
Q and A with Carlos Fonseca

How did you start writing this novel?

I often start from an image. In the case of *Austral*, I had the image of two men – a last speaker of an indigenous language and an anthropologist – seated across each other with a recording machine in between them. In the early months of 2018 I wrote a short story, entitled “The Last”, to unpack that scene. I thought writing that short story would be it, but I soon found myself returning to that story. I figured then that the scene was part of a greater story, the story of loss and redemption I tried to tell in the pages of this novel.

What was the process of finishing, or revising, the novel like?

The novel sketches a journey. It follows Julio’s return to both his past and to Central America. In that sense, I had a feeling that finishing the novel was always aligned with this circular return. For me, this journey meant a lot: it meant in a way finally feeling comfortable narrating from within the precincts of Central America, a region that I recognise as home but which I left long ago. It took me three books to return to Central America, so by the time I got there at the end of *Austral*, I felt relieved but also exhausted.

There are many references throughout the book, ranging from *Under the Volcano* to philosophers such as Wittgenstein. How did you decide which to include in the narrative?

I think that in many ways this is a book about reading. A book about how writing is a way of leaving a mark in the world and how reading is our way of reading those traces others have left behind. In that sense, it made sense for me to leave traces of all of those readings that informed my way of thinking about writing and about the ways we face our past.

Did you draw upon research while you developed the story?

Research sounds perhaps a bit too cerebral and too detached. I like to think that fiction works with characters that fall in love with a fixed idea: think of Captain Ahab’s white whale, of Don Quixote’s windmills, of *The Great Gatsby*’s green light. In *Austral* there are many of those fixed ideas, ideas that lead me back into books and that forced me to read, but which are there in order to explain the motor force guiding the story forward.

Did you read other writers while writing the book, and, if so, was there one or more you focused on?

Often, while writing, I stand up, go to the shelves and pick a book. I get this impulsive feeling that certain books resonate with what I am doing. I read a couple of pages, put them down and continue writing. During the writing of *Austral*, I found myself coming back, once and again, to the books of William Faulkner and to a certain lineage of Latin American writers that wrote in Faulkner’s vein: writers like Juan Rulfo, Juan Carlos Onetti, and Juan José Saer. Perhaps it was their attempt to reach out to the past that drove me there, perhaps the desire to turn nature into a vital narrative force. One never really knows why one is driven to certain books.

How did you decide on the art that appears in the text, including the cover of the fictional book, *Dictionary of Loss*?

Already in *Natural History*, I had included some archival images in the text. By the time I started writing *Austral*, however, I felt that it would be more interesting to think of a book not only as reaching out to a pre-existent archive but rather to imagine the task of a book as creating an archive: a set of images, of documents, of writings. I liked the idea that fictions conjure a reality and I thought it would be a good idea to make that reality visible. So I worked alongside a good friend of mine, the Chilean artist Ignacio Acosta, in bringing Aliza’s last manuscript, the *Dictionary of Loss*, into reality. It was a lot of fun.

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What was it like having this work translated?

I am very lucky to have been able to work with the wonderful Megan McDowell on the last three books. We started collaborating in 2013, even before I wrote my first novel. Back then I had just read her translation of Zambra’s *Ways of Going Home* and had loved it. Megan and I always work together in the translation, we tend to think of translation as a way of opening the writing process, as a way of editing the text once again. She is always one of my first readers and without a doubt perhaps the most attentive one.

What do you hope readers will take away from *Austral*?

For a book that often looks to the past, I would like for readers of this novel to leave the book with an image of the future. I think that in a world obsessed with endings, literature must provide the path for new futures.



CARLOS FONSECA was born in Costa Rica in 1987, brought up in Puerto Rico and studied in the USA. He was selected by the Hay Festival as part of the Bogotá 39 group (2016), by *Granta* magazine as one of its twenty-five best young Spanish-language writers (2021) and by *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as one of the twenty most promising writers in the world for their ‘Young Shapers of the Future’ (2022). His previous novels are *Colonel Lágrimas* and *Natural History*, both translated by Megan McDowell. His work has been translated into English, German, French, Italian, Greek, Turkish, Arabic and Croatian. He is a lecturer in Spanish at Trinity College, Cambridge.
