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Toward a Metanarrative of Life in Gibraltar

Sanchez, M. G. Lowlife Tales. The Dabuti Collective, 2025. pp. 365.

Recent years have seen a rise of academic interest in Gibraltarian cultural studies. The annual Gibraltar International Conference, initiated in 2023, and the Gibraltar Digital Project cultural platform, launched in 2025, focus strongly on language and literature, particularly the specific nature of Llanito and distinctive features of Gibraltarian literature, which seems to have gone unnoticed—for decades, if not centuries—either as part of the Commonwealth or postcolonial literature or as a separate production in its own right.

Some of the characteristics of Gibraltarian literature, frequently stressed by scholars, include its preoccupation with the past, the question of identity, balancing between the British and Spanish Other, the similarly balancing language, and various aspects of border imagery. All of these feature prominently in the seven novels[1] and three short story collections[2] authored by M. G. Sanchez, probably Gibraltar's most prolific author and certainly one deeply dedicated to building a solid body of Gibraltarian literature.

Sanchez's latest short story collection, Lowlife Tales, was published in 2025 in two versions: one for English readership and the other intended for bilingual Llanito-English readers. The final story of the latter was dense with English-Llanito code-switching to the extent that adapting it for the English-speaking audience proved impossible, and it had to be replaced by another story in the English edition. These editions follow the same pattern as Sanchez's latest novel, Marlboro Man (2022), which might indicate an emerging trend. Namely, language might be considered a possible reason for the historical lack of scholarly attention given to Gibraltarian literature, as some of its authors write in English and others in Spanish. Sanchez's most recent achievements offer the

English-Llanito combination as a middle ground, which finely reflects the reality of Gibraltar and paves the way for future (canonical) works of Gibraltarian fiction.

Lowlife Tales (the version here reviewed is for the English readership) contains eleven stories. In a somewhat Joycean manner, the stories follow the line from adolescence through maturity to old age and looming death. As the narration moves from deceleration, describing the day "when it all began to go wrong" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 1), toward extreme acceleration which offers some shocking final details, the first story, "Shot," describes the downfall of Christian, a promising Gibraltarian junior shot-putter. The second story, "Bobby in Babilonia" (Babilonia being a Llanito pun on a Spanish expression), is an account of Nathan's relationship with his step-grandad Papa Roberto, resented by the family for being a town drunk, which evolves between Nathan's age of seven and sixteen, when Papa Roberto dies. "Cabrón x 2" describes an unfortunate incident between Kadrian Agius, a "low-life piece of llanito shit" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 50), and the Spanish border police. In "Patriotic Eric," the eponymous protagonist—Eric Falquero—has a broken washing machine and nothing to wear but an old Union Jack set—an incident that ultimately makes him famous, "one of Gibraltar's true originals" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 78). In "Jimmy C.," Jimmy Cavanna, quiet and timid illegitimate offspring of the famous Cavanna clan of smugglers, does not manage to avoid being involved in the family business. In "Best of Both Worlds," young Jordan Fernando gets drunk while celebrating New Year's Eve with his somewhat older friend Big Ron Marsden. This is what Sanchez presents as a procession of lowlifes—smugglers, drunks, ex-convicts, or simply idle jobless youngsters.

The seventh story brings an unusual twist: the autodiegetic narrator of "Diestro Maestro" is none other than the (fictional) Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Jensen Abateo. In the humorous account of how his clandestine love of corrida, inherited from his grandfather but generally considered anti-Gibraltarian, jeopardized his popularity and position, Jensen Abateo displays great literacy and erudition but still comments that occasionally he feels "small and insignificant": "everywhere I went and everyone I met ended up reinforcing the impression that I was a low-life colonial impostor from Laguna Estate who didn't deserve to be there" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 182). The next story, "Paulie and the Pulpo," returns to the image of an isolated individual, disabled, unemployed, and obese Paulie Hurtado, who finds comfort in snorkeling while also believing it might give him an

opportunity to catch fish and thus earn some money—his only catch in years being a similarly disabled octopus that he cannot but release back into the sea. Leaving Paulie convinced "that nothing, absolutely nothing, he ever did turned out right" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 223), the ninth story takes us back to the world of Jensen Abateo: "CJ Interrupts" features the first and only poet laureate of Gibraltar, Callum Jimenez. CJ is embittered by his hatred for the government officials, who hold high positions but show no appreciation for literature or the arts, and he is perhaps the highest of the lowlife characters in this collection since he gives vent to his hatred in a series of tweets, thus losing his public respectability but winning back the respect of his former Spanish boyfriend Rubén. The last two stories focus on Gibraltarians getting lost in their very own 2.6 square miles: a group of Laguna Estate friends accidentally stuck in one of Gibraltar's ancient caves in "In Paradisium," and retired teacher Tommy Consigliero in "The Return of the Native," returning to Gibraltar for one last time after a lifetime spent in Canada and unable to reconcile with the utterly changed landscape and society.

