

# The Literary Encyclopedia

## Ariel Dorfman (1942-)

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Dramatist/ Playwright; Essayist; Novelist; Poet.  
Active 1968- in Chile; United States

Ariel Dorfman is widely recognized as one of the most important living Latin American writers and intellectuals. Chronologically, he might be considered a member of the Post-Boom generation in Latin American narrative fiction, along with fellow Chileans Antonio Skármeta and Isabel Allende, but the fact that he has gone beyond the narrative genre to become a prolific writer of essays, is also considered an accomplished poet, and perhaps most prominently a critically acclaimed playwright, makes Dorfman a challenging case for the parameters of conventional literary history. Having lived many years as an exile in Europe and the United States since the overthrow of the government of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, he was a highly visible antagonist of the regime of Augusto Pinochet, and much of his *oeuvre* can be read as a call to resist oppressive political and economic systems. Although Dorfman's ideological and aesthetic background has clearly been influenced by his education and participation in politics in Chile, he has made a point of appealing to readers beyond Latin America by writing several of his later works in English, stressing archetypal themes and experiences in his storylines, and tapping into media outlets, such as newspapers, film and the Internet, that ensure that his ideas reach a substantial global audience. His books have been translated into more than 30 languages, and his plays have been staged in dozens of countries. His best-known work is the play *Death and the Maiden* (1991; *La muerte y la doncella*, 1992), which was well received by critics and audiences in North American and Europe and subsequently adapted into a 1994 feature film directed by Roman Polanski.

Dorfman, whose legal given name is Vladimiro, was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1942. His parents, Adolfo Dorfman and Fanny Zelicovich, who were both born to Jewish families in Eastern European republics, emigrated to Argentina as children. In 1943, Adolfo, whose support of Communism and revolutionary ideas would have put him at odds with the fascist tenor of the Perón regime, fled to New York City, where he was joined by Fanny and a two-year-old Vladimiro in 1945. By his own account, the nine years Dorfman spent as a child in New York resulted in a fluency in and love for the English language while in the U.S. he refused to speak Spanish and rejected the name Vladimiro for Edward as well as the beginning of a love-hate relationship with American values and cultural products. In 1954, with McCarthyism at a fever pitch in the U.S., Adolfo was forced to give up his position at the United Nations, and the family moved back to South America, this time to Chile.

Upon arrival in Santiago, Dorfman's parents enrolled him at the Grange, a prestigious English-speaking prep school. Although he initially resisted communicating in Spanish and assimilating the Chilean values that surrounded him as a teenager, by the time Dorfman was a young adult he had fully embraced his Latin American linguistic and cultural roots. During this formative period in the Chilean capital, Edward changed his name to Ariel, in deference to the title of an essay by the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó. Although Dorfman became increasingly critical of U.S. political and economic policies during his years in Chile, he also came to the conclusion that he was irrevocably bilingual and thus continued to value English, favoring it as the language of his earliest literary experiments (116). It is during this period that he met Angélica Marlinarich, whom he would marry, and began to involve himself in Marxist political campaigns, which were rapidly gaining favor with the Chilean working class. In 1967, Ariel Dorfman became a Chilean citizen. In 1968, he briefly returned to the U.S., travelling to Berkeley, California, on a research fellowship to the University of California, where he completed his master's thesis, later published as *Imaginación y violencia en Latinoamérica* [Imagination and Violence in Latin America] (1970).

During the late 1960s, while working as a professor of Spanish American literature and journalism at the Universidad de Chile in Santiago, Dorfman participated actively in the efforts of the leftist coalition known as Unidad Popular (Popular Unity Party) to overcome domestic and U.S. resistance to its Marxist agenda and its candidate for president, Salvador Allende. With the victory of the Unidad Popular in the 1970 elections, Dorfman went to work for the Allende government as a cultural advisor. During the Allende years (1970-1973) he continued to teach at the Universidad de Chile and also worked as an editor at the state publishing house Quimantú, which published his best-known book-length essay, *Para leer al pato Donald* (1971; *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, 1975), a text written in collaboration with Armand Mattelart. A moment that would forever change Dorfman's life and have a great impact on his writing came on 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1973, when a military *coup d'état* led by General Augusto Pinochet toppled the Allende government, ending the Marxist experiment in Chile. Dorfman would spend most of the next 17 years in exile in Europe and the United States. He taught courses in Spanish American literature at the Sorbonne in Paris from 1975 to 1976, and he taught at the University of Amsterdam from 1976 to 1980.

