Digital Commons
@ LMU and LLS

Digital Commons@
Loyola Marymount University
and Loyola Law School

Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Works

Modern Languages and Literatures

2-1-2011

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

Alicia Partnoy
Loyola Marymount University, apartnoy@lmu.edu

Repository Citation

Partnoy, Alicia, "Lost Havens: Review Of Earth and Sea, Confined: A Novel, and Departing at Dawn: A Novel of Argentina's Dirty War" (2011). *Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Works*. 23.
http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/modernlang_fac/23

Recommended Citation

Partnoy, Alicia. "Lost Havens." The Women's Review of Books, vol. 28, no. 1, 2011, pp. 22–24.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

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 father and son. "A Jewish girl would have managed things better," summed up my parent.

She was still in her sixties, this woman who had relished Marquand and Nabokov with me, who had managed the ironies of Cheever and ambiguities of McCullers without my learned assistance. But she was beginning to fail—she'd had an early stroke—and for a few years after *Love Story* she read mainly magazines. Then she entered a nursing home, and in its twilight comfort she returned to books.

She enjoyed Nora Ephron's *Heartburn* (1983), a moderately funny *roman à clef* in which the marriage of two spoiled Jews is souring because of the husband's adultery and the wife's wisecracking. He believes in self-gratification. She believes in faithful love and chicken soup, but her runaway tongue makes her less than loveable. An Italian girl might have managed things better—but I didn't say that. "There's a lot of sex," my mother impishly told me; old age had broadened her outlook. Indeed there is a lot of sex in *Heartburn*, but description is limited to passages like this: "And then we went to bed. We stayed there for about three weeks."

(In *Lolita*, on a Sunday morning, the bewitched Humbert Humbert holds his stepchild on his lap, both fully clothed, and surreptitiously masturbates against her seemingly unwitting twelve-year-old body. For three breathtaking pages, the surf breaks against the land, the world falls away, the reader loses track of time and place and responsibility, until at last Humbert "crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known." This thrillingly mimetic passage—I didn't mention that either.)

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 devotée, 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.

Edith Pearlman is the author of three story collections: ***Vaquita*** (1996), ***Love Among The Greats*** (2002), and ***How To Fall*** (2005). A fourth, **Binocular Vision**, is forthcoming in 2011.

Lost Havens

Of Earth and Sea: A Chilean Memoir

By Marjorie Agosín, translated by Roberta Gordenstein

Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009, 163 pp., $16.95, paperback

Confined: A Novel

By Mariana Dietl

Litchfield, CT: Litchfield Review Press, 2009, 280 pp., $20.00, paperback

Departing at Dawn: A Novel of Argentina's Dirty War

By Gloria Lisé, translated by Alice Weldon

New York: Feminist Press, 2009, 176 pp., $14.95, paperback

Reviewed by Alicia Partnoy

Three long decades have passed since genocidal military regimes generated waves of exiles from Argentina and Chile. Among the first shipwrecked were the writers Luisa Valenzuela, Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, Isabel Allende, and Marjorie Agosín, who have achieved international recognition. Their copious literary production bears the marks of their ordeals. Today, personal accounts by survivors—including those who never left their land—are gradually attaining validation in both South American countries: a myriad of writings (works of fiction, *testimonios*, investigative journalism, memoirs, poetry) daily hit their bookstores and alternative distribution circles. *Of Earth and Sea,*

Confined, and *Departing at Dawn* are rich samples of this current cultural outpouring, often centered on the experience of women condemned to oblivion by dictatorships.

In contrast with *Of Earth and Sea*, Agosín's ninth memoir, which revisits with soothing artistry the author's journey as an expatriate, Mariana Dietl's and Gloria Lisé's novels shift our focus to the nightmare of internal exile. 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?"

