

J A S O N W E B S T E R

Author of *Duende*



Andalus

'Unusually engaging and stimulating...

he's managed to unlock several of the secrets of Moorish Spain without disturbing the enigma that lies at its heart'

Sunday Telegraph

Andalus

Unlocking the Secrets of Moorish Spain

Jason Webster



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ما ليتكلم فى الكركاع غير الخاوي

Duende: A Journey in Search of Flamenco

‘A compelling account of a culture closed to most *guiris* (foreigners) and infinitely darker and more dramatic than the colourful tourist spectacles would have them believe ... a page-turner.’

Observer

‘Unputdownable. The autobiography-as-travelogue that is also a rite of passage is a form which worked brilliantly for Laurie Lee and Bruce Chatwin ... Ladies and gentlemen, we have a new star of the genre: Jason Webster.’

Daily Mail

‘A fascinating book, the most gripping I have read for years ... Jason Webster is an exceptional writer, and this is a great book.’

Guardian

‘An impressive début ... passionate and evocative.’

Sunday Times

‘Outstanding début ... the most authentic and compelling account of flamenco in English, and one of the best books ever written about Spain.’

Literary Review

Jason Webster was born in San Francisco in 1970 and grew up in England and Germany. After studying Arabic at Oxford and living for several years in Italy and Egypt, he went to Spain to learn to play the flamenco guitar. He currently lives in Valencia with his Spanish wife. He is the author of the critically acclaimed *Duende*.

By the same author

Duende: A Journey in Search of Flamenco

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*Spain, first civilised by the Phoenicians and long possessed
by the Moors, has indelibly retained the original impressions.
Test her, therefore, and her natives by an Oriental standard.*
Richard Ford, *A Handbook for Travellers in Spain*

Travel, and you will see the meaning of things.
Moroccan proverb

‘If they catch you they will break your legs. You must leave at once.’

The old man looked away and moved as if to return to work. His thin dark skin glistened under the fur of grey whiskers and his purple lips were cracked and bloody from where he bit them and licked the scab with a circular motion of his tongue. His hands, bloated and hard, were stained pink from the endless fruit he had picked over the course of the season. How many dozens of oranges, strawberries, *nisperos* and lemons I’d eaten had been plucked by this man, I wondered.

The heat under the sheeting was tremendous. We were in a tunnelled underworld stretching for acres over the landscape: a gigantic flat greenhouse made of plastic designed to produce fruit at all times of the year. It was the only way to make things grow in this area – a toe-grip of the Sahara in Southern Europe. This part of Spain was dry, but conditions, they said, were worsening. One day not even the plastic and the artificial conditions would be able to prevent it from becoming real desert. In the meantime the farmers were determined to extract everything they could from the soil using cheap immigrant labour.

I had only been under the plastic for twenty minutes and I was already feeling faint – at an extremely humid thirty-nine degrees it felt as though there was barely enough air passing into my lungs to keep me alive. The light, steady and blinding, seemed to radiate from every surface, while the smell of labouring bodies blended with the sharp sweet scent of the fruit, producing a sickly, sweaty cocktail. But these men, of all ages, from youngsters in their late teens to the old Moroccan in front of me, worked nine, ten hours a day like this. And the little pay they got – if they got any at all – depended on how many boxes they could pack. Some could do as many as eighty-five or ninety in a day. But they were usually the lucky ones – people treated well and given proper contracts, with perhaps even a home to go to – Russians or Eastern Europeans. These men, all Moroccans, were less fortunate.

‘I paid five thousand euros to get here,’ one of them told me. ‘I’ve been working three months now and they haven’t given me anything.’

We spoke in a combination of Spanish, French and Arabic, making ourselves understood as best we could. Their grasp of the European languages was limited, while my Egyptian-dialect Arabic was strange and only partially intelligible to North African ears. I pushed the sweat away as it streamed into my eyes. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could stay under here, trapped in this surreal white world, where the arched wooden ribs that held up the sheeting were the only breaks in the monotony of a plastic sky just inches above our heads.

‘They keep us locked up at night. We can’t get out. I haven’t spoken to my family for weeks.’