In the early 1980s, the Dorfman family relocated to the Washington, D.C., area. In 1983, Dorfman took a position as a visiting professor at the University of Maryland. That same year, he began a sporadic series of return trips to Chile, and the family maintained residences in both countries until 1987, when Dorfman was again exiled by Pinochet authorities. In 1984, Dorfman took a position as a visiting professor of literature and Latin American Studies at Duke University. He returned to Chile to vote against the dictatorship in the 1988 plebiscite, and was also present for the 1989 election of Patricio Alwyn. It was during this extended stay in Chile, following the announcement of a commission to investigate the human rights abuses of the Pinochet regime, that Dorfman penned the first drafts of what would become his most successful work, the play *Death and the Maiden* (1991; *La muerte y la doncella*, 1992). Upon his return to the U.S., Dorfman resumed his position at Duke on a permanent basis.

Dorfman's *oeuvre* is difficult to summarize or even catalogue due to the fact that he has written and continues to produce a dizzying array of works in distinct genres and for various media—in both Spanish and English—and because of the number of editions, translations, updated and revised texts, and collaborative works in circulation. His collections of essays, which span the domains of literary criticism, cultural studies, politics and history, include *Imaginación y violencia en América Latina* [Imagination and Violence in Latin America] (1970), *Para leer al pato Donald* (1971; *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, 1975), *The Empire's Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and Other Innocent Heroes Do to Our Minds* (1983), *Hacia la liberación del lector americano* [Toward the Liberation of the American Reader] (1984), *Some Write to the Future: Essays on Contemporary Latin American Fiction* (1991), *Other Septembers, Many Americas: Selected Provocations, 1980-2004* (2004; *Otros septiembres: provocaciones desde un norte perplejo*, 2007) and the travel essay *Desert Memories; Journeys Through the Chilean North* (2004). His publications of narrative fiction—mostly novels—include *Moros en la costa* (1973; *Hard Rain*, 1991), *Viudas* (1981; *Widows*, 1983), *La última canción de Manuel Sendero* (1982; *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*, 1987), *Máscara* (1987; *Mascara*, 1988), the short story collection *My House is on Fire* (1990), *Konfidenz* (1994; English version, 1995), *The Nanny and the Iceberg* (1999; *La nana y el iceberg*, 1999), *Blake's Therapy* (2001; *Terapia*, 2001), and *The Burning City* (2003), which he co-authored with his son Joaquin. He has also authored poems, many of which are available in English in two volumes, *Last Waltz in Santiago and Other Poems of Disappearance and Exile* (1988) and *In Case of Fire in a Foreign Land: New and Collected Poems from Two Languages* (2002). His major plays include *Death and the Maiden* (1991; *La muerte y la doncella*, 1992), *Reader* (1995), *Widows* (1997), *Voices from Beyond the Dark: The Speak Truth to Power Play* (2001), *The Other Side* (2006), and *Purgatorio* (2006).

In addition to those works, Dorfman has been a regular contributor of journalistic reports and op-ed pieces to newspapers around the globe, including *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *El País*, *Le Monde*, and *Die Welt*, among many others. He has also been involved with various film projects. He co-wrote the screenplay to Roman Polanski's film adaptation of *Death and the Maiden* (1994) and collaborated with his son Rodrigo on *Prisoners of Time* (1995), an award-winning teleplay produced for British television. Dorfman's latest film-writing credit is for the documentary *A Promise to the Dead: The Exile Journey of Ariel Dorfman* (2007), which presents a portrait of the Pinochet coup and its aftermath, mediated by Dorfman's own memories, experiences, and opinions.

A number of recurring themes and motifs permeate Dorfman's works. Chief among these is a sustained call for awareness of and resistance to various forms of imperialism and oppressive political and economic systems. An example of Dorfman's early work focusing on the idea of resisting foreign cultural and economic models is *Para leer al pato Donald* (1971; *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, 1975). A Marxist analysis arguing that the "beloved" Disney comic in fact operates as an agent of cultural colonization, spreading imperialist ideology and making American capitalism look appealing, *Para leer al pato Donald* went on to be the most widely printed Latin American essay of the 1970s. After the coup, copies

of the essay were burned in Chile by the Pinochet authorities. Originally banned in the U.S., it was first published in English in the U.K. in 1975 and has since been translated into numerous languages.

