

the freedom of an "American princess." Without heavy theorizing, the women's personal voices reveal the historical ties that bind generations in grief, cruelty, and love. —Hazel Rochman

Tarleton, John S. *A Window Facing West*. Oct. 1999. 192p. Bridge Works; dist. by National Book Network, \$22.95 (1-882593-30-8).

Huck Finn ultimately ventured west in search of happiness, but Gatlin, the hero of Tarleton's debut novel, only has a westward view. Gatlin's Baton Rouge office window overlooks the Mississippi River, and from this perspective he assesses his life at age 47. His marriage to Sarah has become sexually dormant in the wake of several miscarriages and a stillbirth. Sarah wants to pack up the car and actually head west, seeking adventure, but Gatlin feels shackled to his work as a financial advisor. His male friends represent midlife alternatives: Rusty and Cliff are having rejuvenating affairs, both with the same woman, and Gatlin suspects that the woman in question is an attractive client; Rick, recently sober, finds meaning as a social activist and encourages Gatlin to likewise minister to others; Matt, Rick's 17-year-old son, dreams of a life on the river and wants Gatlin to accompany him on a boat trip. Although Tarleton's final insight underwhelms, the exploration until then is meditative, provocative, and often funny. —James Klise

Torres, Ana Teresa. *Doña Inés vs. Oblivion*. Tr. by Gregory Rabassa. Oct. 1999. 243p. Louisiana State, \$27.50 (0-8071-2476-1).

In this richly detailed novel by a Venezuelan writer, we first encounter Doña Inés Villegas y Solorzano, matriarch of an aristocratic family, as an old woman obsessed with finding her title to a piece of land. But Doña Inés is a ghost, haunting her old house and searching for her land titles through 300 years of Venezuelan history. She witnesses the fate of her descendants through the earthquake that devastates Caracas in 1810 and the War for Independence in 1814. She witnesses the rise of the despised Domingo Sanchez, descendent of Curiepe slaves, who takes part in the civil wars of the 1850s and 1860s. Sanchez ends up as a wealthy government minister, married to Doña Inés' great-great-granddaughter, Belen. It is Belen's nephew, Francisco, who finally locates the titles Doña Inés has been searching for since 1710. Torres' dense and sweeping novel, winner of the 1998 Pegasus Prize for Literature, has been compared to Isabel Allende's *House of Spirits* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. —Mary Ellen Quinn

Tyree, Omar. *Sweet St. Louis*. Oct. 1999. 368p. Simon & Schuster, \$23 (0-684-85610-7). Masterful African American storyteller Tyree sets his latest novel in St. Louis, Missouri. Anthony "Ant" Poole tries out his latest pickup line, "a piece of me for a piece of you," on Sharron Francis, and she is intrigued by his come-on and finds him

attractive. So when they encounter each other again, she is eager to learn more about him. On the other hand, Ant is only interested in a frivolous encounter. Still, Sharron's honest approach is enough to keep him interested. Meanwhile, Ant's best friend, Tone, continually promotes situations that are dangerous for a man considering a monogamous relationship; and Sharron's roommate, Celena, has a cynical view of relationships and is a bit jealous of Sharron's newfound happiness. Over several months, Ant and Sharron's relationship develops from dating to meeting one another's parents to discussions of marriage and children. The four characters deal with the realities of love and the consequences of romantic choices. This is sure to be another hot seller on the long list of Tyree publications. —Lillian Lewis

Unsworth, Barry. *Losing Nelson*. Oct. 1999. 352p. Doubleday/Nan A. Talese, \$23.95 (0-385-48652-9).

