

Activist finds vindication

Memories combat Chile's collective amnesia

►► By Harry Vandervlist

Vancouver author Carmen Rodriguez lives and works "on a teeter-totter, moving back and forth between two cultures and two languages," according to the preface of her English-language book *And A Body to Remember With*, which appears in Canada this month. The Spanish version, *De Cuerpo Entero*, was launched at Chile's National Library last June. Neither book is really a translation of the other. Instead, Rodriguez wrote both in tandem, moving back and forth between them many times — "until I felt that both tips of my tongue and both set of ears were satisfied with the final product."

The book's 14 stories explore the human costs of the military coup that plunged Chile into turmoil in 1973. As a social activist, Rodriguez and her family were then under threat. They fled to Canada, remaining exiled from their home country for 14 years. After Rodriguez's removal from political blacklists in 1987 she made a few family visits, but her real "vindication" came with the Chilean launch of her book.



"It was not my first time back," she explains during a recent interview, "but it was my first time as a published author with a very political book."

"I was quite scared, even though rationally I knew that nothing physical could happen to me," the soft-spoken author admits. "But if those words had been spoken or written a few years before, I would have ended up in jail."

Rodriguez speaks very plainly in her book about the everyday, personal experience of political struggle in the face of violence and torture.

"Friends and family warned me that Chilean people don't want to know about these things

anymore. They just want to forget. Younger people who were born after the coup know very little about what happened because it isn't taught in schools. There is a new atmosphere in Chile now — it is very beautiful, very modern, and people don't want to be disturbed. And my book is all about memory and about bringing up those issues again."

Still, Rodriguez found many Chileans who were interested in combating the nation's "collective amnesia." Above all she is happy that her book has been published and is on the record.

"If people can remember what really happened, perhaps next time it won't be so easy for it to happen again. You can see that those in power recognize the importance of memory when a country like Argentina passes a 'law of forgetting.' They really have a law like that."

"But I'm quite convinced memory is crucial if we want to move forward. We can't go forward on a personal or a national level unless we have resolved our past. That's something I feel I can contribute; an artist can be like a collective memory-keeper."

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