

## A NEW GENERATION: YOUNG SPANISH LITERARY CHARACTERS AT THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Publishers commonly promote the very latest from writers coming of age in our time, all of whom are purported to speak for their generations. This marketing strategy is particularly important in Spain, for it is inarguable that Spanish authors of today, and their readers as well, distinguish themselves from their past, as they have lived through events much different than their parents and grandparents. Eduardo Chamorro states an obvious fact: "La España de los treinta no tiene nada que ver con la España de 2000" (10). Chamorro illustrates this assertion with the claim that more or less half of the Spanish voting public in the 2000 General Elections maintains little or no conscious memory of the *franquismo* (30). Sociohistoric change in Spain has manifested itself in many forms of cultural production. The characteristics of new generations of Spaniards are surfacing in current writings by and about them. Recent works present shifting images of young people. Two novels, *El otro barrio* (1998) by Elyvira Lindo and *Últimas noticias del paraíso* (2000) by Clara Sánchez, intersect in a consistent view of youth and youth culture, departing from novels only a few years earlier. Lindo and Sánchez portray the present and the future of a new generation that has grown up in postmodern Spanish society.

Youth culture is often misunderstood, if not mistrusted or feared, by adults. The notion of "generation gap" hardly needs explanation. A wide range of Spanish cultural commentators have expressed concerned or negative opinions about young people. *Mouida* guru Borja Casani comments that the 1980s "ha generado una sociedad hiperconsumista, acrílica, y ha dado lugar a unas generaciones posteriores, como los jóvenes de ahora, realmente repugnantes" (Gallero 19). Eduardo Chamorro complains about how little history "estos jóvenes" have studied (30) and cites notoriously wrong answers on history exams, such as "Franco fue un dictador que logró imponer durante el reinado de Felipe II un régimen dictatorial," or "Largo Caballero murió asesinado por ETA" (159). Miguel Angel Mendo seems to believe that children avoid their responsibilities: "[P]arece que los niños quieren seguir siendo niños hasta una edad muy avanzada" (129). Mark Allinson examines the "youth problem" by detailing the decline of work ethic and the decreasing value placed on education and parental role models, as well as increasingly troublesome levels of drug use and out-of-control night life (267-68). Christopher Ross writes, "[T]eenagers and young adults represent perhaps the most problematic group in Spanish society," adding youth unemployment to the mixture of social difficulties (207).

Of course the particular socio-economic circumstances during the last two decades in Spain have amplified effects on culture, and most observers believe that youth are suffering disorders that are not completely their fault. Santiago Fouz-Hernández states, "1990s Spanish youth experienced a ubiquitous and profound pessimism as a result of a rapid and drastic decline of the socio-political circumstances" (84). Chamorro, recognizing that young people learn history in school, attacks the decline of educational programs, which no longer teach a unified curriculum. Most analysts acknowledge that unemployment, labor practices, and high housing costs have made it difficult for young Spaniards to become independent and fully responsible adults. For example, many of the 70% of 18-29 year olds who still lived in their parental home, as reported by John Hooper in 1995 (178), probably did not do so of their own choosing. Nor do

they wish to work as underemployed, temporary laborers in jobs with no future. Ross links drug abuse with unemployment, citing how economic despair often leads to a cycle of addiction and crime (207-08). Yet even with these excuses, critics have identified a number of worrying trends in young people, who are growing up in an accelerated, consumeristic culture.

A recent icon for out-of-control youth is the 1994 novel *Historias del Kronen* by José Ángel Mañas. Fouz-Hernández writes that the sense of "a de-centred, dislocated male youth culture pervades" the novel. (85) The characters in *Kronen* irresponsibly practice unsafe sex, spout racist, sexist, and ageist vulgarities, drink to excess, consume hard drugs, and violently hurt themselves and others physically and psychologically. Accordingly, the novel gives a "pronounced sense of a pervasive, unspoken and generalized youth-anger felt by all, as if the gang that gathers daily at the Kronen bar were deliberately reacting against an enforced set of social and moral codes" (Fouz-Hernández 90). This expression of rebellion, a reaction against restrictions imposed by older generations, is also characteristic in the writings of other twenty- and thirty-something writers, such as Ray Loriga, David Trueba, and Pedro Maestre, all of whom were vigorously marketed in the mid 1990s as voices of youth in contemporary Spanish literature.

