

# The collection as a reading device of political violence in children's literature in Argentina

Laura Rafaela-García \*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concept of collection based on themes or objects as an approach to reading and organizing an analysis corpus. The methodological problem involving selection and interpretation of the objects of study is exemplified in the topic of political violence during Argentina's last military dictatorship (1976-1983) and representations of violence in children's literature in Argentina. On the bias of postulates forwarded by Elizabeth Jelin (2002), who defines stories of the past as communicable narratives that serve to build meaning in the future, we propose an examination of the contact points between the field of memory and modes from the appropriation of the

\* INVELEC-UNT-CONICET, Tucumán, Argentina. lau2garcia@hotmail.com

past. Collections of children's readings published between 1970 and 1990 and organized in terms of the representation of violence stand as a legacy for future generations who did not experience the events. Even today the collection as a reading device challenges the selection and organization practices of material from this literary sub-genre existing at the margins of the dominant cultural system.

**Keywords:** Collection; Topic; Political Violence; Argentina Children's Literature.

## RESUMEN

### **La colección como dispositivo de lectura de la violencia política en la literatura infantil argentina**

*Laura Rafaela García*

Este artículo aborda el concepto de colección como un modo de leer y organizar un corpus de análisis a partir de temas u objetos determinados. El problema metodológico que implica seleccionar e interpretar los componentes del corpus de estudio se ve ejemplificado en este caso a partir del abordaje del tema de la violencia política de la última dictadura militar argentina (1976-1983) y la exploración de las representaciones de la violencia política en la literatura infanto-juvenil argentina. Proponemos realizar un recorrido por los puntos de contacto entre el campo de las memorias y los modos de apropiación del pasado a partir de los postulados de Elizabeth Jelin (2002), que define las narrativas del pasado como relatos comunicables que contribuyen a la construcción de sentidos para el futuro. Las colecciones de lecturas organizadas a partir de las formas de representar la violencia en los textos destinados a niños publicados entre 1970 y 1990 se presentan como un legado para las nuevas generaciones que no vivieron los hechos y, al mismo tiempo, muestra que la colección como dispositivo de lectura aun hoy interpela las prácticas de selección y organización de material de una zona literaria marginada por el sistema cultural.

**Palabras claves:** Colección; Tema; Violencia Política; Literatura infantil argentina.

## INTRODUCTION

The prologue of the text *Oliverio junta preguntas* (Oliverio collects questions) by Silvia Schujer (2006) introduces the protagonist as someone who collects questions.<sup>1</sup> The particular quest of the young man is simple, but it nonetheless makes him stand out from his peers because, in contrast to those who collect figurines, Oliverio cannot simply buy questions in the news stand or trade them in the school yard. This situation shows that his album of questions is infinite. First he gathered only his own questions, but soon his friends began to pitch in until such time that some questions were repeated. This caused Oliverio's collecting to stall, seemingly having reached a limit. This impasse causes Oliverio to change his approach and begin to try to find answers to the questions he has collected.

This story interests us because Oliverio is a great collector and the text seems to suggest that those who collect are faced with an interminable job. In this vein, we take stock in order to reflect on the task of the reader and the collector in the endless quest for meanings. This approach views the child as an active reader joining the game of literature described by Walter Benjamin (1989), a passionate book collector. In "*El panorama del libro infantil*" (Overview of children's literature), the author introduces two ideas with respect to the relationship between literature and childhood that are key to our quest to understand children's literature.<sup>2</sup> On one hand, there is the perception of an experience in contact with books in which the child as a reader is an active protagonist; and on the other, it alludes to the many manifestations of this form of itinerancy that a genuine exploration of literature can provide. Benjamin is not only a great collector, but also extremely interested in literature deemed fit for women and children only. Benjamin was busy preserving old children's books as a legacy of the past, in which he sought to find the duty of the future.

This study stands at the crossroads of memory of the recent past and literature. Its objective is to reflect on the modalities of reading in institution-

1 "Oliverio collected question like some collect figurines. Questions of all kinds.

Bign and small, such as: Where is the river out of which the last Phoenician ship set sail before Roman civilization came to an end? Or: How are you? Eas and hard, such as: What color was the white horse of Saint Martin? Or: What is the square root of two million eight-hundred fifty thousand and one?

Until one day he met María Laura. Or he ran out of ink. And since then, without really trying, another notebook began to fill with answers" (Schujer, 2006:10-11).

2 "In this permeable world, adorned with colors, where everything changes place with every step, the boy is received as an actor. With costumes of every color that he collects while reading and looking, the reader enters a masquerade. He participates in it by reading." (Benjamin, 1989: 73).

al spaces. On this point, the proposition transcends the matter of reading in schools and seeks to advance toward library spaces where it is possible to conceive of reading modalities that take into account operations of selection and organization of reading material.

