

Javier Cercas

Soldiers of Salamis

Soldados de Salamina

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Soldiers of Salamis (*Soldados de Salamina*) is a novel by Javier Cercas that combines historical reconstruction with personal reflection, moving between documented events and the narrator's investigative quest. At its centre is Rafael Sánchez Mazas, a writer and leading figure in the Falangist movement during the Spanish Civil War. In 1939, as the conflict nears its end, Sánchez Mazas narrowly escapes execution when a young Republican soldier – whose identity remains unknown – chooses not to shoot him. Soon afterwards, while hiding in the woods, he is helped by three Republican soldiers who are themselves in hiding, waiting for the war to end so they can return home safely. These unexpected acts of mercy leave a lasting impression on Sánchez Mazas. Although he later rises to prominence within the repressive Francoist regime, he never entirely forgets these events.

Compelled by this episode, the novel's narrator – a journalist and researcher – undertakes an investigation to uncover the identity of the anonymous soldier. Drawing on archival materials, interviews, and personal testimonies, he reconstructs the episode while reflecting on the challenges of piecing together a fragmented past. As the inquiry unfolds, the narrative juxtaposes the lives of victors and vanquished, exploring questions of heroism, moral ambiguity, and political allegiance. Javier Cercas's narration, not only in this novel but also in some of his other works, is marked by the use of a first-person narrator – Cercas's own fictional alter ego, sharing his exact name – who investigates the events surrounding Sánchez Mazas while grappling with the act of writing. In this novel, these elements shape both the structure and the story, showcasing a range of narrative techniques associated with postmodern metafiction and autofiction.

Cercas distinguishes between two related narrative forms: the *relato real* (true tale) and the *relato ficticio* (fictional tale). He first introduced these terms in his 2000 collection *Relatos reales*, which compiled a series of articles he wrote for the Catalan edition of *El País*. A *relato real* is essentially a non-fictional text, closely tied to reality yet conscious of the limitations of language in representing the external world. It presents historical events without imaginative embellishment, while remaining aware of the inevitable gaps between words and the realities they describe. In these texts, the narrator's biographical connection to the subject matter, though present, never becomes a basis for inventing a plot. In contrast, a *relato ficticio* emerges when gaps in historical knowledge stall the narrative, requiring invention to continue the story. Unlike the brief, factual chronicles of the *relatos reales*, the *relato ficticio* allows for greater narrative freedom, blending fact and imagination and often employing self-reflexive techniques to address what cannot be fully reconstructed.

Viestenz observes that critics frequently overlook the nuanced distinction Cercas draws between the *relato real* and the *relato ficticio*, often reading his novels as though they were factual narratives rather than works of fiction (Viestenz 549). However, the self-reflexive and autobiographical features

of Cercas's *relatos ficticios* deliberately blur this boundary. In the novel, the narrator—who shares the author's name—claims to be composing a *relato real*, yet ultimately relies on imaginative reconstruction when historical evidence proves insufficient, particularly in his consideration of Miralles as the possible hero of the story.

Soldados de Salamina functions as a political novel not through explicit ideological positioning, but through its sustained reflection on memory, historiography, and narrative form. By reconstructing the episode of Sánchez Mazas and the anonymous Republican soldier, the novel foregrounds the instability of historical knowledge and the inevitable gaps that shape any account of the past. The narrator's inability to establish definitive truth exposes the limits of archival research and testimonial evidence.

At the same time, the novel suggests that literature does not simply reproduce history but operates where historical knowledge reaches its limits. When factual certainty is unattainable, imaginative reconstruction becomes a narrative strategy that allows the story to continue. In dramatising the tension between the *relato real* and the *relato ficticio*, Cercas examines how the past is mediated through language and form, presenting history not as a fixed record but as something constructed through acts of interpretation and storytelling.

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