More recently, however, an apparent shift in emphasis, if not behavior has refined the literary focus on Spanish youth culture. Oscar López writes, "[L]a voracidad de algunos jóvenes escritores del manido boom de principios de los 90 ya es historia" (43). López claims that Spanish writers have given way to more profound and intimate topics since then, and labels Mañas, Maestre, and company (who had been responsible for a "desenfreno hisérgico" in the middle of the decade) as "desaparecidos en combate" (43). The novels of Eivrita Lindo and Clara Sánchez give a less troubling face to Spanish youth today. Their protagonists are teenage boys, slightly younger than the twenty-something characters of Mañas and others. Born a few years after 1975, they truly are children of the transition, and of the postmodern age.

Given that theoretical label, it is important to note that

these are not postmodern works in a narrative sense. Lindo and Sánchez do not distort written language to represent colloquial speech like Mañas and Maestre. As in most other contemporary works, whose stories are more important than the manner in which they are told, their plots are fairly smooth and linear, with no attempt to recreate effects of rapid video editing in narrative. These works carry few of the structural characteristics of the postmodern Spanish novel as defined by Ana María Spitzmesser: "niveles múltiples de diégesis (texto 'muñeca rusa'), misterio/intriga, desrealización del espacio (...), y la presencia del discurso denotativo/pastiche" (4). On the other hand, the works by Lindo and Sánchez inscribe what Spitzmesser designates as over-reaching thematic paradigms of postmodernism in Spain: "vida no realizada, relación humana difícil o fallida, desoes individuales inconexos y sin lógica, y auto-compasión/auto-indulgencia e insolidaridad" (4). Their lives suffer the "symptoms" of the accelerated consumer society in which we identify postmodernism. The metanarratives that ordered and organized life disappeared with the dictatorship, and Spaniards have spent the last twenty-five years reenvisioning their cultural norms, as well as reconceiving what they can expect out of life. It may very well be that the characters of the new generation are becoming the most successful in negotiating a postmodern society and creating a new order in it.

Eivrita Lindo (Cádiz, 1962) is a journalist and writer, well known for her children's radio series based on the character "Manolito Gafotas." She is married to novelist Antonio Muñoz Molina and is stepping out of her spouse's literary shadow. Lindo has converted the radio program into a series of novels—currently there are six in the collection—and received the "Premio Nacional de Literatura Infantil y Juvenil" in 1998 for *Los trapos sucios*. That same year, she published her first "novel for adults," *El otro barrio*. Her protagonist is Ramón Fortuna, a 16-year old boy from a working class family in Vallecas, the marginal community outside of Madrid. Ramón led a fairly typical life for a teen-age boy until he was implicated in a bloody accident in which two friends were badly injured and two neighbors were killed. The novel

touches on the controversy of media-provoked youth violence, as Ramón becomes a face of the publicly-feared savage youth. However, Lindo plays on the media assumptions, showing how the boy is victimized by the insatiable, but superficial, public eye. Prosecutors determine that the deaths and injuries were a freak accident, but public attention moves on to other salacious cases before Ramón is cleared by the courts. The media in no way are interested in investigating the reasons for the incidents, nor in determining the truth of the case. He and his family suffer a complete disruption of their lives. In the upheaval Ramón learns that his family has kept the true identity of his parents from him, but few people remain interested in helping them to recover.

Clara Sánchez (Guadalajara, 1955) has published a number of short stories in magazines and journals and wrote five lesser-known novels prior to her 2000 work *Últimas noticias del paraíso*, which won her the "Premio Alaguara de novela" that year. The protagonist in this novel is Fran, an eighteen year-old boy from a comfortable middle class family in a new residential development along the freeway outside of Madrid. The novel consists of Fran's recollections of his childhood, in a self-contained *urbanización* that had been sierra foothills prior to residential flight from the city. He recounts episodes from the stages of his life, becoming aware of different aspects of his parents, friends, and neighbors as he matures. The action in *Últimas noticias* matters relatively little in comparison to Fran's impressions of them. He is a passive, unmotivated observer of his surroundings, and his judgments of these events differ greatly from those who would choose a course in life for him.

These two novels and their protagonists distinguish themselves from previous works of Spanish youth and youth culture, particularly when compared to Mañas's *Historias del Kronen* and similar works by other authors. Concretely, Lindo and Sánchez de-emphasize the role of violence, drugs, and sex and place the boys in far more positive relationships with those around them. The worlds of these teenage characters are hardly idealized, but they show that some youth imagine a future beyond momentary, self-satisfying, and

hedonistic pleasure seeking.

