

Seed Projects: The Fiction of Alejandro Zambra

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When it was published in Spanish in 2006, Alejandro Zambra's novel *Bonsai* filled just ninety-four generously spaced pages, and its recent English translation by Carolina De Robertis stretches only to eighty-three. Still, each of these volumes should be considered a marvel of book design and production since in interviews the author has let slip that his original text ran only to forty sheets. Rather than shrink in its conversion to bound covers, as most manuscripts do, Zambra's text has swelled--and its effect on the world of Chilean literature has been entirely disproportionate to its size. As the venerable Santiago newspaper *El Mercurio* commented in April 2008, "The publication of *Bonsai*...marked a kind of bloodletting in Chilean literature. It was said (or argued) that it represented the end of an era, or the beginning of another, in the nation's letters."



OMAR FAUNDEZ
Alejandro Zambra

Reading the book a continent away, I would never have predicted such a fuss, though *Bonsai* is a delightful work. A love story that's both wry and melancholy, the novel opens in 1980s Santiago, at a study session turned party, where textbooks give way to vodka and two university students fall casually into bed. "Julio didn't like that Emilia asked so many questions in class," Zambra writes, "and Emilia disliked the fact that Julio passed his classes while hardly setting foot on campus, but that night they both discovered the emotional affinities that any couple is capable of discovering with only a little effort."

Such knowing, cynical observations save the love story of these twentysomethings from sentimentality, and Zambra keeps the zingers coming as he traces the development of Julio and Emilia's "conceited intimacy," which allows them to feel not only loved but also "better, purer than others." The relationship withers by page 35, at which point the novel--this little book has been insistently presented as a full-fledged novel in Spain and Latin America--turns poignant. The brief romance, brimming with heartfelt confessions and adolescent posturing, emerges as the one great love of Julio's dispirited life.

Julio and Emilia's story "is really a story of illusions," the novel observes, and what makes it dazzling is Zambra's nuance. *Bonsai* doesn't just mock its characters' fantasies and deceptions; it also shows how such chimera are necessary to their happiness, and their undoing. Julio and Emilia are literature majors--that is to say, lovers of well-wrought lies--and one of the novel's most amusing scenes occurs

when they decide to read *In Search of Lost Time* as foreplay. At the budding of their relationship, Julio had spurred the romance by claiming to have read all seven volumes of Proust's masterpiece when he was only 17. Emilia had sweetly reciprocated the lie. So when the lovebirds actually open *Swann's Way*,

They both had to pretend that their mutual read was, strictly speaking, a reread they had yearned for, so that when they arrived at one of the numerous passages that seemed particularly memorable they changed their tone of voice or gazed at each other to elicit emotion, simulating the greatest intimacy.

It's a charade that neither Julio nor Emilia can sustain for long: 372 pages into the epic, the couple abandons Proust, and each other. Lies speed love, *Bonsai* seems to say, and corrode it.

Before *Bonsai*, Zambra published two volumes of poetry, and he's said that *Bonsai* began as a third collection of verse that developed into a novel. This history may explain the novel's minimalist style and formal cleverness. (Zambra uses synecdoche and symbol to marvelous effect.) What's most unusual about the book, however, is its insistence on breaking the reader's suspension of disbelief. Like a modern Henry Fielding, Zambra makes no effort to disguise his literary devices; rather, he highlights them at every turn. Here, for example, are the novel's oft-quoted opening lines:

In the end she dies and he remains alone, although in truth he was alone some years before her death, Emilia's death. Let's say that she is called or was called Emilia and that he is called, was called, and continues to be called Julio. In the end Emilia dies and Julio does not die. The rest is literature.

Elsewhere Zambra warns that other walk-ons "don't matter, they're secondary characters." He toys with possible character names and indicates when a woman will "disappear forever from this story." His writer-narrator even confesses his difficulties with plotting: "I want to end Julio's story, but Julio's story doesn't end, that's the problem."

If *Bonsai* were a building, it'd look rather like the Centre Georges Pompidou, all its mechanicals exposed and painted bright primary colors rather than hidden behind the walls. Zambra wants not only to explore conflict and emotion but also to revel in the medium that allows him to express these things. As one Chilean critic noted, "Zambra seeks, from the beginning and through diverse means, always to maintain a certain distance between the reader and the narrative, a distance that stresses, precisely, that we are dealing with a literary text and not an imitation or transposition of reality." Such an approach is common enough among poets, but it's rare among contemporary Latin American novelists, and several prominent Chileans loathed his work.

Chief among Zambra's detractors was *Mercurio* critic Jose Promis, who declared that though *Bonsai* and Zambra's second novel, *La vida privada de los arboles* (The Private Life of Trees), have been sold as novels by Editorial Anagrama, they have no place in the category. On the contrary, Promis wrote, "they step forward...stripped of all the scaffolding that transforms a story into a novel, or at least of how us laymen understand it: as an 'absurd comedy' where 'we're going to pretend like there was a world that was more or less like this.'" This definition of the novel is so narrow as to be laughable--where do futuristic works like *Neuromancer* or grave meditations like *Gilead* fit within such rigid criteria? Promis's final admonition is equally dogmatic: "Renovators who stay in the [metafictional] form risk being devoured by authentic literature."

