and other Tales*. The first and longest of the novellas is set in late nineteenth-century Gibraltar and represents an effort on Sanchez's part to imagine what life must have been like for the working-class natives living under British imperial rule. Its unflinching, grimly realistic portrayal of nineteenth-century colonial life drew criticism from Gibraltar's mayor at the time, although the novella was praised by Prof. John Stotesbury of the University of Eastern Finland, who remarked that it may have been "relentlessly brutal" but was nonetheless "utterly credible" (Stotesbury 156–72). In 2013 Sanchez published his first novel, *The Escape Artist*, a tale of two Gibraltarians—one rich and suave, the other shy and from a working-class background—who meet under fortuitous circumstances while studying at the University of Cambridge in the early '70s. The novel charts the ups and downs of their complex, love-hate relationship over the next ten years and ends in an unexpectedly cynical manner. The British historian and Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature Nicholas Rankin compared it to Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisted*, "but with more resentment and a truly shocking and abrupt finale." Since then Sanchez has published two further novels—*Solitude House* and *Jonathan Gallardo*—both of which continue to explore the vicissitudes and paradoxes of Gibraltarian identity. In *The Escape Artist* Sanchez had already flirted with elements of the macabre/supernatural, but in his second and third novels this partiality is even more developed, leading at least two separate critics to highlight the "Gothic" aspects of his work. Indeed, in a review of *Solitude House*, Esterino Adami suggests that "the Gothic and the postcolonial share some traits since they strive—through different styles and modalities—to embody forms of otherness, and therefore their alliance is significant and productive, as this novel [*Solitude House*] too demonstrates" (186).

In addition to his fiction, Sanchez has written a book of essays on neglected aspects of Gibraltarian history (*The Prostitutes of Serruya's Lane and other Hidden Gibraltarian histories*) and edited two anthologies of British writing on Gibraltar (*Writing the Rock of Gibraltar. An Anthology of Literary Texts, 1720–1890* and *Georgian and Victorian Gibraltar. Incredible Eyewitness Accounts*). Sanchez considers these anthological

projects as the literary equivalent of musical *divertimenti*—pieces that are meant to be read for their entertainment, rather than their educational, value.

A much more serious project for Sanchez was his autobiographical tome *Past. A Memoir* (2016). Episodic in style, interspersed throughout with proleptic and analeptic shifts, and searingly confessional in tone, *Past* explores both the author's troubled relationship with his late father and his own family history on the Rock stretching back to the early 1800s. A large part of *Past* is also devoted to the “border crisis” of 2013, and, in fact, Chris Grocott (author of the seminal *Gibraltar. A Modern History*) has described the book as “the essential source for scholars of international relations and of history when it comes to writing about the social and cultural aspects of the Spanish claim” (iii).

Although currently based in the United Kingdom, Sanchez is a regular columnist for Gibraltar's main newspaper (*The Gibraltar Chronicle*) and has spoken about his books in radio programmes and in front of university audiences in United Kingdom, Italy, Portugal, Switzerland, Gibraltar and Spain. A particular pleasing engagement for him came in March 2015, when he was invited to appear on *Late Night Live*, one of Australia's most well-known radio programmes. He also took part in April 2017 in the BBC's “Cultural Frontline” programme, and in November 2017 he delivered a very successful talk—“Representing Gibraltarianness”—at the Gibraltar International Literary Festival. In all these speaking events, Sanchez has stressed the pivotal role of stories in identity formation, their fundamental importance as a tool of self-definition. In May 2016 he was invited to speak about his books at the University of Salamanca under the university's “Languages and Cultures in Contact” programme. The visit was organised jointly by Prof. Ana M^a Manzanás and the PhD student Sarah M. Abas. The following interview was conducted by e-mail exchange shortly after M. G. Sanchez left Salamanca on May 7, 2016.

Sarah M. Abas. Okay, let's start with the obligatory question—at what point did you decide to begin writing stories about the Rock?

