UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

October 18, 2012
Andrea Estrada

UCSB Literary Scholar Receives PEN Center USA Award for Translation

When Chilean novelist and short story writer José Donoso died in 1996, he left behind a vast collection of papers. Among them was a manuscript begun some 23 years earlier. Discovered by his daughter, Pilar, the manuscript constituted a mostly finished draft of Donoso's final work, "Lagartija sin cola" ("Lizard Without a Tail").

Edited for publication by poet and critic Julio Ortega, the novel was published posthumously, in Spanish, in 2007. Last year, Northwestern University Press put out the first English-language edition of the book –– a translation by Suzanne Jill Levine, professor of Latin American literature and translation studies at UC Santa Barbara.

For that edition –– "The Lizard's Tale: A Novel" –– Levine will receive the renowned PEN Center USA 2012 Literary Award for Translation. The award will be presented on October 22 in a ceremony at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

"On behalf of the entire UC Santa Barbara community, I congratulate Professor Suzanne Jill Levine on this very high honor," said UCSB Chancellor Henry T. Yang. "The prestigious PEN Center USA award is a testament to Professor Levine's outstanding accomplishments as a literary scholar in translating Latin American literature."

Noted David Marshall, Michael Douglas Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts and professor of English and comparative literature at UCSB: "Jill Levine is one of the

finest translators of Latin American literature, as well as a leading theorist in translation studies. She deserves to be honored for bringing José Donoso's posthumous novel to life for Anglophone readers."

Levine, who was personally acquainted with Donoso, is the author of numerous studies in Latin American literature, including "The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction." She has translated two earlier works by Donoso –– "El Lugar sin limites" and "Casa de campo" –– as well as works by other Latin American writers, including Manuel Puig, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Jorge Luis Borges, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante.

"It was a very moving experience for me," Levine said of her work on "Lizard Without a Tale." "Donoso was a great writer –– a great wit. It was like having a conversation with him, even after death. I could feel his voice, his sensibility, his intelligence, his crankiness, his polyglot savoir faire with language, and, most of all, his wonderful wit."

Although he lived most of his life in Chile, Donoso spent many years in self-imposed exile in Mexico, the United States, and Spain. He was one of the central figures in the "boom" –– the transformation of Latin American literature that began in the 1960's. Other members of that group included Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Manuel Puig. "He was part of that group but he was a bit on the margins of it," Levine said. "He was highly respected, but never got the same level of recognition as some of the others."

Having a personal acquaintance with Donoso, Levine said, gave her an edge in translating his work, as it has with others, such as Puig, Infante, and Casares. "Where there was a turn of phrase of his in English, I could hear his accent and the way he would say it. I could hear his voice," she said.

In translating "The Lizard's Tale," Levine took poetic license with the title. As she explains in her translator's note to the edition, one of Donoso's original titles for the book was "The Lizard's Tail" ("La cola de la lagartija"). However, because that title had already been claimed by another novel from that time period, Ortega opted to change the Spanish edition to "Lizard Without a Tail." To honor Donoso's fondness for Henry James and the English language, Levine continues, "I gave the title another ‘turn of the screw,' adding the self-reflective dimension of telling a tale."

Levine describes translating as an act of communication that is also, in some ways, an act of reincarnation. With her keen sense of language, she breathes a different life into the literary works she translates, and brings them to audiences for whom they might otherwise be entirely inaccessible. "In this case, I really felt a closeness to the sensibility of the character and the language," she said. "It felt good to be doing it."

Related Links

Northwestern University Press

PEN Center USA

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.