

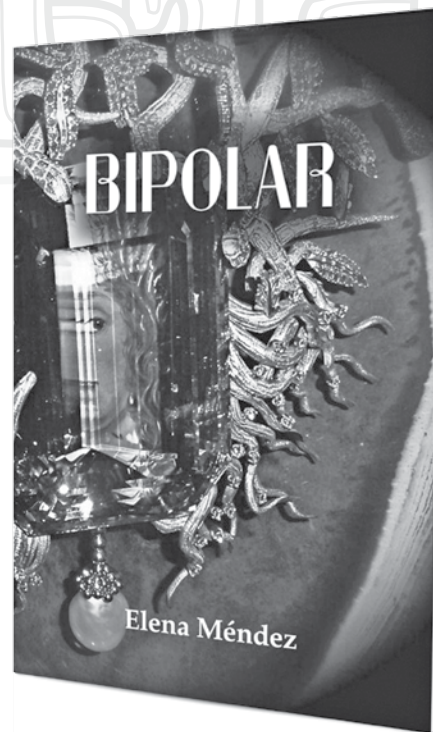
**Bipolar<sup>1</sup>**

Elena Méndez

Linajes Editores

Mexico City, 2011, 86 pp.

“Bipolar, you say, because I say I  
hate you and I love you?  
Well, what will you say when I kill  
you and then revive you?”

Belisa Bartra<sup>2</sup>

Ricardo Piglia says in his theses about the short story that this genre always consists of two stories because they are one inside another, secret one, which constitutes the key to its form. “The short story is constructed to make something that was hidden appear artificially. It reproduces the always renewed quest for a unique experience that allows us to see, under the opaque surface of life, a secret truth.”<sup>3</sup> And he quotes Rimbaud, mentioning “the instantaneous view that makes us discover the unknown, not in a far-away unknown land, but in the very heart of the immediate.”<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, in their apparent immediacy, the stories of Elena Méndez (b. Culiacán, 1981) always reveal to us something more profound that might go unnoticed by the hurried or inattentive reader.<sup>5</sup> It is already a well-known fact that the short story is not particularly sought-after as a genre by the more commercial publishing houses because it demands more involvement by the reader than, for example, the novel. The short story is constructed by the reader in his/her mind with elements that the author merely sketches for him/her. There is no time or space for more. The art of the short story lies in making a crack through which a broader, but more profound reality, beyond the simple anecdote told, can be glimpsed. The art of the short story writer is not making the crack very large, but picking the exact place that this crack will open so the reader can glimpse the story from a unique, privileged viewpoint.

In addition to being an excellent cultural journalist, focusing mainly on interviews and literary reviews, Elena Méndez reveals herself to us with *Bipolar* as a promising short story writer. This collection of 21 stories is divided into two sections: “El cuerpo del delito” (Corpus Delicti) and “Tal vez morir en soledad” (Perhaps to Die in Solitude). The first part presents the longer stories, which are more difficult reading, despite their apparent transparency and simplicity. The great majority have female characters enmeshed in fleeting sexual and love relationships generally in dark, clandestine settings: nightclubs, bars, seedy hotels, brothels; stifling atmospheres and scenarios that frame their own unhappiness, tragedies, and contradictions.

These are characters that have lived on the razor’s edge and seem to bet everything on a furtive one-night stand; on a twisted, destructive relationship; on the hungry, overwhelming passion for fornicating, that in the end leaves them more alone and empty, with unsatisfied desire and the wound of lovelessness right under their skin.

The narration of the characters’ sexual encounters is almost always explicit, sometimes harsh, with no niceties, and yet, it surprises us with details of intense eroticism that tone down the crudity of certain situations.

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The author's intelligent handling of different narrative voices should be underlined, particularly the use of second person singular—which is exemplified so often with the novel *Aura* that it would seem Carlos Fuentes had invented it. It is a very difficult form of narration that, in the hands of a less skillful writer would be disastrous, but Elena Méndez handles with natural ease and effectiveness.

