

Gotcha last: context
and analysis of "the
little school" by alicia
partnoy



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A literary tour de force, Alicia Partnoy's memoir *The Little School* is more than a memoir. It is an act of public and permanent revenge against not just the individuals who imprisoned, tortured, and humiliated her but against all the perpetrators of the Dirty War in Argentina. Although the book cannot produce justice in a conventional way, in which the guilty people are charged, tried, convicted, sentenced, and justly imprisoned for their crimes, its publication ensures that the victims have not been forgotten. It also immortalizes the rampant injustice and brutality of the Dirty War. This essay will provide a brief historical context for Partnoy's book and describe the literary techniques by which Partnoy captures and shares as much detail as she can.

During the Dirty War, the governments of several Latin American countries, including Argentina, faced an ongoing insurgent threat from Marxist and similar radical guerrillas who engaged in terrorist activities. "Urban guerrillas lived and fought in big cities, where they could menace the government, strike at army headquarters, or kidnap and ransom an industrialist to finance their operations."^[i] The goal was not to inflict general mayhem or terror against the Argentine population at large, but the attacks were in no way confined to military targets. The People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), an insurgent group dedicated to the violent overthrow of the Argentine government in favor of a new Marxist government, took credit for the robbery of 166 banks and kidnapped more than 185 people, holding them for ransom to raise money.^[ii]

To suppress an increasingly violent rebellion, the Argentine government and military began to systematically root out the terrorists and people connected

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to them, doing whatever it took to stop them and sometimes using the insurgents' own strategies of kidnapping, torture, and murder against them. In the process, they went too far. It wasn't long before the number of people arrested, kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by the government and military surpassed the number taken by the ERP by an order of the magnitude. Over 30, 000 people, including at least 400 children who were either kidnapped with their parents or born in captivity, were "disappeared" to secret detention and torture facilities such as the one described by Alicia Partnoy. [iii] Many never returned.

The Little School is a partially "fictionalized" account in which Partnoy describes her experience in captivity. There are several aspects of the book that are clearly not an attempt to accurately and dispassionately describe what happened. She describes herself in the third person, creating emotional distance between herself and what was happening to her. She presents poetic descriptions of things that occurred during her captivity. She includes one of her poems about a rerouted stream, which was taken by her captors to be an allegorical reference to a guerrilla leader of some kind. She also changes details about some of her fellow captives who survived, in order to ensure their own safety. She acknowledges the fact several times, and her acknowledgement gives her a great deal of space to expand on some details, recreate others, and conveniently ignore whatever she wishes to ignore, such as the identity of her fellow survivors.

The Little School has clear protagonists and antagonists. Alicia Partnoy establishes at the outset that she and the other captives are the protagonists. She describes herself as a student who engaged in volunteer

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social work, helping others with literacy programs and other initiatives to improve the lives of the poor. She had a somewhat left-of-center perspective due in part to her work with the poor and their fond memories of Peron-era changes that benefited labor unions. Later, after the coup in 1976, she “ clandestinely reproduced and distributed information on the economic situation, the workers’ strikes, and the repression.”[iv] She portrays herself, her husband, and other community activists as positive, hardworking people with no links to Montoneros or ERP.

The arrest of “ good” people, under any circumstances, casts their captors by definition into an antagonist role. In Partnoy’s novel the distinction is very black-and-white. Not one of the prisoners Partnoy describes has any questionable ties that might muddy the very dramatic distinction between the unjustly persecuted prisoners and their captors. In reality, although Partnoy and her husband were not involved with terrorist activities, it is plausible that at least some of their associates might have been. The fact Partnoy presents all the prisoners as innocent victims could potentially be part of the “ fictionalization” or blurring of truth she describes.