Jensen Abateo puts it explicitly: he relates his feeling of being lowlife to being "colonial." Callum Jimenez's bitterness comes from the fact that he despises Gibraltarians while overpraising all things Gibraltarian in his poetry; Jeremy Sarmiento of "In Paradisium" is quite literally enclosed inside the Rock; Tommy Consigliero struggles with accepting that "people had somehow become more British. Not British like the Cockneys in London or the Brummies in Birmingham were British – but certainly more British than they used to be" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 322); Eric Falquero complements the list: a drunk and "el matón"—the bully, he still becomes "a national icon," an orator who claims that "if you cut him open you'd only see red, white and blue and that he preferred a good roast to a paella any day" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 77).

Unlike the stories in Sanchez's other collections, lowlife tales are not connected, at least not on the surface, through recurring characters or acquaintances that are mentioned across stories, as is the case, for instance, in Sanchez's first collection, Rock Black. Certainly, a connection easily transpires from the description above: their identities are shaped by the territory they occupy—it is Gibraltar, it seems, that makes them lowlife. A sense of community in Lowlife Tales is not built through interwoven plotlines but through insight into isolated individuals who, each in their idiosyncratic way, are burdened with failure, grief, or resentment, or simply defeated by the

inexorable course of life and history. This does not make the stories bleak and depressing. Nathan reflects at the end of "Bobby in Babilonia" that there is "just what was and what was going to be," that it all comes down to "waiting for the inevitable," and that all that matters is to "abandon the illusion that we are somehow in control of our destinies" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 49). He finds the thought oddly comforting, and the idea of powerlessness and lack of agency is echoed throughout the collection. Jordan Fernando ends "Best of Both Worlds" (the story title refers to the name of an estate in Gibraltar) thinking "that life is just a flicker of light between two eternities of darkness…" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 149), and Tommy Consigliero ends the entire collection saying to himself, "I shouldn't have come here. What's in the past… in the past lies buried" (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 343). The tone is not one of despair and wistfulness but of comfort and peace with what and where one is.

Resignation is perhaps more pronounced than in Sanchez's previous work. In many ways, however, Lowlife Tales is a proper contribution to the Gibraltarian metanarrative the author has been constructing. For instance, while Rock Black stories reflect Gibraltarian life in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the stories in this collection are set in the present and at times even in the near future. "Diestro Maestro" bears an interesting allusion to Sanchez's 2015 novels Solitude House and Jonathan Gallardo, in terms of the narrative technique that brings the first-person narration closer to the moment of reading: "The entire process couldn't have taken much longer than the time I've spent writing this last sentence," Jensen Abateo informs us, describing the moment in which he felt as if he was about to die (Sanchez, Lowlife Tales 189). The eponymous protagonist of Jonathan Gallardo similarly takes over the narration in the last chapter: "But I didn't die" (Sanchez, Jonathan Gallardo 272), and so does John Seracino in Solitude House: "Right at that moment I had an idea: why not write about everything that had happened to me?" (Sanchez, Solitude House 251). Writing is offered as a means, perhaps the single means, of overcoming the helplessness of human existence and the inability to transcend the limitations that bind each of Sanchez's characters, and which are often traceable to the border lines of Gibraltar. It is a means of bringing all actors involved— characters, narrators, the author, as well as the readers—closer to home.

There is a common thread in Lowlife Tales that additionally links the stories to Sanchez's previous work, which deserves separate consideration and interpretation. It is family imagery, a feature of Gibraltarian literature that might rightly be added to the list given at the beginning of this review, and one that literally brings these narratives closer to home. Family imagery is a reflection of the broader state of the community, as is implied by the postcolonial interpretive framework, within which the "Other – with the capital 'O' … can refer to the mother … to the father … to the unconscious itself … [and] can be compared to the imperial centre" (Ashcroft et al. 155).

Compared with Sanchez's early works, populated with orphaned children and troubled relations, Lowlife Tales seem to be filled with happier families. Jordan Fernando at one point regrets not spending New Year's Eve with his family; Kadrian Agius enters into conflict with the Spanish police because he is celebrating the birth of his friend's child; illegitimate child Jimmy Cavanna is reintegrated into his family, albeit one of smugglers; Jeremy Sarmiento yields to the herd instinct once he is trapped with his friends in the cave; Tommy Consigliero returns to Gibraltar to visit his parents' graves.

The stories in Lowlife Tales have a strong tendency toward recentering, placing Gibraltar as the centripetal point of homecoming, and it is perhaps to this effect that Gibraltar is "more British" in the last story: it is more central. As such, the stories arguably (and hopefully) herald future works of Gibraltarian literature as depictions of the numerous still literarily unexplored aspects of the Gibraltarian present.

Works Cited

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[1] Diary of a Victorian Colonial and Other Tales, 2008; The Escape Artist, 2013; Solitude House, 2015; Jonathan Gallardo, 2015; Gooseman, 2020; The Fetishist, 2021; Marlboro Man, 2022.

[2] Rock Black: Ten Gibraltarian Stories, 2006; Crossed Lines, 2019; and the latest, Lowlife Tales, 2025.

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