Another key theme in many of Dorfman's works is the representation of violence in literature and the psychological effects of violent acts. Dorfman's first collection of essays, *Imaginación y violencia en Latinoamérica* [Imagination and Violence in Latin America] (1970) is representative of this interest and is also considered to be one of his most enduring and influential works, particularly in the area of literary criticism. The text consists of a collection of essays on the pervasive influence of violence in Latin America and its impact on the literary consciousness of several important writers from the region, including Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, and Juan Rulfo.

Similarly, many of Dorfman's works focus on denouncing torture and other human rights abuses suffered under tyrannical regimes, most notably those perpetrated by the military government in Chile during the Pinochet era. The most famous of his works, the play *Death and the Maiden* (1991; *La muerte y la doncella*, 1992), acknowledges the torturous excesses of military rule and explores several other themes, such as love, trust, vengeance, redemption, and forgiveness. The play presents a situation inspired by Chile's attempt to deal with the civil rights violations of the military government during its fragile return to democracy. Its cast consists of just three characters, the lawyer Gerardo Escobar, his wife Paulina, and Dr. Roberto Miranda, a stranger who has helped Gerardo fix a flat tire. Roberto, who ends up stranded at the Escobar home overnight, is aware that Gerardo has just been appointed to head a civilian commission investigating the human rights abuses of the military junta, but he does not know that Paulina was abducted and tortured by government agents during the first years of the dictatorship. Upon hearing Roberto's voice, Paulina becomes convinced that he is in fact one of the men who for several weeks raped and tortured her. While her husband sleeps, Paulina ties Roberto to a chair at gunpoint and gags him, promising to exact her own justice if he does not confess his role in torturing her. What follows is a mock trial in which Paulina forces Gerardo to hear details of her torture sessions and to act as Roberto's counsel, convincing him to confess everything or be executed on the spot. Just at the moment in which Paulina is about to shoot a defenseless Roberto, the stage directions indicate that a giant mirror should descend, gradually replacing the audience's view of the characters with a reflection of itself. The mirror is then lifted to reveal a concert hall whose spectators include Gerardo and Paulina, as well as Roberto and his own wife, implying that Paulina ultimately decides to spare the man who was likely her torturer. The message of the play seems to be that Chileans and other victims of torture or similar abuses can find a measure of justice by confronting those who have perpetrated violent acts and demanding to know the truth, but that the impulse to seek vengeance—however understandable—must be overcome. Among many other honors, *Death and the Maiden* won the Lawrence Olivier Award in 1992.

A number of Dorfman's creative works are characterized by a high degree of metafictional self-awareness and bear clearly identifiable traces of the author's familiarity with notions from literary and cultural theory, psychology, and other disciplines. His 1994 novel *Konfidenz* exemplifies these tendencies. The text is a political and psychological thriller involving a telephone conversation between a man who claims to be a leader in a clandestine anti-Nazi group and the girlfriend of one of the group's operatives. Between each chapter of dialogue, readers are presented with a series of notes in which they—and perhaps the author—are taunted and reprimanded for failing to intervene in the narrative events or to help the characters, a strategy that foregrounds the passive and voyeuristic nature of reading even as it echoes Cervantes, Pirandello, and Unamuno in blurring the demarcations between the real and the literary.

Dorfman's experience and perspective as a writer in exile—the sense of being a man without a homeland—is also a prominent feature in several texts, as is his fascination with how language and communication, in particular bilingualism and translation, relate to complex notions of identity. He reflects at length on these topics in his 1998 memoir *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey (Rumbo al sur, deseando el norte: un romance bilingüe, 1998)*, a text whose chapters alternate equally between Dorfman's own recollections of the days immediately before and after the coup of 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1973, and his reflections on language and identity. In a strategy reminiscent of Borges's *Autobiographical Essay*, Dorfman casts his interest in language and literature, as well as his vision of identity as being dualistic or even multiple, as an outgrowth of the polyglot nature of his forebears, who nurtured their native Yiddish and Russian even as they acquired the Spanish of their new country. His own bilingualism provides the structural metaphor for a life story that unfolds between two languages and two competing and often contradictory geo-cultural settings, North America and the Latin South. Quite contrary to the memoir's title, Dorfman seems to have chosen—at least for now—the life and language of the North. In 2004, he became a U.S. citizen, and at the time of writing he is the Walter Hines Page Distinguished Professor of Literature and Latin American Studies at Duke University, where he continues his teaching, research, and creative work.

### Works cited

Dorfman, Ariel. *Heading North, Looking South*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

**Citation:** Jolley, Jason. "Ariel Dorfman". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 6 January 2009. [http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5422, accessed 1 May 2012.]

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ISSN 1747-678X