

"This book reunites me with the best of Uruguay, with that spirit of regarding another's experiences as one's own"

Ruperto Long - writer, engineer and politician - has just launched "The girl who watched the trains depart" (Aguilar Ediciones). The novel links the stories of four lives in the midst of the tumultuous 1940s. The publication is already in its third edition and, according to Marcos Aguinis, is "a touching work, full of light". Long told *Voces* how the novel arose and about the writing process.

Charlotte, an eight-year-old Belgian girl who disappears in Liège, a city occupied by the Nazis. Alter, her uncle, who is forced to work in a ghetto where Hitler has confined the Jews. Dimitri Amilakvari, a French soldier of Georgian origin. Domingo López Delgado, a Uruguayan soldier who enrolled as a volunteer in the Free French Forces and posted to the Foreign Legion in North Africa.

Ruperto Long's story revolves around these four characters, flowing between memories of real love stories in the face of xenophobia, persecutions, migrations and all the horrors of the Second World War.

Long is the author of four books: "*Piantao. Balada para Horacio Ferrer*" (2014), "*No dejaré memorias. El enigma del Conde de Lautreamont*" (2012), "*Hablando claro*" (2009) and "*Ché Bandoneón*" (2002).

He was decorated with the Order of Arts and Letters of the French Republic in 2013. Two years later he received the Juan Zorrilla de San Martín medal of merit. He has received various distinctions, for example the Eslabón Solidario award for his support for people with disabilities, the Jerusalem Prize, the World Trade Centre Prize, the Premio Morosoli and the Premio Génesis.

He has been a Senator, Chairman of UTE¹ and Chairman of the LATU². He is currently a Minister of the Court of Auditors and is publicly identified as a politician, in addition to being an engineer.

At what time of your life did the writer in you emerge?

¹ UTE: Uruguayan state-owned electrical company

² LATU: Technological Laboratory of Uruguay; created in 1965 as a joint effort of the government and the private sector. Its goals include promoting the sustainable development of the country and its international insertion through innovation.

I have always done all three things at once. I've been writing all my life. When I was 18 I attended the Engineering Faculty and at the same time, after the 1971 elections, Wilson (Ferreira Aldunate)³ published a weekly for the National Party (*Partido Nacional*) and asked me to write a page, sometimes two, on University-related matters. It was then that I started to write articles. That was until the dictatorship shut us down.

That was my first foray into writing. During the dictatorship there were attempts like the magazine "*Propuesta*", where I wrote more in-depth articles, but it was shut down too (laughs). With the return of democracy, I wrote features on political topics, always with a technical slant. Then I was co-author of some books.

How you did you make the leap from writing articles to literary texts?

With my book "*Che bandoeón*", 2002, that took me three or four years. It's a mixture of everything from autobiography to novel and essay.

The issue of development is always present, mixed with fictionalised stories. Then I wrote "*Hablando claro*", which is more about thoughts. And finally my first purely literary work was "*No dejaré memorias*", published in 2012, which is an attempt to recreate the life of a literary great, in the form of fictionalised biography of the Count of Lautreamont. Very little was known, or is known about his life. I compiled the information available and gave it a form that was very well received. This gap needed to be filled, since there is a lot of literary analysis about his work but very little about his life.

Then came "*Piantado*" a biography with a novelistic approach. And this recently published book, which although it is a novel, is inspired by real events. But it is essentially a novel.

In each of your books you deal with very different subjects. What makes you want to write about a particular topic?

I would say that a common denominator is that it has to be something or someone that awakens a certain amount of admiration in me. Something surprising. In this way maybe the same feeling can be awakened in the reader. The Count of Lautreamont, Horacio Ferrer, this Belgian girl, the Uruguayan soldier who goes to fight in World War II, etc., are all characters that make me say "what a life they have, so interesting, so rich!".

I am curious to know what is behind these events. And in all these cases there is a real story where it is difficult to know where reality ends and the novel begins.

³ Wilson Ferreira Aldunate (1919-1988) - A Uruguayan politician and a historically important member of the National Party. Exiled during the dictatorship in the 1970s, he returned to Uruguay in 1984.

Does each case require extensive field research?

Always. There are writers who are discouraged by fieldwork. Several have told me so. In my case it's the opposite, I see it as a challenge. And the more difficult a place is to access, the better I like it. And then another thing happens to me: imagination is fired when I unearth an attractive detail.

And how did the process go with this book?

It was hard work, because it involved recreating a very delicate period, with sensitive issues just below the surface. For everything that happened and issues that have repercussions even today. I'm not just looking for things in the lives of those who are here and those who are not, who died during and after the war, but I also try to understand that era. What happened in France, Poland, Switzerland and of course in Uruguay.

It was a very painstaking search, although with the help of Internet you can access a huge amount of information and connect with archives, museums, etc. I also decided to visit some of the most significant places: Liège, where the story begins, Paris, Lyon, at the Foreign Legion headquarters, a military enclave that allowed me to enter and access original documents from the wars in North Africa. And also in Rocha, which I looked at through different eyes.

You deal with topics that remain sensitive today, was this an additional challenge when approaching them?

That's a very good question because it is true. There is the particular sensitivity of a people that was brutally persecuted. It's a topic I am broaching 70 years later, outside of that context, and in my case without being a person of Jewish origin. Indeed, there is a risk that someone might question such issues being addressed. So yes, we must be particularly careful. And try the best to understand and be fair, avoiding simplifications. I am pleased that it has been very well received by people of Jewish origin who see themselves reflected in these stories. Directly or indirectly.

How do you think readers will feel identified?

There's a question of feelings, people feel a close rapport. It's as though some of the situations could have been lived by them. There are things that catch my attention. I have made many presentations throughout the country and people everywhere feel identified, they are moved. They talk in the first person And this reunites me with the best of Uruguay, with that spirit of regarding another's experiences as one's own. Everyone finds a story and feels identified; there is empathy towards what happened to others.