

**Los niños de colores**

(The Children of Color)
Eugenio Aguirre
Grupo Editorial Siete
Mexico, 1993, 189 pp.

As a member of Mexico's '40s generation —the generation of writers who came into their own during the mid-to-late sixties and early seventies— Eugenio Aguirre has penned more than twenty novels, spanning a great variety of themes and styles. His topics range from the historical through the romantic and supernatural, and his techniques from the traditional through the experimental.

One strand that runs consistently through his work, especially his more recent books, is social criticism. This appears in different guises: historical censure in *Gonzalo Guerrero* (1980), where the legitimacy of the Spanish Conquest is questioned; criticism of mores in *La suerte de la fea* (The Ugly Woman's Luck, 1986), which takes on society's excessive emphasis on external beauty; and political denunciation in *Pasos de sangre* (Steps of Blood, 1989), which decries the plight of Indian peasants at the hands of a corrupt governmental system. In *Los niños de colores* (Children of Color, 1993) Aguirre's social criticism acquires an added, international dimension.

Reviews



approval and support of Washington authorities.

Several types of social criticism form part of the fabric of this story. One of them is naturalism-determinism. The protagonist, Andrés, lives with his family in a squalid hut; the father has no means of income and the children are hungry and sick. They are reduced to an animal state. In the words of one character, "They don't have enough for food and have no means of subsistence, but they sure do fornicate. Each time they do it, that means another child, and the more children they have the more they do it. And there they are! Like pigs, surrounded by dozens of sick kids, starving to death!" The only way out of this desperate situation is to accept the gringos' offer for the healthy Andrés. This causes the parents unbearable pain; nonetheless, circumstances force them to go along with the deal.

Another theme is *indigenismo* (Indian issues). Andrés and his family are Guatemalan Indians. They consult with the *mayordomo*, or village head, who strongly disapproves of the decision to sell Andrés and recriminates the father severely. The old man represents the roots and collective conscience of his race. He also represents divine wrath. That's why "they're afraid of foreigners; they're also afraid of those men and women who come from their land but

break their customs and violate traditions," such as the tradition of keeping the family together. More than anything, the old man is a spokesman who expresses outrage over the exploitation to which his race is exposed.

Also present is some satire of manners. Focusing on the American stockbroker's wife, for example, Aguirre ridicules the superficiality of affluent First World women, to whom visits to the beauty parlor or the aerobics gym are more important than their children's health and welfare, and who make character judgements on the basis of skin color.

But by far the most important type of social criticism in *Los niños de colores* is anti-imperialist protest, a theme in Latin American letters that goes all the way back to Manuel Ugarte, Rufino Blanco Fombona and Enrique Rodó.

However, in those early 20th-century writers this was restricted to the relationship between Spanish America and the U.S., while Aguirre gives it a new global scope covering all "developed" and "developing" countries. In *Los niños de colores* the U.S. stands for the former in their entirety, while the Guatemalan boy, together with children abducted from other parts, represent the latter.

At the heart of this story is a denunciation of the moral fabric of the "first" world, whose societies will unscrupulously sacrifice the members of other nations to insure the survival of their own, their motto being "*¡Los débiles por los fuertes!*" (the weak for the benefit of the strong). It is the same predatory, exploitative attitude that has characterized the relationship

between the dominant and the powerless throughout history.

What lends special intensity to Aguirre's message is the powerful symbolism inherent in his story. Just as the "developed" nations rob their "developing" cousins of their healthy children's organs in order to replace those of their own diseased offspring, so they might be said to be "gutting" those other countries of their vitality in general, in order to regenerate their own decaying core.

They strip them of their natural and human resources and let them slide toward collapse. Seen in this light, *Los niños de colores* becomes a profound metaphor for the relationship between the "developed" and "developing" world, as perceived by the latter. This metaphor reaches deep down to a visceral level, tapping primordial survival fears, symbolizing these nations' worst forebodings.

The nightmarish metaphor is supported by certain stylistic trappings of the novel, reminiscent of gothic or horror fiction. The plot reminds us of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the classic human-experiment formula, where science tampers with human life in disregard of its sanctity. The "evil scientists" are the doctors who run the holding facilities where the children are collected: Simpson and Mailer, who view the children as objects, forcing them to undergo endless medical laboratory tests and preparing them for the transplants to come.