With *Nelson*, Unsworth offers a new interpretation of "historical fiction" and clever commentary on the role of the hero in the national and personal psyche and the distorted world of those who live their lives through others. Charles Cleasby, a reclusive amateur historian, is obsessed with Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson, hero of the Battle of Trafalgar. Cleasby is fascinated with every detail of his hero's life: myriad historical anniversaries, details of his personal life, and accounts of famous battles that Cleasby reenacts with ship models in his basement. In short, Cleasby is living vicariously through Nelson's life, his hero's exploits compensating for his mundane existence. To assert his divine image of Nelson, Cleasby is determined to disprove Nelson's involvement in a brutal massacre that makes him appear to Cleasby and others less George Washington and more Lieutenant Calley. The hero/antihero image of Nelson haunts Cleasby. The gentle nagging of

his secretary and colleagues at the Nelson society fails to temper Cleasby's image of Nelson as Unsworth builds his story to a satisfying final climax. —Ted Leventhal

Mystery

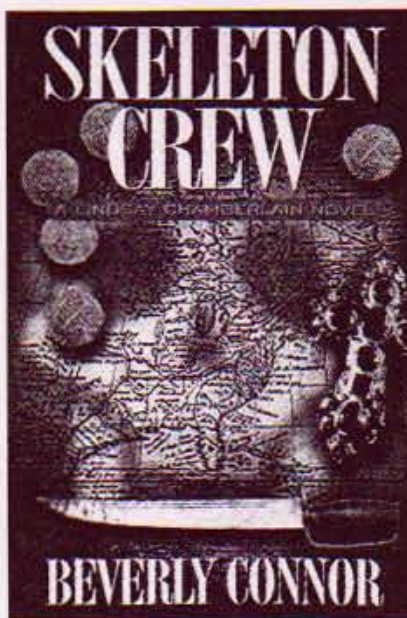
Albert, Susan Wittig. *Lavender Lies*. Oct. 1999. 320p. Berkley/Prime Crime, \$21.95 (0-425-17032-2).

Just before herbalist China Bayles' and police chief Mike McQuaid's wedding in Pecan Springs, Texas, the town is rocked by the murder of a greedy developer. China and McQuaid bring their unique skills to the task of finding the murderer before the case preempts their wedding. Albert's eighth China Bayles mystery starts slow but rallies with a tantalizing plot, a surprise ending, and some great dialogue. Along the way, she delivers witty reflections on flowers and herbs, Texas Rangers, beauty parlors and "big hair," and the special attractions of the Texas hill country. The book's eccentric characters and small-town charm will appeal to fans of Earlene Fowler's Benni Harper series and Joan Hess' Maggody novels. —John Rowen

Alexander, Bruce. *Death of a Colonial*. Sept. 1999. 288p. Putnam, \$23.95 (0-399-14564-8).

Alexander's Sir John Fielding novels aren't as well known as Anne Perry's historical mysteries, but they should be. Set in 1770s London, the stories are cleverly plotted, rich in historical ambience, and written with flair and a keen eye for detail. This time, the blind Sir John, a skilled investigator and respected magistrate, and his teenage protégé, Jeremy Proctor, are drawn into a challenging case when a man claiming to be Lawrence Paltrow, heir to a vast fortune and the family title, mysteriously reappears after being missing for nearly a decade. The man looks and acts enough like Paltrow to

★ **Connor, Beverly.** *Skeleton Crew*. Oct. 1999. 352p. Cumberland House, \$20.95 (1-58182-9).



Nevada Barr, Dana Stabenow, and Skye Kathleen Moody are the natural audience for Connor, as are readers of other archaeological mysteries—e.g., Kate Ellis' *Merchant's House* [BKL Ap 15 99] or Triss Stein's *Digging Up Death* [BKL Ap 15 98]. —John Rowen

A crack treasure-hunting team discovers a Spanish sailor's journal and then a 500-year-old sunken galleon off the Georgia coast. The expedition enlists forensic archaeologist Lindsay Chamberlain to analyze any skeletons that appear as the galleon is excavated from the ocean. Lindsay and her colleagues find mysteries in the skeletons, deal with rival treasure hunters, and confront modern-day murders. This third Lindsay Chamberlain mystery continues Connors' hot streak. It boasts an ingenious plot, intriguing characters, and a mystery as well hidden as rubies on a beach. In addition, the details of finding sunken ships, diving, and maritime history are carefully researched, fascinating on their own, and expertly integrated into the action. Connor also offers some skeletal humor and captures life at sea nearly as vividly as C. S. Forester. Her climax may seem slightly surreal compared to the style of the rest of the book, but she pulls it off. Fans of the outdoor women sleuths in series by

Mystery

FOREIGN LANGUAGE FICTION ROUNDUP

Chamoiseau, Patrick
CHRONICLE OF THE
SEVEN SORROWS
 Trans. by Linda Coverdale
 Univ. of Nebraska