To exemplify our proposal, we examine the topic of political violence associated with the military dictatorship in Argentina in power from 1976 to 1983, and the ways the recent past is handed down for the purpose of ensuring that lessons are not lost by successive generations

With this purpose in mind, we combed out references to political violence in the Argentine literature targeted to children and young people between 1970 and 1990. We aim to identify current literary practices that reflect on the child as a reader. We also hope to raise the question regarding the place children's literature has in library science studies and in open access archives.

This paper is part of a larger research project whose aim is to examine memory studies in accord with the postulates put forth by Elizabeth Jelin (2002) and generally in the Argentine children's literature field.<sup>3</sup> This exploration led us to examine the constitutional tensions of children's and adolescent literature, and the marginality of this area of literature (Díaz Röner, 2000), which often finds itself on the fringes of the cultural system.

In the selection of children's literature in Argentina, we can discern a series of stories that challenge the reader from the standpoint of fiction and which we call narratives. We take this concept from Jelin, who has grasped the importance of these stories in the process of the re-signification of the past. As pointed out by the author, the confluence of certain events of a private order framed in shared social contexts drives the search for meaning. In this order of events, remembered or memorable, it shall be expressed in a narrative form, becoming the way in which the subject builds meaning from the past, a memory that is expressed in a communicable story (Jelin, 2002: 27). Jelin addresses two fundamental elements: the past that takes on meaning through its links to the present, and the intention of communicating this experience that emerges from a subjective process.

The texts in our corpus provide memory studies new modulations for examining the past from the standpoint of fictional narratives. These stories feature certain scenes or situations in which the characters and action

3 We are referring to the PhD dissertation: *Narrativas de la violencia política en la literatura infantil argentina. Los trabajos de la memoria para contar la violencia política (1970-1990)* [Stories of political violence in Argentine children's literature. Works to memory to tell about political violence]; advisor: Rossana Nofal (INVELEC-UNT-CONICET), which was supported by a grant from the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Tecnológicas (CONICET).

address topics associated with the political life of society, such as hierarchy relationships, the forms of domination and conflict resolution, the construction of legitimacy of power, among other matters. Our study starts from the question of how to tell new generations of things that occurred during the times of political violence that prevailed during in the last military dictatorship in Argentina. One form of responding to this question is to organize collections and identify in this practice the will to transmit and remember the past through the forms of representing violence in children's literature.

In the field of Argentine children's literature, the emergence of author Maria Elena Walsh in the 1970s launched a new generation of writers who employed new poetic forms exploiting humor and playful language in order to appeal to the imaginations of children. Outstanding among these authors are Laura Devetach and Elsa Bornemann. From the 1960s through the 1970s, this group of children's book writers began to introduce political elements in their fiction, which serves to challenge the reader with regard to certain aspects of social life. It is not about recognizing a set of values in texts, an exercise that would entails making the field retreat to positions held before the 1960s, but rather showing through the collection how the authors provide tools to the readers to learn about the world and challenge them about the way of intervening in it. Recognition of these movements of the narrative of the field toward literary arbitrariness signals the way in which the fiction of authors articulate empirical and imaginary elements, a fact that evidences the desire to transmit a certain view of the world. In the field of children's literature, this responsibility is manifested in the act of telling, understood as a long-standing literary tradition, which is why this study addresses the genre of narrative published in the study window.

At this point, our research brings together a certain topic linked to the transmission of the past and a zone that literary study has explored hardly at all, which allows reflection on the possibility of organizing collections of readings as a access way to the field of Argentine children's literature and a way of teaching the representations of political violence by a group of authors, which stands out not only for their use of symbolic language, but also for their contribution to a collective world view. In this regard, in the full bloom of the "memory boom" in Argentina in the first decade of the new millennium, Jelin stresses the cultural mechanism by which memory has a fundamental role in building the sense of belonging, and which relates it to

the activity of the collector in a world that wants to interpret its past.<sup>4</sup> Collecting is presented as a currently valid cultural practice that is significant in the construction of subjectivity itself.

At this point, understanding the collection as an approach to reading implies making a place for the specific interests of the reader, who wishes to quell a doubt by exploring multiple approaches to a topic or object. We define the collection as a reading device by which each subject organizes its own itineraries and selects the texts that on the basis of their personal interests serve to configure a given topic area. In this reading operation, which has an empirical basis, we can discern at least two movements: one is the selection by means of which the object is distinguished from the rest on the basis of a particular feature, and the other is by inclusion, in which this singularity re-signifies a collective and contributes to a larger group that at the same time stands apart from the whole.

The organization of a collection implies two positions taken by the collector: on one hand, the search attitude that assumes the action of tracking something, which can take the form of a question that the subject carries forward and attempts to answer through this activity; while on the other, there is the repetition of something that calls attention to itself and whose permanence marks the continuity or unity among the parties that wind up composing the whole. In this same way, collections hold a specific place in both public and private spheres, since they establish fundamental links between distinct generations, and are inherited and preserved not only for the value of their components, but also for the affective weight that imbues them a special meaning.

