

Imagining Argentina

by
Lawrence Thornton



Lawrence Thornton (1937-) earned his Ph.D. at the University of California and was a visiting professor at its Santa Barbara and Los Angeles campuses from 1984 to 1988 when he wrote his first novel, *Imagining Argentina*. Thornton, an English professor, became interested in a story he saw on the CBS television news magazine *60 Minutes* about Argentina's "dirty war." From 1976 to 1983, Argentina was ruled by a group of generals who targeted thousands of their own citizens, attempting to snuff out political opposition and free speech by kidnapping, torturing, and murdering any Argentines suspected of liberal or antigovernment views. Thornton's novel tells the story of the victims of this dirty war—known as *desaparecidos*, or "disappeared ones"—through the eyes of a fictional journalist, Martín Benn, and his friend Carlos Rueda, whose wife is among the *desaparecidos*.

Events in History at the Time the Novel Takes Place

A century of chaos. From 1930 to 1983, Argentines lived in a continual state of political instability. The army's 1930 overthrow of President Hipólito Yrigoyen set a pattern that was to be repeated incessantly throughout the following decades. Leaders replaced one another sometimes as often as every few months, and elections, if held, were as likely to be fixed as fair. In 1946, in a rare, relatively clean election, army colonel Juan Perón was elected; his stint in of-

THE LITERARY WORK

A novel set in Argentina in the late 1970s and early 1980s; published in 1987.

SYNOPSIS

After his wife suddenly disappears one day, Carlos Rueda discovers that he can use his powerful imagination to learn the truth about the Argentine government's kidnapping, torture, and murder of thousands of its own citizens.

fice would last nearly ten years. His second wife, Eva Duarte de Perón, won for him enormous popular support among the working classes; she also solidified his ties to the country's powerful trade unions. This unusually long regime came to an abrupt end, however, when Perón resigned rather than wage a civil war against the group of military officials who challenged his rule. Between Perón's resignation in 1955 and the democratic election of Raúl Alfonsín in 1983, Argentina was ruled by sixteen different governments—an average of one new government every eighteen months.

Fake war, real violence. Juan Perón spent most of those intervening years in exile, but returned in 1971 and won Argentina's 1973 presidential election. Unfortunately the aged Perón died the following year, and presidential duties were taken over by his third wife, Maria Estela "Is-



abel” Perón. During her reign, terrorist activity increased. In March 1976, she was forced out of power by a group of Argentine generals. Justifying their takeover as an attempt to rescue Argentina from impending civil war, the generals quickly dismissed the congress, replaced other elected officials and judges with military officers, and, ignoring the Argentine constitution, declared that the death penalty could be used in sentencing crimes against the state. There were two leftist rebel groups who appeared to threaten the junta’s hold on the country, the Montoneros and the ERP (People’s Revolutionary Army); both were actively working to seize control of the government. Yet the generals themselves were well aware that such a coup would be extremely unlikely—the rebel groups were too small and too weak to be a real threat. In fact, to convince the public that a military government was necessary in Argentina, the generals actually faked hundreds of terrorist acts—acts that they then said were committed by the rebels.

The real goal of these Argentine generals was much bigger than winning a war against disorganized, relatively powerless rebel groups. What they attempted to do in the years between 1976 and 1983 was create a country in which any aberrant political or social views were eliminated. Although their major targets were labor unions, liberal priests, and politically active students and intellectuals, the ultra-conservative generals could easily become suspicious of almost anyone, from the distant cousin of a labor leader to the teenage son of a nosy reporter. These suspicions alone were often enough for innocent Argentines to become *desaparecidos*.

What happened to every *desaparecido* is not known, but the cases that have come to light are shocking. One victim of the dirty war, Pablo Díaz, was sixteen when he was kidnapped for protesting a rise in student bus fares. Suspecting that he and his fellow protesters might have links to the rebel Montoneros, military authorities brought them to what they called the “truth machine,” an electric prod used for torture. “They gave it to me in the mouth, on my gums and on the genitals,” Díaz said later.