Slavery was alive and well here. These men had been duped into working in Spain, tempted by the chance to earn money in Europe and perhaps make better lives for themselves. But instead some mafia-style organization had smuggled them over and forced them to labour in barely human conditions for no pay. They were underfed, confused and frightened.

‘This place is dangerous,’ the old man repeated, speaking in the high sing-song voice typical of North Africans. There was an increasing nervousness about him and the others gathered around. ‘You must leave.’

He lifted himself from the crouching position we had adopted by the low metal rack used for supporting the fruit boxes. His dark-brown trousers were stained and dirty, frayed around the bottom

His ill-fitting shoes slipped up and down as he walked away. Some of the others who had gathered around made to move with him. It was too risky; fear overcame their curiosity in the foreigner who had suddenly appeared among them. I began to wonder if coming here had been such a good plan after all.

A few days earlier, I had spoken to my journalist friend Eduardo about the idea that had been preoccupying me for some time.

‘The Arabs in Spain?’ he said.

‘Not only the history,’ I replied. ‘What about now? Moors and Christians used to get on fine, but look at Moroccans and Spaniards today. It’s a different story.’

I knew I could rely on Eduardo to give me interesting leads. He was the kind of journalist who always knew much more than he could ever write about – plenty of stories were kept out of the newspapers for fear of libel, or because of the proprietor’s political connections.

‘I’ll tell you where you’ll find the real thing. It’s a scandal.’

He listed the farms along the coast where Moroccans and other North Africans were forced to work like slaves.

‘Slaves?’

‘They can’t go to the police because they’re here illegally and would just get sent straight back to Morocco,’ he said. ‘It’s time you opened your eyes.’

‘They’re trapped, then.’

‘It’s not going to be easy getting in and out, son,’ he said. ‘We’re talking mafia here. The farmers keep the workers under tight control. And they may well be armed. I’ve been wanting to break the story for months but my editor won’t let me: says it’s too risky. But don’t worry – you’ll be fine.’

And of course I jumped at the idea. I’d seen hundreds of North African immigrants in Spain – the area where I lived in Valencia had one of the highest concentrations in the country. And many, I knew, were here illegally, smuggled over the Strait of Gibraltar in fishing vessels or speed boats, or strapped underneath trucks crossing on the ferry from Ceuta or Tangier. The ancestors of these people had once ruled Spain – Al-Andalus, as they called it – but today they were as unwelcome as though the Reconquest had never ended. The Spanish didn’t put them to the sword any more, but if caught they were quickly sent back over the water.

Eduardo’s words echoed in my head as I watched these men melting in this plastic city, enslaved on a farm, picking plastic fruit for plastic supermarkets.

‘Why have you come here?’

As the other Moroccans picked themselves up and returned to work, one of them, a young man I guessed at being in his mid twenties, stayed behind, beckoning me with his hand to remain seated for a moment. I hadn’t noticed him before: in jeans and trainers, he was dressed like a typical young North African man in Spain. But his hair was longer than usual and he seemed less nervous than the others. He spoke better Spanish as well.

‘I heard about the conditions here. I wanted to see if—’

‘You’re a journalist?’

‘No.’

‘Then why?’

I shrugged. ‘I’m treasure hunting.’

‘Here?’ He smiled, his teeth brilliant white against his dark complexion. I noticed one of his teeth was set at an odd angle, slightly lower than the rest and pushed back, as though at some point he had been punched incredibly hard. ‘You’ve come to the right place,’ he said with a laugh. ‘This is a gold mine.’ He stuck his hands into the ground by his feet, breaking the hard dry shell on top to reveal clods of fresh brown earth underneath, unleashing a baked, musty odour into the air.

‘ZINE!’

~~There was a rasping shout from behind. The other workers were shuffling as fast as they could in either direction away from us. The Moroccan skipped onto the balls of his feet and peered above the trenches of fruit lined along the tunnel. I turned to see where he was looking, dizziness flooding my head as I pulled myself up onto my knees. Through the plastic I could see three pairs of legs moving towards us, walking briskly and heavily through the sand-like soil on the other side of the sheeting. They spoke Spanish with strong southern accents.~~

I felt a slap on the back of my head, and with a thud my face hit the ground, the Moroccan’s quivering hand holding me down.

‘Jesus Christ!’

‘Quiet!’ he said.