**Violence.** Given the events of *El otro barrio*, a reader might assume that violence is a central theme, but the novel examines its case from beneath the surface of initial impressions. It is true that Ramón is involved in a violent accident. The media portray him as a savage teenage murderer after the incident, reporting that he has reacted to seeing "Natural Born Killers" on video—a birthday present from his mother. The incident provokes a quick public outcry against violence, placing blame squarely on the entertainment industry for corrupting young people. However, Ramón explains in depth that he didn't see the film at home; his naive mother didn't know what the film was about when a video store manager recommended it to her, and the accident occurred as Ramón was watching the film's opening credits. We see that Ramón does have a dark side when he assaults another boy to defend a friend. Part of the novel's enigma is how a quiet, shy boy could be involved in such an act, but it is clear that Ramón is not a nihilistic hoodlum. A broader question in the novel is how a moment of violence can change the lives of many people forever.

*Últimas noticias* contains few references to violence. The neighborhood is shocked at news of a murder, when a woman shoots her husband in a jealous rage. That is far from a random act of violence, and Fran marvels over how it could have happened at all. The boy does not get into fights, saying "[D]esde que era pequeño no me he pegado con nadie" (233), and he cannot defend himself when a rival beats him up. Violence is most notable by its relative absence. Neither Fran nor Ramón resemble the unstable, violent, and abusive characters of other emblematic novels of youth culture.

**Drugs.** Readers of Mañas easily could draw the conclusion that all Spanish youth participate in frequent bouts of binge drinking or usually are high on something. However, Ramón does not use drugs, even though he has friends who pop acid (a contributing factor in the accident). Living in working class Vallecas, and later in a juvenile center, he has other friends who are the children of drug addicts. Drugs are all around him, but Ramón shows no inclination to experiment

with them. Perhaps he sees the broken lives of users and does not wish to suffer the same fate.

Similarly, Fran is aware of drug use around him, but he barely smokes cigarettes and is sensitive when others blow smoke at him. He moralizes over his mother's recreational cocaine habit. He resents her growing dependence on the drug, but saves telling her that he knows her secret for an argument, relishing in the thought of trapping her in a hypocritical tirade against people who are wasting their lives. Given Fran's sanctimonious views on drugs, and the fact that Ramón pays little attention to them in spite of their being all around him, it is clear that the treatment of this issue in these two novels contradicts the importance of drug culture in many others.

**Sex.** These are not puritanical novels. The boy characters know all they want about sexual relations. Nevertheless, sex is not a violent and abusive act, disconnected from conventional emotional ties with a partner, as portrayed in *Kronen*. Ramón thinks about some fairly typical adolescent groping with girls. Later, his sister reveals a secret about a sexual encounter with a group of friends when she was fourteen. Otherwise, sex, like drugs, means little to Ramón. Fran knows that his mother is having an affair with her exercise instructor, but largely accepts her infidelity as a normal part of life in his home. He obsesses over the older sister of a friend, entertains some fetishized sexual fantasies, and becomes involved with two women. His relationships are not traditional, but they are fairly nurturing in comparison with the quick sex scenes of other novels, for Fran considers romance and love as companions to physical pleasure.

These departures, the deemphasis of violence, drugs, and sex, distinguish *El otro barrio* and *Ultimas noticias del paraíso* from other novels of youth culture in which these elements indeed are stressed. There is a clear distinction between these teenage characters and their older cohorts, suggesting that the new generation, born during the transition (late seventies or early eighties), is living better in the new Spain. They have not suffered the same cultural acceleration and subsequent disappointment with its results. Having known no other world than the postmodern society

into which they were born, they do not look back to how times used to be, but rather seek to make sense out of what they have before them. Thus, they exhibit a number of characteristics that are symptoms, effects, or results of growing up beyond postmodernism, all of which may also better equip them for life in their new society.

Expressions of loneliness and alienation are nearly universally thematic in youth literature, no matter the period. These topics are very present in *El otro barrio* and *Ultimas noticias del paraíso*. The former novel titles its sections with statements from Ramón. Part I is called 'Me sentí tan solo' and describes Ramón's reaction to the accident. The narrator states that Ramón perceived himself as different than other boys his age: "alguna vez se sintió distinto al resto de sus amigos" (14). Part II, entitled 'Por fin, un amigo,' shows Ramón's increasing confidence in dealing with other boys in the juvenile center and his growing relationship with his attorney, the first adult male with whom he has been close. Fran is a similarly solitary boy, isolating himself in the *urbanización*: "sentí algo como si yo no pintase nada en el mundo del exterior" (19). His life inverts the conventional relationship between city center and outlying areas, because the fringe is in fact his center. His family geography influences his personal life throughout the novel.