They even pulled out a toenail with a tweezers. Often we were hit with billyclubs, fists and kicked. . . . They asked all of us about the school fare, why we participated, what motivated us to ask for the reduction, who was guiding us. . . . We had to sleep on the floor. Us guys were in our underwear, because they had taken our

clothes from us. Almost all of us ended up in rags, almost nude.

(Díaz in Andersen, p. 201)

This was only the beginning of months of torture for Pablo Díaz and his classmates. When it was finally over, only three of the fifteen kidnapped students had survived.

The brutal treatment of these students for such a seemingly innocent act was not unusual in the days of Argentina’s dirty war. It was not unusual for Argentine citizens to disappear for committing such “subversive” acts as teaching modern math or setting up cooperative farms for poor peasants. As more and more people vanished, a feeling of great fear swept over the country, and most Argentines felt powerless to stop the horrors that they suspected (or knew) their government was responsible for.

A PHONY BATTLE



A common practice of the Argentine military during the dirty war was to stage phony battles between their forces and communist rebels. One former U.S. intelligence agent tells the story of “having arrived at the scene of a supposed ‘shoot-out’ between the security forces and leftist guerrillas in 1976 to find the former splashing chickens’ blood around the locale before admitting local reporters and photographers” (Andersen, p. 3).

Government news vs. real news. Journalists were equally at risk during the years of repression between 1976 and 1983. When the military seized power, it also seized control over the Argentine press, torturing or killing writers like the novel’s fictional Cecilia, who tried to report on stories independent of the official government news agencies. Such control of the press was necessary for the junta to protect the basic lie of its regime—the façade that it was fighting a war against terrorist rebels, not innocent citizens.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Despite their fears of retaliation, one group of Argentine citizens managed to protest the government’s brutality throughout the dirty war. This group, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, staged its first demonstration in front of the government headquarters (at the Plaza de Mayo) in April 1977 to demand that their “disappeared” children, friends, and relatives be returned alive. Every Thursday afternoon for the next ten years, the

Mothers returned to the Plaza de Mayo carrying pictures of their kidnapped loved ones and demanding information about their whereabouts. They also made lists of the disappeared, the most recent numbering over eight thousand. Although Argentina's military government sent a spy to investigate the Mothers and kidnapped and killed a number of them, the group stayed intact well into the 1980s, working to insure that those responsible for the disappearances were identified and punished.

Nazis in Argentina. After the defeat of Germany in World War II, a number of key Nazi figures escaped from Europe and the subsequent war crimes trials. Most settled in somewhere in South America under an assumed name. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Argentina's President Perón welcomed thousands of Nazi war criminals, issuing fake passports that protected the identities of these new immigrants. One such beneficiary was Adolf Eichmann, who headed the Jewish section of the Gestapo and thus oversaw the murder of millions of Jews in Europe's concentration camps during the war years. Perón claimed that he was most interested in the technical skills of these Nazi immigrants, which would help him build new factories and improve Argentina's military hardware. What he welcomed to Argentina, however, was more than

technological know-how. Many of the same Nazis listed by the U.S. Army as war criminals began serving in the Argentine military, leading one Nazi immigrant to comment: "There are now so many former Gestapo men in the intelligence service here that it is riskier to tell a joke about Argentine Government personages in German than in Spanish" (Hunt, p. 148).

The mingling of exiled Nazis with Argentine military and government officials in the decades following World War II may also have resulted in a fusion of harmful ideas and practices. Many Jewish Argentines—especially those who had immigrated after surviving Hitler's concentration camps—noticed the similarities between the Nazi past and the Argentine dirty war. One such Argentine explained, "I was held in Germany's concentration camps, I was persecuted during the [military regime], and my daughter was kidnapped here. The only difference was that there they cremated people and here they threw them in the river" (Andersen, p. 205).

The Novel in Focus

The plot. Carlos Rueda's life as playwright for a children's theater in Buenos Aires is suddenly interrupted one afternoon when his wife, Cecilia, disappears. A journalist, Cecilia has written one

too many editorials critical of Argentina's military government; her husband and daughter, Teresa, assume that she has been taken on the orders of government officials.