The contrast between the protagonists and the antagonists may have been heightened artificially by Partnoy’s lack of emphasis on any criminal activity some of her prisoners might have committed, yet she does not need to exaggerate her description of her captors’ behavior to show systematic human rights abuses. She describes her warrantless arrest, her imprisonment for more than two years without any criminal charge or opportunity to defend herself, and the way she was treated during her imprisonment. She was forced to wear a blindfold constantly, deprived of <https://assignbuster.com/gotcha-last-context-and-analysis-of-the-little-school-by-alicia-partnoy/>

food for eighteen hours a day, deprived of exercise, and frequently beaten. She describes a scene of sexual humiliation where she was forced to stand naked, and she describes how one of her fellow prisoners, nicknamed Benja, was hung upside down and beaten. None of these activities, which were frequently meant for "fun" according to their jailers, was related to the search for information about Montoneros or ERP. Even if they had been, they are concrete examples of routine human rights violations.

To this day, Partnoy does not know who ordered her arrest. Nor does she know the perpetrators of the offenses she experienced during her imprisonment. The brief glimpses she got by peeking through a gap in her blindfold, and the names and personality details she was able to collect about the guards, were not enough to conclusively identify anybody. The question of exactly who used the cattle prod on Graciela, or on exactly which date Partnoy witnessed her husband's torture, cannot be precisely answered simply because Partnoy's captors took such pains to keep their identities secret. She includes, in the book's Appendix, as much information as she can recall, attempting to paint as vivid a picture as possible of each person involved. The detail she provides is not enough to justify an arrest or to obtain a conviction. Most dates and times are not precise because of the way one day blended into the next. To protect the identities of her fellow victims, Partnoy uses pseudonyms and nicknames. Yet perhaps one of her jailers will come across Partnoy's account and recognize the description of himself. Perhaps, also, his friends, peers, and family will read the description, wonder for a moment if it matches him, and love him a little less for it. But the retaliatory aspect of justice, where retribution is visited upon the guilty,

cannot be served. However another aspect of justice, in which society is protected from future abuses, is definitely available.

One of the things Partnoy's book accomplishes, along with her testimony on human rights abuses, is a deliberate direction of the public awareness toward the human rights abuses that occurred during the Dirty War. The Little School forces its reader to think about torture, not just from a theoretical or pragmatic perspective but in terms of its consequences. She dedicates the book to her deceased brother, who was one of the "Disappeared", who reappeared like she did, but who later committed suicide. The victims of the torture, even though they survive, cannot always move beyond their experiences. Indeed, Partnoy's decision to continue living outside Argentina is due in part to her experiences while imprisoned. How, exactly, can a person be expected to take the bus to work, or walk down the street, or shop for groceries without wondering if this half-remembered voice or that dimly recalled footstep belonged to one of her captors who recognizes her?

The Little School honors Partnoy's fellow prisoners in several ways. It validates the experience of the other survivors by providing proof that their experiences were not imaginary or in any way deserved. It provides needed information to comfort the families of at least some of the victims. It publicly refutes the official proclamation, quoted at the start of the book, that accusations of state sponsored kidnapping, torture, and murder are categorically false. But most of all, the book is an act of retaliation. Written in a poetic, "fictionalized" form, the events of the book cannot all be

independently proven or corroborated, but they can also not be effectively

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denied. Published as it was from outside the country, Partnoy's book now belongs to the whole world. Even if a similar coup occurred in Argentina again, the word is out and the world is now watching carefully. The political climate that allowed the Dirty War to pass unremarked and without international response has changed. Not only is the Cold War over, and the incentive to ignore human rights abuses by "friendly" right-wing dictatorships diminished, but the USA no longer the only significant socioeconomic power influencing events in South America.

The old proverb about revenge being a dish best served cold definitely applies to the publication of *The Little School*. With her family safely out of reach outside the country, and with the identities of the other prisoners sufficiently obscured as to prevent retaliation against them, Partnoy's book delivers its message in a way calculated to protect the victims from further abuse. Also, the accusations are permanent. Instead of allowing the conversation to revolve around whether the victims can prove something happened, Partnoy challenges the now-defunct regime and the individuals who supported it to prove that it did not.

[i] John Charles Chasteen. *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*, 3rd Ed. (W. W. Norton & Co., 2011) p. 289.

[ii] Paul S. Lewis. *Guerillas and Generals: The " Dirty War" in Argentina*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002) p. 52

[iii] Alicia Partnoy. *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*. (Cleis Press, 1986, 1998) p. 16.

[iv] Alicia Partnoy. *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*.

(Cleis Press, 1986, 1998) p. 13