‘I can’t breathe.’ My nose was buried in the dirt; lumps of grit flew into my mouth with each breath, a bitter, cloying taste on my tongue. I wriggled to get free, but he held me down harder.

‘Quiet! They’re coming.’

With a twisting motion, I managed to pull my head loose and looked up. The Moroccan stared hard at me with bulging eyes. These farmers were dangerous; the old man had said so. If they found me, I would be in trouble. But despite the warnings I’d been given – even by Eduardo, who usually had a cavalier approach to entering ‘forbidden’ areas – I was still unaware of quite how much danger I was in. At most they’d throw me off the farm, I thought – nothing more.

But when I saw one of the farmers carrying a heavy stick, I began to wonder. Through the plastic it was hard to make out properly, but it looked suspiciously like a baseball bat.

There was a moment of silence. The men stopped just beside us on the other side of the sheeting and the two of us remained motionless, hunted animals not certain yet if they’d been trapped or still had a chance of escape. I wasn’t sure how much they could see through the sheeting. Perhaps, I thought with mindless optimism, we could bluff our way out of this. My heart pushed its way upward through my ribcage, cold passing through my stomach. The dizziness of earlier, I noticed, had gone.

It became clear, though, that the farmers were being led to where we were. A fourth person standing behind them pointed to the exact spot where we were crouching, and, veiled behind the white sheets, the three of them took a simultaneous step in our direction.

With a scooping movement, the Moroccan grabbed me by the armpit and hauled me to my feet. Within a second we were running like gazelles along the tunnel, heads bent to avoid crashing into the low ceiling, all effort thrown into forward motion.

‘¡AQUI! ¡AQUI!’

The farmers’ shouts came hurtling after us. I had no idea how fast they could run. If we were lucky they’d be middle aged and well fed, unable to keep up with our younger legs. But we were trapped inside the tunnel: we would have to get out somewhere. How many entrances did these things have? Would we have to rip ourselves out of this cocoon and make a break for it across the fields? The few passageways outside the plastic were equally long and thin – if they found us there it would be like being caught in a firing range. I followed my companion blindly, my only hope.

‘He’s got a Moroccan with him. *Están bajando*. They’re heading downhill.’

It was hard to make out which way the slope went as we powered past the fruit bushes, other workers pulling themselves out of the way as we sped past. The Moroccan was quick, his head steady above skinny hunched shoulders. For a moment I wanted to call out to ask where we were going, but they heard our voices we would give ourselves away. Not that it mattered. The shouting around us would tell them where we were.

We ran faster, taking short shallow breaths, adrenaline feeding a belief that we were going to make it, that somewhere further along there would be a way out of this tunnel.

The Moroccan jerked to the right, ducking his head, and I saw him vanish through a plastic flap into the outside world. Without a thought I followed him through, into the sun on the other side. My lungs clawed at the fresher air. A quick check and I saw there was no-one around, but immediately we were running again, turning to the left and heading down the passageway between one tunnel and the next, ahead of us nothing but more plastic – a dense ocean of white, with distant hilltops the only sight of land. I could breathe better here, but already my legs were losing strength, my heart straining to perform.

We reached the end of the passageway – a kind of junction with a main corridor that linked various gaps in the plastic. I thought we'd stop and look before crossing, but the Moroccan just kept running. He should know, I thought. But as we passed from one pathway to another, we came face to face with one of the farmers – a short man with no neck, shoulders like a bull and a dull inhuman look in his eyes. He held a baseball bat in his hands.

'Vale,' he said. And without any warning he brought the bat crashing down onto my lower leg. Had I not managed to lift and turn it slightly before the impact, he might have broken my shin, but the blow was directed onto the calf muscle.

I doubled forward with shock, half falling to the ground, trying to keep myself upright to avoid a strike on the back of my head. I lifted my arm in an instinctive attempt to ward him off, stumbling and shift my weight onto my right foot. The pain was immense. For a second I thought I might throw up.

There was a loud grunt and a groan; from the corner of my eye I saw the Moroccan throw his bony-framed body at the farmer, his hand grasping to get a grip around the man's neck before he could hit me a second time. The two of them toppled over, the bat falling to one side. The farmer thrashed wildly, but round and overweight, he was like an upturned beetle, his short arms vainly punching the air while the Moroccan sat on his chest and began heaving his head up and down on the ground, trying to knock him out. Dust rose up from the dry earth in a cloud as the two of them grappled with each other. The farmer's face was turning a thick shade of red.

