

Materia Strana (Strange Matter)

By J J Gómez Cadenas, translated from the original Materia Extraña, published by Espasa Calpe

Edizioni Dedalo

Paperback: €16



(http://images.iop.org/objects/ccr/cern/53/6/30/CCbks2_06_13.jpg)

Gomez Cadenas (http://images.iop.org/objects/ccr/cern/53/6/30/CCbks2_06_13.jpg)

CERN has attracted the attention of a number of writers as a stage for their thrillers and in most cases they have been assisted on the scientific background by friends or by interviews with key CERN scientists. In Dan Brown's *Angels & Demons*, CERN's science portfolio was an excuse for writing a science-fiction novel in which special effects overshadow reality to create shocking situations. Bruno Arpaia's *L'Energia del Vuoto* (*Vacuum's Energy*) was more respectful of CERN's science, providing detailed scientific descriptions but with the risk of breaking the rhythm of the novel (*CERN Courier* December 2011 p59 (<http://cerncourier.com/cws/article/cern/47838/2>)). By contrast, J J Gómez Cadenas has been gifted with a rare combination of talents: he is a good writer and a professional particle physicist (*CERN Courier* March 2013 p23 (<http://cerncourier.com/cws/article/cern/52360>)). As a result, *Materia Strana* is a powerful thriller based on an almost realistic scientific case that fits well with an engaging narration.

The possible existence of stable strange matter in the universe was put forward by Edward Witten and independently by Álvaro De Rújula and Sheldon Glashow in 1984. Some neutron stars could, indeed, be strange stars. The possibility that high-energy ion-ion collisions could create chunks of strange matter that would have a tendency to grow exponentially in size was debated when the Relativistic Heavy-Ion Collider started operating in the US. The probability of this happening has been calculated to be negligibly low but in *Materia Strana* it is assumed to be much higher – dangerously high for a high-luminosity, ion-ion LHC at CERN.

This is the main theme around which a truly international thriller develops involving Irene, the gifted young theoretician with Iranian roots and Héctor, an amazing experimental physicist from the US with multiple backgrounds as a boxer, soldier and scientist, who becomes involved in a highly dangerous mission in Iran – as well as with Irene. There is also Friedrich, the powerful but unscrupulous head of the large experiment that is likely to bring him the Nobel prize; Helena, the hyper-efficient, fighting and bright director-general of CERN; and Boiko, a natural-born killer, who escaped to Geneva from the horrors of Chernobyl and Grozny. The deadly fight between Hector and Boiko has the intensity of the pages of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. Intermixed with dreams and ghosts crossing the border between life and death, these stories provide the texture for a decent thriller where good wins eventually over evil, although with a heavy toll.

• Roberto Battison, *University of Trento*.

Strong in the Rain

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