M. G. Sanchez. Well, it's a fairly complex question, in the sense that I had to go through different stages of awareness before I realised that I wanted to write narratives about Gibraltar. I think the first stage occurred relatively early, when I was a student at Bayside Comprehensive School in Gibraltar. I was not a particularly bad pupil, but I hated Mathematics and the Sciences with a passion—so much so that I frequently used to hide at the back of the

school library to avoid attending lessons in those subjects. The corner where I used to hide was right at the back of the room and next to the modern classics section and one day, purely out of curiosity, having nothing better to do, I picked up a copy of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. I read the first page... and that was it: I instantly fell in love with reading and the world of literature. From that day onwards I read everything I could get my hands on: Dickens, Maupassant, Huysmans, Galdós. As you can imagine, this was a fantastically exciting time for me, but even back then (bear in mind that I must have been only 13 or 14) there was a part of me that used to think: wouldn't it be great if someone wrote novels set in Gibraltar one day?... The second stage came much later, when I was doing a PhD in English Literature at the University of Leeds in the UK. I was looking at representations of hispanicity in sixteenth-century English writing and I had to spend many hours spooling my way through reels of microfilm. Occasionally, while doing this, I used to chance upon eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English books on Gibraltar. What struck me about these texts was that they talked a lot about subjects like politics, natural history, military strategy and so on and so forth, but nothing about the inhabitants themselves. The third and final stage came in the mid-1990s, when Britain and Spain were yet again at loggerheads over Gibraltar. Gibraltar was very much in the news those days and I remember seeing all kinds of ludicrous assertions about us in both the English and Spanish papers: that we were all drugsmugglers and gun-runners, that 99.9% per cent of us didn't speak English, that we were no more than a bunch of tax-dodging British ex-pats, that we were as Spanish as "a dish of paella," *et cetera, et cetera*. This isn't right, I thought. Someone has to stand up and tell the Gibraltarian story from our own perspective, to fight all these exaggerated, often deliberately malicious stereotypes that are being propagated about us. Our culture, our social history, our politics, our use of language, our way of thinking: all these things need to be set down in writing so that people can see beyond the crude oversimplifications peddled by the political press.

S.M.A. Was it easy to approach publishers with all this Gibraltarian material?

M.G.S. No, it wasn't. Again and again I got told by British publishers that Gibraltar was a topic of no interest to anyone in the UK, that there was no market for it among British readers. I thought that this was a mistake on their part. Gibraltar is a complex, fascinating place with all sorts of socio-cultural quirks and oddities, and an equally complex and intriguing history.

So what happened in the end? Together with a friend I created an imprint (Rock Scorpion Books) and started circulating Gibraltar-related publications. I was convinced that there was a market for them, that people wanted to know more about this contentious rocky outcrop at the southernmost tip of the Iberian Peninsula that keeps being mentioned in the news, but no one really knows that much about. And so far we can't complain. Though it's taken quite a few years to get the ball rolling, so to speak, more and more people are getting to know Gibraltar through the books that we have published.

S.M.A. Is that what you see as your main task as a writer? To uncover the “the real Gibraltar” for your readers?

M.G.S. Absolutely. I think that every community needs to have its own stories out there in the public domain. If you don't, you open yourself up to being misrepresented by others. In fact, you won't just be misrepresented; people will end up believing these misrepresentations! I remember, for instance, an episode I once had back in my student days in the UK when I was introduced to a student from Madrid. On hearing that I was from Gibraltar, he became very angry and argumentative, saying that I couldn't be a Gibraltarian because in Gibraltar, as everybody well knows, “solamente hay soldados ingleses y colonos” (“there are only English soldiers and settlers”). I had to sit down with him and very patiently explain to him that many Gibraltarian families can trace their ancestral origins on the Rock back to the late eighteenth century, when large numbers of Genoese, Maltese, Portuguese, Spanish and British immigrants came to the colony looking for employment. My own family is a case in point. On my mother's side we have the Whitelocks (who came over from England in the mid 1780s) and the Schembris (who arrived in 1861 from Malta). A similar story can be seen on my father's side (with the Sanchezes coming from Spain in 1805 and the Duartes from Portugal around 1820).

