

Refugees' memories revealed in simple, powerful stories

AND A BODY TO REMEMBER WITH

By CARMEN RODRIGUEZ
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Reviewed by CAROLINE HARVEY

Vancouver is a place of sheltering mountains and mild winters, glittering high rises and leisurely coffee. It's a place full of people who own cars and VCRs. A place where even if you plaster the city with posters of Brian Mulroney hanging from a tree, you can go to bed without fear of a late-night visit from Men with Clubs.

This freedom should not be taken lightly. Just ask Carmen Rodriguez. For, after reading *And a Body to Remember With*, you will also realize that Vancouver is a place of refuge.

Rodriguez's collection of short stories about Chilean exiles explores how hard it can be to re-root oneself. The immediate beauty and comfort of this city helps them escape, but not erase, the terrors of brutal regimes. More people than you think understand what it is to really fear the government.

Rodriguez was born and raised in Chile, and because of her political and social activism during Augusto Pinochet's regime, she and her family almost didn't make it out alive. She came to Vancouver 14 years ago, and as her writing attests, she has never been able to forget the family and childhood friends, the streets and the landscape that she risked her life for, and was forced to leave behind.

No one gets through life without a scar, and everyone must come to accept that the shadows won't just disappear, that it is the nature of memories (no matter what their ilk) to rise and flood. She documents the ways.

Rodriguez explores how exiles are plagued with visions of murder, betrayal, and torture; how they are taunted by the warmth of letters, recipes and laughter. The exact profiles of each person and



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memory may change, but the problem remains fixed: "Forgetting is not an option."

Most of the stories are very short (under five pages) and close with jarring images and grief-struck epiphanies. This reflects the cutting losses and horrors that haunt the exiles, and jolts the reader into the same position.

"3-D" describes a woman's room, everything from a list of her music tapes to the contents of her underwear drawer. Then we see the body with the slit veins and the story's ending words: "My torturer is here, in Vancouver."

A glimpse into the room where a musician helps a tortured prisoner heal is provided with "the mirror." The writing here, as elsewhere, is a blend of stark and sensuous images, as rent skin is bathed and the two women exchange commitments and pasts. And, as in others, this story makes the often banal talk of "the future" take on a striking urgency.

Of course, the resistance member must leave without a trace, without even saying goodbye. In

the exile's life, powerful connections are made and broken – swiftly, unnaturally. The hatred for the Pinochet regime that spills on to almost every page is not only about spilt blood, but severed bonds.

Or bonds that cannot be made. In "bodily yearnings," a Chilean woman tries to bury her loneliness. We follow her attempt to ground herself with the love of a "Canadian to the marrow." But her memories of her first Chilean love, and the secret places that they met override her efforts. She marries the Canadian – and then buys a single, one-way ticket to Chile.

As long as the reader is willing to sort through Rodriguez's occasionally oblique endings, her clipped stories work. Still, some readers may feel frustrated, as if Rodriguez beckons, and then tears you away before you can really focus. The separate stories must be connected by the reader, the experiences layered and linked. There is a lot to layer, a lot to rearrange.

The layers aren't just about military oppression

and futile longings. In "breaking the ice" three immigrant women meet at six in the morning to watch their sons' hockey practice. All three miss their home countries. Two women don't like their children growing up wild like Canadians, don't like their daughters dating boys the wrong color. They lock up their daughters, and drive away the wrong-colored men who love them.

But eventually the wrong turn becomes clear: drawing on the pain that they lived, that they've shared, the women realize the need to free their children, to stop tragedies that they *can* control. If you have trouble determining what is self-inflicted and what is state-afflicted, Rodriguez will help you sort it out.

In "a balanced diet: laughing and crying at the house in the air," she weaves together the anticipation of a reunion between childhood friends and the memories of the resistance terrors that they survived. The women haven't seen each other in 20 years, and the laughter they finally share is a powerful statement about the healing that friendship promises – if, as an exile, you can get to it.

Above all, this collection underlines the power of a simple story, of how one person's experiences can strengthen everyone's understanding. Yet, in her foreword, Rodriguez writes: "For me, living and writing in a hyphen implies translation ... [it] is important to use the hyphen of my bilingualism, my biculturalism, the hyphen of my double identity as a bridge."

This suggests that she feels a need to position herself within the literary circle of so-called race writing. But Rodriguez's stories stand on their own; labels are not necessary and seem out of place. Besides, "hyphens" define this country.♦

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Carmen Rodriguez will appear at the Vancouver International Writers (and Readers) Festival on Oct. 22 and 23.

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