

French gentiles who mocked the new rule by wearing a version of the stars. Jacques Semelin wrote his book with good intentions, describing the very real rescue efforts of some French people during the Holocaust, even as other French people aided those efforts and an even larger number had time only for their own struggle to survive a bitter enemy occupation. Serge

Klarfeld, the principal memorializer of the Holocaust in France, has long accused the Vichy state and defended the French population in ways quite similar to those of Semelin. The Vichy state “disowned itself in contributing efficaciously to the loss of a quarter of the Jewish population of this country.” Klarfeld wrote twenty years ago. But the remaining three quarters “owe

their survival essentially to the sincere sympathy of most French people, and to their active solidarity as soon as they understood that Jews who fell into German hands were condemned to death.” Semelin has approached this sensitive matter with care and scholarly accuracy. But the balance he wanted to adjust remains off kilter. There is a troubling tone of satisfaction in the

subtitle—“how 75 percent of the Jews of France escaped death.” Semelin claims that the French population inflicted a “half-failure” (“*semi-échec*”) on the Nazi Final Solution. What he fails to say is that the actions of the Vichy state and its accomplices in the French population made the result worse than it would have been without them. □

Stories from Pinochet's Prisons

David Gallagher

La Vida Doble
by Arturo Fontaine,
translated from the Spanish
by Megan McDowell.
Yale University Press,
302 pp., \$25.00

Ways of Going Home
by Alejandro Zambra,
translated from the Spanish
by Megan McDowell.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
139 pp., \$23.00

On September 11, 2013, Chileans commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the military coup in Chile. Memories of it helped the center-left opposition led by former president Michelle Bachelet, who returned to power in elections this past December. For young people, the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet is remembered not for its economic reforms but for its abuses of human rights. More than 2,000 political adversaries were killed, of which 1,107 simply disappeared; some 38,000 were tortured, and many more were exiled.¹ Michelle Bachelet was herself tortured and exiled, and her father, an air force general who worked with the deposed president Salvador Allende, died in prison after torture.

The center-right, which is somewhat in disarray, fielded as its presidential candidate a woman, Evelyn Matthei, who is also the daughter of an air force general, but one who was a member of the ruling junta. So the election was charged with deep symbolic significance in a country that has become significantly more polarized in recent months, as a reaction to four years of center-right government.

The Pinochet period will have disturbing reverberations in Chile for a long time to come. It should, and to ensure that it does, there is now a deeply moving Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago. But there is probably nowhere more appropriate to reflect on the complex moral issues posed by a repressive regime than in fiction, in which the effects of

¹The figures were constructed over time in various documents, particularly the reports of the Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación of 1991 (National Commission of Truth and Reconciliation, at www.ddhh.gov.cl/ddhh_reting.htm) and the Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura of 2003 (National Commission of Political Imprisonment and Torture, at www.indh.cl/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Valech-1.pdf).

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Augusto Pinochet and his wife, Lucia, being paraded around a stadium in a carriage, Talca, Chile, 1988

Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

dictatorship on individual lives can be explored. *Ways of Going Home*, by Alejandro Zambra, and *La Vida Doble*, by Arturo Fontaine, both ably translated by Megan McDowell, are masterly examples of such novels.

Zambra writes in a minor key. He is interested in peripheral characters, modest people on the edge of history. Dictatorship permeates his novel, but with subtlety, because his principal characters are not directly involved in politics; they only realize gradually that people close to them are. Fontaine by contrast confronts the issues of dictatorship head on. He is a founder and life board member of the Museum of Memory, and he has long been a severe critic of the Pinochet regime's human rights abuses although, as an independent, he is not a member of a left-wing party.

(I should say, by way of disclosure, that I know him well. I am on the board of the Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP), a think tank of which Fontaine was for thirty years the director. He kept it fiercely independent—a feat in a polarized country—and for that reason it became the most prestigious institution of its kind in Chile. Unfortunately some of the CEP's more conservative donors seem to have become intolerant of Fontaine's freedom of spirit, and, in what became a cause célèbre in Chile, they summarily dismissed him in May.)