Let us return to Oliverio and his question collection, which is a representative figure of what each reader as heir can do with reading as they exercise the freedom to put together their own collections of texts. At the juncture of text and reader, multiple meanings and alternatives are unchained, such as in the case of the character Schujer, who transforms his initial amazing question into a collection of answers as a way of making it possible to re-appropriate objects. In this sense, we take up the concept of appropriation posited by Analía Gerbaudo (2011), who starts with the concepts of Jacques Derrida

4 “We live in the age of collectors. We record and store everything: childhood photos and the mementos of our grandmothers in the private sphere of family life. Collections of newspapers and magazines (or clippings) referring to topics or periods of history that interest us; the official and private archives of all kinds. There is a cult to the past, which is expressed in the consumption and merchandising of diverse “retro” fashions, in the antiquarian boom and the historical novel. In the public sphere, archives grow, the date to be commemorated multiply, the demand for commemorating plaques and monuments never ceases. Moreover, the communication media structure and organize the presence of the past in every sphere of daily life” (Jelin, 2002:10)

in literary discourse, and we reflect on the possibilities of understanding the reader as an heir capable of re-signifying the texts in their quest for meaning.<sup>5</sup> The narratives found in children's and adolescent literature collections constitute a legacy that open an unpredictable route into the subject experience of the reader and with regard to their time and place, while contributing to the construction of new understandings of the past.

### THE COLLECTION AS A READING DEVICE

To organize a collection, it is important to start from the intention of gathering a subset of elements around a spinal axis, which can be a topic area or object that is determined in the examination of a given field, theme or segment of time, and which serves to imbue the collection with meaning. It is important to clarify that the reader shall have a rhythm of appropriation and organization of the stories in collection that is distinct from that of a reader who is just starting out in the field and in practice, since that latter must invest time in gathering and selection.

The concept of theme is operative to the organization of a collection of literary works. At this point we point to Raymond Williams in *Marxism and literature*, who asserts this term as a determinant variable, which in conjunction with the *position* or the choice of a mode of text organization and *mode of formal composition* define the concept of gender (1980: 210). As a constitutive feature of the gender category, the theme is a variable associated to the different forms of the material social process and the literary system; therefore, it arises from the scope of action, from the quality of the object or from the particular process.

Williams notes that theme is subject to social, cultural and historical variations in such a way that the emergence of studies on memory of the recent past start from an interdisciplinary approach to perform a review of the horrors of the dictatorship, which makes it possible to cross reference it with literature. In our case, this motivates our examination of how authors writing during the dictatorship allude to political violence and what kind of references can be discerned during the subsequent early years of democracy.

In this regard, we wish to stress that the collection as a reading device is determined by the features of the problem at hand, and the definition of theme is the starting point for organizing the *corpus* of work under study.

5 Gerbaudo expresses it in the following terms: "He inherits, or is ,worthy of being considered an heir, he who is partially unfaithful, that is, he who *appropriates*, he who can make something new with that which he carries" (2011: 22).

The collection locks into the fragmentary nature of the field of memories in order to account for the injuries of the past. This includes interfering factors and memory gaps, but also tools for creating new meanings in the future. The fragmentary nature of the collection makes the story of the past bearable. In the subjective framework of the collection, the transmission process is found. Jelin and Kaufman (2006: 9) claim that subjectivity relates to processes and dynamics that are fundamental features of human existence, providing and creating meanings, while articulating experiences, representations and affiliations in a unique way. Memory specialists argue that this process is both individual and social, because experiences and emotions are always present in social relations.

Moreover, the profusion of themes and texts in Argentine children's literature in recent decades is such that the field can be addressed from the perspective of the collection, a device around which other distinct collections on diverse themes can be organized. The collection provides a Derridean way of understanding reading that according to Gerbaudo is like a journey that begins with the text one chooses and leads to other texts and toward representations holding the memory of other texts, without any certainty about all the texts involved in the work (Gerbaudo, 2007: 259). On the basis of this idea, it is possible to set up diverse itineraries based on objects or any given thread one wishes to follow. The organization of collections addresses another of the interests of our research, which is to examine the modes of fiction dealing with political violence in children's and adolescent literature, and which has been largely overlooked. In this line and in order to lend continuity to the logic of the collection as a doorway to exploring and learning about a field, we might examine representations of childhood in children's literature, the manifestations of fear or modalities of animal characters in order to propose feasible and attractive themes that are attractive to reading and knowledge of this literary genre.

