



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *El libro de recuerdos* by Ana María Shua

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A number of these narratives, which range from two and a half to eighteen pages in length, call attention to the fact that they are exercises. The titular story begins with an attempt to clarify the differences between *novela* and *cuento*. The former, it is claimed, need not offer a conclusion whereas the latter must do so. Nonetheless, “Valga como ejercicio...un cuento sin final, sin consumación alguna: que el final lo decida el lector (o que lo invente)” (16). By way of illustration, the speaker resorts to one of the most basic forms of narration and recounts a fairy tale which is a game of mirrors and has no ending. Despite the prefatory declaration that the ordering of the stories is arbitrary and they can be read in any sequence, this first one sets the tone for the entire collection. “La llave” follows a similar pattern. The narrator states a premise—there are circumstances in which we doubt the certainty of all that surrounds us and it occurs to us that everything may be a mental fabrication—and then describes the tale that could be told to confirm the initial proposition, how it would begin, and what style would be most suitable (sentences would be short and descriptions laconic).

Most of the stories foreground their status as fiction. The frequent use of the conditional underscores their hypothetical nature, and subsequent shifts to the future tense convert hypotheses into announcements of what will be done. “El parapeto,” for example, begins with the affirmation that there is a man who one day decided to erect a barricade around himself. “Para hablar de este hombre podría iniciarse el relato con algo meramente anecdótico...El objeto de este ejercicio sería demostrar que...Se demostrará con el presente texto que...El relato se dilatará a propósito porque el tema requiere un tratamiento confuso o laberíntico...” (41–42). The labyrinthine treatment called for is specified in a complex, page-long sentence that explains how the story will set out in one direction and will then change course, how there will be expository passages that will contain detailed information, how there will be a long section about the man’s past, how the countries where he lived will be described, and how nothing will be said about the present in “estas notas” (43) nor will it be divulged whether the character is happy. The decision as to whether he has chosen the appropriate course of action will be left to the author’s discretion. Readers are, in effect, given notes which sketch the starting point of a story and the process whereby it can be developed.

“Nadie” demonstrates how the use of the first person permits the reader to coexist with and enter into a relation of intimacy with the fictional character, and “El verbo” exemplifies the effect created by verbless texts, which prevent us from knowing whether things have already happened or will happen in the future. A third tale, “El diccionario,” makes the argument that the words we use shape us and our view of the world; we are not what we eat but what we speak. Del Río’s professional experience as a translator clearly has given her a special sensitivity to the possibilities and limitations of language.

The act and art of narration, the indeterminacy of texts, the role of the reader, the relationship between reality and fiction, problems of communication, and the nature of time are recurrent concerns in *La duda*, finalist in the competition for the I Premio Nuevos Narradores, sponsored by Tusquets Editores and the Escuela de Letras in Madrid. Del Río is currently at work on another collection of stories and a novel. It will be interesting to see whether they continue the experimental vein of her first book.

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Shua, Ana María. *El libro de recuerdos.* Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1994. 203 pp.

Ana María Shua declared, in a 1994 interview with Beth Pollack, that if her books have anything in common, it would be a particular sense of humor, of irony. That special brand of Shua humor, expressed in the colloquial, intimate *porteño* Spanish she wields so well, invites the reader into the fictional world created in *El libro de los recuerdos* just as it captivated readers in her earlier novels, such as *Los amores de Laurita* (1984) or *El marido argentino promedio* (1994), or her short story collections *Viajando se conoce gente* (1988) or *Los días de pesca* (1981).

Like *Los amores de Laurita*, *El libro de los recuerdos* is a novel created of chapters which could stand alone as short stories. In *El libro de los recuerdos*, the stories are those of several generations of an Argentine family. We meet the grandfather, who escaped from Poland because “quería hacer la América, pero no esta América, sino la otra, la de verdad, la del Norte” (9). Unable to get documents to emigrate to the United States, he ends up in Argentina, “que también es América, pero no tanto” (11). We meet his wife and their five children and, as the novel

progresses, their spouses and children, as we are regaled with tales of childhood soccer games, impetuous love affairs, disastrous business ventures, family feuds, economic and political problems.

The novel is an intimate story, leading the readers to feel that they are meeting the characters and hearing their stories. The narration of the chapters is frequently interrupted by short conversations, in the form of questions and answers, set off in italics. The resulting impression is of stories being told, probably by a member of the second generation to one of the third, and interrupted by the questions of that younger family member. Referring to generations of the family as "la clase de 98" y "la clase de 27," echoing Spain's literary generations, highlights both their roles as storytellers and Shua's metafictional tendencies in weaving the tapestry of her novel.

The stories told in the novel have as their source the "Libro de Recuerdos," the family scrapbook with photos, documents and assorted tales. The Libro de Recuerdos is the authoritative family text, yet it is often an unreliable one; there are blank pages and pages that have been torn out. When a story or detail is missing from the Libro de Recuerdos, "será que no es algo para recordar....Porque hay cosas que no se

deben contar, que no se pueden pensar" (71). In a much lighter vein than Toni Morrison's *Be-loved*, Shua's novel offers the idea of narrating something that "is not a story to pass on."

Shua's novel is one that self-consciously plays with the genres of fiction, history, testimony and journalism, questioning the "truths" that each of these genres purports to present.

The chapter "La Epoca del Miedo" contains an intercalated story (in italics) about "los señalados," people whose disappearance seemed completely random. The main text goes on to state that although the "señalados" do bear some resemblance to the *desaparecidos*, "las desapariciones verdaderas no eran tan arbitrarias" (117). The intercalated text serves as a barely-masked commentary on the politics of the *proceso* while the family saga tendered by the text serves as a humorous vision, or version, of twentieth-century Argentine history. In the end, *El libro de los recuerdos* is a novel about how to tell a story, about what can and cannot be narrated, and about how the stories we tell serve to construct personal, family and national identity. It is a novel that can be analyzed in terms of narrative strategies or simply enjoyed as a "good read."

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