For both Agosín and Lisé, memory is the catalyst that moves them to write. In Lisé's preface to *Departing at Dawn*, she explains that one day, 25 years after the Argentinean military coup of March 1976, "this novel burst forth, surging up from my deepest being, where it had been stored in memories." Agosín starts her book, subtitled *A Chilean Memoir*, with the following words:

> I try to speak now of memory, to dialogue with it and assure myself of the precision or imprecision of certain dates, and nevertheless, I realize that even as I muse about memory, there is a tremendous component of pain and forgetfulness.

Indeed, the pain of being banished from memory is what makes of Dietl's *Confined* a disturbing reading. Elena, the protagonist has been forgotten by all and condemned to the most destructive of solitudes. For her, a prisoner in her own home, there is no hope. She can find neither solidarity nor the refuge of a caring hand—unlike Berta, the protagonist of *Departing at Dawn*. Elena's redemptive act, to gather the names of those killed or disappeared by her husband, hoping to report his actions, ultimately isolates and destroys her. Dietl's writing so skillfully transports readers into the world of the tortured protagonist, that readers—especially if they have been abused or victimized by a military regime—may wish to view Elena as a symbol of her country, Argentina. Seeing her as a conquered land, isolated and reduced to the most extreme abjection by the people who claim to protect her, provides enough distance to enable us to read this work without risking the reawakening of our own traumas.

This exercise is sustainable because the author, who worked in her native Argentina as a journalist, has peppered the text with multiple historical references, newspaper articles, and excerpts from *Nunca más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared* (1986). Moreover, the connections between the protagonist and the events that shaped her country are striking:

> Even though Elena had been surrounded by military men and their paraphernalia since she could remember—her great-great uncle had fought in Roca's *Campaña del desierto* during the mid 1800s to seize Patagonia from the Indians; her grandfather had been a lead organizer of the coup against *El Peludo* Yrigoyen in 1930; and her father always said that if he had not had to take over his farms at an early age ... he would have become a soldier— ... she had never felt entirely at ease among the ranks of polished brass buttons, engraved spades and collector's Mausers that Jorge Luis Borges referred to so much in his tales.

"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 Basigalupo, 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 Dietl'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."

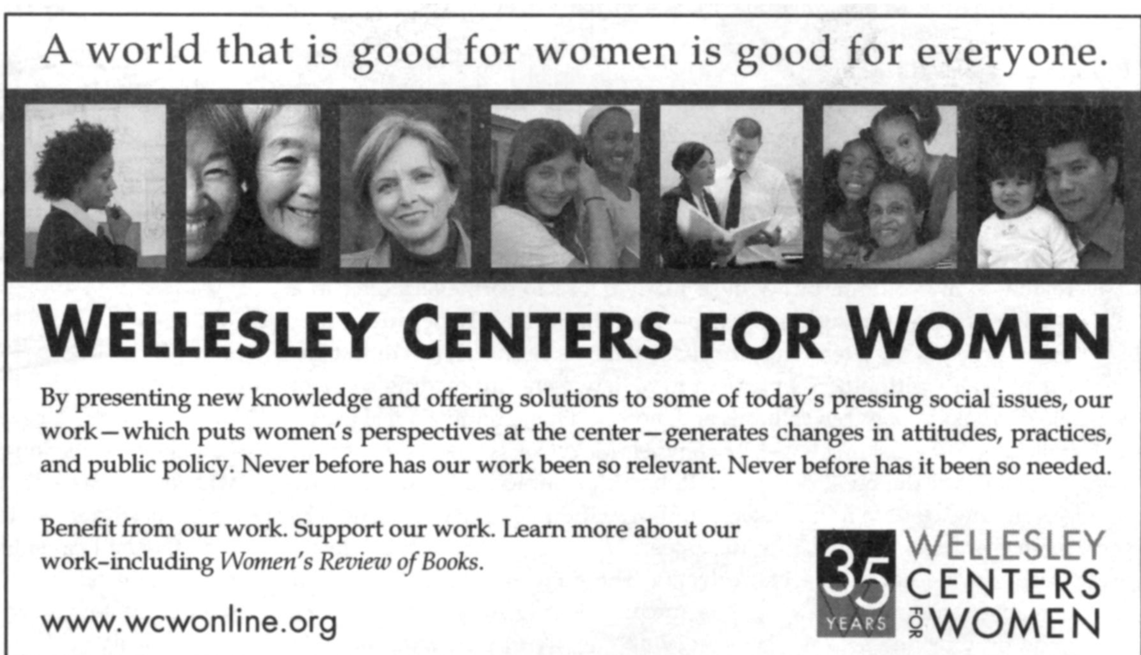
Departing at Dawn, a novel translated entirely into English, starts with a quote in Spanish: two stanzas of a folk song by the Argentine singer and staunch enemy of the dictatorship, Atahualpa Yupanqui. His *zamba* lyrics announce his departure at dawn and swear never to forget. Lisé's novel, titled 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 rededicated, 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 keep moving, 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.



