

## Ways of Going Home

Alejandro Zambra, trans. from the Spanish by Megan McDowell.  
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In this wonderful novel-within-a-novel, Zambra, born in Chile in 1975, contemplates the delayed unease of having grown up during Pinochet's dictatorship: "While the adults killed or were killed, we drew pictures in the corner." The book begins with the March 3, 1985, earthquake and is told from the perspective of a nine-year-old boy who, that night, meets Claudia, a girl three years his senior for whom he will spy on his solitary neighbor (who turns out to be Claudia's father, living incognito). Zambra deftly portrays the anxiety and bravery particular to children who both understand and don't understand the brutal contexts of their lives. In the second section, an adult writer struggles with the aftermath of a breakup while simultaneously struggling to write the novel that will help him reconcile with his family's sympathy toward the Pinochet regime. The first section, it turns out, is the writer's novel, and the boy, conceivably, a variation of his younger self. This two-way mirror effect allows the reader to contemplate the bewilderment of coming-of-age in a terrifying time as well as the guilt and confusion, and attempt to make sense out of impossible choices that may well continue for a lifetime. In the process, Zambra raises thoughtful questions about expectations for and the limitations of the redemptive possibilities of art. Unfortunately, the conclusion feels like a shortcut, less satisfying than the observations of either the boy or the man creating him. Overall, though, this compelling book brings the experiences of a generation to the page with haunting emotion and beautiful prose in a fine translation by McDowell, her second time working with Zambra (after *The Private Lives of Trees*). (Jan.)

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