

A moral thriller driven by small town menace: *All Is Silence*

Manuel Rivas recounts a vivid comedy rooted in Spain – and almost creates a great Irish novel

Passion play: a Good Friday performance in northern Spain last Easter: Manuel Rivas describes such a scene in a fine set piece. Photograph: Cesar Manso/AFP

Eileen Battersby

Sat, Jun 21, 2014, 01:00

The Galician writer Manuel Rivas has championed the language, literature and culture of his native northwestern Spain. Through his poetry and journalism as well as his fiction, he has used words as beautiful weapons. He is an artist aware of the value of a linguistic legacy as well as the physicality of a place, its geography, even the hapless fish that support the local economy.

His importance is obvious, and he is widely respected as a cultural commentator in Spain. Two of his novels, *The Carpenter's Pencil* (1998) and *Books Burn Badly* (2006), are vital components in the literature of the Spanish Civil War. In addition, the simple fact remains that, removed from his campaigning polemic, the wonderful *All Is Silence* (2010) must be one of the finest tours de force published anywhere, in any language.

Here is a morality play cum thriller of daring artistry that soars on so many levels, from the intellectual to the political and on to the emotional, as to leave a reader reeling. It has horror and humour, bleak truth, naked humanity and a depraved integrity. Rivas knows what fiction can do, and pushes the form here with a casual abandon that defies superlatives. Luckily, in the translator Jonathan Dunne he seems to have found a soulmate who shares his vision and comic timing.

Everything about this book thrills: the coastal setting, the characters, the dialogue, the pace, the shifting points of view, and the bad guys who are as sympathetic as the good guys are irritating, as well as the crazy asides and chaotic story that would have won the approval of the great William Gaddis. If there is a novel that seems to hover in the wings of Rivas's calmly manic narrative it is Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985).

All Is Silence is driven by the menace that shrouds a small town in which all power resides in the badly burnt hands of Mariscal, an eloquent criminal who nurtures a belief in the greatness of the Western. He is like no other baddie; once a seminarian, he uses his Latin to great effect. It certainly confers a surreal profundity on his evildoing, which begins modestly with smuggling fish and then hits the big time with drugs.

He has style, a roving eye and some of the best lines in contemporary fiction. Late in the novel he is about to be interviewed by a journalist. It seems that Mariscal's power is such that, in keeping with many great criminals, he is being tipped to run for political office. The young woman proceeds with caution and decides to begin by flattering him, reminding him that he has been described as a self-made man.

"He stared at the journalist in silence. Made out he was considering her statement when in fact he was thinking about her . . . There was an animal intelligence in her eyes. He noticed this because the first thing she did on entering the Ultramar's back room was pay attention to the little owl . . ." The bird is stuffed and in a glass display case. He notices that she writes the words "little owl". "He soon saw that extended periods of silence made her nervous, and this discomfort on her part made him feel secure."

The journalist battles on, fielding his smart replies, including his asking her what she thinks of John Wayne. "The girl smiled. She'd end up being the one interviewed."

Extraordinary interaction

Years earlier there were three children; Victor Rumbo – "Brinco" – with whose mother Mariscal had been conducting a haphazard relationship; another boy, Fins, who suffers from fits that he describes as absences; and the lovely Leda, more streetwise than either of them.