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SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

'My Documents,' by Alejandro Zambra

By NATASHA WIMMER MARCH 27, 2015

"My Documents" is the Chilean writer Alejandro Zambra's first collection of short stories and at the same time his longest book to date — at 240-odd pages, it's a veritable tome next to "Bonsai" (2008, 86 pages), "The Private Lives of Trees" (2010, 98 pages) and "Ways of Going Home" (2013, 160 pages). These slight, intimate novels created a stir when they appeared in English, attracting readers who appreciated their meshing of Barthesian inquiry with the muffled malaise of daily life in post-Pinochet Chile. Their chronicles of diffident romances or precarious domestic arrangements set the stage for intensely affecting examinations of the mechanics of fiction.

The title of his new collection carries on the metafictional game. The stories gathered in "My Documents" might be pulled straight from Zambra's computer files; despite their polish, they are pleasingly miscellaneous, unmediated. Computers themselves play key roles in several of the stories. No laptops here — these are unwieldy desktops, paid for on installment plans; in one scene, a character lugs a monitor, C.P.U. and keyboard on a long bus ride. The cumbersomeness and impending obsolescence of the machines sets the tone for the book, with its sad-funny stories of the lost and the out-of-sync.

As the most talked-about writer to come out of Chile since Bolaño, Zambra is often compared to the author of "The Savage Detectives" and "2666." It's easy to come up with a list of genuine correspondences — among them the quixotic pursuit of literature as subject matter, a loving regard for minor characters and the dreamlike overlap of characters and plots from book to book — but they are very different writers. Zambra's terrain is more circumscribed, geographically and temperamentally. Bolaño is a seeker of extremes, while the minimalist Zambra holes up in the apartments of Chile's middle class.

Perhaps the most significant resemblance between the two writers is the hardest to spot: the concerted effort of both to avoid easy rhetorical and narrative effects. Both resist the urge to let stories (and, in Bolaño's case, sentences) follow

a predictable path. Sometimes Zambra's strategy is to create the illusion that he is speaking directly to the reader, to construct Möbius-strip splicings of reality and fiction. Other times, it is to play up a deliberate lack of action or direction. This is plain in the apparently guileless biographical trajectory of the first (and title) story of this collection, which narrates the life of a boy born in Chile in the mid-1970s through his unremarkable childhood and young adulthood.

This protagonist shares traits with some of the protagonists of other stories in the collection, and with the protagonists of Zambra's novels. His family lives in the undistinguished Santiago suburb of Maipú, he loves poetry (Simon and Garfunkel's line "I have my books / and my poetry to protect me" was "what I lived, . . . what I thought, seriously, solemnly"), he aspires to political consciousness but feels estranged from Chile's ugly recent past. More intangibly, he is possessed of a certain mildness, an empathic interest in those around him, a kindness tempered by detachment.

Because Zambra's protagonists share so many qualities and circumstances — even plot points repeat, in slightly altered form: a lost cat, a conversation about a book, a girlfriend who leaves — it's easy to presume a kind of familiarity with them, to feel that they are old friends. This extends to Zambra's broader literary universe, whose cohesiveness and interconnectedness is one of the distinctive qualities of the writer's work. But in some of the stories here, Zambra's characters reveal a new side to us, a side in which mild self-regard curdles into narcissism and detachment becomes cruelty.

In "Memories of a Personal Computer," Max, a 23-year-old university assistant, acquires a girlfriend, Claudia, and the two proceed to enjoy low-key pleasures centered on Max's new computer: solitaire, sex, poetry writing, photo cataloging. Only deep into the story does the reader learn that Max has a son, Sebastián, whom he sees very infrequently. "Yes, it's true, he should have come up sooner — over 2,000 words had to go by before he came into play," the narrator confesses. Even this lapse (on both Max's and the narrator's part) comes across as somehow understandable, leaving the reader unprepared when — after a predictable breakup — Max violently assaults Claudia.

Max's debasement can be read as farce, and he gets a kind of comeuppance when he takes a nine-hour bus ride to present his clunky computer to his son (who already has a better one). But the reader is compelled to ponder the ur-Zambra character we thought we knew and to wonder where the fault lines lie. In the previous story, "True or False," anger also lurks near the surface. Daniel,

another part-time father, gets a cat to please his son (and to irritate his ex-wife), but plans to casually flush its kittens down the toilet and crudely rejects a neighbor's dinner invitation.

Behind this anger is a sense of being adrift, of living in a kind of limbo. More extreme cases of aimlessness present themselves in "The Most Chilean Man in the World" and "Family Life." In the former, Rodrigo decides on a whim to surprise his girlfriend in Belgium, only to be rejected and left close to penniless wandering the streets of Brussels. This fable of haplessness hinges on a joke (deftly rendered by Megan McDowell, whose matter-of-fact translation suits Zambra well) and is much lighter than the cutting "Family Life," in which 40-year-old Martín house-sits for a distant cousin and entangles himself in lies. At the start of his stay, he admits to his college professor cousin that he doesn't like to read ("The last thing I would ever do is read a book. Sorry") and that damning admission gives way to a whole catalog of failings.

The darkness of some of these stories (especially the brutal final entry, "Artist's Rendition") gives Zambra's work new dimension, but some of the best are those in which he flirts with sentimentality, working a more characteristic vein in which he has few peers. In the lovely "Camilo," the narrator tells the story of his father's godson, a charismatic kid who takes the narrator under his wing. Camilo's father was exiled from Pinochet's Chile and lives abroad, and Camilo's own life takes a tragic turn. Years later, the narrator meets Camilo's father in Amsterdam, and they talk about soccer and the past. Their unremarkable conversation ends on an emotional note, and the narrator says: "I think that the story can't end like that. . . . But that's how it ends."

This is cliché thoroughly considered and employed with full awareness of its shallows and depths. Zambra knows how to turn the familiar inside out, but he also knows how to wrap us up in it. These generous stories satisfy our demand for narrative even as they question it. Storytelling is like love, or at least like the kind of love on display in "Thank You," in which a man and a woman deny to the world and to themselves that they're together, though from the outside "someone brash, someone who believed in these kinds of stories, . . . someone who believed in love — he would think that the two of them would be together for a very long time."

MY DOCUMENTS

By Alejandro Zambra

Translated by Megan McDowell

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Natasha Wimmer has translated many books from Spanish, including Roberto Bolaño's "2666" and "The Savage Detectives."

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