



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

Ways of Going Home

by Alejandro Zambra



Table of Contents

Ways of Going Home

About the Book	3
About the Author	3
Discussion Questions	5
Credits	6

Preface

Called "Latin America's new literary star" (*The New Yorker*), Alejandro Zambra is a popular writer in his native Chile. Born two years after the coup that brought down President Salvador Allende and installed Augusto Pinochet, Zambra writes from the perspective of a generation that was learning to read and write as their parents were becoming victims of, or accomplices to, brutal human rights violations. *Ways of Going Home* explores this theme by switching between the story of a young boy growing up in the Pinochet years and the story of the writer who is writing the boy's story. "It is structurally exquisite," writes *The New Yorker*. "In a political culture of actual disappearance, how can the writer not be acutely sensitive to questions of fictional ethics—to the whole complicated business of fictional lying, of inventing parallel worlds, of game-playing, of narrative presence and absence?" Writes Edwidge Danticat for *Granta*, "I envy Alejandro the obvious sophistication and exquisite beauty of the pages you are about to read, a work which is filled with the heartfelt vulnerability of testimony."



"While the country was falling to pieces, we were learning to talk, to walk, to fold napkins in the shape of boats."

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

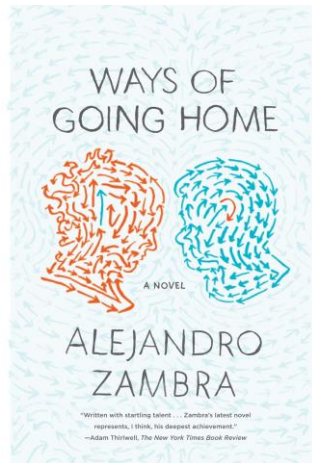
"In fiction you are closer to the truth, because everything you say is, from the start, arguable." — Alejandro Zambra in *McSweeney's*

How do you understand who you are if you can't trust your memories? How do you find meaning in your life when you feel like a secondary character in the lives of others? Alejandro Zambra's slim novel, *Ways of Going Home*, asks big questions about a generation that grew up under the brutal dictatorship of Chile's Augusto Pinochet. It was a generation of children who, shielded by their parents, played games and learned to walk and talk and live happily without knowing the reality of what was happening around them.

Zambra's 2013 novel tells two separate but connected stories in four alternating chapters. The first story unfolds with a fictional account of a nine-year-old boy who we later meet as a 20-year-old in chapter three. In the other chapters we meet the novelist who's writing the fictional story in the first and third chapters and is struggling with where to go with it. The parallel narratives raise questions about the manner in which we reap and revise memories to try and construct and communicate the stories that define who we are. "This small novel contains a surprising vastness, created by its structure of alternating chapters of fiction and reality," writes *The New York Times*. "Almost every miniature event or conversation is subject to a process of revision, until you realize that Zambra is staging not just a single story of life under political repression, but the conditions for telling any story at all."

The novel opens in the aftermath of an earthquake. A boy develops a crush on Claudia, an older girl who asks him to spy on a suspicious man named Raul who lives alone and who instills fear in the boy's guarded parents. Years later, he tries to write a novel but comes up short on material from his own, uneventful childhood. Instead, he tracks down Claudia to learn the real reason for her interest in Raul and about her traumatic history. In the second chapter, we're introduced to the restless novelist who is writing the story in chapter one about the boy and Claudia and Raul. The novelist is trying to get back together with his ex-girlfriend, Eme. He feels stifled by nostalgia and the frustration of writer's block.

As Zambra ruminates on larger issues, he also hones in on singular moments that may seem innocuous but that tap



into deep and common emotions. The boy at the beginning of the novel, for example, gets lost and separated from his parents. He's scared, but finds his way home before they do. His parents keep searching for him and are scared, too. The boy, safe at home, imagines that they are the ones who are lost. Once they are all home, his mother, full of love and still fraught with fear, asks why he went a different way; the boy doesn't answer.

