

# **UCLA**

## **Mester**

### **Title**

Carme Riera. La voz de la sirena

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5gt2f6dh>

### **Journal**

Mester, 45(1)

### **Author**

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### **Publication Date**

2017

### **DOI**

10.5070/M3451030733

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CARME RIERA. *La voz de la sirena*. Barcelona: Lumen, 2015, 96 pp.

Carme Riera, an accomplished and prize-winning author, has devoted her career to giving voice to those subjects who have been, or continue to be, silenced. Throughout her novels and short stories, women, slaves, crypto-Jews (among others) of all ages and from different time periods take the stage and give a testimony of their lives and marginalization. In her latest novel, *La voz de la sirena*, illustrated and designed by Helena Pérez García and winner of the 2015 Spanish Premio Nacional de las Letras, Riera does not cease to amaze her readers by offering a new version of Hans Christian Andersen's tale *The Little Mermaid*. The Danish writer's fairytale is, in fact, present in its entirety as an addition to Riera's work, nestled in the middle of the volume and printed on smaller, aqua-blue pages. This additional book-within-a-book, translated into Spanish by Enrique Bernárdez Sánchez as "La sirenita," not only gives credit to Andersen for his literary production; it also allows readers to compare two versions of the tale.

Riera's novel tells the story of Cliodna, the youngest of four mermaid sisters who live in the depths of the sea with their father and grandmother. Despite her young age, Cliodna's career has been decided for her: she is to become an Olympic athlete who specializes in the maritime acrobatic jump. The protagonist's life, however, is not one of medals and accomplishments. Rather, similarly to what many women face in today's societies, she is forced to choose between a career and love, which leads to an unavoidable tragedy. Nevertheless, this tragedy is counterbalanced by the voice that Riera bestows upon her character. In Andersen's version, the protagonist is neither given a name nor a voice of her own: the tale is entirely recounted by an omniscient narrator. To the contrary, in Riera's novel, Cliodna does have a voice to tell her life story, which she does in the first person from beginning to end. However, she also reminds the readers that "nunca me resultó fácil hablar de mí misma y menos ahora que tengo que hacerlo con voz prestada, pero considero que es importante que se conozca mi historia, sin faltar un punto a la verdad" (15). The final pages of the novel, despite not matching Andersen's nor Walt Disney's conclusions, draw attention to an aspect that is perhaps more important than a cliché happy ending. Although being forced to tell her tale

“con voz prestada” (which readers later discover is the voice of the waves that will carry her story for eternity), Clodna can share her version with all those who believe in it and who are, therefore, capable of hearing it and writing it down for posterity.

The novel deals with themes including authorship, appropriation, and distortion, all of which have appeared time, and time again in Riera’s work. *La voz de la sirena* avoids references to historical events, such as the Spanish Inquisition and repression and expulsion of Jews from Spain or the political independence movement of the Spanish colonies against the crown, which serve as the setting for two of her best novels, *En el último azul* and *Por el cielo y más allá*. Instead, the author relies on the well-known fairytale of the Little Mermaid and makes this character the central element of the novel. Riera chooses to break away from the traditional and patriarchal versions of the tale by giving the protagonist a voice, so that she herself—and not the male narrator—can recount her story. Although the ending of the book leaves readers wondering if the protagonist really can speak for herself (since she must borrow the waves’ voice to tell her tale), the sole fact that she is given agency is enough to break with tradition.

One of the elements that makes Riera’s novel different from her previous works is the fairytale-like nature of *La voz de la sirena*, which is augmented by the illustrations by Pérez García that are scattered throughout the book. This detail, besides presenting readers with a new format that does not resonate with Riera’s traditional style, also makes the novel adequate for children and adolescents without being categorized as a children’s book. Despite not reaching the literary level of a number of novels written by Riera, one of the most compelling aspects of this adapted fairy-tale is its versatility. It is congenial to younger generations of readers who would be drawn in by the illustrations, the simple language, and the fairy-tale charm, while also speaking to adult audiences that can appreciate the subtleties, the references, and the intrinsic messages about a woman’s struggle for self-determination that the author wishes to convey.

In *La voz de la sirena* Riera takes a classic fairytale and adapts it to the twenty-first century by focusing on themes that are central to her writing and to society as a whole.

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