

Ways of Going Home by Alejandro Zambra – review

Alejandro Zambra's third novel examines life in Chile under General Pinochet



Mina Holland

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'At the spearhead of a new Chilean fiction': Alejandro Zambra. Photograph: Ulf Andersen/Getty Images

Internationally acclaimed Chilean writing about the Pinochet regime has been relatively elusive, with the obvious exception of Isabel Allende. Could this reflect Chile's reticent national temperament? Hungover from a violent past, Chileans have remained a quieter breed than the stereotypical Latin American and conversations about the former dictator continued to be conducted largely in the private sphere for years after his 1990 departure. Novels about this phase in Chile's history have been similarly unforthcoming. Until, that is, the new generation of Chilean writers, to which Alejandro Zambra belongs.

Ways of Going Home
by Alejandro Zambra

Ways of Going Home, Zambra's third novel, is both a literary and meta-literary foray into Chile's troubled past by a writer who lived during the Pinochet regime but who doesn't consider himself one of its primary victims. "The novel belongs to our



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parents," he says, understanding that his childhood experience of terrorism was vicarious, diluted by his infancy. His generation are "war correspondents, tourists" or – and here the metafiction kicks in – "secondary characters" in this retold narrative about life in the Maipú province of Greater Santiago in the 1980s.

"Ways of going home" refers literally to an anecdote with which the book begins, when a little boy gets lost but finds an alternative way home from that taken by his parents. More symbolically, the title touches on different ways of remembering, understanding and coming to terms with disorienting history. While for the narrator's parents' generation this is silence – they are, like their homes at the time, "impregnable bastion[s]" – he and his peers pick storytelling as an outlet for the past.

Zambra splits his novel between our narrator and a fictional narrator of the former's creation; he tries to grapple with the past via fiction ("I'm waiting for a voice that isn't mine – novelistic and solid"). He ultimately gives up on this fictional framing of real-life events, because it's a story he's already telling: "Although

we might want to tell other people's stories we always end up telling our own." Dealing with the Pinochet aftermath is thus at the behest of the writer's creative anguish about his calling to write.

For both narrators, writing defines them and it is approached as a heroic act. The former hankers for his lover (Eme) to read his manuscript and to validate his work, while his fictional creation retells the 1980s as a kind of catharsis. However, he in turn does so via another, Claudia, the fictional love interest. Claudia's father was a spy during the Pinochet years and, as a child, she tasks the fictional narrator to keep an eye on him. As an adult, she tries to understand her family's past, a journey she and the narrator embark upon together. Less a plagiarist than an uninspired creative, he then takes her story as a framework for his novel, which results in their eventual parting. She says: "I know my story is important to you, but your own story is more important."

Zambra raises questions about the perceived benefits of committing real life stories to paper, an act that mirrors growing up: "We used to know more, because we were full of conviction, dogma, rules... And now we understand everything. We understand especially failure." *Ways of Going Home* almost draws a line beneath the narrator's childhood, and the shackles of a turbulent history, freeing him to tackle ideas rooted in the present tense. Complex yet sophisticated, the novel places Zambra at the spearhead of a new Chilean fiction and sets him alongside other Latin American writers such as Colombia's Juan Gabriel Vásquez, who weave some of the continent's most difficult historical themes into an exciting modern art form.

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