

Memory and Identity in the Narratives of Soledad Puértolas: Constructing the Past and the Self

By Tamara L. Townsend

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Narratives of contemporary Spanish writer Soledad Puértolas (1947-), inducted into the Real Academia Española in 2010, depict the psychological struggles of the individual in postmodern democratic European society. Puértolas's realist style emphasizes storytelling and character portrayal, and her urban middle-class characters seek satisfying interactions with others and a sense of purpose. Memory aids characters in their quest for meaning and identity, and their use of memory reveals their self-perception and outlook on life. This book maps four ways in which Puértolas's narratives use memory to approach the fundamental problem of the individual's search for purpose and identity.

Some characters are burdened by memory in certain texts, especially *Días del Arenal* (1992) and *Burdeos* (1986). Reflection upon a painful self-defining memory affects their present mood and behavior. For some, this burden causes them to withdraw or to act irresponsibly; others accept and overcome the scars of the past. A second type of character takes an escapist approach to memory, as seen in *Queda la noche* (1989). Their nostalgic retreat indicates a restless dissatisfaction with the present. In a third type of memory, a secondary character provides the organizing force behind a protagonist's reminiscences, often an extroverted foil to highlight the protagonist's introspective nature. Memory of the relationship motivates the protagonist to mentally order his or her own life through the life review process; *Una vida inesperada* (1997) and *La señora Berg* (1998) provide examples. Finally, in the amnesic mode, Puértolas departs from realism to experiment with different forms of amnesia, as in *La rosa de plata* (1999) and *Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero* (1995). Memory loss highlights the centrality of memory to personhood and identity, while at the same time it draws attention to the inadequacy of memory to explain the totality of existence.

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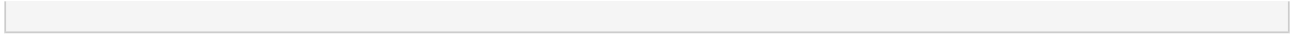
Some characters are burdened by memory in certain texts, especially *Días del Arenal* (1992) and *Burdeos* (1986). Reflection upon a painful self-defining memory affects their present mood and behavior. For some, this burden causes them to withdraw or to act irresponsibly; others accept and overcome the scars of the past. A second type of character takes an escapist approach to memory, as seen in *Queda la noche* (1989). Their nostalgic retreat indicates a restless dissatisfaction with the present. In a third type of memory, a secondary character provides the organizing force behind a protagonist's reminiscences, often an extroverted foil to highlight the protagonist's introspective nature. Memory of the relationship motivates the protagonist to mentally order his or her own life through the life review process; *Una vida inesperada* (1997) and *La señora Berg* (1998) provide examples. Finally, in the amnesic mode, Puértolas departs from realism to experiment with different forms of amnesia, as in *La rosa de plata* (1999) and *Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero* (1995). Memory loss highlights the centrality of memory to personhood and identity, while at the same time it draws attention to the inadequacy of memory to explain the totality of existence.

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Editorial Review

Review

Thoroughly researched and beautifully written, Tamara Townsend's study on the construction and reconstruction of memory illuminates a fundamental theme in the works of Soledad Puértolas. In an era in which Spanish society is deeply immersed in the understanding of its historical past, Townsend's insightful approach to the works of Puértolas also introduces readers to Spain's sense of collective memory and national identity. (Katica Urbanc, Wagner College)

Tamara Townsend's exhaustively researched, elegantly written, and cogently argued *Memory and Identity in the Narratives of Soledad Puértolas* is a significant and welcome contribution to the study of this eminent Spanish writer, one of the few women ever elected to the Real Academia de la Lengua in its 300-year history. Two decades after the only book-length study on Puértolas published in the United States, Townsend effectively brings criticism on Puértolas into the twenty-first century, detecting parallels between Puértolas's texts and the ongoing memory debate in post-Franco Spain. Townsend identifies memory as the recurring, unifying motif of Puértolas's narratives, and explores the different roles it plays ('baggage,' 'escape,' 'relational,' 'amnesia') in the construction of the subject, and the relationship between the self and society. Well-organized and ambitious in scope with close reading and insightful analyses of several of Puértolas's novels and short stories, Townsend's book is a compelling and necessary read for all students of contemporary Spanish literature and history, philosophy, psychology, and memory studies. (Francisca González Arias, University of Massachusetts, Lowell)

A fascinating study of memory in the narrative of Soledad Puértolas; Tamara Townsend explores the ideas of the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica in relation to Puértolas' work, as well as the mysterious nature of memory in identity and how memory helps to 'navigate the murky river of life.' (Sandra J. Schumm, Baker University)

This study provides a comprehensive look at the writings of Soledad Puértolas, 2010 inductee into the Real Academia Española, and the ways in which the contemporary individual in Spain constructs meaning and identity through memory. Protagonists understand their past experiences in diverse ways, and their approach to memory affects their relationships, self-understanding, and sense of purpose.

About the Author

Tamara L. Townsend is assistant professor of Spanish at Wheaton College.

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