In the tasks of identification and construction of the corpus of this study, the contributions of Miguel Dalmaroni (2009) are essential, for by making the *corpus* the overt device in the domain, he makes certain questions explicit and this contributes in the direction of our assertions.<sup>6</sup> This operation inevitably involves symbolic violence, since it entails mechanisms of domination and exclusion that are part of the historical dispute between canon and *corpus*. It also introduces dialogue with authors from other times and poses the question about which the collection imposed order to certain subjects

6 "Is the order of the subset the condition for recognizing a collection? Who collects, and on what basis?" (Dalmaroni, 2009: 70)



in any given past (Dalmaroni, 2009: 74). Finally, in light of the philosophical and epistemological dilemma, we face the problem of building a historical-narrative and critical *corpus*, which seeks to produce and experience something new. In our case, this serves to explore representations of political violence in the field of Argentine children's literature. To this end we position ourselves as critics in order to provide new ways to re-signify the past that go beyond the historical facts or witness testimonies. We also position ourselves as readers searching for certain tracks or hidden clues that allow us to respond to the initial question of our research, which is how to relate the horrors of the dictatorship to younger generations who did not experience it.

To organize the corpus of our work, we started by reading the article "Literature for children and memories: collection of readings" by Rossana Nofal (2006), who organized the first collection telling of political violence. This collection was based on series of stories for children orbiting around the fantasy work of Rosmary Jackson (1986). This paper describes the author's survey of children's literature and her questions arising from the ways the dictatorship is depicted in Argentine children's and adolescent literature.<sup>7</sup> Among the things we examine in our analysis, we have the object as a common denominator of a collection, which in our case is stories, as determined by the subjectivity of the collector, the uniqueness of the individual and the object's contribution to the whole, as well as the collector's imprint on the object selected to be included in the collection, which matches, once again, the subjective value and the potential movement of the object to the periphery, where it occupies a new place among things strange or exclusive.

These conditions motivate our proposal to examine the narratives of children's literature, as the authors mount their challenge from the field of children's literature, while defying adult expectations in terms of themes and genres. The first movement consists of tracking the figures in this field that make the recent past conveyable, while potentiating the capacity of the children's literature field to address political violence through the act of bringing together these stories. We understand that each of these stories finds its place in the collection, and by tracking this movement we find that each has its own way of alluding to violence. At the same time, however, these stories could be part of other series, because the topics addressed and their narratives allow it to be so. In each story we recognize the unique imprint of an author, and as fiction readers we find a modulation of the past in the fictional

7 Regarding the organization of collections, Nofal provides some keys: What makes a subset of objects constitute a collection? The coherence and individuality of each element, the same class, techniques and logic for ordering them, the standard, the interest in its special value and the seduction of things strange." (2006: 115)

account. In that gesture, the story enters the public domain and becomes part of the collective logic of the collection. This is where the movement of interpretation resides, contributing to the construction of ways to think about the question at hand.

The confluence of the proposals of Jelin, stressing the need to appropriate the recent past and assign new meaning to the stories, the organization of a corpus that represents a new contribution to literary research --as Dalmaroni posits—reading as part of an experience that arises from a personal survey of a field, from the inconceivable semantic saturation and the possibility of understanding the work of the reader or critic as unfaithful heir of long-standing tradition --as suggested by Nofal and Gerbaudo—have contributed to the organization of three collections of readings, which we believe can serve to relate political violence in literary discourse.

### ITINERARIES OF ELEPHANTS, TOADS AND MONSTERS

We have stated that the concept of theme is essential to organizing an excursion of the field of readings that comprise by the collection. Objects or figures, however, are also important because their reoccurrence in the texts makes it possible to place them in a series and grasp their continuity and importance. In this section we intend to present a brief overview of the collections, stressing some key moments in its organization. We will also provide a general review of the texts included in each collection in order to illustrate some possible compositional movements.<sup>8</sup>

The first collection was called “memory of an elephant.” It sets up a game alluding to the popular association of elephants with memory and the importance of memory. This idea is repeated in series of stories gathered in the study window.

The first text that drew our attention was the story “An elephant takes up a lot of space” by Elsa Bornemann (2008 [1975]),<sup>9</sup> which was published in a children’s collection that was banned during the last dictatorship that claimed it was a threat to Christian moral values. This text and the central character, who promotes an uprising of circus animals to protest their abuse by animal tamers, provided a structure for a series stories orbiting this figure in accord with the order of appearance.

8 These collections were developed in detail in the doctoral dissertation, in several published papers (García, 2010; 2012; 2013) and in diverse conferences.

9 The initial date of publication and the importance of the production context of the texts included in our historical review shall appear in square brackets. [sic]

The stories' symbolic content and the role of the elephant as protagonist in the collection is based on the rhetorical device of metaphor referring to political forms in the adult world. The story led us to review earlier stories featuring elephants. We found the novel *Dailan Kifki* by Maria Elena Walsh (2007 [1966]). In this story, the protagonist wishes to adopt a pet elephant. This provides fodder for a crazy adventure that challenges the institutional order of society. In a tone of parody, it exposes how difficult is it for adults to respond to the situation.