Soon after Cecilia's abduction, Carlos discovers that he has a strange new ability: after hearing the stories of other *desaparecidos* from their loved ones, he can imagine where they are, what has happened to them, and what is still in store for them—and these imaginings turn out to be true. Deciding to use this gift of extrasensory perception to combat the lies told by the government about the *desaparecidos*, Carlos begins holding sessions in his garden with the mothers he meets in the Plaza de Mayo to hear their stories and to tell how they end.

Although Carlos is able to bring comfort to a number of families with his gift, he cannot use it to find his wife; he sees passing images of her but none that tell him where she is or whether she is alive. These images lead Carlos to the pampas, or grasslands, of southern Argentina. There he finds an old Jewish couple, the Sternbergs, who survived a Nazi concentration camp and give him this advice: "If you are forced to live in a nightmare, you survive by realizing that you can reimagine it, that some day you can return to reality" (Thornton, *Imagining Argentina*, p. 79).

After his visit to the pampas, Carlos completes a play for his theater called *The Names*. This play, about the erased names of the disappeared, is performed to a packed audience that includes government officials. In retaliation for what they see as an act of subversion, the officials board up the theater, knock Carlos unconscious, and kidnap Teresa. Dizzy but enraged, Carlos follows one of the generals home from his government office with a gun, but when he sees him with his family he is not able to pull the trigger.

Left now without his wife or daughter, Carlos continues searching his imagination for traces of both. In one of his garden sessions, he describes the images of Teresa that come to him, but when his vision ends in a blinding light, he believes that she is dead—a belief that is confirmed later in the novel. Unable to tell any more stories and unable to stop reliving Teresa's death, Carlos leaves Buenos Aires. For a few weeks, he lives on a beach, uncertain of whether Cecilia is alive or whether he should go on living. By the end of his stay, though, he is able to sense her presence and returns to Buenos Aires to tell her story.

In his garden, Carlos tells of how Cecilia was taken from home and moved from place to

place, always blindfolded. He tells of how eventually she was kept in the same building as Teresa and, as part of a soldiers' game, was forced to choose her daughter's rapists. Then he tells of how she survived by writing in her head and how she memorized her words by matching each thought to a place on her cell's wall. Finally, he describes how she escaped by killing a guard. This story and the images that follow gradually lead Carlos to discover Cecilia's whereabouts; she has been hiding with a family in the pampas since her escape. It is not until Argentina's generals themselves start disappearing and the dirty war reaches its end that Cecilia returns to Buenos Aires and is reunited with her husband. There they watch the trial of the generals who brutalized their country, and there they both return to the reality that was interrupted by a true nightmare.

A WORD ABOUT LATIN AMERICAN FICTION



In an essay called "Latin America: Fiction and Reality," the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa argues that Latin Americans have a hard time differentiating between fiction and reality, and this difficulty can be traced to the days of Spanish colonization. Because novels were forbidden in the Spanish colonies of Latin America by the strict Spanish Inquisition, the natural human "appetite for lies" emerged in other parts of life. As Vargas Llosa explains, "the inquisitors achieved the exact opposite of their intentions: a world without novels, yes, but a world into which fiction had spread and contaminated practically everything: history, religion, poetry, science, art, speeches, journalism, and the daily habits of people" (Vargas Llosa, p. 5). This theory perhaps sheds some light on how a regime based on lies and terror could last so long in Argentina—and why it took so much time for the truth about the dirty war to emerge.

The uses of imagination. *Imagining Argentina* tells the story of a government that has taken control of almost everything in the country, even deciding what constitutes truth. One of the only things beyond its reach is the imagination of its citizens. For the "disappeared" characters in the novel, imagination provides an escape from the nightmare of torture, as it had for the Sternbergs during the Holocaust. For Carlos Rueda, however, imagination assumes even greater meaning.

