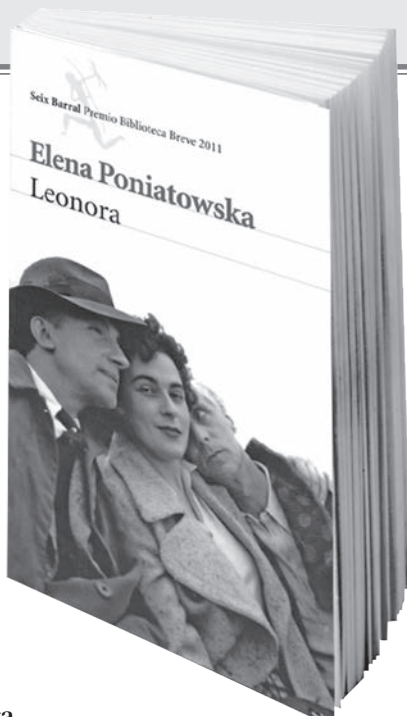


Reviews



Leonora

Elena Poniatowska

Seix Barral, Barcelona/Editorial Planeta
Mexico City, 2011, 510 pp.

“THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SORCERESS
TO HAVE SURVIVED INTO OUR TIMES”

This is how Elena Poniatowska situates Leonora Carrington, the last living surrealist, who made “magic with each and every color,” as an epigram on the map of the reader’s consciousness. But it takes Poniatowska over 500 pages to spread the “sorceress’s” life as a scintillating cobweb that mesmerizes the reader. This is no doubt one of the reasons *Leonora* was awarded this year’s prestigious Brief Library Prize in Spain.

In her epilogue-like piece Elena Poniatowska claims, “This novel... in no way attempts to be a biography, but rather a free approach to the life of an artist by far out of the ordinary.” One might add that it takes a great and outstanding woman to write significantly and exhilaratingly about a great and outstanding woman. *Leonora* is certainly the case.

Elena Poniatowska met Leonora Carrington in the 1950s and for half a century visited her as a friend. They shared a European upper-class childhood —English and French— and a life in Mexico, loved by each in her own way, among

other common interests. During that time Elena also interviewed Leonora with her finely spun talent webbed into an art by grueling journalist training that included a daily interview routine for many years. But, it is also Elena’s generous heart and shrewd eye for human nature’s myriad miracles, foibles, and quirks that make *Leonora* such a great read.

The style is fresh, determined, poetic. The narrative trots, canters, and gallops, perhaps in emulation of Leonora’s own core conviction, and a leitmotif throughout the novel: that she is a mare in the guise of a woman. The narrative keeps pace with Leonora’s unbridled, dazzling, hyperbolic energy; it also fills pages with anecdotes and brushstroke cameos of well-known figures who touched or were enmeshed at different times in Leonora’s life.

The publication of this novel celebrating Leonora Carrington has been uncannily timely: prior to her ninety-fourth birthday (April 6) and to her death (May 25). Leonora herself was not eager to receive awards and public homage, which she did anyway during her lifetime; but, as the novel makes clear, she most certainly enjoyed becoming the center of attention when it was worth provoking.

Leonora is depicted at the epicenter of several groups, particularly as a major female exponent of the surrealist movement, even though she kept a distance from anything that would pin her down to any specific movement, dogma, religion, or cult. Poniatowska writes, “Celtic mythology was Leonora’s only religion.” In the novel, she stands on her own, often surrounded by people, some of them renowned, and by an extraordinary array of beings inhabiting her imagination, dreams, and unconscious, that seeped into her paintings and writings. Poniatowska poignantly lays bare the solitude that at times gallops wildly within and at others drags her into dark caves and pits. Solitude remains faithful at the end of every tunnel.

At the core of Poniatowska’s portrayal is a careful objectivity that refrains from masking Leonora’s eccentricities and

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weaknesses, her self-obsession and self-pity, her standoffishness and arrogance. Elena's deep and translucent respect for Leonora helps her walk the thin line between being true to Leonora as she unabashedly was, and exerting tactful caution regarding certain information: as Leonora would say to Elena, "Let's not get too personal." This might be why Poniatowska left out of the novel some 250 pages of the original manuscript, as she recently revealed.