We also found the story "Guy" by Laura Devetach included in *Monigote in the Arena* (2008 [1975]), which explores the elephant's fear of disappearing when it sees its reflection vanish in a pool of water. In the context of the first disappearances of persons at the hand of the dictatorship, this story posits a suggestive image. In the chronological order of the collection, the next story, "An elephant takes up a lot of space," features the protagonist Victor. The title of this story reiterates the phrase that Guy repeats to express his fear of vanishing. Victor's proposal has to do with the freedom of life in the jungle, which most circus animals have never known. In the key of fiction, there is a social proposal to oppose the oppression of Argentine society in general at that time.

In 1984, when democracy had been reestablished, Gustavo Roldan published the story "Who knows the elephant?" in the collection *The mountain was a party* (2008a). In the conversation between Sapo and Vizcacha, this text employs the figure of the elephant and some of its features, which in the logic of the collection makes sense and can be understood as the will to replace this figure on the basis of the censorship of Bornemann's text. The next story by the same author is titled "Elephant Forbidden" (Roldan, 1999 [1988]), which relates the confrontation between the Pumas and the Jaguars, the former saying the elephant is the size of a horse and the latter claiming it is the size of a mouse. This is solved by means of elections, which is knotted in a tie, and eventually resolved with a compromise position stating the elephant does not exist. Throughout the text we witness the reaction of the flea, who truly knows the elephant exists, because he lived in the circus. The flea is forbidden to speak because of his small size and the accepted view that the largest animal in the jungle does not really exist.

Finally, we included in our first collection the story "The genie of the midden", which belongs to *The hero and other stories* by Ricardo Mariño (2008 [1995]); It tells the story of a boy who lives in a garbage dump and finds a rusty teapot, a kind of magic lamp containing a grumpy genie, who nonetheless grants the boy's wish to have an elephant. The existence of an exotic elephant in a world of material deprivation generates a series of adven-

tures. At the close of this journey, this story symbolizes the will of memory as a subject's chosen means for appropriating the past. If you go into more detail in the narrative situations of texts included in this collection, you will likely discover the symbolic meaning of each of the elephants. These meanings enrich the allegory of both man's ability and impotence before authoritarianism. These symbolic meanings also echo in terms of ideological differences and hierarchies, as well as in regard to the importance of collective action that does not resort to subordinating or subjugating others. It is about political practices that cut across social life and the figure of the elephant which empowers and multiplies as it progresses along the route.

Rounding out this first collection is the story "El genio del basural" (The genie of the refuse midden), which first appeared in *El héroe y otros cuentos* (The hero and other stories) by Ricardo Mariño (2008 [1995]). It is a story of a child living in a garbage dump who find a rusty magic teapot, from which a grumpy genie emerges, who nonetheless grants the child's first wish, which is for an elephant. The arrival of the exotic elephant on the scene drives a series of adventures amid a landscape of deprivation. Closing out the collection, this adventure symbolizes the individual's willful choice to remember and appropriate the past.

A closer look at the situations posited in the narrative included in this collection reveals the symbolic meaning of each of the elephants, enhancing the allegory of the possibilities and impossibilities of acting against authoritarianism, ideological differences and hierarchies, etc., as well as the importance of collective action, without resorting to subordination and subjugation of any another party. These are political practices that traverse social life, and the figure of the elephant empowers and multiplies as it move forward.

The unifying element of second collection is Sapo (Toad), a character in the stories of Gustavo Roldan that holds a special link with the past. He is the narrator of the group and his favorite tool is the spoken word. Therefore, among the group of animals of the Chaco Forest, Toad is positioned as the legitimate representative of the voice of all animals. In the prologue to *Cada cual se divierte como puede* (Everyone makes their own fun) (Roldan, 2007a [1984]), Toad intervenes to denounce the author and claim authorship of the stories Roldán is telling. Throughout this poetic foray, we recognize the author's identification or projection into the Toad character, which allows him to become a link between past and present, and to address the issue of violence and others matters from foundation of experience. In this collection, the first stories establish Toad's status as a mediator between the life of the mountain and the city, and between past and present; while the subsequent stories focus more on the topic of political violence.

The first story in which Toad makes his appearance is “On rain and toads,” where he is the victim of the superstitions held by other animals, who believe he must be held prisoner in a belly up position. The action moves forward through the dialogues involving several characters, a device that highlights spoken language and will remain a distinctive feature of the author’s poetics. The particular tone of these interactions is derived from the counterpoint of voices, especially that of Toad, who manages to escape through his cunning speech. The second text that contributes to the construction of the character is the title story of *The Mountain was a party* (Roldan, 2008a [1984]) This story describes the mountain bisected by a river, with large and small animals living on either side. The narrator speaks from “this side of the river” and as the story progresses the reader leans about life on this side of the river. In the story “Who knows an elephant?” Toad manifests his ability to represent and demonstrates the power of his words to assist in the construction of the world view on the mountain, because by describing the elephants to the other animals they are able to reformulate its appearance. In contrast, the third major story in this collection, “In the olden days it really rained,” Toad takes us back to his origin, thereby legitimizing his authority and knowledge on the foundation of his long experience reaching as back to the time of the flood.

