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The Young and the Restless

By Alberto Manguel,
the author of numerous books, including "A Reading Diary"
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SHORTS

Stories

By Alberto Fuguet

Translated by Ezra E. Fitz

Rayo. 327 pp. \$13.95

The unexamined life may not be worth living, but it doesn't follow that every examination needs to be turned into a book. And yet, in North America at least, that old admonition has inspired a deluge of memoirs, autobiographical fiction and novels that chronicle with painful exactness the daily life of yet another inhabitant of Brooklyn, as if every event, every feeling, every thought born in the United States deserved a place on the page. As an all-too-frequent reader of these confessions, I often want to ask: "Why are you telling me this?"

Though always looking northward, the writers of Latin America have not yet fallen under this confessional influence. Lives are told, hearts and minds are opened, but in moderation, and usually by devices that elevate or shift the story from true confession to honest fiction. Manuel Puig first sought to renew the memoir-novel by making use of popular art forms such as soap operas, films, *fotonovelas* and tangos. After "Betrayed by Rita Hayworth" and "The Buenos Aires Affair," the melodramatic lives of Latin American characters no longer needed to exist within the strictures of the 19th-century novel. The writer's model, formally at least, was no longer Flaubert but the stars of the *cine latino*.

Half a century later, the Chilean Alberto Fuguet follows in Puig's footsteps, but with a voice that is entirely his own. Like Puig, Fuguet is interested in the vocabularies of pop culture to lend prestige (or justify) the banalities of everyday life, and to Puig's range he has added the film script, the recorded interview, the home video. Until recently, Latin American fiction mainly chronicled, with few exceptions, the life of the underdog, the urban poor, the peasants, the lower middle class: For every wealthy Gatsby or McInerney broker, there were hundreds of Aureliano Buendias and Pedro Paramos.

Fuguet's heroes, on the other hand, are from the Chilean poor-little-rich-kid class, unwilling to confront their country's reality in the post-Pinochet years and living instead in the sitcom world borrowed from dubbed North American TV series. Money, early pregnancies, drink, drugs, the shadow of their parents' morally equivocal lives -- all mingle strangely with ancestral rituals of honor and ancient notions of gender. In between an indulged adolescence and what seems to them the distant prospect of adulthood,

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the young people in Fuguet's new collection of stories, "Shorts," stumble through friendships, jobs and relationships without engaging fully in any of these, adrift and undetermined, attached to nothing. "My feeling is this," says one of Fuguet's characters, "there's nothing more irresponsible than loading yourself up with responsibilities." As a result, everything appears permissible, and nothing represents a limit. Their idea of a joke, for instance, is making a man who's had his eyes ripped out as a child lick a tab of acid and then leaving him alone to hallucinate in a tiny room.

Fuguet's Spanish is clipped, exact, unpretentious, capable of assimilating a pop vocabulary without making it sound jarring, allowing it to mesh with passages of formal classical beauty. Ezra E. Fitz has produced a translation of miraculous clarity, intelligence and immense readability. Thanks to him, none of the difficulty of rendering Fuguet's style into English remains evident in a paragraph like this one:

"He looks at the boundless sky and wonders if it sags under its own sheer size. Here everything is exaggerated, immense, and the sun burns and parches you even in the shade. This is a place for people who do not scare easily, he thinks; people who aren't afraid of geography and passions that exceed the human scale."

The stories that make up "Shorts" are thematically linked, forming a kaleidoscope of fragments illuminating dark corners of other fragments. A crime committed in an early story has horrible consequences in a later one; love betrayed in another story is (almost) redeemed a hundred pages later. Only one piece, the beautiful, two-page-long, melancholy "Lost," seems unrelated: It tries to explain why, "in a country full of missing people, disappearing is easy," and it plays brilliantly on the many senses of the word "lost." Placed in the very middle of the book, it serves as a linchpin, keeping the rest of the fragments in their allotted position.

"Youth is wasted on the young," wrote George Bernard Shaw ironically. Fuguet has placed Shaw's wisecrack as an epigraph to the book. By the time the reader has reached the last page, all sense of irony has vanished, and what is left is a feeling of intense bitterness and melancholy -- and proof of Fuguet's superb storytelling craft.

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