Lost Havens: Review Of Earth and Sea, Confined: A Novel, and Departing at Dawn: A Novel of Argentina’s Dirty War

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I went to college and read Eliot, Marcel Proust, Trollope—assigned classics. At home my mother read James Michener, Herman Wouk, and Bel Kaufman—the best sellers of the day, almost forgotten now. But here and there our choices matched: we both read Carson McCullers and John Cheever. The popular could be literary, the literary popular. The mother seeking entertainment and the daughter hell-bent on enlightenment sometimes found what they wanted—and found each other, too—on the same pages.

But we no longer discussed books when we met. We didn’t discuss looks, either—I had capitulated; I now dressed up and combed my hair. We didn’t discuss anything at all, really, for the next decade or so, because every sentence my mother uttered, whatever its topic, mutated into the sentence that was on her mind—every noun became "men," every adjective "eligible," every verb phrase "have you met any?" For single-mindedness and firmness of purpose, Captain Ahab had nothing on her. For murderous resentment I was a match for Hamlet.

And then I got married, after all, and even bore a couple of lovely kids.

But after a decade of this conflict, my mother and I could not return to the comfortable days when George Apley was our banker and Timofey Pnin our cousin—not until the year when, along with the rest of the world, we both read a novel with cardboard characters and silly dialogue and a shrunken plot. Sharing scorn, we approached each other again.

The heroine of Erich Segal’s Love Story (1970) is Italian American. Its hero is a Yankee who hates his father. The heroine, doomed to die, fails to reconcile her mind—every noun became "men," every adjective "eligible," every verb phrase "have you met any?" For single-mindedness and firmness of purpose, Captain Ahab had nothing on her. For murderous resentment I was a match for Hamlet.

I read to live. I’d drop my computer keyboard down a ravine before I’d surrender my library card. My mother too found elevation, excitement, and relief in books. And so, when I think of her as a fellow devotee, I can peel the outer woman—the one who advised me to take off my glasses and for heaven’s sake keep my mouth shut—from the woman who grew misty remembering Elnora and Ramona. With her interest in who marries whom and her obsessive insistence that I marry, oh, anybody, she reincarnated some memorable fictional parents: Mrs. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice; the determined mama who engineers her daughter’s marriage to Dickens’s Dombey. That resentful daughter is named Edith, and Dickens is my favorite novelist; perhaps some day my own daughter—true to family tradition, she finds me irritating—will undertake to relate my character to my taste in reading. I hope, as she turns the pages, that I rise in her estimation. My mother has risen in mine: she was as persistent as Elnora Comstock, as faithful as Ramona, as worldly as Mrs. Hopkinson, as snobbish as George Apley, as sentimental as the young wife in Heartburn—that is, she was full of lively contradictions and forgivable faults. She was also, I regretfully admit, as underappreciated by some of those around her as Timofey Pnin.

“All three authors rely heavily on historical and cultural frameworks to produce texts that ask, again and again, “How do you survive when your home, your homeland, is no longer a safe haven?”

Furthermore, Elena’s parents, who could personify Argentina’s national oligarchy, show total complicity with the military rulers, represented by Rogelio Basigalupu, the abusive husband.

Dora and Solano Reyes—her parents—saw the bruises on several occasions, yet they never asked. And when she insinuated it to them a couple of times, they changed the subject: after all, how could Rogelio, que era todo un caballero, who was so respectful to everybody and pulled the seat for his wife to sit down on and helped her take off her coat upon arriving anywhere ... how could Rogelio, such an honored and patriotic citizen, do something like that?

Elena can also be read as the proverbial “madwoman in the attic” or, especially by those familiar with Luisa Valenzuela’s Other Weapons (1985), as a construction resembling Laura, the main character in the title story of that collection, who lives with her torturer.

One important difference between Dietel’s novel and works that, like Valenzuela’s, were published in the United States 25 years ago, is that the multicultural nature of US literature is reflected in the profuse use by current writers of Spanish. Characters successfully communicate in their native language, with translations following or preceding their utterances only when the author deems them necessary to clarify meaning. For example, when Elena confesses to the priest, Padre Cruz, that she has the list of those murdered by her husband, he replies, “The country is sick, mi querida. We need to purify it, christen it with God’s blood.”

Departing at Dawn, a novel translated entirely into English, starts with a quote in Spanish. Two stanzas of a folk song by the Argentine singer and staunch enemy of the dictatorship, Atahualpa Yupanqui. His zamba lyrics announce his departure at dawn and swear never to forget. Lisé’s novel, titled after Yupanqui’s song, takes us to the northern provinces of Tucumán and La Rioja, where Berta lives in internal exile, escaping from the dictatorship that has killed her lover and is chasing after her.

