

ADAM LIVELY

THE INFATUATIONS

by JAVIER MARIAS

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This absorbing and unnerving new novel by the man hailed by Roberto Bolaño as "by far Spain's best writer today" takes up once more a theme that he has pursued obsessively in previous novels: interpretation. He is fascinated by how we can "read" each other, and how we can extrapolate stories, Sherlock Holmes-like, from the smallest signs observed in others.

Jacques Deza, the cold-blooded protagonist of Marias's acclaimed trilogy *Your Face Tomorrow*, has this natural gift for "seeing through" other people, for "reading" the tiniest detail of their appearance and behaviour. The female narrator of Marias's latest novel, *The Infatuations*, has this gift, too, but where Deza's gift was used for professional surveillance and investigation, hers is motivated by sexual obsession.

Put like this, Marias's may sound a rather philosophical, continental approach to novel-writing — and his style, it is true, is discursive and

cerebral after the manner of Milan Kundera or José Saramago. But there is another dimension to his writing: his intimate but ambivalent relation to English life and literature. For in addition to his career as a novelist, Marias is a noted translator of English fiction — he has rendered everyone from Laurence Sterne to Robert Louis Stevenson into Spanish — and also spent a couple of years in the 1980s teaching at Oxford University. Those dreaming spires (none too flatteringly portrayed) are a backdrop to his burlesque comic novel *All Souls* (1992), while London (a world of minor diplomats and expensively sleazy Mayfair nightclubs) is the principal setting of *Your Face Tomorrow*. But more than that, Marias has absorbed into his creative bloodstream two characteristically English genres that give full vent to his fascination with masks and detection: the spy novel and the murder mystery.

In *The Infatuations*, it is the spirit of murder mystery that predominates (without the novel ever becoming a murder mystery, in the sense of the "solution" becoming the ultimate point). Set in Madrid, it is narrated by Maria Dolz, a junior employee at a publishing house. Every morning she breakfasts at the same café, and takes to observing, fondly, a happy married couple who habitually

occupy a neighbouring table. Though she never speaks to them — she exchanges with them only waves of acknowledgment — she spends much time thinking about them, imagining their lives. She comes to call them, in her mind, the "Perfect Couple". And then, one day, she returns to discover that the husband has been killed in the street in a random attack by a deranged homeless man. Maria approaches the widow, and this leads to her meeting Diaz-Varela, a handsome friend of the murdered man. Maria's crush on Diaz-Varela (which quickly translates into a casual affair) leads to the suspicion that Diaz-Varela himself may be infatuated with someone else, and that the husband's death may not have been at all random or meaningless.

For all the currents that ripple across its surface (meditations on the relationship between the dead and the living, and between truth and the stories people tell), *The Infatuations* is powered ultimately by the pressure of good old-fashioned suspense. Two long scenes in particular — dialogues between Maria and Diaz-Varela — are masterclasses in how a conversation that rambles (over possible interpretations of a Balzac novel) can at the same time strain to unbearable tautness a potential for instantaneous violence.

These dialogues are real, but there are others, just as gripping, that are imagined by Maria as she probes for the truth. "Everything," she reflects, "becomes a narrative and sounds fictitious even if it's true." Stories have a terrible obliterating power — which is why politicians always want a "narrative". The dead can be obliterated, or miraculously resurrected. *The Infatuations* is a labyrinthine exploration, at once thrilling and melancholy, of the meanings of one man's death — and, through Maria's obsessive speculations about Diaz-Varela, a vivid testimony to the power of stories, for good or ill, to weave the world into our thoughts and our thoughts into the world.