Later in the novel, the character, older now, reflects on an intense conversation with classmates in which they shared stories about their families, stories about the dead and whom they left behind. He feels strangely bitter for not being able to share a similar story. Instead, he thinks about sharing Claudia's story, but has an epiphany: her story is not his story. Finding and sharing our own stories, he implies, is one way of "going home."

About the Author

Alejandro Zambra (b. 1975)

"I'm not interested in an assertive I, but rather in one that delves deep into its own uncertainty." — Alejandro Zambra in an interview with *BOMB Magazine*

Alejandro Zambra was born in Santiago, Chile, where he claims everyone has either experienced an earthquake or grown up hearing about one. Zambra's grandmother



Alejandro Zambra (photo: Beowulf Sheehan)

lost her parents in the country's deadliest earthquake in 1939, which killed 28,000 people. She'd recount how her brother saved her from the rubble and how the sensation of dirt in her mouth lasted for years. "She'd tell these stories and there'd be lots of laughter, even though inevitably...all the characters in them died," he told his friend Daniel Alarcón in an interview for *BOMB Magazine*. Zambra didn't experience his first large earthquake until 1985, which was mild by comparison but still significant to him. "Something that had been fiction all of a sudden became real."

Zamora's grandmother wrote songs and stories and so did Zamora, whose interest in literature came from lyrics, jokes, and tongue twisters rather than from reading books. He attended the National Institute, Chile's oldest and most prestigious secondary school that claims as alumni many Chilean presidents. He went on to receive degrees in literature, including a PhD from the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile.

His first published work was a collection of poems he wrote in the mid-1990s and though he has published another book of poems, several novels, a book of essays, and a book of short stories, his circle of writer friends are mostly poets. Poetry in Chile, he jokes, "occupies a place in the collective imagination because we won two Nobel prizes" (for Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda) (*Vice*).

Perhaps more influential than poetry on the imagination of Chile, and in particular Zamora, was the reality of living under a brutal dictatorship. Zamora was born two years after the coup that ended Salvador Allende's presidency and brought to power Augusto Pinochet, a man known for committing thousands of murders, forced disappearances, imprisonments, and brutal acts of torture throughout his 17-year rule. Zamora's parents' generation bore the brunt of that regime; they often shielded their children from the harsh truths, protecting their innocence. "I think that many happy memories later become bitter through the mediation of other memories," he told English PEN. "The child who used to go to the National Stadium and eat ice cream and watch football matches later learns of the horrible things that happened there and only then do his happy memories darken." The grave error of the early 1990s (his teenage years), continued Zamora, was the country believing that Pinochet had lost his power. "We had no idea what a democracy looked like; we had been born in a dictatorship and for that reason we accepted the limited freedom—that pastiche of freedom—as if it were some wonderful prize. Democracy only really began to return when Pinochet was arrested in London in 1998."

Zamora lives in Chile and teaches literature at Diego Portales University in Santiago. Several of his books have been translated into English, including the award-winning novel *Bonsai* (Melville House, 2008), which was made into a film of the same name; the novel *The Private Lives of Trees* (Open Letter, 2010); the short story collection *My Documents* (McSweeney's, 2015); and *Multiple Choice* (Penguin, 2016). *Ways of Going Home* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014) was awarded the Altazor Award, selected by the National Book Council as the best Chilean novel published in 2012. All of Zamora's works of fiction have autobiographical elements, though he is not particularly interested in confirming them.

"I need to think that nobody will read what I'm writing in order to be able to write. Each time I think someone will read it, I become paralyzed," he told Alarcón, adding that he frequently records himself reading his entire books aloud, to hear how they sound. "Lucky your books are short, man," joked Alarcón. "Maybe that's why," answered Zamora.

About the Translator

Megan McDowell is a Spanish language literary translator living in Chile. Her many translated books include Alejandro Zamora's *The Private Lives of Trees* (Open Letter, 2010), *Ways of Going Home* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), *My Documents* (McSweeney's, 2015), and *Multiple Choice* (Penguin, 2016). Her translations have also been featured in *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, *The Paris Review*, *McSweeney's*, *Vice*, *Words Without Borders*, and *Mandorla*, among other publications. Her translation of Zamora's *Ways of Going Home* won the 2013 English PEN Award for Writing in Translation. Read English PEN's interview with Megan about translating *Ways of Going Home*:

<https://www.englishpen.org/translation/genuine-intimate-provocative-a-word-from-the-translator-with-megan-macdowell/>.



