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Sixteen interview with contemporary Chilean authors: the emergence of a new narrative

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## REVIEW

**García-Corales, Guillermo. *Dieciséis entrevistas con autores chilenos contemporáneos: la emergencia de una nueva narrativa*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005. 283 pp. ISBN: 0-7734-5992-8**

García-Corales's book consists of sixteen interviews with several Chilean authors from the Generation of 1980 (also known as New Chilean Narrative, the NN, Emergent, Post-coup Generation and Generation of 1987) who have received national and international recognition: Pía Barros, Jaime Collyer, Gonzalo Contreras, Ana María del Río, Ramón Díaz Eterovic, Mauricio Electorat, Diamela Eltit, Alberto Fuguet, Pedro Lemebel, Diego Muñoz Valenzuela, Darío Oses and Hernán Rivera Letelier. Along with these twelve writers, García-Corales's book includes an interview with the president of Chile's Society of Writers, Fernando Quilodrán, and three other interviews with Chilean literature professors and critics Patricia Espinosa, Andrés Gallardo Ballacey and Eddie Morales Piña. The topics of discussion range from sociopolitical issues —such as feminism, exile, neoliberalism and the democratic transition— to literary topics —such as the neo-detective story, the new historical novel, writing from the margins, literary criticism and the contemporary Chilean cultural field in general. While differing in their treatment of this wide range of topics, all of the interviews deal with both the authors' perspectives on their own works published in the last fifteen years and the way in which those works have generated cultural debates.

In the introduction, after briefly mentioning a few recent studies on contemporary Chilean narrative, García-Corales highlights the fundamental premises of this group's writings as expressed in the interviews. Overall, the literature of the Generation of 1980 responds to the trauma of realizing that a national utopia has been betrayed. Although these authors use variegated codes and styles (including neo-avant-garde experimentation, melodrama, neo-detective story, adventure accounts, science fiction, mediatic documentary, the simulacrum of social epopee and the urban chronicle), they coincide in their political and ideological stance, which García-Corales groups under the umbrella term "the poetics of disillusionment." We notice, for example, the conflict

between memory and oblivion as well as the authors' uneasiness about Chile's extreme neoliberalism and the acritical consensus inherited from the ideology of the military dictatorship. As García-Corales points out in the introduction, although no explicit solutions are offered in these interviews, there is a collective feeling of disappointment with Chile's newest form of democracy and the choices it has made to "modernize" the country by blindly accepting the rules of globalization. As a result, one of the main figures that emerges from this prose is that of the loser, the precarious anti-hero, or the marginal character. Yet, an anti-dogmatic utopian impulse persists in the authors' prose, even though it is articulated at times from the prism of nostalgia, pessimism, and precariousness.

In the first interview, Pía Barros underscores the political correctness and frivolousness (*farándula* is a term used by many of these authors) of today's cultural debate in Chile. Together with Jaime Collyer, Gonzalo Contreras, Diego Muñoz Valenzuela, and others, Barros criticizes the youngest generation of Chilean writers since the 1990s for their tendency to ignore politics and seek only to entertain their readers. As Barros explains, in order to avoid political frictions and commitment, historical novels ignore the last fifty years and feminism has turned into *light* feminism. This lack of intellectual depth, according to her, responds to the cultural market; that is, writers cater to editors and publishing houses that prefer trivial topics and plots to highly intellectual and reflective ones. In contrast, there is a "leftist" narrative that Barros implicitly states is represented in her own writings as well as in the writings of Ramón Díaz Eterovic and Diamela Eltit (whom Barros considers to be the best female writer in Chile), which focuses on the inner searching and questioning of the characters rather than on external events.

Within these aesthetics of precariousness that dominate the 1990s, Pía Barros, Jaime Collyer, Ramón Díaz Eterovic, and others coincide in pointing out the character of the traitor (who betrays himself to avoid pain) as the predominant figure in the last years. Their generation —according to Collyer and Darío Oses— lost its innocence when Pinochet's dictatorship helped them unveil national myths: "Suddenly we realized that we were a banana republic without bananas" (Darío Oses). Along the same lines, Barros,

Collyer, Eltit and Díaz Eterovic emphasize the pervasiveness of consumerism in Chile and the ultimate acceptance of neoliberalism in the country.

