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The News from Paraguay
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You've never been to Paraguay but you spent your childhood in Peru and Uruguay and you spoke three different languages by the time you were ten years old. Can you talk about the effect South America had on you? Has living in other countries given you a perspective that perhaps staying in one place for a lifetime, which many great writers do, would not have given you?

My childhood, although not unhappy, was a solitary one. I was an only child and my parents had to move a lot — first from Germany, then France, then South America — to escape the war and persecution. This also meant that I had to change schools several times and learn different languages. The result of this, I think, is that I had to rely on my imagination for company and entertainment. It also forced me to read a lot.

I was very young when I lived in South America so my memories are quite vague and mostly associated with family events. However, I do remember the lushness and the bright colors in our garden — the color red especially stays in my head.

I feel certain that living in other countries has given me a different perspective as a writer. It has heightened my sense of dislocation and rootlessness. One of my favorite quotes is from the poet, Paul Celan, who writes: "In the air, that's where you roots are, over there, in the air." I think this feeling is reflected in my characters: most of them women, whose lives are changed by either a physical displacement or a loss of some kind. In addition, I like to write about places that people might not know a lot about as that, too, adds an element of strangeness and menace to the story.

What drew you to the subject of Paraguay in the mid-nineteenth century and the Lopez dynasty?

Originally what drew me was not the subject matter as much as the fact that I wanted to try to write a different kind of novel — a novel that was not based on personal experience — and a historical novel seemed like a good idea: (I have to add that I did not want to write a traditional historical novel, I wanted to try and make the form more contemporary.) Then I remembered how a long time ago, I had read about Ella Lynch and the dictator, Francisco Solano Lopez, and so I began to do the research. The research was fun and luckily, for me, there was not a huge amount of material on 19th century Paraguay in English so it seemed doable, at the same time that the paucity of material allowed me to use my imagination.

In your Author's Note, you quote a friend of yours who said, "Nouns always trump adjectives and in the phrase 'historical fiction,' it is important to remember which of the two words is which." Why is this quote important to you?

Ken Kesey, the writer, once said that "Art is a lie in the service of the truth." I agree. A story need not be true to be good or important, it need only point toward a recognizable or a universal truth — look at fairy tales and fables. I believe that one can achieve a more profound form of the truth through fiction. Also, for me, the beauty of a book lies in its language and in its imagination and not in its plot or its historical verisimilitude. I read not to be instructed but to be entertained, to be surprised, and, ideally, to be transported.

What were some of the constraints you felt writing a book about historical characters?

The biggest constraint to writing about these historical figures was that the two principals, Ella Lynch and Francisco Solano Lopez, were not "nice" people — they were in fact quite evil — yet I did not want to make them entirely loathsome as that would alienate the reader (and the writer!). This meant that I had to find a way that was honest to make their characters sympathetic on at least some level.

The other constraint was getting in all the facts — for the most part, little known historical facts about Paraguay and the War of the Triple Alliance — without making them appear as facts but as essential to the narrative flow.

What does *The News from Paraguay* winning the National Book Award mean to you as a writer?

It means recognition for my work and it makes me happy.