

Vagas desapariciones
[Vague Disappearances],
by Ana Teresa Torres.
Caracas: Grijalbo, 1995.

Like Torres's earlier novels, *Vagas desapariciones* deals with the individual's battle against oblivion. Employees in a Caracas psychiatric hospital, Pepín and Eduardo are an unlikely pair of best friends. Pepín, an orphaned street urchin who never received much of an education, considers himself a self-taught writer. He spends his free time penning his memoirs in a desperate attempt to remember the dates that shaped his existence, especially the date when he went to work at the hospital. Eduardo, a failed artist from an upper-class family, is engaged in the creation of a photographic essay that will prevent him from being completely forgotten. For both, the past is a series of "vague disappearances," an unretrievable blur into which they fear sinking. The struggle against the void is what unites them.

Deserted by his father, Pepín was raised in a Caracas slum by his mother, a maid who supplemented her meager income through prostitution. His brothers are thugs, and as a child, Pepín lives in apprehension of being swallowed into the drug-infested, violent underworld of the neighborhood. In a desperate attempt to create a past and thereby an identity for himself, he invents endless stories about the father he never knew, only to have his mother shatter them with a dismissive remark. After her death, he learns to survive by escaping from the neighborhood and ingratiating himself to people who can help him. Two things fill him with dread: losing his mother's little house, his only anchor to the past, and being caught by a social worker who will cast him into an institution, where he will become one more anonymous "abandoned minor."

Pepín finds work picking up garbage with a man who has a truck, doing odd jobs for middle-class matrons, helping the old man who tends the grounds in the cemetery where his mother is buried, cleaning a brothel, working in a bookstore, distributing Bibles for an evangelist, and rabble-raising for communists—all the time harboring dreams of saving up enough money to take a course in electricity. Eventually, Pepín does wind up in the dreaded orphan asylum. When a fire breaks out, he aids the medical staff and earns the respect of a doctor, who offers him a janitorial job in the mental hospital where he now works. There, through his memoirs and his conversations with Eduardo, he attempts to recuperate his vaguely remembered past and fix in time the pertinent events. He comes to realize, however, that the struggle is futile. The artistic creation is simply a projection of the artist's imagination, not a window to the reality of the past.

Unlike Pepín, Eduardo possesses a panoply of memories recorded in carefully dated photographs. Through them, he is able to document his life: his upbringing in a materialistic, bourgeois family that repudiates him for his artistic leanings and his homosexual life-style; his mother's efforts

BESTSELLERS IN THE AMERICAS

(ALPHABETICAL BY AUTHOR)

FICTION

Albert Camus, **The First Men** (C)
Umberto Eco, **The Island of the Day Before** (A,C,M,U,V)
Laura Esquivel, **La ley del amor** (A,Ch)
Jostein Gaarder, **El misterio del solitario** (V)
Juan Grompone, **La conección Mam** (U)
Gabriel García Márquez, **El coronel no tiene quien le escriba** (N)
H. Khemraj, **Cosmic Dance** (G)
Marcela Serrano, **Antigua vida mía** (Ch,M)
Sidney Sheldon, **Morning, Noon and Night** (A,B,U)
Jô Soares, **O Xangô do Baker Street** (B)

NONFICTION

Paulo Coelho, **Brida** (B)
Robert Fernandes, **Sea at Our Door** (G)
Louise Hay, **You Can Heal Your Life** (U)
Lourdes Ortiz, **La fuente de la vida** (V)
Octavio Paz, **Vislumbres de la India** (M)
Sergio Ramírez, **Un baile de máscaras** (N)
Daniel Samper Pizano, **Aspecto sicológico del calzoncillo** (C)
Elizabeth Subercaseaux, **Las diez cosas que una mujer en Chile no debe hacer jamás** (Ch)
V. Sueiro, **Año 2000, las profecías** (A)

A = Argentina; B = Brazil; Ch = Chile; C = Colombia; G = Guyana; M= Mexico;
N = Nicaragua; U = Uruguay; V = Venezuela

(Only those countries that submit before deadline are included.)

to make him a pianist; his artistic training in Paris; his initial success; his mother's withdrawal of support after his paintings turn unconventional and begin to reveal his deep-seated hostility toward women. Like Pepín, Eduardo comes to realize that art does not capture reality, but camouflages it. The photos lie. The smiling faces at the social gathering mask loneliness and alienation.

Through Pepín's and Eduardo's descriptions of the psychiatric hospital and of their encounters—real or imagined—with different characters from their pasts, Torres creates a panorama of Venezuelan society. The clinic is filled with recognizable types: a failed military officer who allowed personal feelings to interfere with duty, a muddled professor who lectures endlessly to an inattentive—or nonexistent—audience, a disillusioned housewife whose tyrannical husband prevented her from engaging in any kind of fulfilling activity, a senile politician, an alienated teenag-

er. Other types are added through the ruminations of Pepín and Eduardo: a floundering, middle-aged pianist; a sex-obsessed priest; panhandlers and street thieves. The hospital and its contiguous world becomes a metaphor for failure and social decay. The unrealized lives that populate *Vagas desapariciones* are slated for oblivion, and neither Pepín's notebooks nor Eduardo's photos can save them. That is why, perhaps, Pepín finally resigns himself to the inevitable and proceeds to hasten along the process.

And yet, by writing *Vagas desapariciones*, Torres accomplishes what neither of her protagonists was able to do: bestow validity on the lives of the forgotten. Herself a psychoanalyst with many years of experience in institutions, the author depicts the hospital as a repository for those who simply do not quite fit in, and yet, are not so different from the rest of us, for we are all engaged at some level in the same primal struggles. Torres has written a consequential, highly disconcerting book on life and art. Sensitive, moving, and beautifully crafted, *Vagas desapariciones* recasts the eternal questions in a new and trenchant way. ■