Megan McDowell (courtesy of Megan McDowell)

Discussion Questions

NOTE: To differentiate the key male voices associated with *Ways of Going Home*, we use “the author” to refer to Zambra; “the narrator” to refer to the character who’s writing the novel and speaks to us in the second and fourth chapters; and “the young man” to refer to the boy-turned-young-adult in chapters one and three who is the subject of the narrator’s novel.

1. The first chapter of *Ways of Going Home* is called “Secondary Characters.” What does it mean to be a secondary character? Who are the secondary characters of this book? How do they each cope with this role?
2. Why do you think the author decided to structure his book the way he did? How would your reading experience be different if the author began with the narrator’s story instead of the young man’s?
3. “While the adults killed or were killed, we drew pictures in a corner,” writes the narrator (p. 41). How are children insulated from the adult world in *Ways of Going Home*? Do you believe adults should try to shield children from a harsh reality? If so, to what degree? How do the author’s characters try to come to terms with their innocence and guilt?
4. The novel takes place during a time of political turmoil in Chile’s history. What do you know about Salvador Allende? About Augusto Pinochet? What might you imagine life was like for children of both rich and poor families under the governments of each? Where does the author draw the line between the political and the personal? In what ways does the time in which we live shape who we are?
5. Why do you think the author keeps both the narrator and the young man nameless? Why does the narrator feel it’s “a relief” (p. 37) not to give the characters in his novel last names? What effect did this have for you as a reader? Are there other places in the book where names of people, places or things might signify larger issues at play?
6. The novel’s plot is built around people who have “known” each other for many years—parents, spouses, childhood friends. What does Eme mean when she tells the narrator that, for a relationship to work, “sometimes you have to pretend we’ve just met” (p. 119)? Do you ever wish you could meet someone again for the first time?
7. How does the narrator’s relationship with Eme compare to the young man’s relationship with Claudia? How does one inform the other? Do you agree with Eme that it was a kind of “robbery” (p. 133) when the narrator gave parts of her life story to Claudia?
8. Referring to the 1985 earthquake in Chile at the beginning of the novel, the young man says, “I think it’s a good thing to lose confidence in the solidity of the ground” (p. 9). What do you think he means by this? Do you agree? Why do you think the author chose to begin and end the book with earthquakes?
9. What takeaways do you draw from the book about who “owns” stories and what it means to try to tell them? What happens (or should happen) when people cannot or will not tell their stories? The young man tells us that, when we tell others’ stories, “we always end up telling our own” (p. 85). Do you agree?
10. “My story isn’t terrible...there were others who suffered more, who suffer more,” says Claudia (p. 97). Why does she compare her suffering to others? Have you ever found it difficult to empathize with someone else because your own pain felt more immediate? Or vice versa?
11. The book includes two similar scenes involving a late-night conversation: in the first scene the narrator speaks with his mother (p. 62-65); in the second scene the young man speaks with his mother (p. 107-111). How do they diverge? Why do you think the author chose to “repeat” this particular scene? Did you read the first scene differently after reading the second one? Were there other scenes that were similar for both the narrator and the young man?
12. Says the narrator: “To read is to cover one’s face. And to write is to show it” (p. 50). What do you think he means by this? What did you learn from the novel about the struggles writers face?
13. *Ways of Going Home* is a book in translation (from Spanish into English). What might you imagine are the difficulties in bringing a story from one language into another?
14. What do you make of the title?
15. In what ways does the narrator change when, as an adult, he discovers more about his parents’ past? How does this affect their relationship? Did you ever discover something new about your parents that made you view them differently? If you have children, how do you think they will remember you?

Credits

Cover image: "Philips CC-1 Continuous Cassette - Tape - As New - ISO" by stuart.childs. Flickr.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/stuartchilds/13844920714>



The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



NEA Big Read Reader Resources are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Arts Midwest