CHRONICLE OF THE SEVEN SORROWS (\$25.00; Nov. 19; 226 pp.; 0-8032-1495-2): The first novel (published in 1986 in France) by the Martiniquean author of *Texaco* and *Solibo Magnificent*, among other colorful fiction and autobiography, is a raffish mock epic celebration of his island homeland's energetically mixed (French and Creole) language and culture. The lively antihero Pipi Soleil is an amoral "djobber" (deliveryman, at sea and ashore) who transports (and sometimes imperturbably murders) human cargo, contends in a (brilliantly described) wheelbarrow race, ineptly pursues the beauty of his dreams, and reluctantly guards a threatening zombie's buried treasure. This is wonderful stuff. Don't be surprised if the accomplished Chamoiseau emerges as one of the new century's leading Nobel prize candidates.

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Filippini, Serge
THE MAN IN FLAMES
 Trans. by Liz Nash
 Dedalus—dist. by
 Subterranean (265 S. Fifth
 St., Monroe, OR 97456)

THE MAN IN FLAMES (\$16.99 paperback original; Nov. 18; 367 pp.; 1-873982-24-0): Filippini's engaging historical was first published, in 1990 in Italy, to understandably great acclaim. The story concerns Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno's marginalized life as a cantankerous freethinker and impenitent homosexual, as recalled by Giordano himself shortly before he is to be burned at the stake by the Inquisition. It's a lively and likable performance (Bruno is the kind of renegade genius Anthony Burgess might have created), distinguished by convincingly replete period detail and vigorous portrayals of such luminaries as Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, second-rate Elizabethan poet Fulke Greville, Sir Philip Sidney's (doubtless fictional) elder brother Cecil, who's the love of Giordano's life—and a sharp-witted young charmer who'll later take the name of William Shakespeare. A fascinating novel.

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Maalouf, Amin
PORTS OF CALL
 Trans. by Alberto Manguel
 Harvill—dist. by Farrar,
 Straus & Giroux

PORTS OF CALL (\$24.00; Nov. 30; 197 pp.; 1-86046-446-7): The native Lebanese (now French) author of such exotic fiction as *The Rock of Tanios* (1994) and *The Gardens of Light* (p. 177) offers here the winsome (though strangely uninvolved) story of Turkish-Lebanese nobleman Ossyane Ketabdar's renunciation of both his father's revolutionary ardor and Clara, the Jewish woman whom their respective cultures, a world war, and the later (1948) Arab-Israeli War keep apart for many years, before a final bittersweet meeting seals their fates. Ossyane's recall of his thwarted life, recounted to Maalouf's sympathetic narrator, has several fine moments (especially when focused on his experiences, while living in Paris, with the Resistance). But, overall, both his pacifism and his passivity seem unfortunately generic, and his plight never fully engages our emotions.

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Molina, Silvia
THE LOVE YOU
PROMISED ME
 Trans. by David Unger
 Curbstone

THE LOVE YOU PROMISED ME (\$14.95 paperback original; Nov.; 160 pp.; 1-880684-62-4): This wry psychodrama, which won the Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz Prize, charts its thoroughly uninteresting protagonist Marcela's lugubrious reflections on her recently ended affair with her (much older) married lover Eduardo, the similarly unstable union of her wealthy father (a heartless exploiter of Mexico's Indian laborers) and lowborn mother, and her country's ongoing political unrest. Molina (*Gray Skies Tomorrow*, 1993), a prominent Mexican writer, doggedly fabricates connections between Marcela's present unhappiness and its complicated context—but neither Marcela nor her (vaguely sketched) husband and sons ever come to life, and Eduardo seems nothing more than an egotistical prig whom she's well rid of. Consequently, we care nothing for any of them, or for Molina's interminably attenuated little novel.

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Torres, Ana Teresa
DOÑA INÉS VS.
OBLIVION
 Trans. by Gregory Rabassa
 Louisiana State Univ.

