

*Doña Inés vs. Oblivion*, by Ana Teresa Torres, translated by Gregory Rabassa

reviewed by [Kathleen L. Housley](#) in the [March 8, 2000](#) issue

Winner of the 1998 Pegasus Prize for Literature, this novel is both a family saga and a fictionalized account of the history of Venezuela, focusing on the relentless conflict between races and classes over land ownership. A long list of historical figures march through its pages, including Simón Bolívar and a series of military dictators. These men spawn storms of violence that buffet the fictional characters, who are also beset by such natural disasters as earthquakes and plagues. By the book's end, class and race are of little significance: the descendants of former slaves have risen to and fallen from power, while the descendants of the ruling class have alternately lost and regained their money. Loyalty is based on expediency, and property rights outweigh human rights. Oblivion—the total loss of memory and of ties to the land—wins.

The story is told by a ghost, Doña Inés Villegas y Solórzano, whose interest in the lives of her descendants is sustained by her determination that they regain possession of land that she once owned. She does not care about justice except as it pertains to her own narrow concerns. Based on an actual court case, the precipitating event that drives the plot is the gift by Doña Inés's husband of a plantation to a son he had fathered with his slave mistress. The problem is that the land had been owned by Doña Inés's father and was hers by inheritance. She is so adamant about her right to the land that, after her death in 1780, she refuses to lose interest in earthly things, following intently, indeed obsessively, the legal wrangling between her descendants and those of the former slave. The irony is that by the end of the book none of either of their descendants care about the land. In return for being made partners in a corrupt corporation, whose powerful owners intend to build a resort for foreign tourists on the site, the descendants give up their rights.

Though *Doña Inés vs. Oblivion* has been compared to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez, the book does not incorporate magic realism (a combination of fantasy and reality) despite the fact that its narrator is a ghost. Torres is not interested in transforming reality via her writing. The ghost is merely a convenient narrative device that allows Torres to provide an overview of 300 years

of history. As Doña Inés describes herself, "In this unmemoried country, I'm pure recall."

But though the device of the ghost may be convenient for Torres, it is also limiting. Doña Inés is both omniscient and omnipresent. She knows everything that is happening and what everyone, even her adversaries, are thinking. However, she has no power over the action; all she can do is comment on it, principally to her dead husband. Even as a ghost she is the most alive person in the book. Unfortunately, her passionate voice too often drowns out the other voices, creating a void between the reader and the characters. In an attempt to overcome this problem, Torres occasionally resorts to third-person narration before abruptly switching back to Doña Inés's shrill tones.

A native of Caracas, Torres has written three other novels, none of which has been translated into English. She credits her 20 years as a clinical psychologist for giving her insights into the stories people tell. Well known in Venezuela, Torres will no doubt step onto a broader literary stage with the winning of the Pegasus Prize, which recognizes distinguished authors whose literature is rarely translated into English. Established in 1977, the prize has brought several exceptional books about other cultures and ideas to the attention of American readers. One component of the prize is translation, and in this respect Torres can be said to have won twice. Her novel was translated by Gregory Rabassa, highly regarded for his translations of García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar.

Even though Torres is not yet in the same league as García Márquez or Isabel Allende, she is a writer to watch. She shares with them an anguished love-hate relationship with her own country and culture, a relationship which can be mined for rich fictional material. This is evident in the final pages of *Doña Inés vs. Oblivion*, when the legal case has come to an end, and the nothingness of forgetting is about to settle on the land. Metaphorically, when Torres has Doña Inés address her "beloved corpse," it is Venezuela itself that she means.