Poniatowska's complex portrait of an extraordinary woman and artist is remarkable: it unfolds Leonora's personal and public transits through Europe, New York, and Mexico, and various *ambiances* that tic-tocked in Leonora's ever-surprising destiny. One is her childhood in an aristocratic and stiff-upper-lip English family, dappled with the wisdom of her Irish grandmother and her beloved Irish Nanny (who understood Leonora's clairvoyant gifts), both of whom instilled in her love for all things Celtic and for the Sidhes who would keep her company and find their way into her paintings. A rebel at an early age, demanding her brothers' freedom while she was trained to be a good wife, she was expelled from several schools run by nuns and did not live up to her parents' expectations as a court debutante at Buckingham in London.

Another *ambiance* depicted in detail is her sizzling life in Paris where her true vocation as an artist was unbridled. Strikingly beautiful, having just turned 20, she met Max Ernst, 27 years older than her, who called her "the wind's bride," both living out to the hilt what surrealist André Breton named "*l'amour fou*." At the time she met and mingled with prominent surrealists and figures such as Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Breton, Paul Éluard, Man Ray, Leonor Fini, and Marcel Duchamp, among many others.

When Ernst was arrested and sent to a concentration camp, chaos and despair were unleashed in Leonora, still in her early twenties; her quasi-visionary madness, so the novel suggests, had its affinity with political clarity, a frenzy not unrelated to the chaos and despair in a war-torn, Nazi-infested Europe. She was interned, as per her father's instructions, in an asylum in Spain, a terrifying experience that marked her

deeply and which she was to recount much later in the hundred pages of her memoir titled *Down Below*.

Also depicted in detail is her escape—it could almost be an excerpt from a work of fiction—from being sent to another sanatorium in South Africa. During a stop in Lisbon, with nothing but pocket money to buy some gloves, she eluded her caretakers and took a taxi to the Mexican Embassy where the well-known Mexican diplomat and journalist Renato Leduc she had known previously in Paris took her under his wing.

Shortly after this, they would marry and sail to the U.S., but not before Leonora's destiny with Max Ernst was played out in Lisbon and later in New York: now he was Peggy Guggenheim's lover. The novel suggests that Leonora's decision to take an unpredictable route away from the surrealist crowd in decadence, was to go to Mexico with Leduc, although they would soon divorce.

Leonora's life in Mexico for over 60 years becomes richly entwined in the novel with an amazing array of people and events. Her life took a turn when she met and later married Hungarian Jewish photographer Csizi Wiesz, known as Chiki, and discovered the centering bliss of motherhood with the birth of her two sons, Harold Gabriel, or Gaby, and Pablo. Also life-changing was the happy meeting in Mexico with Spanish surrealist painter Remedios Varo, her "twin soul" who "[taught] her to pronounce *Quetzalcóatl*" and was to become her dearest and closest friend. Eccentric British millionaire Edward James, with his yellow socks, saved the family finances by becoming her enthusiastic admirer and mentor for many years. She also knew and mingled with other figures like Kati Horna, Eva Sulzer, Alice Rahon, Herbert Read, Wolfgang Paalen, Günther Gerzso, Octavio Paz, Ignacio Bernal, Luis Buñuel, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Laurette Séjourné, Diego Rivera (of whose frescoes she is quoted as saying in English "They are not exactly my cup of tea"), Frida Kahlo, and others.

What Elena Poniatowska is also able to regale the reader with in the part of the novel centered in Mexico is her ability to succinctly cameo not only people but places, and historical moments and to extract precious filaments from the rich tapestry of Mexican culture and history. The binocular effect in which biographical protagonist and narrator-writer merge into a single perspective is prevalent in the novel and brings the reader lines such as these: "In Mexico, miracles, like idols, come out even from under the stones" (p. 324); in Mexico, "to be a foreigner is a stigma,"; and "This land that at each moment expels the remains of an extraordinary culture

moves Leonora.” Other statements, though, are clearly direct quotations from Leonora: “Mexico has made me what I am because had I stayed in England or in Ireland I would not have yearned for the world of my childhood as I have here [in Mexico]” and, “What I paint is my nostalgia.”

Leonora is, in a sense, also about how Mexico homed an outstanding British artist, as it has done so for many foreigners at different times. And one could venture to say that, as happens with novels, it’s as much about Leonora as it is, in some ways, about Elena.

Leonora Carrington will not be forgotten for many reasons. One is no doubt this remarkable book, which will most certainly find its way very soon into English-language bookshelves in the U.S., the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. An ode to Leonora’s life, talent, suffering, inner strength, eccentricity, uniqueness, keen wit, and sense of humor, this novel is a valuable gift to us readers for which we have Elena Poniatowska to graciously thank. ■■■

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