

**Carmen Stephan**  
**It's All True**

120 pp., Hardcover  
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**The drama set around Orson Welles and a fisherman.**  
**A story about a truth that does not tell us what we should see, do or believe.**

Brazil, North East, 1941. Four men no longer want to put up with what is wrong. They build a raft and set off to visit the President. They sail two thousand kilometres across the ocean on their jangada. Upright. Barefoot. Without map or compass. They are guided by the stars. They are the fishermen Jerônimo, Mané Preto, Tatá and their leader, Jacaré. They travel for something as simple as it is great: their right. They reach Rio de Janeiro after sixty-one days and they are heroes.

The Hollywood director, Orson Welles, whose film *Citizen Kane* is running in the cinemas, wants to make a movie about their bold odyssey – but during filming, Jacaré goes overboard and disappears into the ocean.

• **Carmen Stephan's novel is based on a true story that has never been told before in such form.**

*“Where else in contemporary literature can one find debutants who produce images so languidly, beautifully and morbidly deploying linguistic subtlety and profound background knowledge?”*

*Der Tagesspiegel on Mal Aria*

**Carmen Stephan**, born in 1974, lives in Geneva. She spent several years living in Rio de Janeiro as an author. Her collection of stories *Brasilia Stories* was published in 2005. Her debut novel *Mal Aria* received the Literature Prize of the Jürgen Ponto Foundation 2012 and was awarded the Buddenbrookhaus Debut Prize 2013.

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Translated by Rachel McNicholl

Underneath the stones. Underneath the singing of the birds. Underneath the cries of the cranes. Underneath the moss. Underneath the light. Underneath the dew on reeds and rushes. To me the truth seemed to lie like a finely woven web underneath everything. And the people could not see it. They spoke of what was real. But it was not the real thing. The truth was deeper. It had a foundation.

Why exactly this gossamer web became visible to me in the story of Jacaré and Orson Welles is something I cannot explain. But I can tell you the story. About the poor fisherman from north-eastern Brazil and the big movie director from North America. They met in March 1942 in Rio de Janeiro. Orson Welles called Jacaré a hero. Jacaré, in the short time they spent together on this earth, called Orson Welles *bebê chorão*. Because he reckoned the director always looked like a baby about to cry.

A few months earlier, Jacaré and three other fishermen from Fortaleza had sailed to Rio to ask their President for help. Four men on a raft. No shoes, no compass, nothing but the stars to guide them. They travelled 2,381 kilometres in 61 days. Far away in America, Orson Welles sat with a newspaper, his jaw dropping as he read about their odyssey. He decided to make a documentary about it: the film was to be called “It’s All True”. One of the first scenes to be shot was the glorious arrival of the four fishermen on the coast of Rio. “I want you to do it exactly as it was,” Orson Welles said from behind the camera, addressing Jacaré, the leader. *I want you to do it exactly as it was*. Then, as they steered their raft through choppy waters, the sail still up, and were just about to land on the beach, a big wave caught Jacaré and pulled him overboard. He disappeared into the sea –never to be found again, to this day.

Orson Welles shot “It’s All True”. Without Jacaré. With Jacaré. For Jacaré.

For half a century, the film was considered lost. All those people who searched so desperately for the truth. The children who said, maybe they took Jacaré to America. The fishermen who said, maybe they killed him. What can you see on the rolls of film. All those people who talked. Yet did not see the web that Jacaré and Orson Welles had exposed. Underneath the cries of the cranes. Underneath the moss. Underneath the light. I will show it to you.

\*

There were two plants. One was a dark brown liana that climbed and twined upwards with great vigour. The other was a quiet little bush with green leaves. The two plants grew in different places in the forest. But they belonged together. The plants knew this. What people discovered was merely what the plants already knew. His parents came to know each other when they drank a tea brewed from the liana and the leaves. The leaves held the secret of great wisdom. The liana had the hidden strength to open this door. Whoever drank the tea could no longer disguise anything, could no longer make anything seem bigger or smaller. Could only see things as they were. One day, his parents went into the forest where these plants grew. His mother picked the leaves, his father chopped down the liana. They brought home the tea made from the two plants. They drank it as he was being born. And so the strength of both plants came with him into this world.

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Jacaré grew up on Praia de Caponga. Let me sketch it for you in a few lines. The tree trunks, the jangadas, the palm trees, the sea. You can hear muffled hammering, like in Orson Welles’s film; the men are building jangadas. You can see the women sewing in front of the reed-thatched huts. Now it’s a silent movie. You see how the men stem their legs as they push the heavy raft into the sea, jump up on it and stand up straight. Standing

up straight was everything. You see the children standing on the beach, watching. Lying on their bellies in the water.

Watching until the dot grows smaller and smaller. Their father was a raft with a sail, vanishing out of sight. Sometimes young Jacaré had to go with him. The weather was often stormy and he would throw up; his father would tie him to the mast with a rope, lest he fall in.

