

# Remaining Human

*Three generations of Chilean women affirm life after Pinochet's regime.*

CATHY STONEHOUSE

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## Retribution

*Carmen Rodríguez*

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“THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 11 WAS sunny and bright.” In 1973, on that fateful date, the Chilean government was violently overthrown in a military coup led by Augusto Pinochet, in the aftermath of which thousands of Chilean citizens were murdered, tortured and “disappeared.” In her debut novel, *Retribution*, Chilean-Canadian writer Carmen Rodríguez returns to that day, as well as to the years preceding and following, through the eyes of three very different Chilean women: a grandmother, a mother and a daughter. In so doing, she asks some timely questions: is it love or blood that makes a family, and are humans capable of responding to violence by seeking peaceful retribution, as opposed to violent revenge?

A political novel in many senses of the word, *Retribution* is Rodríguez's third book, and was published in the same year as her daughter Carmen Aguirre's award-winning memoir, also about politics and sexuality: *Something Fierce*. Rodríguez too acknowledges in her afterword that the novel is “based on historical events that I witnessed or participated in.” So although *Retribution* is fiction, its basis in lived experience is not disguised. Rodríguez's reasons for exploring this in fiction, as opposed to non-fiction, are ultimately irrelevant, but the suggested echoes between her own family's life and that of her three narrators certainly amplify the novel's themes of community, solidarity and the interweaving of activism, art making and family life.

Like Aguirre's memoir, *Retribution* is a story rooted in the body. Ambitious, wide ranging and at times extremely dark, it is marked throughout by tenderness and humour and an earthy celebration of female heterosexuality that emerges in parallel with its narration of the lives of three generations of women, each of whom is touched by the traumas of the Chilean mass extermination in different ways. It is also a book about youth: the women are each invoked first as girls experiencing similar struggles in different geographical and historical

circumstances, and the activists it describes are predominantly students.

Tania is an East Van girl, growing up in the multicultural mix of urban Canada, a budding artist aware in only vague ways of her Chilean political heritage. Tania's mother, Sol, is the novel's main protagonist, a fiery, awkward girl who grows into a courageous lover and activist, and who ultimately faces the full impact of her choices in the concentration camps and torture chambers of Pinochet's regime. Sol's mother, Soledad, is a more conservative yet equally brave young woman whose decision to eschew her girdle one day catapults her into early motherhood. Bookended by Tania's words, the bulk of the novel narrates the years between 1942 and 1986, during which Soledad and then Sol

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come of age, marry and become mothers, and are forced to decide where their loyalties lie as Chile convulses with political turmoil. A question, introduced at the start, also hangs over the narrative: is Tania in fact the offspring of Sol's torturer, and not Sol's “disappeared” husband, Miguel?

The voices of the three women are somewhat similar, differentiated mostly by perspective, rather than language, and as they pass the narrative torch between them a picture emerges of mothers and daughters who, although they have their disagreements, continue to support and birth each other through acts of daring, courage and self-sacrifice. There is also a fourth woman in the story, Soledad's sister Amparo, whose sympathies lie with the Pinochet regime, and whose successful business career provides her with a different kind of freedom. Amparo functions as a foil to the other women, and early on in the novel inspires both Sol and Soledad with her unconventional choices. Yet, in the end, she betrays them. Amparo has chosen a different route, a path of independence that precludes family and community, despite sharing the same beginnings as Soledad. By the end she borders on a caricature of evil. Yet to her credit Rodríguez does not let us forget her former dignity, for Amparo once loved a Japanese boy and was targeted for that. The choices she makes are tragic and significant, and at times I found myself wishing Rodríguez had narrated the novel from Amparo's perspective also. But that would have made for a different book.

This may be because, for better or worse, Rodríguez seems anchored to the narration of this entire historical period, and to including every twist and turn of the women's fates, and their pol-

itical awakenings, even if at times this makes for a bumpy read. The novel's many strengths include its ability to capture both the fiery intimacies of mothers and daughters that echo engagingly across time, and the specific strategies of minds under pressure, and its ability to maintain a mischievous humour and lyric tenderness even in unexpected moments. But it loses power when what I imagine may be the real-life demands of staying true to what happened, or else just plain exhaustion, cause the narration to collapse into summary or overstatement. When entire decades are leapt over with a token reference, or the righteous-sounding exposition begins to resemble a historical textbook, the vivid fictional world unfortunately recedes. Likewise, when Rodríguez occasionally resorts to cliché, or unnecessary broadcasting of her underlying messages, the characters suffer, as do all of us when we are reduced to mere abstraction. And this is a shame, for it opens the novel up to being dismissed as a political tract, when it is not.

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Pinochet regime went to destroy all opposition, as well as the lengths to which that opposition went to defend its rights. It does this with grace, lyricism and humour. The novel's ring of truth gave this reader relief from the solipsistic, irony-saturated self-consciousness of so much North American literary fiction, as well as from the escapist fantasies that readers are increasingly fed during these times of uncertainty. *Retribution* was not researched over the internet, nor was it merely someone's clever idea, although it is full of smart, quick-thinking characters. It is also hopeful. When we leave Tania, she is preparing an art installation that integrates much of her inheritance, including the likelihood that she is the daughter of Marcelino Romero, her mother's torturer. “We all have the capacity for kindness and cruelty,” she reflects, “...What matters is that I'm not at all like him.”

Yet this hopefulness is implicitly accusatory, for the future in this novel is Canada, specifically Vancouver, and Rodríguez's Canada is one we all thought we recognized: the international haven, journey's end for fleeing refugees, that place of loneliness and exile but also freedom from oppression. Life there may be modest, but living, simply living, is its own form of revenge, or retribution. Reading the book I felt nostalgia for the lefty East Van I once knew, which in its own way was a version of Canada. I also felt angry. What also matters about this novel is the mirror it holds up to us as a country, and we should care about what we see there. *Retribution* reminds us that democracy is fragile and precious, and that engagement with each other is what makes us human. I just wished Rodríguez had left a little more unsaid. LRC

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Cathy Stonehouse published two books in 2011: one of short fiction—*Something about the Animal (Biblioasis)*—and the other of poetry—*Grace Shiver (Inanna Publications)*. More information about her is available at <[www.cathystonehouse.com](http://www.cathystonehouse.com)>.