La Vida Doble gives one a good idea of why these donors might finally have wanted to be rid of Fontaine for being altogether too independent and too doggedly determined to unravel

unpleasant truths. It is a harrowing examination of political violence during the Pinochet period. It goes into the lives of the far-left militants, and into the murky world of the secret services, the notorious DINA and CNI, or “Central” as the novel calls them, that sought to destroy such militants with torture and murder.² But it is much more than a novel of denunciation. It is a complex, open-minded investigation into the mentality of those involved on both sides. In particular, it goes deeply into the labyrinthine dynamics of torture, as seen by a female terrorist who is tortured, changes sides, and becomes a torturer herself.

This heroine, or antiheroine, is called Irene, or Lorena. Upper-middle-class and educated by nuns, to whom she is meekly obedient, Lorena is a passive girl—“soft clay,” as she describes herself. And despite her devotion to the Virgin Mary, she waits, as she grows up, “for the man to arrive who would be able to give me shape.... I wanted my Pymalion to appear.”

Lorena, whose early malleability is a clue to her future mutations, has a succession of Pymalion figures. First Rodrigo, who gets her pregnant, only to leave her. Then Rafa, a fellow student who introduces her to left-wing poli-

²The Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA) was officially created in 1973 and disbanded in 1977. It was replaced in 1977 by the Central Nacional de Informaciones (CNI), disbanded in February 1990, just seventeen days before the inauguration of democratically elected President Patricio Aylwin.

tics. Under his influence she pulls down the posters of Mick Jagger and Led Zeppelin in her bedroom and replaces them with images of Karl Marx and Che Guevara. She joins a clandestine, far-left, militant group called Red Ax, in which she is introduced to the Marxist canon. Her life, she reflects, has become “a script in the Great Theater of the World, a work in which I, as a character, was looking for my authors among the bearded saints looking back at us from the book covers.” She becomes involved with a Red Ax leader called the Spartan—“without him, you can't understand what we were”—and with Canelo, with whom she makes love, sticking “to him and his fight like ivy to the wall.”

Lorena takes part in dangerous Red Ax missions, and in one of them, a raid on an exchange office in Santiago, she gets arrested. In the dungeons of Central, she is subjected to brutal torture, but she refuses to confess and is released. She goes back to her previous life—looking after her daughter Anita and teaching French. But then she is arrested again, and subjected to more torture. This time they know about Anita's existence, and the prospect of her child being hurt breaks her, and she agrees to become a double agent.

She starts participating herself in the torture at Central as an interrogator. Questioning her blindfolded former comrades in a mock Cuban accent, she gets to be known as La Cubanita. She acquires two new Pymalions, a senior officer called Flaco Artaza and, later, Macha, a ruthless killer of insurgents.

From Fontaine's statements we gather that Lorena is actually a composite of some real women whom he interviewed, and who like her were tortured by the Chilean secret services and ended up working for them.³ But she is also very much his creation. Fontaine has conceived her as a clever student of French culture, and that allows him to have her articulately reexamine her experiences. She does so in a five-hour interview she gives “the novelist” while dying of cancer in Stockholm, the city that gave its name to the syndrome she suffered from when, with sometimes indecent eagerness, she collaborated with her former tormentors.