Jacaré was born Manoel Olímpio Meira, but his parents called him *Jacaré* because, even as a little child, he had a face as creased as a crocodile's. He laughed a lot. Jacaré had a direct connection with the world. He saw things undisguised. Sometimes he would sit in the shallows, watching the sea come towards him. Louder, stronger; he did not know where the sea came from; it was life, and it was a mystery. The waves crashed against his knees, swirled around him, pulled back, drew in again. He could sit there for hours, tasting the salt in the air, listening to the sound of the surf, watching the circles the water made. He would never know where they came from, or why they came. Who the author of these circles was. He would never know this. And this *never*, surely that was proof of infinity. It existed, the infinite. The sky, the sea, the wind, everything conspired to draw him into the vast openness, even as he sat on a little patch of sand. God was the lowest word for what he did not know. The law behind the law. The mystery behind the mystery. For him, it was the simplest, most logical thing. Beginning with life itself. You are born. You are given life. If you are given something, there must be someone to give it to you. Someone who *granted* you your appearance on earth. Was there no one? But no one was someone too. And because Jacaré felt all of this so intensely and immeasurably, and at the same time felt his tummy rumbling and knew he would only get two forkfuls of fish to eat again that night, a tear would sometimes slide down his cheek. But he would wipe it away. His mother had instilled this in him. No crying. Ever. So he wiped the tear away as soon as he felt it hot on his cheek. Even when he was alone he wiped his tears away. And then he thought how trapped they were by this no-crying, no-showing, not even to themselves. How narrow they made the world when, with every single moment, nature assured him how wide it was.

Jacaré was nine when his cousin Pedro, who was the same age, drowned in the sea. His mother stood in the doorway of their reed hut; it had no door. He knew, because she was waiting for him, that something had happened. Jacaré made his way up from the beach in slow steps; the sand felt like hot lead enveloping his feet. When he was but two steps away from her, she said, “Pedro is dead.” He looked at her with the big eyes of a child, eyes through which everything still filters and is retained, unguarded. He spoke with no one because no one spoke with him, and he had no knowledge of situations like this. He found some reeds, fashioned a little figure from them, and blackened it with coal.

Jacaré held his mother’s hand as they walked to his aunt’s hut. He heard his aunt’s scream, loud and harsh, a never-ending wail. He felt a lump in his throat. He did not know where to look, so he looked out to sea. Into the distance. His mother’s eyes were full of despair but still she did not speak to him, the next day or the days after, about what had happened. She just kept going as if nothing had happened.

Yet he had two ears, and two eyes, and a mouth. This was the first time he felt it without realising it: if people were not truthful to each other, their hearts could not connect. His mother’s heart continued to beat. His heart continued to beat right beside her. But they were divided. They were on two planets light years apart, because they were not truthful to each other. The truth connects everything.

To keep that connection when he went to sea. That is what Jacaré wanted when he too became a fisherman. He told his children to stand on the beach and make a fist with their left hands as soon as they lost sight of the dot on the horizon. In that very moment, he would do the same, when he lost sight of the dots that were his children. He told his wife, Josefina, to look at the moon when he was away fishing for days. He would do the same, and so their love would meet on the moon. He gave her a shell so that she could hear, at night, what he was hearing. Later, after Jacaré was lost at sea, their son Francisco sometimes held the shell to his mother’s ear while she slept. She was not aware of this, nor did it matter; all that mattered was that he did it.

Her eyes were like stones. The first thing Jacaré noticed about her was that her eyes were the colour of stones. She was from the Sertão region. Brittle branches, dry

leaves, cacti like accusations in the landscape. Here the cattleherds drove their animals through the searing steppe in search of a few tufts of yellow grass. Josefina's father was a herdsman too. Except it was his children he drove out into the steppe, not cattle. He carried a stick and made them walk. For days, with no water. Ten-year-old Josefina strapped her two-year old sister onto her back when the little one could walk no more. The senselessness of her father's behaviour lived on as a horror deep inside Josefina for the rest of her life.

Josefina was happy with Jacaré. Even though they lived in dire poverty in Praia de Iracema. The *jangadeiros* had no rights. They did not exist in their own country. The sun scarred their eyes but they had to keep fishing, blind, until the end of their days because they had no pension. If the four fishermen on a *jangada* caught twelve fish on their lines, they had to give half of the catch to the owner of the *jangada*, liked bonded servants. They divided the other six fish among themselves. That left one-and-a-half fish for each. A whole fish and half a fish. That was not enough to feed nine children. So they went hungry. In their hunger, they searched for God. Sometimes *jangadeiros* would reach a point of no return and let themselves fall, exhausted, into the open stormy sea. At least their families did not have to pay for a funeral then. Or they ended their lives with a stab from the knife they used to gut their fish. For Jacaré, that was no answer.

Why do people have two hands. So that one hand can hold the other. Before anyone sews, fishes, caresses, hits out or murders, one hand holds the other. The first thing an infant consciously grasps is its other hand. That is what it is there for. People should never forget this. One hand can take hold of other, pull the whole person up, so that they stand up straight again. If nothing else works. If there is no longer any sign of help from anywhere. There is still the other hand. It is the simplest of truths. The most beautiful mystery. The most important key. The men who killed themselves forgot this in their pain. That one of their hands could take hold of the other. Instead, they used one hand to kill the other. They wanted to quench their own spirit, these men who lacked knowledge. Who puts a knife to his own neck with his own hand, or a gun to his head,

and says: You no longer deserve to live. Who has forgotten his other hand. Who has abandoned his other hand.

He often talked to Josefina about what needed to be done, about what his hands were on this earth for. It was intolerable that one man should steal another man's last fish, that children should whimper at night because they were too hungry to sleep. Jacaré wracked his brains in search of a solution. He listened to Josefina. Because she could see things he might miss, things she alone could feel, and she could tell him these things because she loved him. This is what the relationship between husband and wife meant for him: the one must be the torch for the other.

Should they fold their arms? Lay down their work? Go on strike maybe? Keep their heads down and fish away in silence? Weep and moan? Jacaré was looking for a higher way. Then came the night that brought an answer; it was so far off the chart of possible solutions, so absurd, so dangerous and so out of the question that he went for it.