



the complete review

The Private Lives of Trees is, like Zambra's [Bonsai](#), a miniature of sorts. A bonsai tree actually figures in this novel, too: the protagonist Julián, a thirty-year-old professor of literature is also a writer, and for a time he was very preoccupied with a rather sorry little bonsai -- to the extent that:

instead of being content with the stories that destiny put at his disposal, Julián remained fixated on his bonsai.

Zambra does better -- and more -- with the stories at his disposal -- even if he never forgets about the bonsai either.

In the time when *The Private Lives of Trees* is set, Julián has more to deal with and focus on. He is a step-father now, and as the story opens is putting his barely eight-year-old stepdaughter, Daniela to bed with a bedtime story (an ongoing one, featuring trees). His wife, Daniela's mother, Verónica, isn't home yet, and it's an absence that grows increasingly noticeable, as Julián tries not to think too much about what might be delaying her, but can't help himself.

The story is centered around her absence and her anticipated return, too, the omniscient narrator/author letting it be known that:

When she returns, the novel will end. But as long as she is not back, the book will continue. The book continues until she returns, or until Julián is sure she won't return.

This is no simple case of a woman staying out late: it is her absence and the uncertainty surrounding it that allow for this fiction. Until there is certainty -- she has returned, or she definitely won't return -- Julián (and the novel) can continue in this Schrödinger-cat-like limbo.

The novel is unevenly divided into two parts, 'Greenhouse' and 'Winter', the former many times longer than the latter. 'Greenhouse' is set in the long night during which Julián waits (though he is not primarily or at least just waiting). Daniela must be entertained, at the beginning and later on (she wakes during the night), but Zambra also introduces much else here, going over how Julián met and conquered Verónica, for example, as well as both his and her previous relationships. Zambra has an easy, pleasant style and way about him, in how he lets these stories unfold and how he weaves them together.

Eventually, Julián reflects not just on the past but spins out his thoughts of the present situation and projects them on the future, imagining Daniela in later stages of her life, at twenty, twenty-five, thirty Among other things he imagines her eventually reading his novel.

Zambra captures this looking-ahead particularly nicely: He wants to catch sight of a future that can exist without the present; he accommodates the facts willfully, with love, in a way that protects the future from the present

The Private Lives of Trees is small novel, in the best sense(s). Most of what is described is simple, mundane, everyday, and there are few dramatic events. Yet despite this, and despite being less than a hundred pages long, it is a surprisingly full-bodied and resonant work.

Zambra's stories are of the everyday, and he captures the ambiguity and uncertainty of our day-to-day lives particularly well, employing a very agreeable, almost understated style and approach. *The Private Lives of Trees* offer no pat resolutions and answers, but it's still surprisingly satisfying, with lives and certain crossroads very well conveyed.

- M.A.Orthofer, 21 April 2010