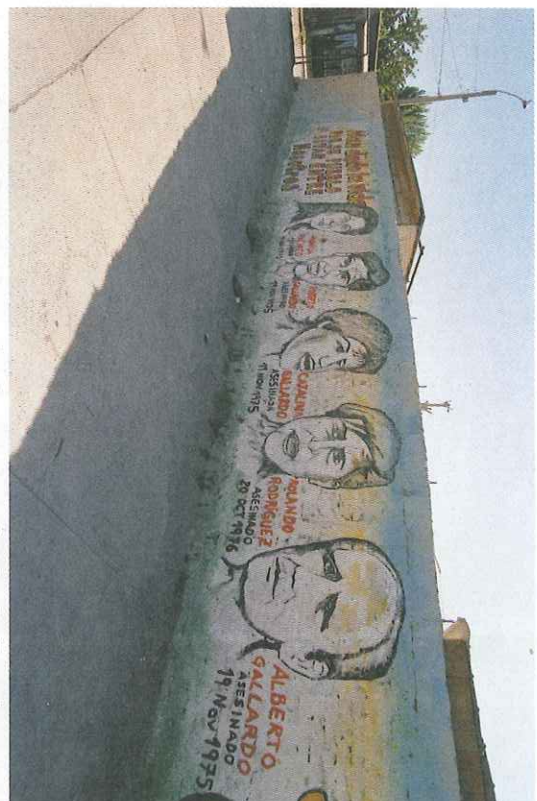
Lorena describes this collaboration blow by blow. She is chosen to work

³Two of them wrote books: Luz Arce, *El infierno* (Santiago: Planeta, 1993), and Marcia Alejandra Merino Vega, *Mi verdad* (Santiago: ATGSA, 1993).

says sarcastically. Maybe they did not want to win and conquer at all? Maybe they wanted just the moral superiority of the vanquished? Isn't that what they have achieved? While the likes of Gato, Flaco, and Macha are now disgraced?

Fontaine's novel poses uneasy questions aimed at challenging the reader's moral judgments. His way of creating suspense in describing the actions of the Red Ax is itself morally challenging. For why do we worry about the outcome of Central's raids on Red Ax safe houses? That Fontaine seems to be turning suspense itself into a metaphor of our moral confusion is itself disturbing, contradictory, and horrible; his book rigorously avoids becoming a moral adventure tale. In Lorena, Fontaine has created a forbidding, in many ways repellent, character, although readers will discover that she does in the end perform a redemptive act.

The excellent, very short novel *Ways of Going Home*, by Alejandro Zambra, is less intense than Fontaine's, but it is subtle and skillfully wrought.



A mural in Santiago depicting a family assassinated under the Pinochet regime

Claudia, three years his senior, taking the lead. She asks him to spy on a man called Raul, who she says is her uncle, and he does so assiduously, anxious as he is to please her. He has no idea that the "uncle" is in fact her father, and that he is hiding from Pinochet's police. More than twenty years later, we find the narrator writing a novel, which he discusses with a former wife, Emme. The novel is about his childhood in Maipú, and about Claudia, whom he may or may not have invented.

So we have Chinese boxes here, with layers of fiction in each. The novel that Zambra—or the narrator—is writing has walk-on parts for some "real" Chilean writers who are friends of Zambra's, and includes elements of his own autobiography, including the days when he attended the National Institute, an elite public school; and within Zambra's novel, we are told of his reunion with Claudia years later; also about his parents, whom Emme knows well. There is no clear dividing line between the different layers of narrative: Emme and the parents and the narrator recur in all of them.

The narrator tells us that in literature classes at the National Institute, they always had to discuss characters after reading a novel—especially secondary characters: "The less relevant the characters, the more likely we would be asked about them, so we memorized names resignedly, though with the pleasure of guaranteed points." So on reading *Madame Bovary*, "it was important to know that the errand boy with a limp was named Hipólito and the maid was Felicité, and that the name of Emma's daughter was Berta Bovary."

The narrator—or Zambra himself—may seem to be suggesting that this classroom experience was the origin of

his clear preference for minor characters. But this preference is also due, I think, to a self-deprecating aesthetic of Zambra's. Whereas Fontaine's Lorena saw herself as a protagonist in the great theater of the world, Zambra seems more at home with modest, simple people, like the narrator's father, obsessed with fixing his broken-down Peugeot. The narrator himself gets a job counting the cars that go down a street at night. When he goes to a clinic thinking he has swine flu, the doctor points out that they both have the same family name, and that they come from Careno in Italy. The narrator retorts that his branch descends from a bastard. He is doggedly unambitious, not to say depressive.