On the other hand, the short story “A mountain for living,” from the collection *Everyone makes their own fun* (Roldan, 2007a [1984]), reveals the collective poetic project in which the characters exist. We find the first references to political violence, such as banning and persecution under laws imposed by the Tiger, whom many animals obey. This results in silence and fear among many animals in the bush, some of which move to live on the other side of the river in a clear allusion to exile. Another important story in this collection revealing the importance of the Toad’s word and role as mediator of intergenerational dialogue is *As if noise can really disturbs* (Roldan, 2007b [1986]). As good storyteller, Toad speaks the truth to the smallest animals of the mountain about the death of Tatu. The title story of the collection alludes to the discomfort of death and the void caused by the silence of absence. Toad’s account shows the hostility of death as part of life. The character’s farewell is an act of remembrance in which the joy of Tatu’s life and all of his adventures are retold.

The story “The size of fear” tells the tale of Coati’s encounter with fear. In the first part of the story, the narrator builds suspense through the device of spoken counterpoint, because Coati never states who is chasing him; but he gradually describes his tormentor as he responds to Toad’s questions. This reveals that the supposed monster does not exist and is rather a prod-

uct of Coati's imagination. Thereafter, Toad deftly helps Coati face this monstrous image and dismantle it.

The auditorium filled with animals asks Toad how he recognized the threat, and Toad responds that he has faced it many times. The story closes with Toad wisely assuring all the animals that one's fear is just like the fear of others. In this scene, subjectivity is presented as a part of the construction of each subject needed for facing the challenges; and it is accepted as a trait of the personal and shared collective identity.

Roldan's (2008b [1989]), collection *Toad in Buenos Aires* is his fundamental vehicle for addressing political violence. It includes the key stories: "Likes are likes" and "The rules of the game". In the former story, Toad describes life in the big city and he tells the animals of the jungle of the daily hustle-bustle, the crowding, the polluted river, the people's interest in learning about animals from other lands, etc. The allusions to prohibitions, censorship and police intervention as a way of life are critiques of society's illogical order. Toad acts as if these things are perfectly natural, but the animals are indignant at his suggestion that such are "The rules of the game." The story speaks of the political organization of the city. The game known as elections has several stages, involving posting campaign posters on all of the walls of the city, casting ballots and other associated activities. Toad explains all of this in an objective way despite the bafflement of the animals, who speak out appalled at all of the abuses they learn about. When Toad describes the military class, he uses a shared code and is able to transmit the very real danger such people represent. Toad tells them of all the people who spoke out against the system and tried to change the rules of the game.

In this reading tour, we conclude that the objections of the animals of the jungle reveal the operation of a system of norms and codes distinct from the ethical and political project guiding the lives of the animals. In Roldan's poetics we see an alternative to political violence based on collective actions. This collection addressing political violence is built on the figure of analogy, which allows the reader to recognize similarities between two social organization represented by the way of life in the jungle and the ways on the other side of the river. In this context, the mediator between the distinct parties and the distinct time frames is Toad. Roldan shows the reader situations that are similar to the Argentine social reality, and he shifts these into his stories of life in the jungle in order to highlight the irony of the positions taken and the variants employed to resolve problems.

The third collection is organized around the figure of the monsters and their potential modalities. This is why we decided to call this collection "The monstrous." This collection consists of stories published in the decade of

the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, during the early years of the democratic reorganization. We stress this context for two reasons: on one hand, it allows us to highlight the emergence of the fantasy genre in the field of Argentine children's literature, while on the other being mindful of the public's growing demand for authorities to account for the disappearance of persons during the dirty war. In this regard, the climate of the those times was informed not only by the experience of violence, but also by the voices of victims and other directly affected parties, which served to mobilize the outrage of certain social groups.

Recall that in these years the National Commission on Disappeared Persons (CONADEP) is established, and in 1984 it published a report titled *Never Again*, gathering the testimonies of witnesses and survivors of the killing centers.

With the conception of monstrosity, emerging from the appropriation of the fantastic and especially from children's fantasy literature, we allude to a narrative field that addresses the strangeness found in situations that cause deformation of the familiar, what Freud called sinister, the involvement of monsters and ghosts as protagonists that recreate "the other" --both distant and near to the world of the reader-- and sensibility that moves beyond the story to give rise to a subjective experience built within the limits of the unspeakable and representable. The uniqueness of the experience of violence influences the authors in the field, and they employ the fantasy genre to subvert and attack the establishment cultural order by undoing its structures and meanings.