'Stop,' I said, coughing in the haze.

'Run!' he shouted. 'Straight down there. Go!'

I didn't move. Through the panic and pain, a more rational voice was making itself heard inside me.

'¡Corre! The others are coming.' The Moroccan began punching at the farmer's throat.

Someone, I thought, was going to die here if I did as he said. Either he would kill the farmer or the others would kill him once they found him. The man had saved me: I wasn't about to run away. Besides, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to.

'Run!'

The farmer's head was flopping about and his arms had stopped trying to hit up at his assailant. For a second I thought he was unconscious before I saw his eyes were still open. He looked as if he had concussion.

'Get off him,' I said. And limping over, I pulled the Moroccan off the prostrate farmer.

'¿Estás loco? Are you mad?'

'Grab that stick,' I said. He walked over to where the farmer's weapon lay on the ground and made as though to hit him over the head with it.

'No!' I held out my arm. The farmer began to groan like a child, incomprehensible words tumbling from his half-open mouth. Perhaps it was the pain in my leg, or seeing him so helpless, but I was unable to feel anger towards him. All thoughts were of escape and the other farmers.

'Here.' Stumbling, I went to lift the man up. 'We'll leave him in this passageway.' Then, turning to the Moroccan, 'Come with me.'

We dragged the farmer to the side, propping his head up against the plastic wall of one of the

tunnels. He looked all right, just shaken and bruised. But we had to move fast. The others would find him soon. ~~Already the workers inside were beginning to shout about the fight: news of what was happening was spreading like ink.~~

We began running again, down the hill. I willed myself forwards, my left leg reluctantly forced to work as the muscles clenched with pain, hopping and skipping my way behind the Moroccan. The other man had been right – they were a violent lot. I didn't want to find out what would happen if they caught us now.

In the distance behind us I could hear dogs barking. I'd seen Spanish farm dogs before – notoriously ferocious creatures that often killed one another in fights to the death. If they were loose they would rip our throats out.

'Go!' I shouted ahead. 'Faster.'

I didn't care about the other farmers any more. The dogs had put the fear of God in me. I desperately wanted to get out of there.

'Down here.' The Moroccan weaved to the right and I sprinted after him, all thoughts about my leg evaporating with fear. Ahead, two hundred yards in front of us, there was a break in the whiteness – a little brown streak, barely a smudge, but the first sign of an end to the labyrinth – a dirt track leading somewhere, anywhere, it didn't matter.

Emerging from the plastic world, we burst out onto the road. There was nothing in sight – no nearby town, no traffic, no immediate way to escape from the murderous farmers working their way towards us. I stopped, half choking as my lungs tightened with exhaustion, black spots flashing before my eyes. Where should we go? We had to keep running. But left or right?

Before I could decide, the Moroccan had grabbed my arm again and was hauling me up the hill. I couldn't believe what he was doing. We could at least keep following the slope downwards to make things easier for us. But he seemed certain of where he was going. My head was bent down as we ran, shoulders sloping forwards, and I clutched at the stitch now stinging in my side. Briefly I looked up and saw ahead of us a dirty red Derbi moped parked in the shade beneath a eucalyptus tree, a helmet balanced on the back seat.

'I just hope we can get it started,' I thought.

In a few more paces we had reached the bike. I looked back: there was no sign of our pursuers but the dog-barking was still there, like creeping black ice.

'Get on.' The Moroccan was already gripping the handlebars: the key had been left in the lock and he was pumping at the pedals to get the tiny motor running. With a last effort I pushed the helmet to the ground and seated myself behind him, trying not to fall off as we jumped off the stabilizers and the back wheel touched the ground. The motor screamed as we headed down the hill, back towards the point where we had come out from the farmland. If they found us it would almost certainly be now. I stared ahead, eyes fixed on the gap in the plastic from which they would emerge.

We couldn't hear the barking now for the complaining high-pitched wail of the bike: there was no way of telling how close they might be. But they would have heard us, and would be moving in fast. I kept my eyes fixed on the gap: outrunning their dogs on this thing would not be easy.

