

BOOKS

Science without fiction: a collective experiment between literature and journalism

Writing on scientific subjects in the Spanish press is limited to unvarying basics: news, reports and interviews. The book format, on the other hand, is monopolized by the popular monographs. Hence the originality of the volume coordinated by Jesús Méndez with a precise objective: the promotion of novel ways of writing on subjects such as the CRISPR technique, space travel, pseudosciences, quantum computing and the ethical dilemmas of artificial intelligence.

Pablo Francescutti

16/10/2019 10:30 CEST



Presentation of *Science without Fiction* in Madrid, September 2019. / Espacio Fundación Telefónica

Apart from the papers, manuals and monographs of the researchers themselves, in texts on science in Spain are concentrated in a few genres: the news, the report and the interview. Chronicles and critics are scarce, as are obituaries, editorials, loose articles, columns and opinion articles.

In the book format, uniformity is even more pronounced: only informative works by one sole essayist get to be published (the **graphic novel** about science is a pending subject). The only novelty is provided by those bloggers

skilled in such matters that, with the usual online style, mix information, interpretation and opinion with disparate results.

This excessively uniform panorama highlights the originality of a book like [Science without Fiction](#), coordinated by the science journalist **Jesús Méndez**. In the prologue, he traces the origin of the work to the moment he became aware that there was no non-fiction literature in Spain with science as its main theme.

Until now, there has not been a non-fiction literature in Spain that has science as its main theme, except for this book

With the intention of making up for this, he brought together four long-time colleagues and a prestigious novelist. The five texts that make up an unusual volume in our editorial and journalistic environment were the result of this common effort.

The compilation is headed by a piece by the coordinator, in which he refers to his meetings and conversations in Alicante with [Francisco Mojica](#), the microbiologist whose research paved the way for the CRISPR genetic editing technique.

Jesús Méndez reconstructs the history of invention, critically reviews the [patent war](#) waged by the scientists who fine-tuned the CRISPR methodology, weighs Mojica's chances of [winning the Nobel Prize](#), and concludes with an assessment of the amazing potential of genetic publishing. All this is recounted with a skilful alternation of short and long sentences, as opposed to the overuse of long and subordinate sentences in the usual journalistic writing.

Pere Estupinyà, a communicator trained in audio-visual dissemination, reconstructs [Pedro Duque's](#) flight on the Discovery space shuttle. The choice of character could not be timelier, as he is the current [Minister of Science, Innovation and Universities](#). Removing himself from the heroic pedestal, Duque recalls his trip of 1998 in detail and, despite Estupinyà's effort to bring drama to the experience, shows how routinized the astronaut's trade has become.

Javier Salas, member of the *Materia* team, focuses on the cases of [Mario Rodríguez](#) and [Rosa Pulido](#), who died from undergoing pseudo-therapies instead of following the mandatory oncological treatment. These two cases affect him very closely, since the coverage he gave them had the effect of opening a national debate on the harmful effects of alternative therapies. Combining the “making of” accounts of the articles he published on the subject with the analysis of the pseudoscience boom -patent in the use of the fraudulent Power Balance bracelet by the very former Minister of Health, Leyre Pajín – Salas’ committed journalism conveys his indignation over those deaths and the tangle of circumstances that made them possible.

The only glitch lies in his classification as pseudo-sciences of phenomena of a very different nature (folk medicine, homeopathy, scientific errors, climate denialism, etc.), which detracts from the explanatory power of the category.

It would be desirable for the path opened by this collective work to be expanded on by other authors and for the media to be opened to other narrative models

He is followed by **Sergio Fanjul**, a graduate in astrophysics who combines poetry, scientific information and cultural journalism. His mission: to bridge the gap between basic research in physics at the beginning of the 20th century and the computing horizons of the 21st century. Lying somewhere between scientific and humanistic culture, his pleasant narration, seasoned with notes on the passage of the local history of Silicon Valley and the personality clashes between the brains of the computer revolution in the 50s and 60s, he manages to show how quantum permeates our lives.

Novelist **Belén Gopegui** closes the volume with the fictitious interview of a professor in artificial intelligence with a computer researcher turned hacker. In a remote village in Palencia, the two Spanish experts meet to clarify the meaning of her disruptive actions. Filling the dialogue with well-inserted references to specialists, the narrator contrasts the man’s rigid way of thinking with the woman’s conceptual fluidity.

The character of the hacker who disturbs computer systems for political purposes leads to a critical examination of the ethical and social implications of the digital algorithm, data mining, the unbridled empiricism of its gurus

and the dehumanized conception of science and technology at the service of power.

None of the topics discussed is novel, the novelty lies in its presentation. At its best, the lively writing, which aims towards style, the clear and succinct explanations of the scientific-technical nuts and bolts and the strong authorial presence of the first four texts justify the compiler's choice to create non-fiction literature. Gopegui's story, for its part, demonstrates the efficacy of pure and simple fiction in raising scientific debates of great significance.

It would be desirable for the path opened by this collective work to be expanded on by other authors, and, likewise, for the media to be open to narrative models that, like these, depart from conventional moulds.

Technical data sheet

Title: *Science without Fiction*

Authors: Jesús Méndez, Pere Estupinyà, Javier Salas, Sergio Fanjul and Belén Gopegui

Genre: Nonfiction

Published by: Debate

Place and date of publication: Madrid, 2019

Pages: 272

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CRISPR | PEDRO DUQUE | PSEUDOSCIENCES | BOOKS | QUANTUM PHYSICS |
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE |

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