To define this concept we appeal to Rosmary Jackson (1986), whose work employs three central features of the fantasy genre: its disruption and undermining what is representable and "real" in literature; its hostility towards static units by juxtaposing incongruous elements while resisting fixedness, and, finally, its ability to dissolve the basic notions of time, space and character in conjunction with the appropriation of language and syntax in order to raise questions about the social order and the meaning of life (Jackson, 1986: 12-13). Fantasy modalities make it possible to address issues relating to the fragmentation of personality, the natural fear of formlessness, absence, death, while also offering ways to resist and react against the arbitrary social order.

The monstrosity recognizable in the singular figure of the monster assumes the symbolic form of fear in stories that speak from the position of fear and the things fear can produce. The latter aspect of fear is illustrated in the first story of our collection, titled *Irulana and ogronte (A Tale of plentiful fear)*, by Graciela Montes (1991). This story contrasts the exceptional size

of the monster and the tininess of the protagonist. The device exploits two manifestations of fear, as the protagonist is paralyzed at the sight of the monster and the people are emotionally subjugated to the monster's foul moods. The arbitrariness of power depicted in the story addresses not only political violence, but also touches on the relationships between adults and children. Early in the story we learn the protagonist's name is Irenita, the narrator, however, gives her the nickname Irulana thanks to her courage and other twists and turns of the story. In the final scene in the dark of night, Irulana is faced with the sleeping monster; she builds up her courage and shouts out her name. The importance of this scene lies in the power of the word, in this case the proper name. Moreover, the scene informs other scenes contained in the collection, while providing clues on how to face fear.

The flip side of the monster is parodied in the prologue of the collection titled *Help! (12 stories to collapse in fear)* (Bornemann, 2004 [1988]), which is signed by none other than the infamous Frankenstein. In the poetics of Elsa Bornemann, the modes of addressing terror are mediated by humor. In this case parody is achieved intertextually through the allusion to Gothic literature. In an amiable tone, Frankenstein usurps the role of author to confess his fears and express his desire to be liked. The humanization of the character serves to appeal to the reader and his choice readings within the terror genre. The collection *Help! (12 stories to collapse in fear)* understands the torments stirred by fear. The fear of death that haunts us as children is addressed in diverse childhood situations. In the story "The lady in 11-J," a perverse grandmother comes back after death in the things her only granddaughter has inherited, and ultimately makes the little girl disappear. In the story "The Sleeve" a strange neighbor turns into a spider and kidnaps children and kills them in his web. The animation of inanimate objects, strange unfolding of time and space, transformations and duplication of the characters are some of the motifs of the fantasy genre that appear throughout the stories in this collection. These strange events occur on a backdrop of ordinariness, thereby creating an atmosphere fraught with ambiguity as the characters are forced to interpret the world from their subjective standpoints.

Another inflection of this collection can be found in the first children's novella titled *I have a monster in my pocket* by Graciela Montes (2003 [1988]). The protagonist Ines projects feelings and desires onto the monster that lives in her apron pocket. Narrating in first person, Ines provides the facts and presents situations that touch on how to face and solve personal fears with regard to physical appearance, shyness and difficulties encountered in school and with family during the transition into adolescence. In this case, the monster acts as a projection of Ines' thoughts, and reacts in



diverse ways. At first, Ines was a little surprised and at the same time amused with the monster that seemed to grow and shrink at will. However, there comes a day when she wanted to break free of the monster, which had increasingly taken more and more space. Since she cannot rid herself of the monster that is soon destroying everything, she becomes very frightened. The conflict is resolved when she manages to cope with certain personal situations and is able to tell her grandmother Julia about the secret monster. Julia takes it in all very naturally, telling Ines that we all have a hidden monster, and that the best way to make it go away is to talk about it.

Another facet of the monster figure appears in the novel *Maruja* by Ema Wolf (2011 [1989]), which parodies the life of monsters. The story tells of Veremundo a hideous, disheveled monster that hates children. The plot is launched when one day his aunt, a ghost called Maruja, who is dispossessed by a flood in the local graveyard, arrives to his mansion and takes up residence. Veremundo experiences an invasion of his personal space and sees his lifestyle altered, which unleashes a series of mishaps as he vainly tries to get Maruja to move back to the cemetery. This parody of domestic life first entices the reader to sympathize with the monster, but soon the high jinx of Maruja, who is a box of surprises, begins to win the reader over.

This collection also offers several stories with a naturalistic tone that through subjective experiences of violence show the disturbing power of sinister secrets, while at the same time positing themes that are often muzzled in the contemporary society. Bornemann's story "Never visit Maladony" from the collection *Help! (12 stories to collapse with fear)* (2004 [1988]), relates the tale of Timothy Orwell, a youngster of thirteen who wakes up to find one day that his neighbors and family do not know him. As the reader ponders this situation, the story explores the unlikely fate of the boy who inhabits a once familiar world that suddenly turns strange and hostile.