Changes in the traditional Spanish family have been well documented in studies such as those by Lawlor and Rigby or Jesús M. de Miguel, and are frequently the subject of literary works. Jo Labanyi has commented on a number of novels of mid-life crisis in which a character's marriage falls apart, and that authors from other generations have concentrated on breakdowns of other types of relationships (155). Interestingly, sociological data indicate that divorce rates are still quite low in Spain, so the problem may be overstated in literature. However, perception shapes the reality, and Lindo and Sánchez examine family problems from the perspective of their teenage protagonists, also providing significant thematic intersections.

Both of these boys grow up virtually without a father. Ramón's father died when he was two years old, and subsequently he lived under the overly protective care of his moth-

er and his sister, fifteen years his senior. His father has been no more than "una foto en el cuarto de la tele" (17). Ramón frequently dreams conversations with his father, often wishing that his father had lived to know him, but he asks himself "¿Se puede echar de menos lo que nunca se ha conocido?" (18). Nonetheless, Ramón's family life has been much more stable than those of many of his friends in the juvenile center, who have been abandoned, if not infected, by their delinquent and addicted parents. Even so, a family secret revealed shatters his image of what he has lived: Ramón discovers that his sister is in fact his mother. She became pregnant at age fourteen and her parents hid the family shame by raising Ramón as their own son. The novel hints at who his father may be, but Ramón never is sure. Lindo's character has few solid roots: the boy never may know who he really is.

Fran grows up in a two-parent household, but his father is mostly absent, first on business and later when he leaves his wife for another woman. The man's departure matters little to Fran when it happens, as he already was accustomed to living without a father, and both he and his mother really prefer that he is away: "mi padre no se enteraba de nada; nuestra casa era una escala entre viaje y viaje; agradecía mucho tener padre y que ese padre no fuese una carga para mí" (20). Fran becomes responsible for raising himself when his mother declares, "He perdido mi juventud," and at that moment he realizes that she "empezó a descenderse de mí (...). Había decidido ocuparse sólo de ella" (11); later, he observes that she "Acabó descuidando por completo mi formación" (19). He becomes accustomed to answering to no one: "me gustaba estar a mi aire" (12), which suggests that the older generations, caught up in their own emotional introspection, have let down their children while wildly pursuing their own personal fulfillment. Abandoned to their own devices, youth create a culture that rapidly disconnects from tradition. They have struck out on their own, largely turning away from the past of their elders—a past that in reality has little meaning because it has not been effectively transmitted to them.

Contemporary society has developed new sources for the transmission of cultural icons. Traditional sources of education compete with a number of media outlets, and young people commonly value image over text. Television often fills the void of parental attention, and thus youth cultivate new ways of interpreting experience in life. These boys spend a great deal of time with television. Fran recognizes that television series "me daban la vida" and admits that he and his friends "estábamos enganchados a la tele" (21). Later in life, he prefers watching films to serious study. For Ramón, the effect of commercial media images is an important factor in his case. His building was surrounded with video crews as the authorities investigated the incident. The boys of the juvenile center, several of whom have criminal records, take pride in their appearances in the news. However, they prefer visual over print media; another resident in the center compares articles about him to those of another boy: "el tío va y me enseña un pedazo de hoja del periódico toda escrita que dice que habla de él, yo le dije: Es que ese tocho a mí no me dice nada. A mí las fotos. ¿No tienes fotos?, como si no hubieras salido" (89). These characteristics suggest that the new generation will continue to shift away from text-based experience of cultural production.

Imitating the purchasing behaviors of their elders and peers, these boys join fully in the pursuit of satisfaction through the acquisition of goods. Fran recognizes the futility of seeking fulfillment through shopping. He observes how neighbors constantly upgrade and remodel their homes, but notes, "Nunca estaban satisfechos [...] era improbable que fueran a estarlo en el futuro" (140). Nevertheless, he does not repress his own consumer desires. At age fourteen, he explains the priorities of his friends, "No pensábamos más que en la ropa. De pronto caí en la cuenta de que necesitaba de todo, desde calzoncillos hasta reloj, pasando por la chupa, las zapatillas y un traje para la Nochevieja" (29). Later, he refuses to go on a skiing trip without the proper clothing: "O iba a la última o no iba. Sin un equipo decente no voy a ninguna parte" (95). For Fran, continuous consumption represents life as an adult. Without a decent job, he is unable to pursue that satisfaction, seemingly forgetting

his prediction about his neighbors and their remodeling: "Echo de menos consumir con regularidad. Ir, por ejemplo, a unos grandes almacenes y encapucharme con chorradas y comprármelos" (202).

