

# My Documents by Alejandro Zambra review – compulsive short stories

Memory comes to the fore in an excellent collection from a rising Chilean star

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It is ironic that a collection of short stories should be the Chilean author Alejandro Zambra's longest book to date: his three previous novellas range from just 80 pages to the relatively epic 140 of 2011's *Ways of Going Home*. But if, in *My Documents* (translated by Megan McDowell), Zambra has traded genres, he has remained resolutely consistent in theme. In this excellent collection, as in all his work, memory is put under a microscope, and the division between author and characters is never certain.

"My first class was in March of 2000," writes the narrator of "Long Distance", "a few days after Pinochet came back to Chile like he owned the place (I'm sorry for these reference points, but they're the ones that come to mind)." Zambra's stories are always – or always allege to be – acts of remembrance, and the care he takes to let his readers know that suggests something distinctive about his method. In the title story, a memoir of growing up in the Pinochet era in the middle-class Santiago suburb of Maipú, the closing sentences take us out of recollected event and directly into the author's decision-making process:

*"I cut and paste, change and enlarge the font, play with line spacing. I think about closing this file and leaving it forever in the My Documents folder. But I'm going to publish it, I want to, even though it's not finished, even though it's impossible to finish it."*

In the hugely entertaining "I Smoked Very Well", a diary-like piece about a struggle to quit cigarettes that becomes a nicotine-themed literary tour, the author claims he is only writing the fragmentary story we are reading because of writer's block: "I am a person who no longer creates anything. Who just writes down what happens as if it would interest someone to know that I'm sleepy, that I'm drunk, that I hate [Chilean TV presenter] Rafa Araneda with all my soul."

And at the conclusion to "Camilo", which movingly describes the friendship that developed between the narrator and his father's godson, we encounter the following: "When we say goodbye, he hugs me and starts to cry. I think that the story can't end like that, with Camilo Sr crying for his dead son, his son who was practically a stranger to him. But that's how it ends."

The story "can't end like that" because it is a cliché? "But that's how it ends" because it really happened that way? In all these instances, Zambra is acknowledging and stress-testing the line between fiction and personal history, memory and story; and it isn't only his narrators who are in on it. In "Memories of a Personal Computer", the narrator's girlfriend, Claudia, "threw herself passionately into digitalising extensive family albums. She would sit in front of the computer doing this for hours, and although the sessions seemed fairly tedious, she enjoyed them because she wasn't just documenting the past, she was altering it: she distorted the faces of her more obnoxious relatives, she erased secondary characters and added in other, unlikely guests."

In "Camilo", Zambra refers to "this suspiciously stable place that is the present", and as this description of Claudia's photo editing implies, the present moment will also be altered when it has become the past: we all make removals and additions, consciously, or simply through forgetfulness. And it is possible to edit the present too, most obviously by dishonesty (a recurring trait of the Zambran male): in "Family Life", one of the best stories in the book, the narrator creates a fake personal history in the process of seducing a neighbour. In the metafictional world of Zambra's writing, the ragged division between memory and invention is the torn nail that is always being picked: how real is the past, and how does it shape who we are?

Zambra's self-referencing and concentration on a small number of themes could be precious, but his project feels not complacent but compulsive, and therefore dramatic. His fellow Chilean Roberto Bolaño told an interviewer that he thought of his own books "as a whole. Not just in stylistic terms, but in terms of plot as well: there is a continual dialogue among the characters and they keep appearing and disappearing", and something very similar is happening in Zambra's work. Locations, objects and incidents recur throughout his novellas and stories: an elite Santiago secondary school; a BBC English course; an optical illusion whereby a bridge begins to move and the water beneath it freezes (this experience, first described in the novella *The Private Lives of Trees*, is experienced again, by different characters, in "Camilo").

Far from barrel scraping, these repetitions make Zambra's books, his fluent and engaging writing, increasingly rich and thought-provoking. They form a network where knowledge of one influences the experience of reading another. So if you are going to read Zambra, which you should, don't just read *My Documents*: read everything he's done.

To order *My Documents* for £9.99 (RRP £12.99) go to [bookshop.theguardian.com](http://bookshop.theguardian.com) or call 0330 333 6846.

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