When Tim comes home after school, he finds himself cut off from his familiar world and the new homeowners and neighbors believe he is crazy. The youngster wakes up in a hospice room, tied to the bed, and in a nightmarish twist he finds that his caregivers are his family members. He is held there for forty years and finally discharged when he stops identifying the people around him as his family, who by that time are all deceased. The narrator, an Argentine student on scholarship in London, questions Tim, who tells his story, giving his own version of the facts. Tim then disappears into the London crowd and the narrator decides to return to his country. The ending poses the paradox of the situation through a direct reference to the year 1978, when the dictatorship was at its most repressive. The feeling of estrangement enveloping the entire story is also a modulation of the violent intrusion that

disrupts the daily life of the protagonist, who suffers captivity, oblivion or the outright rejection of his community.

The last text is the collection, *Otherness: Latest news from the underworld* by Graciela Montes (2007 [1991]), manifests the need for transgressing the order of reality through the representation of the underworld. In this story, the institutional order of the clandestine life of a group of youngsters and the violent threat posed by Patota is reasserted, in a likely allusion to the militancy of the 1970s and the procedures of the armed forces during the dictatorship. These elements are also mixed with the meta-literary discourse introduced by the narrator to tell how the story is put together and his relationship with those witnesses who eventually dare to speak. The importance of this text lies in the way it represents the weak and blurred boundaries between private and public spheres that are threatened by violence, addressing issues such as the underground and its persecution that serves to create a climate of constant intimidation.

This general overview of the fantasy themes in children's literature shows that violence can also be conveyed from subjective states unfolding in certain scenes in which fear, silence, oblivion and estrangement are experienced. The device on which this collection is organized is cause-consequence, the first being fear, which results in multiple manifestations of subjectivity issuing through the modalities of fantasy.

Concluding the tour of our collections, we can say that literature does not directly cite the violent events of the past: there are other discourses for that. Our collections challenge the reader's sensibilities through situations give an account of the ways in which violence affects the subject; and, therefore, the approach of these texts transcends their context of production and the issue of political violence. As Nofal (2006) states, violence is conveyable in children's literature through fantasy. In our collections, we recognize three themes that serve to tell about the recent past: the abuses of power and the unveiling of political forms belonging to the adult world revealed in certain scenes of the first and second collection; the power of collective action led by Toad and the revolutionary thought of the elephant that leads to change and intergenerational dialogue; and, finally, the experience of fear as a modulation of the private wounds and public trauma cause by political violence.

The fictional pact assumed between reader and literary work that occurs when one begins reading and the continuity of the characters proposed in each collection contribute to the construction of the reader's subjectivity, so that during the course of reading ideas are introduced inviting the reader to identify with a character, situation or subject. Moreover, as readers, we know that after reading, the outlook of the subject is never the same. In this line of

thinking, a sojourn in the poetic texts included in our collections place the reader before new conditions for questioning the world and defining how to live in it.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

In view of these considerations, we can conclude that literature rehearses actions, valuations and considerations that dispute the reader's subjectivity; and the act of reading creates a space where manifold imaginative variants can be tested (Ricoeur, 1999). The relationship we raised between reading collections, the continuity of a theme or object, and the subjective processes in play to draw meaning out are potentiated in the collection as a reading device allowing many issues to be addressed simultaneously.

Literature can create a watershed by providing readers opportunities to practice the task of interpretation, where the authors of children's literature grant the reader the power to question the world. Stories and narrative situations making up these collections articulate a willingness to bestow experience through reading. At this point, the practice of collecting is associated with the intergenerational transmission of experience while acknowledging the individual's needs to make his own imprint. According to Jelin:

In order to transmit the meaning from the past, there are at least two requirements: the first requires the existence of foundation for a process of identification to achieve an intergeneration expansion of the concept of "we". The second requirement is to open up the possibility of those who "receive" to make their own meanings and to practice interpretation and signification on their own terms, without resorting to rote memorization (2002: 126)

In this line of thinking, Jacques Hassoun says in *Los contrabandistas de memoria* (Smugglers of memory) (1996) that we are all caretakers and conveyors of an inherited legacy built actively from generation to generation, because it does not happen on its own. In these stories, children's authors work as mediators between past and present, performing the role of social agents who employ their knowledge of the past and their belief that children are capable of attaining autonomy through contact with literature that excites the imagination.

The collection as literary device reveals that Argentine children's writers have a lot to offer regarding the ways of representing the world, and their mastery of aesthetic forms serves to bring the reader into closer contact with this world. On the other hand, the cultural system needs to provide more

support to the field of children's literature, because there are still broad aesthetic areas to be explored to bring children closer to literature. In general, this literary genre is viewed with some prejudice. The approaches presented herein seem to respond to a personal interests of certain authors, such as Walter Benjamin. Finally, highlighting the attributes of the collection as a literary device leaves out the occlusions entailed in this approach. To show the potential of the field of children's literature, however, we first prefer to concentrate on this modality of reading which grants autonomy to the reader, who must make choices and decisions in the knowledge that by doing so he foregoes other readings and interpretations.

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