In the third interview, Gonzalo Contreras denies the existence of a Chilean literature in exile and claims that during the 1970s and 80s there was virtually no Chilean narrative. In contrast, Mauricio Electoral believes that while the cultural activity continued, there was no means to disseminate it. According to Contreras, the main literary theme between 1990 and 1995 was the dictatorship, along with the sub-theme of the left's *mea culpa*. He also condemns Magical Realism as a fad that ascribed exotic, picturesque and folkloric dimensions to Latin America in order to export it to Europe and the United States and laments the fact that there is almost no literary criticism in Chile.

In her interview, Ana María del Río states that the dictatorship's censorship actually favored the use of an excellent metaphoric language during the 1980s, when writers edited each other's works in clandestine literary workshops led by leading figures such as José Donoso, Diamela Eltit, and Pía Barros. Although Ana María del Río and Darío Oses assign considerable importance to these literary workshops, Pedro Lemebel and Alberto Fuguet deny any of those influences on their own writings. While Pedro Lemebel confesses that he participated in these workshops because they offered food, drinks and the opportunity to meet handsome men, Alberto Fuguet demystifies the influence that José Donoso (who led a workshop in which he participated) might have had in his own work. Later, in Ana María del Río's opinion, the appearance of publishing houses that gave advanced payments for the manuscripts propelled a harsh competition among the writers and ultimately destroyed the guild spirit. During the democratic transition, she continues, the main topics or approaches studied by Chilean narratives were the city, the fallen/victim character, sad humor and the *bildungsroman*. Testimonials and memoirs also acquired certain preponderance. However, she shares with Barros and Ramón Díaz Eterovic the feeling that today there is a sort of ideological paralysis that has ended all utopian dreams. Among the main aesthetic traits of her generation, she underscores the tendency of writers to depict the ugliness of life (the *esperpento*), the prevalence of absence (of places, characters, and circumstances) and the rejection of the exoticism proposed by Magical Realism.

Like Diamela Eltit and other peers, Ramón Díaz Eterovic highlights the inevitable influence that the military coup and the “dilemma of the disappeared” had on his generation. He also defines the New Chilean Narrative as a marketing phenomenon created by publishers and believes that the Chilean mass media has created an image of the country that has little to do with reality. According to this author, the detective story is today’s social novel. In turn, in Mauricio Electoral’s view, the main thematic nucleus of this generation’s writing is that all the works are about Chile. He divides this group of writers into two groups: those who belong to the wealthy high class (Fuguet, Fontaine Talavera, Franz, and Contreras) and accept the new neoliberal Chile; and then the rest to the second.

Among many other things, Diamela Eltit, in her interview, explains that the literary scene in Chile is marked by the relationship between literature and the market, claiming that some authors have begun to write according to the requirements of the market. For different reasons, Alberto Fuguet and Pedro Lemebel distance themselves in many ways from the Generation of 1980: while Lemebel writes mostly chronicles, Fuguet instead identifies with the group that used to publish in “*Zona de Contacto*.” Fuguet also clarifies that, in contrast with so many Latin Americans, it is not so easy for him to hate the United States. One of the most interesting elements in Fuguet’s interview is his explanation of the role of critics in his development as a writer.

Overall, this fascinating collection of interviews is a much-needed contribution to the field of Chilean literary and cultural criticism. It unveils the ideological premises of a prolific generation of Chilean writers and opens the door, through the writers’ own interpretation of their works and those of their peers, to numerous lines of research. Undoubtedly, this book will be tremendously controversial in Chile, since the authors interviewed are not shy about criticizing their peers. To provide just an example, while Alberto Fuguet praises Jaime Collyer’s writings, the latter considers Fuguet “limited, clumsy, rudimentary. To say the least, a little untidy.”

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