It is both an escape from a painful reality of uncertainty as well as a window into the truth. It enables him to sense true stories that otherwise might never be heard.

Although Carlos is used to writing fictional plays for children, he discovers after his wife's disappearance that to help his community and himself, he must also start dealing in facts—the facts that have been distorted by Argentina's military government. Through his imagination, Carlos gains access not only to information about the *desaparecidos*, but to the feeling of power that comes from knowing things for certain—a rare feeling during the fearful and unpredictable era of the dirty war. In *Imagining Argentina*, Carlos shows that imagination is not just the tool of an artist, but a necessity for surviving these times. “We have to believe in the power of imagination,” Carlos says, “because it is all we have, and ours is stronger than theirs [the generals’]” (*Imagining Argentina*, p. 65). In a country ruled by terror, suspicion, and lies, imagination ends up being a powerful weapon for self-defense.

Sources. Lawrence Thornton had never been to Argentina when he began writing his first novel. He had been following the disturbing news reports about Argentina's dirty war and was especially moved by a *60 Minutes* television in-

terview with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in the early 1980s. This interview prompted him to think about the word “disappeared,” and his thoughts led to the writing of *Imagining Argentina*.

The novel borrows heavily from the real history of Argentina's dirty war. For example, Cecilia works at a real Buenos Aires newspaper, *La Opinión*, whose publisher, Jacobo Timmerman, was abducted during the dirty war. Other details from the novel are also taken straight from history: the green Ford Falcons used as getaway cars during kidnappings were a common sight in Argentina at that time. Listed below are a few of the most shocking events from the novel, events that actually happened in Argentina between 1976 and 1983:

- Fifteen high school students are abducted and tortured, most eventually killed, for protesting high bus fares.
- A government spy, disguised as the mourning brother of a *desaparecido*, infiltrates the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, planning the abduction of some key members. In the novel, the spy's plan is foiled by Carlos, who senses his dishonesty. In reality, the plan succeeded.
- In the Naval Mechanics School and in other facilities used for torture around the country, innocent victims of a suspicious government,

like Carlos's friend Silvio, endure weeks or months of electric shocks and beatings, finally being thrown out of helicopters and into the sea, where they disappear forever.

Events in History at the Time the Novel Was Written

A final injustice. Economic trouble and a failed attempt to win back control of the British-held Malvinas (Falkland) Islands finally ended the rule of the generals in 1983. Sensing their loss of any popular support—their lies had become less credible after the lost war with Britain—and their inability to solve the economic problems brought on by high military spending and financial mismanagement, the generals yielded power to civilians, scheduling a presidential election for October 1983.

A month before their planned departure, the generals passed a law protecting all military personnel from being prosecuted for acts committed during the dirty war. This attempt at protecting themselves failed, however, when newly elected president Raúl Alfonsín nullified the law soon after taking office. Two years later, after dozens of unmarked mass graves had been discovered and torture had been declared a crime equivalent to murder, the nine generals who had run the country from 1976 to 1983 were put on trial for genocide. However, despite the stirring words of their prosecutor, who claimed to be working in the name of “10,000 *desaparecidos*” (Andersen, p. 11), many of the generals received light sentences, with four acquitted and only two sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1990 the three generals still in prison and all others convicted for participating in the dirty war were pardoned by President Carlos Menem.

Reception. *Imagining Argentina* won numerous book awards and received praise from reviewers for its powerful storytelling and effective blending of the supernatural with the realistic—a style known as “magical realism,” popular among Latin American writers. It inspired a number of screenplays and a flamenco production called “Garden of Names.” Criticism of the novel focused on its unconvincing portrayal of Argentina, noting signs of Thornton’s unfamiliarity with the look and feel of Buenos Aires and the pampas. Thornton himself dismisses these criticisms, explaining that writing novels is not just about telling or re-telling stories but changing reality. “I believe,” he says, “that fiction plays an important social function, and while novelists can’t expect their works to change the world, we have to believe it’s possible” (Thornton in Trosky, p. 421).

For More Information

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