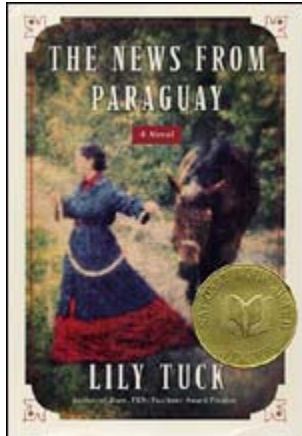


No News Is Good News: The Grim Message of Lily Tuck's *The News From Paraguay*

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Paraguay, like many poor, developing nations, receives very little of the world's attention except when struck by a devastating natural disaster or violent political or social upheaval. Its appearance in Latin American history texts tends to be brief, with the exception of one single event – the War of the Triple Alliance (1864 - 1870) – that nearly destroyed the country and decimated its male population by ninety percent. Other discussions of Paraguay invariably address its traditions of military dictatorships, human rights abuses, and its reception of former Nazis at the end of the second world war. In short, the little news that most of the world gets about Paraguay generally paints a negative picture of a primitive backwater, and Lily Tuck's highly acclaimed novel does absolutely nothing to dispel that image.

The News From Paraguay is a historical love story that describes the relationship between the Paraguayan dictator, Francisco Solano López, and his Irish mistress, Ella Lynch. The former led his nation into the ill-fated nineteenth-century war, which pitted Paraguay against its neighbors, Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina, and the conflict serves as the novel's setting. Tuck juxtaposes the dictator's leadership style to his sexual appetite and womanizing, creating an overall image of a barbaric savage. While history concurs with some aspects of this portrayal – Solano López was indeed an abusive, autocratic strongman and he did actually have affairs with numerous women – this author's depiction of him as such creates problems for the novel and the novelist on a number of levels.

Perhaps the most striking and troublesome aspect of the novel is the author's portrayal of Solano López and, by extension, all Paraguayans. Throughout the book, Tuck describes Solano López as if he were a sexually voracious animal who, after his first encounter with Ella Lynch, leaves the bed sheets "covered with dark hairs. If she had not already known, [the maid] would have said a dog or an animal with fur had slept in Ella's bed" (13). Even the look on his face when suffering from a toothache frightens the doctor: "[H]e felt he was looking into the eyes of a wild animal" (111). Other Paraguayans are described as "lazy" (49, 85), and Ella characterizes them as "...a bit childish in their habits and pleasures. The men are content to spend the day...swinging in their hammocks, drinking tea" (53). In addition, numerous characters suffer from sexually transmitted diseases, and Solano López is insatiable in his sexual needs, "...the women were a physical need, like eating or drinking or going to the toilet..." (75).

In contrast, the novel presents the opportunistic Irish mistress as a "civilizing" force in Paraguayan society, who obliges him sexually but whose principal tasks appear to be buying expensive clothes and household items from Europe, and attending the opera, concerts and dinner parties. Other European voices in the book are asexual and intellectual; even Napoleón writes a letter assuring Solano López that his "country will continue her progress along the path

of civilization” (81). This comparison of Europeans (or U.S. citizens) versus Latin Americans, as I have noted elsewhere in this issue, perpetuates myths of civilization versus barbarie that have dominated outsiders’ writings on the latter region throughout its history. Beyond the text itself, Tuck’s work raises questions about the political impact and role of historical fiction. *The News from Paraguay* received a great deal of attention and acclaim in the United States, where it was released, so much so that it won the prestigious National Book Award for 2004. Given this recognition, it became an important representation of one version of the most important event in Paraguayan history, a fact that seemed as insignificant to the author as it deeply upset the Paraguayans.

In her acceptance speech for the National Book Award, Tuck commented, “Actually I have never been to Paraguay nor do I intend to go. I think the honest or most likely answer to why Paraguay? is that I like to write about "stuff" -- excuse the word -- that most people don't know very much about. I think, as a writer, it gives me an edge.” Unfortunately, that “edge” struck a deeply sensitive chord in Asunción. In an *ABC Color* review, María Eugenia Garay wrote the following about the work, in a piece titled, “*Novela lasciva y de escasa calidad sobre el Paraguay*”: “*El holocausto del pueblo paraguayo no puede ser tratado con tanta ligereza, entre sonoras carcajadas, alfombras persas y tintineantes copas de cristal*”. She further describes the work as “[M]uy despreciativa hacia el Paraguay y los paraguayos, en típica y anacrónica actitud eurocentrista”.ⁱ

The Paraguayans, although offended by the work, invited Tuck to visit their country, and she accepted. Prior to her arrival in February, the National Tourism Minister declared on the Presidential website, “*Esperamos que la misma, que no conoce nuestro país, adquiera durante su permanencia una acabada visión del Paraguay...*”.ⁱⁱ For her part, the author, who lived in Latin America for many years as a child, was received by the highest ranking members of the national government.

At the end of the novel, in her Author’s Note, Tuck appears cognizant of its problematic presentation. She ambivalently writes,

“What then, the reader may wonder, is fact and what is fiction? My general rule of thumb is whatever seems most improbable is probably true. Also I would like to quote a friend who cautions his readers with these words: ‘Nouns always trump adjectives, and in the phrase ‘historical fiction’ it is important to remember which of the two words is which’” (247).

The fact remains that historical fiction is a dangerous genre, especially when addressing a relatively under-studied event or location. It may be argued that the novel, as a work of art, must remain exempt from the constraints of politics or historical baggage. But I believe that by writing a version of history, Tuck joins the critical and timeless ranks of storytellers whose collective production actually constitute reality. In other words, as Hannah Arendt reminds us in *The Human Condition*, “[T]he political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds’”(199).ⁱⁱⁱ In choosing the words and deeds it shares, *The News from Paraguay* does little to edify or unite us, and goes far in reinforcing divisive and misinformed stereotypes.

ⁱ *Diario ABC Color*, Asunción, 8 Feb. 2005. [[http://: www.abc.com.py](http://www.abc.com.py)]

ⁱⁱ Sitio Web Oficial, Presidencia de la República del Paraguay, 9 Feb. 2005. [[http://:www.presidencia.gov.py](http://www.presidencia.gov.py)]

ⁱⁱⁱ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.