Alice Weldon's translation is engaging. She has successfully overcome the two challenges that she mentions in her afterward: "to convey the pervasive atmosphere of terror produced by the 'dirty war' in the lives of ordinary people," and "to deal with the many popular culture references."

However, in the packaging of the novel to make it more appealing and accessible to American readers I find a third, unmet challenge. Both the back-cover plot summary and the end notes fail to accurately explain current approaches to Argentina's political history. For example, the plot summary makes a point of saying that the protagonist was "never involved in [Juan] Atilio's union efforts"— as if her proclaimed innocence will awaken more sympathy in the reader. This wouldn't work in Argentina, where it is well-known that even those who were not involved in the resistance movement tend to exaggerate any past personal attempts to oppose the rule of terror. In addition, the endnotes provide wrong information about the origin and supposed disappearance of the *Montoneros*, describing them as a group of "terrorists adept at kidnapping," when in fact they were the largest guerrilla organization resisting the dictatorship. In contrast, the narrator, 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 guerillas who had dedicated "their lives to Perón" and were now in hiding.

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 Alegría'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 vignette 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 orders 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 Alegría'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 very 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, desperately searching for a safe haven.

Alicia Partnoy's ***The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*** (1986) about her experience as a *disappeared*, 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 poetry collection ***Revenge of the Apple*** (1992) has just returned 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 Wronsky's poetry collection *So Quick Bright Things* (2010). She teaches at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

GOOD READS

The Novel of Political Turbulence

By Trish Crapo

The Invisible Mountain
Carolina De Robertis
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009, 364 pp., $24.95, hardcover

Beneath the Lion's Gaze
Maaza Mengiste
New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010, 305 pp., $24.96, hardcover

It is one of the joys of this job that, on a regular basis, books arrive at my doorstep. I delight in browsing through them, choosing which few to review in my column. But with so many books to sort, every once in a while one slips through my grasp—sometimes simply because other books grabbed my attention before it, sometimes because it just didn't jibe thematically with others I planned to review. I end up reading some of these "lost" books in between columns and, now and then, finding a real gem.

Carolina De Robertis' first novel, *The Invisible Mountain*, is one of these gems. Long after I'd put the book down, De Robertis's characters lived on in my mind. Even now, close to a year later, I find myself thinking about the novel's three main characters: Parajita, who disappears as a baby and is "reborn" thirty meters above the earth in a ceibo tree at the edge of her tiny town of Tacuarembó, Uruguay; her daughter Eva, forced to leave school at a young age, who ends up working as a waitress, serving a circle of well-known, male bohemian poets, longing to write poetry herself; and Eva's daughter Salomé, who, in the 1960s, joins the Tupamaro guerrilla movement.

Each woman's story is a novel of its own, grounded in the politics of Uruguay and Argentina over the course of sixty years. As the stories build, the larger political and social happenings are layered with many intimate family stories, creating a dense narrative (and I mean dense in the best possible sense, as in chocolate cake).