In other stories, the author uses the more traditional first person because, from time immemorial, it is the best way of telling stories, or making the reader feel as though he/she had been there because it speaks directly to him/her, like in “El cuerpo del delito” (Corpus Delicti). Therein lies another element that characterizes Elena Méndez's writing: the use of orality, the great “ear” that she has for the popular turn of a phrase, slang, regionalisms from Mexico's north, specifically the state of Sinaloa, where she was born.

On the other hand, the author knows how to play with different genres, combining them with the short story, without the piece stopping being a short story. Sometimes her texts are almost like aphorisms, like short poems, touching on poetic prose. In one that I consider outstanding, she dares make a micro-Rayuela. This is “Crónica de una pasión en vano” (Chronicle of a Passion in Vain), in which in a bare 13 numbered paragraphs, she tells us what initially seems to be a story of failed love, but thanks to the “reader's guide” that she places at the end, she surprises us with a variation of it, using the same resources.

The book's second part is made up of shorter stories, dominated by an even more somber, sad feeling, since the characters have to deal with the impossibility of love, with incompleteness, with loneliness.

Some inattentive readers might consider Elena Méndez's work “feminist” because her characters are mainly women and therefore show a sensibility unrelated to the “traditional.” As critic Teresa Dovalpage says quite rightly in her brief introduction to the book, “Elena Méndez's stories do not look at the situation of women today through rose-colored glasses, but present it as it is.” Most of the women portrayed in *Bi-*

*polar* are bitches, determined women who control their own bodies and sexuality, women who are not to be messed with. “In every lead character, there's a clear dose of madness, or at least, of transgression,” as Ignacio Trejo Fuentes said when referring to the book.<sup>6</sup>

As is the case in the work of all writers, Elena's characters contain a little—or a lot—of the many Elenas that make up the author. Curiously, the last story in the book, “Noches vacías” (Empty Nights), has a male protagonist, whose situation also expresses that sadness to the point of weariness, that impossibility of relating to the opposite sex, which demonstrates that being fucked-over has no preferences, and visits itself equally on men, women, and chimeras.

The stories in *Bipolar* are situated in the reality of emotions and feelings, in the going and coming of loves and lovelessness, of need and loneliness, without falling into the facile or melodrama, but with the profound, critical gaze of its characters and their circumstances. This is why they move the reader, never leaving him or her unperturbed, always pushing him/her to reflect on human nature in these times, so miserable and so extraordinary, so contradictory, so bipolar. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this review was published in the *Revista de la Universidad de México*, April 2012. All notes in this review are Editor's Notes.

<sup>2</sup> Tweet from Belisa Bartra.

<sup>3</sup> Ricardo Piglia, “Tesis sobre el cuento,” Tesis XI. *Crítica y ficción* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1990), p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Elena Méndez received her bachelor's degree in Hispanic language and literature from the Autonomous University of Sinaloa and writes in the literary portal [www.homines.com](http://www.homines.com). From 2007 to 2010, she was the assistant director of [www.revistaespiral.org](http://www.revistaespiral.org). She has participated in literary workshops with Mexican writers María Baranda, David Toscana, Cristina Rivera Garza, Andrés de Luna, Federico Campbell, Anamari Gomís, and Antonio Deltoro. Articles, interviews, and literary reviews of hers have been published in Spain, Chile, Mexico, the United States, Brazil, and Colombia. She is the co-author of *Antología mínima del orgasmo* (Monterrey, Mexico: Ediciones Intempestivas, 2009). Information taken from her blog, <http://cuentistacuentera.blogspot.mx/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ignacio Trejo Fuentes, “Cuentos eróticos,” in “La cultura en México,” supplement of *Siempre!* August 20, 2011, <http://www.siempre.com.mx/2011/08/cuentos-eroticos/>.