

Ways of Going Home by Alejandro Zambra: review

'Ways of Going Home' by Alejandro Zambra is a brief, elegant novel of life and writing after Pinochet



Alejandro Zambra, whose latest novel is 'Ways of Going Home' Photo: Alexandra Edwards

By Adam O'Riordan

7:00AM GMT 24 Jan 2013

Chilean novelist Alejandro Zambra came to the attention of many English-speaking readers via his debut *The Private Life of Trees*, a book which saw him selected for *Granta's* 2010 list of the Best of Young Spanish-Language Novelists.

Zambra's latest novel, *Ways of Going Home*, opens in the Chile of General Pinochet and explores the tension between the demands of an authoritarian state and the beliefs and behaviours of the individual; territory readers might recognise from Roberto Bolaño's novella *By Night in Chile*.

The first part of the book tells the story of a nine-year-old boy living in a middle-class suburb of Santiago. On the night of an earthquake the boy, who remains unnamed, meets a mysterious older girl named Claudia: "she had been following me for days, spying on me". Claudia in turn convinces him to spy on her uncle Raul, a Christian Democrat and "the only person in the neighbourhood who lived alone".

The story is picked up again in later life when the narrator of the opening section, now struggling to

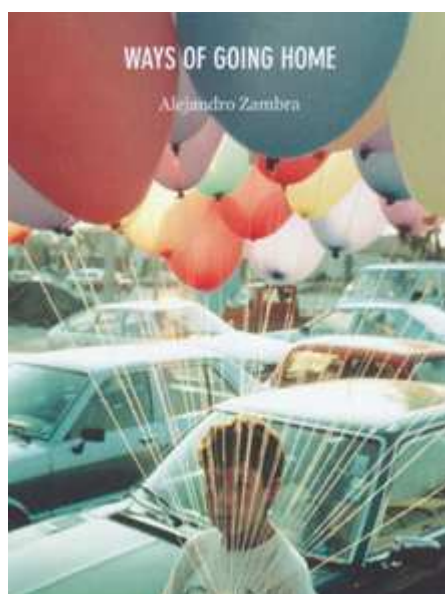
come to terms with both the violence and the silences of his childhood, meets Claudia again and the two become lovers.

The weighty but simple narrative is augmented by a second thread – a reflective account of the manner in which a novelist harvests and modifies material from the raw experience of life: “Sometimes when we write we wash everything clean, as if by doing so we could advance towards something. We ought simply to describe those sounds, those stains on memory.”

The novel has an air of insomniac attentiveness: a sharpened observation of daily routine, an accumulation of detail and interleaving of banality and profundity.

Megan McDowell’s limpid and unfussy translation serves the book well. Zambra cannot simply be pigeonholed as a “Spanish-Language” writer. His concerns and influences are broader, and in the meditative, discursive timbre of the writing readers may recognise an affinity with other voices such as Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole.

What the narrator calls “stains on memory”, and by extension the strain memory places on the individual, fascinate Zambra and he elegantly explores them in this brief but notable novel.



Ways of Going Home

Alejandro Zambra (trans Megan McDowell)

Granta, £12.99, 160pp

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