With the slope working in our favour, we gained momentum as we moved closer and closer to the moment when we would know whether or not we had made good our escape. As the Moroccan pulled harder on the accelerator, the tunnel moved into focus. Then in a second it flashed by and we had gone past, leaving my mind with the clear photo-image of two farmers stumbling towards the track. No dogs with them, but one of them, I was sure, had been holding a handgun.

'Faster.' I squeezed the Moroccan's arm; the bike barely responded.

I looked behind me to where the two men would now appear. It was not far to the first corner on the road – once we reached it we would be out of range. But if they got to us before then? 'Pistols a

useless over more than twenty or thirty yards,' a soldier friend had once told me. 'There's no accuracy there.' At least if he fired at us there was a high chance of him missing. Lifting myself to see above the Moroccan's shoulder, I could see we were still about twenty seconds away from safety.

In my mind's eye I had already seen the image before I turned round again. The two men were there, standing still now having run out onto the road, one resting on his stick, the other raising his arm, the black metal weapon held firm in his outstretched hand. 'He's going to fire at us,' I thought. 'The bastard's going to shoot us.' I found myself ducking instinctively, as though to make a smaller target, still turned backwards to stare at our would-be assassin. Do you actually see the bullets, I wondered. A flash, perhaps.

I never found out. The Moroccan suddenly threw one arm out to hold onto me as he jerked the bike sharply to the left, along a track that forked off down the hill and away from view. The plastic city vanished behind the crest of the slope, and with it the two farmers, the pistol, the dogs, the danger. They wouldn't follow us now. We were safe.

Chimo claimed he never liked the shape of his nose anyway, and that if he were twenty years younger he would emigrate. He couldn't understand why I lived in Spain. The place was going from bad to worse, and these *populares* had been in power for too long now.

'This violence is their fault, and just the beginning,' he said, still dabbing spots of blood with his handkerchief. But then England, he admitted with a sigh, had also produced *La Thatcher* and *the hooligans*, and now *el señor Bush* was about to invade Iraq, so perhaps I was better off here after all.

Except that time was running out.

I'd been going to see Chimo about once a fortnight for years, ambling down to his snuff secondhand bookshop just a few streets away from my flat in Valencia, deliberately walking past the bigger, overpriced shop next door belonging to his fat, bald rival. Chimo would usually be sitting behind his scratched wooden desk, flicking through dusty lingerie catalogues or simply staring through his square spectacles at a street half screened out by the rarely sold books he placed on display. Opposite was a Moroccan grocer's, while the bar next door was run by Algerians. Immigrants had concentrated in this part of the city: North Africans, Ecuadoreans and Chinese.

Chimo would offer me a cigarette, and with a slight weariness in his voice ask what kind of thing I was looking for: times were tough, and I was expected to be part of the solution; you felt that even if you offered to buy his entire stock, it could never be enough, somehow. I'd pick something up on his recommendation, often a book I wasn't especially interested in – a novel from the 1950s about life on the France–Spain border, or a guide to rural architecture in Castilla-León – with the idea that it could come in useful at some point. I was sure that one day he would lift some gem from his grubby shelves and hand it to me with his nonchalant shrug, looking at me out of the corner of his grey eyes as if to say, 'Will he take the bait?'

'Have you seen what they're doing now?' he said that afternoon as soon as I walked into his shop. His wrinkled face looked puffed and swollen. 'Another billion on that new museum and they can't even come and fix the drains. A storm the other night and *¡hala!* the stink! Smells like a sewerage farm here. And then those young fascists start coming round saying it's because of the *moros*, that there are too many of them, and they shit so much they're blocking up the pipes. It's a bloody joke. I told them, get out, I said. I don't want you lot round here. We didn't live through the dictatorship just to see people like you knocking on our doors ... That's when he hit me.'

I looked at this skinny old man, spectacles bandaged together with sticky tape over his swollen and bruised nose, and felt a surge of anger towards the moron who'd done this to him. Things had been tense since the anti-immigrationists had taken over a heavy-metal bar five doors down the road. Most of them worked as bouncers at various nightclubs around the city. The week before, two Moroccans had been knifed; the district was in danger of becoming a no-go area.

