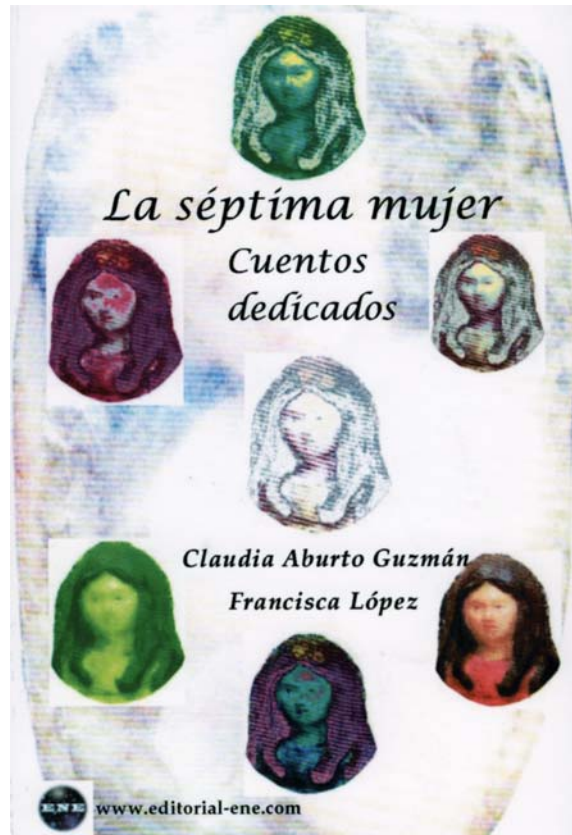


Aburto Guzmán, Claudia and Francisca López. *La séptima mujer: cuentos dedicados*. New Jersey: Ediciones Nuevo Espacio, 2004.

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The nine short stories in this co-authored collection are anchored in experiences of cultural displacement and uprooting, on one hand, and personal growth and development, on the other. While each story is autonomous and capable of standing alone, the entire collection can be seen as a somewhat linear and progressive feminine narration of awakening, coming of age, and cultural integration, when read as a whole and in chronological order. The concept of the *seventh woman* (*séptima mujer*), which gives title to the collection, constitutes an adaptation of the *seventh man*, a term used by John Berger in 1975 to refer to the lonely, disenfranchised, and isolated European migrant worker of the 20th century. The *seventh woman* similarly recreates the idea of the solitary exiled woman, her cultural hybridism, her perspective from the margins of society, and her struggle to harmonize her two identities.

In this first collaborative enterprise between Claudia Aburto Guzmán and Francisca López, the authors have succeeded in endowing their work with a certain thematic unity and cogency, even while exhibiting their distinctive writing styles, as well as their diverse cultural origins (Chile in Aburto Guzmán's case, Spain in López's). The tone of the stories, at times humorous and at times nostalgic, but always frank and intimate, provides introspective depth to the narrative. Such

introspectiveness is further advanced by the subtle but omnipresent background reflections on cultural stereotypes, national differences, and personal authenticity.

Francisca López's "El cuento de nunca acabar" ("A Never-Ending Story") opens the collection and sets the tone for the book as a whole, by introducing the idea of the misleading nature of childhood myths, fairy tales, and happy endings. Furthermore, this text underscores the connections between personal stories and national history, but also warns the reader about memory's complexity and unreliability. While this is a poignant story about the 1936-39 Spanish Civil War and, in particular, about a soldier who was executed by his best friend during that time, it is also, and perhaps more significantly, a story about the young female narrator's efforts to make sense of this absurd tragedy. The text as a whole deals masterfully with the painful but enlightening process of coming to terms with the fact that the personal stories that comprise human History ("los cuentos [que] hacen la historia," p. 18) rarely have a happy ending.

The tone of disillusionment and, at times, traumatic awakening is further developed in Francisca López's "Cosas que pasan" ("Things that Happen") and Aburto Guzmán's "Camino a Ft. Lauderdale." ("On the Way to Ft. Lauderdale"). Both stories deal with gender issues; the former by exposing the effects of domestic abuse on women, and the latter by portraying the disquieting experience of abortion. These topics are treated with sensitivity and courage, even as the devastating psychological consequences of such experiences become the main focus of the narration. Both texts further complement each other by contrasting the fragility of the young vulnerable child who unknowingly becomes an indirect witness to violent sexual abuse in "Cosas que pasan," with the inner strength and unflinching dignity of the young woman who undergoes an abortion procedure without any emotional support from the outside world in "Camino a Ft. Lauderdale."

In contrast, humor abounds in some of the lighter narratives, revealing a keen power of observation, as well as a healthy dose of scepticism and spontaneity on the part of the authors. Claudia Aburto Guzmán's "Bienvenido Dr. Pan" ("Welcome Dr. Pan") is a witty story of three generations of Hispanic women in Miami who become part of a community of believers. Dr. Pan's unconventional Eastern (Chinese) medical practices are construed by this Latino community as the miraculous actions of this saintly and Christ-like figure. This playful narrative fuses together beautifully the three cultural identities and idiosyncrasies that are represented in the text: the Hispanic community, whose members are quick to place Dr. Pan's good medical results in the realm of the miraculous; the Chinese culture, which endorses an integrative view of the world; and, lastly, the American culture, whose pragmatism and conventionality lead to the closing down of Dr. Pan's office and to the investigation of his alternative medical practices. The story shows the very different ways that one person's actions can be interpreted within the confines of each culture, exposing the relativity and ambiguity of our values and beliefs.

Likewise, in "Las uvas de la risa" ("Grapes of Laughter") Francisca López portrays cultural clashing with nostalgia, irony, and humor as she tells the story of the main character's first New Year's Eve in the United States, her expectations, her disappointments, as well as her futile but touching search for meaning and a sense of belonging. At times in this collection irony gives way to sarcasm; such is the case in López's "Búsquedas" ("Searches"), a story that deals with the excesses of American academia, specifically its obsession with legality and professionalism. The darkest stories of the collection, Aburto Guzmán's "Ella y la Norton" ("She and the Norton")

and López's "Agujeros negros" ("Black Holes"), deal with the more universal themes of death and dying, and love and betrayal respectively.

Overall, this collection constitutes an important contribution to Hispanic literature for its captivating portrayal of biculturalism and for its frank attempt to look beyond national stereotypes, frozen myths, and rigid conceptions. Endowed with human depth and written with elegance in a vibrant Spanish that is lightly sprinkled with Anglicisms, the stories are a pleasure to read. For the sophisticated reader they provide wit, wisdom, and subtlety, while also supplying social commentary and cultural reflection. For those who choose to view *La séptima mujer* as an exploration of the *other*, the stories provide a glimpse into the mind of the outsider. Readers who are seeking to escape from the cultural mainstream and embrace the view from the margins will find that this collection corroborates Virginia Woolf's well known assertion that perhaps it is worse to be locked in than to be locked out of society: the outsider, the *seventh woman* in this case, has the advantage of a broader and more lucid perception of reality and is thus able to better grasp cultural nuances. In this regard, many, if not all, of the stories in this collection could very well serve as an excellent starting point of discussion for Spanish literature courses which focus on exiled writers, gender issues, and cultural topics.