I practiced a calm and dignified life: I spent the afternoons reading

On hearing Emme's story, the narrator has a revelation: that his entire generation (Zambra was born two years after Pinochet's coup) could only be minor characters, because the real action had always involved their parents:

The novel belongs to our parents. I thought then, I think now. That's what we grew up believing, that the novel belonged to our parents.... While the adults killed or were killed, we drew pictures in a corner. While the country was falling to pieces, we were learning to talk, to walk, to fold napkins in the shape of boats, of airplanes. While the novel was happening, we played hide-and-seek, we played at disappearing.

novels or watching TV for hours, smoking tobacco or marijuana, drinking beer or cheap wine, listening to music or listening to nothing—because I sometimes sat in silence for long stretches, as if waiting for something, or someone.

There is another angle to Zambra's interest in secondary characters, one that is both epistemological and political. The characters in his novel seem secondary because most of the time they are seen as children trying to read the hermetic world of adults. And that world is full of political overtones: the children do not understand—the book takes place during the last years of Pinochet, just before the plebiscite of 1988 that threw the dictator out of office.⁴ When Emme is seven or eight, playing hide-and-seek in the yard, it is getting late and the adults keep calling the children in. But suddenly their calls stop. So now the children are worried:

When she went inside, Emme saw that her father's friends were crying and that her mother, rooted to her seat, was staring off into space. They were listening to the news on the radio. A voice was talking about a raid. It talked about the dead, about more dead.

Emme remembers: "We kids understood, all of a sudden, that we weren't so important. That there were unfathomable and serious things that we couldn't know or understand."

⁴On page 96, there is a misprint in which the date is given as 1998.

This revelation, the narrator tells us, gives him the idea for his "novel," which goes on to describe a reunion with Claudia, some twenty years after she had asked him to spy on her "uncle." It is there that Claudia tells him that this uncle was in fact her father. He was living in disguise with his brother's identity so as to carry out clandestine activities. Claudia was not allowed to acknowledge him as her father and she was rarely allowed to see him.

Here we see that Zambra has hit on

an idea that serves as a metaphor of the fortuitous birth of political consciousness in a repressive regime: that of children slowly waking up, slowly opening their eyes to the murky political reality their parents live in. That is what happens to Claudia. And as her eyes open, as a result of asking more and more questions of her family, she starts wanting to be at least a secondary character in their story, a subplot in their epic novel—she knows she cannot aspire to anything more. And as she tells her story to the narrator, so many years after their childhood friendship, and twenty years after Chile's return to democracy, he himself is able to open his eyes to the real meaning of his past. How blind he has been! He had spied so diligently on Claudia's uncle, yet he had not been capable of deciphering what was actually happening to him.

Of course in Chile it was not only the children who were blind. Fontaine's Gato imagines that bourgeois Chileans do not even know he exists, yet he argues that they owe their prosperity to him. Gato is of course being self-serving. How could anyone not know? Maybe some didn't, but many just did not want to know.

That is why it is important that there should be a Museum of Memory in Santiago and that there should be novels like Fontaine's and Zambra's, which open our eyes, even if not, necessarily, to see clearly—on the contrary, they make the reader understand that the past was complex, that it cannot be reduced to stereotypes, that it is not even fully knowable. Maybe it is in that very complexity that there is scope for reconciliation, although there has not been much room for it in Chile during the past election year. □

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Howard Gardner and Katie Davis
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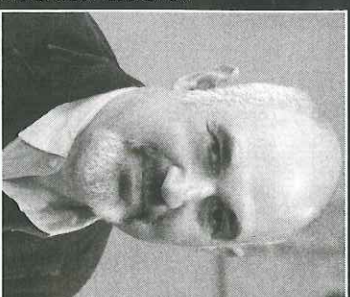
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