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## NEW ISLAND AND OTHER STORIES

by *María Luisa Bombal*

*Translated from the Spanish by Richard and Lucia Cunningham*

Reviewed by **Akeela Gaibie-Dawood**

There is consensus that María Luisa Bombal is amongst the Latin American literary stars. Says Jorge Luis Borges in the preface to this slim volume of short stories: "...In Santiago, Chile, Buenos Aires, in Caracas or Lima, when they name the best names, María Luisa Bombal is never missing from the list."

Most of the stories in this collection were written in the 1930s. The opening novella, "The Final Mist," is an alternate version of *The House of Mist* with the same characters and storyline. For a fan of the latter, elegant classic this is a happy find! There again is the caustic Daniel still pining for his beautiful, young wife who has just died under mysterious circumstances and his new, unassuming, naive bride recently arrived at the hacienda in the misty woods.

Bombal's writing is magical and one is swept up in the dream world she conjures. She was a forerunner in the magical realism arena in Latin America, and if this genre appeals to you, these stories will entice. "The Unknown" is set "a thousand fathoms beneath the sea", "miles down, below the deep, dense zone of darkness ... [where] a golden light radiates from gigantic sponges, yellow and resplendent as suns."

Many of the stories explore loveless marriages juxtaposed with passionate romances and sensuality outside of the marriage bond. The women are frequently young and inexperienced at the time of marriage and later, inevitably, question their choice of life partners whilst yearning to be adored by their disinterested husbands. One character, Brigida, "wanted love, yes, love, and trips and madness, and love, love..."

As a result, the women escape into a fantasy world, where they experience untold passion and pleasure in order to quell the boredom and the depths of their distress and suffering.

One might swear that Bombal was enamoured of women's tresses, which feature in all their gloriously exalted states in most of the stories. One protagonist has "chestnut hair, that unbound, cascaded to her waist," whilst "Queen Mélisande's blond braids [are] longer even than her delicate body" and the last wife of Bluebeard sang "As she brushed her hair, endowing it with vigor and beauty." Bombal mischievously informs that hair is the means whereby a woman "gently instils her magic and wisdom into all things living."

Bombal is a skilled storyteller and her exquisite writing is replete with fantastic and dreamlike elements. The lines between reality and illusion are frequently blurred, for the characters as much as for the reader. There is mystery, surrealism and an ephemeral quality in abundance in this enjoyable volume.