S.M.A. Out of interest—did your chat with the student from Madrid make him change his political opinions about Gibraltar?

M.G.S. No, but it made him view Gibraltar and the Gibraltarians in a different light. More specifically, it made him realise that we are not just a transient “settler” population like some elements in the Spanish right-wing media like to portray us.

S.M.A. How would you describe your writing? Is there any particular genre that you identify with?

M.G.S. A recent article in a Romanian university journal described it as “Mediterranean Gothic,” which is a good way of putting things, but the descriptive label “Mediterranean noir” would be equally applicable. My characters tend to be individuals either on, or just beyond, the periphery of respectable society: social misfits, misanthropes, alcoholic womanisers, people who hear “voices,” failed smugglers, those types. Additionally, there are what could be termed “environmental presences” within the books: the Rock of Gibraltar, the border between Gibraltar and Spain, Spain itself. These presences weave their way in and out of the lives of my characters, shaping their behaviour, influencing their perceptions. They say that environment predetermines people’s behaviour, but I am convinced that this happens more in Gibraltar than in most places.

S.M.A. What do you mean by this? Could you elaborate on the idea?

M.G.S. Well, think of it like this. Gibraltar is six square kilometres in size. Over thirty thousand people live there. From 1969 to 1982, thanks to General Franco’s policies, the place was entirely cut off from the Spanish mainland. Since then, the border has been open, but sporadically we go through periods of tension when it might take up to five or six hours to cross that short fiftymetre stretch of land. The sheer unpredictability of the situation is without a doubt having an impact on the local population, as well as on the Spanish workers who each day have to cross the border on their way to and from work. I’m very interested in these *psychological aspects* that come with the whole border issue. In my novel *Solitude House*, for example, the main character is a Maltese doctor who has been resident on the Rock for many years. At a certain point in the novel he talks about the effect that crossing the border is having on some of his patients, who are having to spend two, three, sometimes even four hours per day caught up in the border queue. They come to him asking for tranquilisers like Valium and Ativan, sleeping tablets like Zopiclone and Zolpidem, beta blockers like Propranolol and Metoprolol—anything, basically, that will help them cope with their daily commute.

S.M.A. It’s an interesting angle of focus. Very often on the Spanish news we see footage of “la verja” (as the Gibraltar-Spain border is generally known in Spain), but nobody ever talks about how the queues and tensions at the border affect people at an individual level.

M.G.S. Yes, precisely. There is always a subtext that is very rarely captured in TV and newspaper reports, and this is where the writer must step in with a more interrogatory angle of focus, trying to bring to light the reality that lurks behind surface appearances. Also, I think it is extremely ironic that many people in Spain refer to the border as “la verja” (the fence). You’d think from this description that it is no more than a line in the sand, a rickety fence dividing two adjacent fields, but the reality is that it is the “the most border-like border” in Western Europe, if you know what I’m getting at. Barbed-wire, CCTV, different checkpoints, x-ray machines, law enforcement officers with guns—it’s almost like a throwback to the “Cold War” era in many ways. Then, of course, there is the element of unpredictability, the fact that you never know what to expect when crossing that border. Let me give you an example of what I mean. In the summer of 2013, my father suffered a fatal heart attack while cycling on the Spanish side of the border and my family had to arrange for his repatriation back to Gibraltar. To make things even worse, his death coincided with one of the worst ever flare-ups at the border. As a result, my family had to deal with all kinds of problems: three- or four-long-hour traffic queues, unhelpful officials, prejudice against us because we came from Gibraltar. In fact, the experience was so traumatic for me personally that for a long time I simply refused to go anywhere near that border. Yet, when I finally crossed it a short while ago, would you believe, I managed to go through the border without anybody even looking at my passport! This is what I mean when I talk about unpredictability: you simply don’t know what you’re going to experience once you are in that “border zone.”