'Does it hurt?' I asked. He was a proud man, and I didn't want to push it too far.

'No. *¡Que va!* It's nothing.' He shrugged and lit a cigarette. 'It's only fractured.' He began leafing through some papers in a drawer to show how unaffected by it all he was.

'What these idiots don't understand,' he said, looking up, 'is the *moros* were here even before they were. Ha! Valencia was Moorish for centuries. These yobs don't read, that's their problem. They did they'd know. Ruzafa, the name of this part of town, is Arabic: it means orchard, or garden, or something like that. These Moroccans have as much right to be here as anyone.'

His words struck a chord. I'd often thought that Spain had retained more of its 'Moorishness' than people cared to admit. Arabs and Berbers had lived here for almost nine centuries, and sometimes, looking at ordinary 'Spanish' faces, it seemed they had never left. The Alhambra in Granada, the Great Mosque in Cordoba – these were beautiful and dramatic reminders of the Islamic civilization that had once flourished in Spain. But it seemed likely that its legacy ran deeper than a few ancient buildings and a collection in a museum – nine hundred years was a long time. There were moments when you could sense some lingering *Thousand and One Nights* magic about the place, an exoticism, but perhaps something more than that as well: a world man had yet to throw out of balance by believing he could impose his will with impunity on fate and nature. I found constant echoes from the time I'd spent living in the Middle East – in the food, the people, the buildings and the customs.

'I shit on the whore! You think this is a democracy? Well, you're wrong. Time is running out. These skinheads will be in power one day soon, just like the fascists before them. Under Franco you couldn't even see two people kissing in a film. That's right – they'd cut it just before their lips met. Now, if I want to, I can go down the nudist beach and see as much as I want, when I want. Don't know about you, not everyone's cup of tea, but it's the most natural thing in the world to feel the sun on your back over. And there are some beauties down there, too ...'

Despite being in his late sixties and the latest victim of right-wing thuggery, you couldn't help feeling that some adolescent part of Chimo's imagination was still very active, and was probably thriving on his spending too much time alone in his little shop. It was an innocent form of lechery, though: he could be a perfect gentleman, as I'd seen on the odd occasion when women had walked in.

'Still treasure hunting?' he asked with a grin as I glanced momentarily back at the shelves. I was still angry about what had happened to him, but had heard him eulogize the female form often enough.

'Just like your predecessor, *el pirata Drake*.'

In Spain the great English hero – explorer, sea captain and bugbear of Philip II – was reduced to a mere 'pirate'.

'You lot always come to Spain looking for spoils,' he said. 'Take Gibraltar for a start.'

'That's not English: it's Moorish,' I said with a laugh.

'I know. Gibraltar – *jabal Tariq* – the mountain of Tariq, the first Arab to conquer Spain. He landed there before marching north.'

'The *first* Arab?' I asked vaguely.

'Before Musa came along. Musa was Tariq's boss. Came after Tariq and took all the glory. Created the greatest civilization on earth, the Moors did. Right here in Spain. We had the first universities, the first paper factories, the first street lighting in the whole of Europe.'

The Moors had first crossed the Strait of Gibraltar during the Dark Ages, at about the same time as Bede was writing his *History*, over half a century before the first Viking attacks on the Northumbrian coast. Muslim armies had recently spread out from the Arabian peninsula following the establishment of Islam and the death of the Prophet Muhammad, conquering as far as the Himalayas in the east and North Africa in the west. According to the old accounts, the Christian Count Julian of Ceuta, angry over the rape of his daughter by the Spanish King Roderic, asked the newly arrived Muslims to cross over into Spain to avenge him. Spain at that time was under Visigothic rule, the Germanic tribe having moved in and taken over as the Roman Empire collapsed.

In the year 711 a small Moorish force led by the commander Tariq crossed the Strait of Gibraltar. 'Moor' was the term often used to describe the Muslims in Spain – an ethnically diverse group comprising Arabs, Berbers, Syrians, Persians and eventually Spaniards themselves; it originated from the Latin *maurus*, which had been used to refer to North Africans. It was a loose and fuzzy term, but often more accurate than simply 'Arab' or 'Muslim' – words that were usually too strict for the blurred divisions of the time. The following year a second group led by Musa also crossed over, and

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