DOÑA INÉS VS. OBLIVION (\$27.50; Oct. 26; 243 pp.; 0-8071-2476-1): An accomplished 1992 novel, which won the 1998 Pegasus Prize, surveys Venezuela's modern history through the combative lament of "a crazy old aristocratic woman, . . . lost in her memoirs, . . . shouting for her slave women and her children, who'd already forgotten her." The eponymous Doña Inés's heated monologue excoriates such real watershed events as Simón Bolívar's revolution and Rómulo Betancourt's attempts to establish democracy, while she simultaneously

vilifies the freed former servant who sues for ownership of *her* land (the story features a Dickensian court case that drags on for generations) and her late husband Alejandro, whose death has left her alone to confront the tide of revolution and social change. What distinguishes Torres's energetic tragicomedy from dozens of other magical-realist Latin American novels is its focus on the embattled relationships among classes and between masters and servants. Doña Inés is both a retrograde tyrant and ferocious force of nature, and Torres has brought her to life (-in-death) with stunning success.

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Valdés, Zoé
I GAVE YOU ALL I HAD
 Trans. by Nadia Benabid
 Arcade

I GAVE YOU ALL I HAD (\$24.95; Nov.; 256 pp.; 1-55970-477-2): A wonderful second novel from the Cuban-born author of *Yocandra in the Paradise of Nada* (1997) builds an impressive picture of Havana before, during, and in the wake of the Castro Revolution, while telling the exuberant story of former country girl Cuca Martinez's riotous life and loves. Teenaged Cuca's fixation on suave, seductive Juan Perez (the only "Uan" for her) somehow survives his vaguely criminal associations, their (consequent) 30-year separation, and even "Uan's" canny manipulation of Cuca in a scam involving Cuba's invisible crimelords. Valdés plays ingenious metafictional tricks with her loquacious narrator (who is, and isn't, its heroine, and who keeps bursting in on the action, to high comic effect), and portrays the story's deliciously observed characters (including Cuca's surrogate mothers in the wicked city, a pair of hilariously feisty whores, and also her militantly Communist daughter Maria Regla) with infectious warmth and energy. Fidel probably won't be amused, but the rest of Valdés's readers are in for a treat.

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Viganò, Renata
PARTISAN WEDDING
 Trans. by Suzanne
 Branciforte
 Univ. of Missouri

PARTISAN WEDDING (\$19.95 paperback original; Nov.; 240 pp.; 0-8262-1228-X): A collection of 17 plaintive stories (accompanied by 2 autobiographical essays) from Viganò, a critically acclaimed Italian novelist and journalist (1900-76) whose oeuvre memorably dramatizes the experiences of "women of courage" during WWII. Viganò's anti-Fascist rhetoric comes through perhaps a bit too strongly in the vivid translation by Branciforte (who also contributes a fine Introduction). Still, there's much to admire in such pungent tales as the deeply ironic "Wool Socks" (redolent of more than one neorealist film), the unapologetically earthy "Red Flag" and moving "Portrait of Garibaldi," and the title story, itself a resonant metaphor for Italy's embattled state: Its estimable heroine is both innocent bride and seasoned Partisan fighter. Interesting and provocative fiction, well worth resurrecting. One hopes translations of Viganò's other fiction may be forthcoming.

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PRESS CLIPPINGS

The history of everything, according to Doña Inés

By TONY BECKWITH

Special to the American-Statesman

A land dispute that began in 1663 leads to a bitter feud between an aristocratic old lady and her former slave, who is actually her husband's love child, born to one of their black servant girls. Doña Inés has long since passed over to the spirit world, but she won't let it go. Centuries later she is still on the case, and her ghostly, rambling account of the family saga leads us through a vivid history of Venezuela.

Ana Teresa Torres is a good writer and an even better researcher. She presents a very credible picture of colonial Caracas and the privileged life-

style of the elite. She alternates between using Doña Inés as the narrator and using a (far more appealing) descriptive third person.

Understandably, the story is told from the viewpoint of a person of substance in that world of plantations and luxury for the fortunate few. When she's writing about the violence of the times, Torres evokes the terror inspired by the rag-tag armies of the dispossessed, "... threatening to mount an assault on Caracas, and to kill all the whites, all the rich, and all those who know how to read." She can make a scene come alive. When the shattered families are frantically withdrawing from Caracas in General Bolívar's chaotic caravan of de-

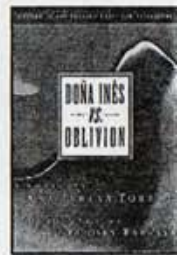
spair, Isabel watches the trunks as they fall, "exposing to the rain the ruffled skirts, open bodices, taffeta shawls, lace mantillas, muslin wraps, silk capes."