This debut novel has been saluted by Luisa Valenzuela as one in which the “outbreak of our worst military dictatorship is told with utmost reserve” and a “beautifully simple, poetic story of solidarity and love.” It portrays Berta’s recovered memory of her traditions and her family’s past, which helps her to survive. She has to learn, however, to open herself as well to the unfamiliar culture of the isolated areas of a country that takes pride in its cosmopolitan city culture. Berta finds a sense of home and protection when she connects to people and places that have been marginalized for centuries. One of these places is Olpa, where she settles with the pretext of helping an ailing uncle run his family business.

Olpa retained its original Indian name. Being so small, inhospitable, and distant from any possible ambition, it apparently had not deserved to be redefined, or even to have been officially founded in the first place. That act would have required more than the Church; it needed the presence of holy water and the cross on a sword, which might have rescued Olpa from its pagan state of original sin.

Partaking in the daily life of the people helps Berta deal with her personal tragedy. She accepts her fate when, journeying deep into a country that bears permanent marks of its past, she finally understands her own place in its history.

Her aunt was frying onions, rice, and potatoes, filling the rooms with the smell of oil and vegetables, the familiar smell of home. It was a smell that said keeping life, does not stand still and the world is still moving on, because evidently the sun was still making its way through the shutters over the windows, windows that had witnessed the last Indian attack, the May Revolution, the end of slavery, the rough caudillos of La Rioja, and the birth of a nation.
back-cover plot summary and the end notes fail to
protagonist was "never involved in [Juan] Atilio's
when in fact they were the largest guerrilla
past personal attempts to oppose the rule of terror.
The Invisible Mountain
organization resisting the dictatorship. In contrast,
aware of the complex political scenario
at the time of the coup, explains,

Perón had died and all that was left were his
speeches full of clichés repeated over and
over and out of context. Nevertheless, this
guaranteed that he would continue to exert
his own particular influence on the present
reality; that of the Montoneros, the guerrillas
who had dedicated "their lives to Perón" and
were now in hiding.

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these discrepancies are not surprising,
considering how difficult it has been for us
Latin American writers settled in the US to
keep pace with the changing climates in our home
countries, where people are increasingly listening
to the victims, judging their victimizers,
compensating survivors, and openly discussing the
past and its horrific consequences. Agosín’s
memoir includes a deep reflection on our continued
quest for new meanings, renewed readings of
history, and reassessment of our role as chroniclers:

Exile means existing and not existing, living
between worlds, dreaming of the South and
living in the North, being dislocated, always
speaking with an accent and missing being
recognized in your mother tongue, the first
one, the happy one, the original one.

Agosín says that Of Earth and Sea "arranges
history according to a poetic intelligence dominated
by the essence of moments, fragments, traces, by
the avatars of history." Her approach evokes
Eduardo Galeano’s Memory of Fire trilogy (1985 –
1988), and her tone is reminiscent of Claribel
Alegria’s novel Luisa in Realityland (1987). Like
Galeano, Agosín seeks to cast light on historical
moments by focusing on individuals, whose actions
then become metaphors for the larger reality. In a
witticism subtitled "The Funeral of Pablo Neruda,
September 1973," she writes,

Yesterday they held a wake for Pablo Neruda
in his home in Santiago. The military guarded
the house they had sacked days earlier. Matilde is
calm. That is what they say, and
she remains firm in the face of the military’s
courses to not allow anyone to enter. Little by
little, the house fills with poets, musicians,
and fortune-tellers.

Of Earth and Sea is divided into three parts; in the
first, The Early Years of Childhood: 1960s, the
familiar shapes, smells, events, and people of her
country are presented from a child’s perspective,
echoing that of the child Luisa, in Alegria’s book:

I like to write. Papa gave me a notebook
without lines, I think I will be a poet. They
talk here about a very strange woman named
Gabriela Mistral [the Chilean poet and
Nobelist]. They say she has no husband, no
children, and they say she does not have a
desk, that she writes on her knees while
staring at the sky. That is what I want to do,
write on my knees that are always trembling.

The second section of Of Earth and Sea revisits
The Times of Darkness, and the book ends with a
poetic reflection on the experience of exile and a
declaration of love to Chile. The writer is at peace
with her life after more than three decades away
from her land; she has figured out her relationship
with it and feels comforted when she returns. In
different places are the protagonists of Dietl
and Lisé’s novels: Berta and Elena are still living in
the seventies, at the beginning of their ordeal,
derately searching for a safe haven.

Alicia Pattony’s The Little School: Tales of Disappear-
ance and Survival (1986) about her experience as a dis-
appeared, was in print for twenty years in the US and
England before its publication in her native Argentina
in 2006 as La Escuelita: Relatos testimoniales. Her po-
etry collection Revenge of the Apple (1992) has just re-
turned as Venganza de la manzana to her birthplace,
Bahía Blanca, eighteen years after its publication in the
United States. Her most recent work is a translation of
Gail Wronska’s poetry collection So Quick Bright
Things (2010). She teaches at Loyola Marymount Uni-
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