

# Elena Poniatowska

## On Her Latest Book<sup>1</sup>

Interview by Claire Joysmith\*



Jorge Silva/REUTERS

Elena sits comfortably in her living room at home, surrounded by an immensity of sunlight, lots of bright yellows and whites that draw light to the sofa, cushions, paintings, and flowers —real and painted. She is also surrounded by many books that can barely squeeze into several floor-to-ceiling bookcases, books that spill onto several tables, where they sit in little stacks.

Always a kind and welcoming host, she offers tea in dainty cups and talks about her latest book, *Rondas de la niña mala* (Nursery Rhymes of a Bad Little Girl), which includes 30 of what she calls *rondas* (an equivalent of sorts to nursery rhymes).

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“I have called them *rondas* because that’s a kind of style in itself and because I think this is not really like poetry. I have no intention of claiming to be a poet. I would love to be one, but I’m not.”

But if one were to call them poems? Writing poems doesn’t necessarily make someone a poet. Or does it?

“Well, you can call them poems if you like, but I used *rondas* in the book so people wouldn’t think I felt in the least like a poet. Well, if others call them poems, that makes me happy. I like the word *rondas*, though. And this book has a lot to do with children’s *rondas*, wouldn’t you say? Just like in that [Mexican] *ronda* that goes ‘Naranja dulce, limón partido...’ [Sweet orange and cut-open lime...]. This is perhaps akin in many ways to the English language nursery rhyme “Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St Clement’s...”

Partidos los limones  
verde es la esperanza,  
el agua que la baña  
proviene de la luna  
que rige nuestra casa.

(Limes cut open  
hope becomes green  
its bathing water  
comes from the moon  
that governs our home.)

There is, of course, a whiff of nostalgic childhood memories in the use of *rondas*, sung by children and associated with children’s play. This is the sense Elena Poniatowska brings out in *Rondas de la niña mala*. Although there is, of course, the additional allusion to the *niña mala* (the naughty or bad girl) which gives these *rondas* yet another slant.

Obedezcan, niñas,  
¿qué hacen allá arriba?

La maestra, en el suelo,  
estremece y sacude  
del cristal de sus risas  
el árbol que da niñas.

(Little girls, obey,  
what are you doing up there?)

The teacher, below,  
shivers and shakes  
from the glass of their laughter  
the tree that grows girls.)

The very titles of these *rondas* are evocative of childhood memories, of early adolescence, and, indeed, their aura is unquestionably autobiographical: “Fruncida estrella” (Wrinkled Star) “El árbol que da niñas” (The Tree that Grows Girls), “Ángel de la guarda” (Guardian Angel), “La sopa” (The Soup), “Primera sangre” (First Blood), “El rompecabezas” (The Jigsaw Puzzle), “Otra vez mi hermana” (Again My Sister), “El armario” (The Wardrobe), “Pan con mantequilla” (Bread and Butter), “Mi madre, mi hija” (My Mother, My Daughter), “Magda lava nuestros calzones” (Magda Washes Our Panties), “Mi hermano” (My Brother), “Mi padre toca el piano” (My Father Plays the Piano), and so on.<sup>2</sup>

La niña tiende en el piso  
los hilos de sus piernas,  
su globo rojo se ha ido  
a casarse con la luna.

(The little girl lays on the floor  
the strings of her legs,  
her red balloon gone  
to marry the moon.)

These *rondas* were written “quite some time ago,” Elena muses. And she remembers: “there is even one that Octavio Paz made corrections to a million years ago...It’s called “Paulette” and is dedicated to my mother.” Her memories continue: “I have them somewhere...Yes, he made the corrections in his own handwriting.”

What kind of time-span do these *rondas* bridge? “Well, they’re from when I was young, from the early ‘50s, I believe, up until my father died and then my brother, who died in ‘68; so they must span about 20 years, because that’s when my brother died.”

And Elena adds, “I have them. I can show you. I have a huge bagful of poems.”

So how come these *rondas*, as she calls them in the book, have been brought to light at this very time? Elena responds with unflinching sincerity, “I happened to come across them, that’s all. And if I find more stuff I might also bring it out...But I think it was old age that really got to me, and

I said to myself, well, I'd better bring them out, yes, I might as well, as if I were cleaning out stuff....The thing was whether they would actually want to publish them!"

Niña de pechos planos,  
algo sucede en ella,  
culposo, inexplicable  
como andar por la vida  
equivocada.

(Flat-breasted child,  
something happens inside,  
guilty, inexplicable  
like wandering through life  
mistaken.)

In these *rondas*, the texture of feelings and perspective is not unlike those in *Lilus Kikus*, published in 1954, although Elena mentions she wrote it years before, since this is “stuff I wrote when I was a *chavita*, when I was very young.”

In *Lilus Kikus*, childhood is poetically evoked through the innocent yet shrewd and un-awed perspective of Lilus, the young protagonist who finds the adult world to be not so much confusing as confused. *Lilus Kikus* is in many ways autobiographical, isn't it? “Well, of course, one always has those childhood memories and stuff one keeps through the years.”

And what kind of connection is there between the poetic voices in *Lilus Kikus* and *Rondas de la niña mala*? “Well, I feel there's a kind of secret link there because there are many things that burst inside a kid. It's about a young girl's awakening to life. *Lilus Kikus* is obviously that, too, and these poems also have to do with that, with love, with curiosity.”

Enséñame tu ombligo,  
anda, suena, es un timbre,  
tintinea de risa,  
toco, vienes a abrir  
y me dices que pase.

(Show me your belly-button,  
c'mon, it rings, it's a doorbell,  
it tinkles with laughter,  
I ring, you come open  
and ask me to come in.)

The book's dedication is “To my sister.” “Yes, the entire book is dedicated to Kitzia. It's also a tribute to her because she's had a son with paralysis for a zillion years —over 40 years now— and this was a way of telling her that I love her very much and that I admire her.”

In *Rondas de la niña mala*, Elena's sister Kitzia becomes a character whose unique presence and strong personality come across in several *rondas*. “Yes, she was very strong, not so much dominant as strong, very strong. So, she comes across as a great character? I'm glad of that. My sister is no doubt a great character in real life.” And did both of them get along as siblings? “Well, she's my only sister, the only sister I have.”

En el armario, los vestidos sonríen,  
su perfume nos toma por asalto.

(Inside the wardrobe, the dresses smile,  
their perfume takes us by surprise.)

Both *Lilus Kikus* and *Rondas de la niña mala* have been published in Spanish by the Mexican publishing house ERA. And both contain wonderful illustrations by British-born painter and writer Leonora Carrington, who arrived in Mexico in 1942, considered by many one of the major figures in the surrealist movement, although her own surrealist approach, particularly as a woman painter, is unique.

Whose idea was it to have Leonora Carrington do the illustrations for the books? Elena responds readily, “That was me. First for *Lilus Kikus* and now for *Rondas de la niña mala*. Yes, I asked Leonora to do that. There were thousands of illustrations for *Lilus Kikus*. In fact, she gave them to me and now my daughter Paula has them in Mérida. But the ones she did for *Rondas* were mostly engravings she had already completed. Except for one which she did especially for me. There are also some illustrations by her son Pablo.”

Elena smiles graciously with her kind eyes and announces the end of the interview and the beginning of an informal conversation. ■■■



#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *Rondas de la niña mala* (Mexico City: ERA, 2009). Illustrations by Leonora Carrington and Pablo Weisz Carrington.

<sup>2</sup> The titles and the *rondas* have been translated into English by the interviewer.