Some of the characters are quite humorously portrayed: "... that fallow man from the Andes, who has the size and lechery of a monkey." There are also some wonderfully Latin American observations: "Liberalism didn't work out, and they had to invent dictatorship." And later: "Nothing was gained from the dictatorships either, and they had to invent democracy." The saga ends in the 20th century, with the descendants settling the dispute in a thoroughly modern way. One of them says, "... we can't keep

killing each other over land. Nowadays wealth comes from other kinds of work."

Torres is the Venezuelan recipient of a Mobil Pegasus Prize. One of the considerable benefits of winning this prize is getting one's work translated and introduced to the English-reading markets. Unfortunately, I found this translation to be disappointing in places, not doing justice to the breezy, free-flowing style of the original. The English version is at times so literal as to spoil the flow, which is a great shame as this is a well-researched book with a well-told story.

Tony Beckwith is a translator and free-lance writer living in Austin.



**Doña Inés
vs. Oblivion**
By Ana Teresa
Torres

Translated by
Gregory Rabassa
Louisiana State
University Press,
\$13 paper



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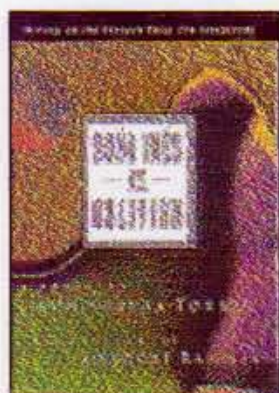
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ABOUT THE BOOK

From The Publisher

"Matriarch of a wealthy planter family in the eighteenth-century village of Caracas, Dona Ines fights for control of a coastal-province plantation that her late husband has bequeathed to his illegitimate son by a black slave. She dies in 1780 but continues her exposition, searching to prove her rights while observing the political upheavals, natural disasters, bloodshed, and changing racial, social, and cultural strictures visited on her own and other Venezuelan families in the next two hundred years. She watches, finally with resignation, as Caracas becomes an unrecognizable modern metropolis and her descendants acquiesce to compromise over the disputed property."--BOOK JACKET. "Ultimately a journal of the tragic clash between classes, of the interface between humanity and geography, Dona Ines vs. Oblivion depicts the maturation of Venezuela more vividly than any work of nonfiction."--BOOK JACKET.

Reviews

From Publisher's Weekly - Publishers Weekly


Winner of the Mobil Pegasus Prize for Literature, this bold novel by Venezuelan writer Torres probes the effects of violence, corrupt politics and class strife on one family over the course of 300 years, from the early 18th century to the present. Torres traces the historical roots of Caracas through the eyes of Do a In s Villegas y Solorzano, the aristocratic widow of a wealthy plantation owner who desperately fights to keep the land her family has owned since 1663. Even after her death in 1780, Do a In s continues narrating the story in her dogged attempt to keep her land out of the hands of the black and mulatto descendants

of her husband and a slave woman. In effect, she becomes Caracas's chronicler as she observes the city metamorphose from sleepy plantation lands to a vibrant, hectic metropolis. Based on a real-life court case that was, incredibly, not resolved until the 1980s, the novel reveals Venezuela's cultural transformations as vividly as any history book might. Unfortunately, its slow pace and monotonous narration do not do justice to the dramatic events depicted. Even after her death, Do a In s maintains dictatorial control by revealing other characters only through her eyes. Other characters' dialogue is sparse, appearing as Do a In s relates and remembers it, so that her version of things strives to be the ultimate last word. But Torres also examines the bitter woman's diminishing hold on her domain, and it is this triumph of the living city and its inexorable journey into the future over the tenacious ghosts of the past that is the visionary thrust of the novel. In this encompassing, ambitious epic, Caracas emerges as a sensuously and politically charged survivor, the enduring hero. Five-city author tour. (Nov.) Copyright 1999 Cahners Business Information.

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