S.M.A. Going back to your writing again, are there any writers that have influenced your prose style?

M.G.S. Difficult question. Every writer has been influenced by writers before them, either directly or indirectly. Writing in this sense, I think, is a bit like genomic inheritance; you acquire the characteristics of your forebears almost without realising it. Writers that I admire include Thomas Bernhard, Joseph Roth, John Banville, Patrick Hamilton and Louis-Ferdinand Celine. If I have inherited just an infinitesimal amount from these great writers, I’m happy!

S.M.A. Your novel *The Escape Artist* has two Gibraltarian characters studying at the University of Cambridge in the early seventies. One (Henry Portas) is an affluent, smooth-talking charmer who has no trouble adjusting

to the British way of life. The other (Brian Manrique) is a talented but shy working-class youth who suffers crippling pangs of homesickness and doesn't feel as British as he thought he felt back on the Rock. What can we infer from their differing experiences in modern-day Britain? Do Gibraltarians living or studying in Britain suffer from the kind of alienation experienced by the character Brian Manrique?

M.G.S. I've always been very interested in the idea of the geographically displaced and maladjusted individual. In some ways, of course, maladjustment itself is the *postcolonial theme par excellence*. Think about novels like Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners*, Ben Okri's *Incidents at the Shrine* or *Youth* by J. M. Coetzee, for example. They all share a similar template of displacement don't they? Some colonial/postcolonial kid gets brought up with fixed notions of Britishness, travels expectantly to the British mainland, then discovers that life in the Mother Country doesn't quite live up to the preconceptions that had been carefully inculcated within him. I think something similar is experienced by a large percentage of Gibraltarians when they go to study in the UK, although, conversely, there are many others who, like Henry Portas, have no trouble integrating into the fabric of British society. I guess it's all dependent on *extrinsic factors* like sociability, family background, experience of the world, *et cetera, et cetera*, but without a doubt, if you ask me, there's also an element of luck involved. Some people seem to "land on their feet," to use the colloquial British expression. Others struggle from the moment they first set foot in a new environment.

S.M.A. *The Escape Artist's* ending is morally ambiguous and also quite shocking. What made you end the novel this way?

M.G.S. I spent a long time thinking about that particular ending. I wanted to come up with something that would rattle the reader, a denouement that, in the space of a few lines, would suddenly uncover just to what extent Brian Manrique hated Henry Portas. I think it's one of those endings which make you reassess everything that you have taken for granted about a character.

S.M.A. What about your other two novels—*Solitude House* and *Jonathan Gallardo*? Are they also laden with a similar "shock factor"?

M.G.S. In *Solitude House* there is a moment when everything is turned upside down, but, unlike in *The Escape Artist*, this moment comes halfway through the novel. Actually, you could say that *Solitude House* is almost "a

novel of two halves.” The first half is very Gibraltarian in thematic orientation—dealing as it does with a young professional who is struggling to buy a property during a period of housing shortage. The second half... well, let’s just say that things start to unravel very quickly for the protagonist and he soon finds himself in a very perilous emotional and psychological position. I was inspired to adopt this dual structure after having read the novel *Audition* by the Japanese novelist Ryu Murakami. (I’m not talking about the Murakami that everybody knows, by the way, but his less well-known—and in my opinion far more interesting—namesake.) The first half of *Audition* is a very sensitively written and finely nuanced account of a widower trying to come to terms with the loss of his wife. The second half, by contrast, reads almost like the Japanese equivalent of *Nightmare on Elm Street*. I thought it was very interesting how Murakami fuses such disparate narrative strands in a single novel and I wanted to come up with something similar in *Solitude House*.