Ramón's economic background prevents him from a high level of consumption, but he clearly desires more than has. His thoughts reveal envy of a group of boys eating in a Vips restaurant:

cuatro tíos con gorras, con pendientes, con pantalones a cuadros y cortes de pelo extravagantes se estaban comiendo unos sandwiches desconmutunbrados a pisar cafeterías, y bares, y tuvieran siempre dinero en el bolsillo para gastarlo por ahí con los amigos. Quiso ser como ellos, que nada le vineira grande en la vida, quiso poder ser extragante. (97)

Although they have less than others, Ramón and his friends appreciate the labels and brands of prestige in the market. They wear clothing marked with Reebok and Nike logos, attend the latest Hollywood motion pictures, and spout the trendy phrases of international consumer production.

Subsequently, these novels are full of references to global youth culture. International public figures, brand names, clothing, music, and the like fill their conversations and actions. Doreen Massey discusses how global elements interact with local specificities to reinvent customs and to create hybrid cultures. Of course, youth are not the only ones involved in these complex social interactions, but they do seem most ready to incorporate international influences. Often, explains Massey, young people adopt new influences in an effort to territorialize and claim spaces as their own, including some and excluding others (126).

Interestingly, both Ramón and Fran zealously guard their own spaces. While both boys feel isolated while growing up, they eventually push away many of those who would be close to them. Ramón's space is the juvenile center where he lives

after the accident. There he bonds with other troubled boys, and they create an insular community. Ramón identifies much more with his roommates than with his own mother/sister. The third part of this novel is entitled "Tengo que irme," in which Ramón disconnects from his family. He prefers to spend Christmas Eve in the center and does not return home when his case is cleared, but moves into a training center for homeless youth, feeling no loyalty to his blood relationships. He will have nothing to do with his grandmother (whom he formerly thought was his mother), and his relationship with his mother (whom he formerly believed his sister) may never reach any state of normalcy.

Fran's space is much more personal and individualistic, but equally as exclusionary. He avoids getting close to his friends and hides most of his life from his parents. He consciously chooses to have nothing to do with his father after the man leaves his wife, observing coldly, "Puesto que él no había estado casi en mi vida, no me veía obligado a tener que estar yo en la suya" (130). Now a young man, Fran continues to resist any suggestion from his mother or friends that he pursue educational or career opportunities.

Given their flight from conventional cultural spaces, the boys pursue non-traditional occupations as well. Fran is easily described as a slacker. He skips school, fails to pass university entrance exams, and works in a video store because he does not care to look for another job. The boy's passivity is maddening. He constantly expresses acquisitive desire to participate fully in consumer culture, but he refrains from any activity that will provide the funding for the clothes and car he wishes to buy. Similarly, he dreams of various projects, namely going to film school and working as a director. However, nothing motivates him to action. He realizes that he is wasting time, but does no more about it than to decide to watch all the videos in his store, which he realizes is the first serious intention in his life. Only an incredible stroke of luck allows him to fulfill his dreams, one of which is to travel to China to study Chinese. In Ramón's case, he avidly studies computers, casting his lot with new technology and turning away from the rooted sense of place and the traditional

careers of nearly every one around him. The placeless, changing world of cyberspace becomes his path to a new way of living, a hybrid culture that is both Spanish and international.

The novels by Lindo and Sánchez present a new generation of Spanish youth. Ramón and Fran have suffered the same economic and social problems that all Spaniards have experienced, but since the boys have known no other culture, it seems normal to them. They de-emphasize the violence, sex, and drugs endemic in novels about young characters only a few years older than the protagonists in *El otro barrio* and *Últimas noticias del paraíso*. Also, following their consumerist desires, they participate fully in global youth culture, integrating international references to their local and national contexts. To the extent that their characters also reflect contemporary youth culture in Spain, they suggest that the new generation is continuing to turn away from its recent past, more constructively creating its own forms of culture and practice in a hybrid postmodern society.

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