Such sermonizing about what constitutes "authentic" novels generally strikes me as specious. From *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* to *Molloy* and *The Lover*, the world of fiction has always contained many realms, and *Bonsai* is in no more danger of being "devoured" than Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Actually, to judge by public honors, Zambra has done remarkably well. In April 2007, *Bonsai* won a prestigious Chilean prize for the best novel of the year, and that same

month Zambra was chosen for the "Bogota 39," a juried selection of the thirty-nine most important Latin American writers younger than 39. By then, *Bonsai* was already being translated into French, Italian and Greek. And the controversy about whether the book was really a novel and whether it deserved such lavish recognition? It only plumped the book's sales.

Readers who consider Roberto Bolano the pole star of contemporary Chilean fiction will be jolted by Zambra's little book. For though Zambra has been stamped as the Next Great Chilean Writer in many circles, he's in no way Bolano's heir. (But then, who is?) Where the heroes of Bolano's novels are resolutely proletarian, Zambra's characters are mostly downwardly mobile bourgeoisie. (At one point, *Bonsai* even refers to working-class beachgoers as *lumpen*, or riffraff.) Where Bolano wrought romantic detective stories showcasing the virtues of courage and integrity, Zambra's protagonists lead mundane lives rife with small deceptions. It's no surprise that Zambra says he reads Bolano very little. He doesn't care much for Bolano's literary hero Julio Cortazar, either.

In these tastes, Zambra is indeed the herald of a new wave of Chilean fiction. As the noted critic Javier Edwards of *El Mercurio* has observed, "in the antipodes of long-winded writing, like the negation of a Roberto Bolano," the minimalist novel has carved out a place in the national letters. Like Beckett reacting to Joyce, the young writers of Chile, who were born in the 1970s during the military dictatorship and who cut their teeth on the satirical newspaper *The Clinic* during the newly recovered democracy, have turned from Bolano to the bonsai.

Zambra himself fashions a tale from this trend. Near the end of *Bonsai*, Julio meets the antithesis of the young Chilean author, an old novelist named Gazmuri (a clear riff on the real Chilean historian Cristian Gazmuri, whose most famous work is the two-volume series *The History of Private Life in Chile*). Zambra's old writer has published a series of novels "about recent Chilean history," and he needs someone to type up his latest opus, which of course he's written by hand. Sitting in a cafe in the once-posh neighborhood of Providencia, Gazmuri asks Julio, "Do you write novels, those novels with short chapters, forty pages long, that are in fashion?"

"No," Julio responds. "Would you recommend that I write novels?"

Rejected by Gazmuri, Julio attempts to become him by writing and then transcribing the novel he imagines Gazmuri had in mind. But when Gazmuri's book comes out, we see the gulf between Julio's attempt and Gazmuri's own, and Julio turns to a project of "true art": cultivating, from seed, a real bonsai. The Gazmuri novel is thus portrayed as both impossible and unworthy.

The Private Life of Trees also revolves around a struggling writer. Julian is putting the final touches on a novel about a bonsai and is plagued by doubts about its merit. Maybe, he thinks, it would have been better to make a simple record of the conversations he overheard from the bar downstairs? Maybe he should have written a book about the life of an 8-year-old boy during 1984, when Pinochet's dictatorship was still in full force? *Private Life* even presents some of the memories Julian would have used in writing this second, more Gazmuri-like book. In the end, however, Julian decides, "It isn't that he wishes to write that story. It's not a project. Rather, he wants to have written it years ago and to be able to read it now."

There's something lazy about this solution to Julian's dilemma. Indeed, although *The Private Life of Trees* has moments of real sparkle, compared with *Bonsai* the novel feels tossed off. Its digressive structure is wobbly where it should be tight, and its exploration of mature relationships is marred by evasion and sentimentality. Even the novel's metafictional observations feel stale. ("When [Julian's wife] returns the novel ends. But while she doesn't return the novel continues.")

The problem isn't minimalism or metafiction per se; it's Zambra's reluctance to apply to Julian's

tender spots the same pressure he brings to bear on those of Julio and Emilia. In interviews, Zambra, who was born in 1975, often mentions that what unites his generation of writers is that they are all children of the Pinochet dictatorship; yet the dictatorship figures little in the settings of his books. That period, when handled at all, is always treated obliquely. If anything, his two novels can be read as accounts of well-off people who lived through the dictatorship and were hardly bothered by it at all. Of course, there were many, many such people in Chile, and it would be a pleasure to see Zambra tackle this material with the dry, nuanced eye he showed in *Bonsai*.

Instead he turns to feeble analogy. At its crux, *The Private Life of Trees* turns on a parallel between the vanishing of Julian's wife, Veronica, who goes to art class one evening during the democratic era and never returns, and the murder of political dissidents who were disappeared while the country was under military rule. "I'm the son of a family that has no dead," Julian says to himself during the minutely detailed night he spends waiting for Veronica's return. Other friends, he remembers, had families "where death appeared with pressing insistence"; what he has is Veronica's unexplained absence. Yet between these two kinds of loss lies a world of difference that Zambra never musters the courage to explore.

About Marcela Valdes

Marcela Valdes is a contributing editor at *Publishers Weekly*. She is at work on a book about Chile. Her last piece for *The Nation* was "Alone Among the Ghosts." [more...](#)

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