S.M.A. Would you say that your third novel *Jonathan Gallardo* follows a similar binary pattern?

M.G.S. No, *Jonathan Gallardo* is a more sedate and less frantic novel, a more philosophical novel if you like. It deals with Gibraltar’s forgotten colonial past, with the way that the past and the present intersect in our geographical surroundings. You could almost describe it as a “psychogeographic” novel—inasmuch as it looks at how environment can sometimes shape the way that people think and act.

S.M.A. I know that you have lived away from Gibraltar for quite a few years. Does living away from the Rock influence how you write about the place?

M.G.S. To be honest, I don’t think I would have written half of the things that I have written had I still been living on the Rock. Gibraltar, you see, is a very close-knit place where everybody knows each other, and it would have been difficult to write objectively about the place while still living there. I think sometimes you have to be outside your subject, as it were, in order to write about it.

S.M.A. Changing topic again, in Spain there is a perception that people in Gibraltar all speak Spanish and yet your stories are written in English (with the odd Gibraltarian interjection here and there). Could you tell us something about this dualistic use of language in Gibraltar?

M.G.S. Well, I grew up speaking English at school and in formal situations, and a local dialect known as *Llanito* out in the street and among friends. *Llanito* is not something you get taught; it is something that you assimilate naturally, what could be termed in Spanish “un lenguaje de la calle” (a language of the street). Superficially, it sounds very similar to the type of Spanish spoken in Andalusia, but if you listen carefully you will hear plenty of English interpolations as well. There are also many compound words in *Llanito* which are neither English or Spanish, but a peculiar fusion of both languages (one term that immediately springs to mind is the *Llanito* word *kayki*, which is the Gibraltarian rendering of the English word *cake*). To make matters even more complicated, there are a few words in *Llanito* which appear to have been imported directly from Portuguese and Italian by way of the migrants who came to Gibraltar in the nineteenth century. A well-known example is the Genovese word *marciapê*, which is how you would refer in *Llanito* to what you would call in English “a pavement” or in Spanish “la acera.”

S.M.A. Have you ever been tempted to write a work purely in *Llanito*?

M.G.S. I have been tempted, but I am not sure it would be a viable proposition. First, there is the fact that *Llanito* has never been standardised in the way that, say, Maltese or Faroese have been standardised. This lack of standardisation would make it very difficult to come up with an “authentic” *Llanito* text. Then there is the matter of readership to consider. If I were to write a novel in *Llanito*, I’d probably be limiting my readership to a few hundred readers or maybe even less! In this sense, writing something purely in *Llanito* would be the equivalent of artistic suicide!

S.M.A. What about recent projects? Anything new in the pipeline?

M.G.S. Yes, in September this year I will be publishing a memoir about the events in 2013, when we had to repatriate my father’s remains in the middle of the worst “border crisis” in the last twenty or thirty years. In a certain sense, the book can be viewed as a tribute to his memory, but in other ways, too, it can be regarded as an attempt to map out or delineate “Gibraltarianness.” I also wanted to repudiate some of the unfair ideas that are sometimes circulated about us. Too often in the Spanish nationalist press, we are presented either as lifeless, dehumanised stereotypes, or—even worse—as some kind of disease-causing bacillus that has somehow burrowed itself into the underbelly of “la madre patria.” I think that this sort

of negative stereotyping is awful and says more about the people doing the stereotyping than the ones being stereotyped.

S.M.A. Finally, if anybody reading this interview would like to find out more about your writing, where should they look?

M.G.S. I recommend that they visit my website: www.mgsanchez.net or my facebook page www.facebook.com/mgsanchezwriter/.

S.M.A. Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Mark. I would also like to thank you for accepting our invitation to the University of Salamanca.

M.G.S. No, thank you, Sarah, and thank you to the University's Departamento de Filología Inglesa—and in particular to Professor Ana M^a Manzanas Calvo—for having invited me to come to Salamanca to speak about my writing.

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