There are also those elite medical specialists who, in American society, target potential clients for transplants and effect the sales of organs —like the unscrupulous Doctor Morris. These master-villains, in true gothic-horror fashion, come with their

henchmen: the notorious Captain North, who is responsible for smuggling the children stateside by ocean vessel and doubles as a brutal enforcer when on dry land; and the indescribably ugly Smart, a guard in one of the facilities, who, underneath his repulsive exterior —like Victor Hugo's Quasimodo— conceals tender human feelings, which he evidences in a futile attempt to save the protagonist.

There is a host of other supporting villains threatening the children's welfare, such as the child-merchants who are responsible for the initial purchase, flying into remote areas by small plane, acquiring the children from their parents and then selling them to an American firm for a profit. They are degenerate misfits, outcasts from their own society: Benjamin, an unbalanced Vietnam veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome; John, a doctor who has been stripped of his license; and Steel, a soldier of fortune with an unsavory past. Motivated solely by greed and the indulgence of their baser instincts, they are grotesque and scary examples of the "ugly American." Topping them all is the organization which runs the entire operation, the "Company," an impersonal entity, created by anonymous shareholders, which manipulates its employees in an Orwellian fashion, projecting menace and inspiring terror.

In contrast with these villains stand the children themselves, guinea-pigs in the medical experiment —ingénue victims filled with hope and enthusiasm, unaware of their captors' evil designs. One of them is Andrés, who, motivated by the desire to help his family, goes

along with his abductors willingly, believing he is to be taken to the U.S. in order to learn English.

Another is Tomás, from Honduras, picked up from the streets by the child-merchants, inspired by the dream of becoming a major-league baseball player—a fantasy fed by his keepers in order to secure his cooperation. Then there is Corazón García, the Filipino girl, who thinks she'll be sent to language school in Canada, and Minu Chaudry from Bangladesh, who believes he is destined to become a waiter in London. And there are others still, from Cuba, Poland, Nicaragua, Colombia—from all around the globe, all of them unaware of their keepers' plans.

If the plot and characters of *Los niños de colores* do much to create a gothic atmosphere, the latter is heightened by the element of dreams, in particular guilt-ridden and fear-inspired nightmares. There are several of these interspersed throughout the novel. Andrés, the protagonist, dreams of violence at the hands of the *gringos* and of grotesquely threatening dogs, reflecting his fears.

Tomás, the Honduran boy, dreams of hard times back in his home town, where he lived in the streets, a victim of hunger and exploitation by others. Bety (sic), the nurse who looks after the children, has tortured dreams of divine retribution for her sin of collaborating with the villains.

In addition there are waking references by the characters themselves to the fact that their situation seems a nightmare. "I no longer know if all this makes any sense, or if it's nothing but a weird

nightmare," exclaims the father of one of the American children destined to receive an organ.

A further touch of horror is added by surreal settings such as the steamy, untamed jungle and the impersonal environment of the medical laboratories the children pass through for examination. These laboratories are particularly impressive, with their dehumanizing procedures, which the author portrays with admirable realism.

Aguirre's language is functional and intense. Most of the novel is written in the present; dialogue and narration are frequently blended without the benefit of quotation marks; verbs are omitted in many passages. The result is a story that frequently has the immediacy and hectic, compulsive quality of a bad dream.

The broader significance of Aguirre's *Los niños de colores* consists of several aspects. In a world where overt imperialism has been replaced by what is frequently only a pseudo-equality among nations, based on sweeping international trade and political agreements, the book points up the deep-seated fears and insecurities of "developing" countries, which suspect that in a clandestine fashion —like the child-organ trade—the old exploitative relationships may persist and that they will continue to be the victims.

At the same time the novel brings back a traditional theme of Spanish-American letters—anti-imperialist protest—and dresses it in a contemporary garb, infusing it with new life and giving it an expanded and deeper meaning. That this is achieved by a member of the '40s generation—that group of writers which, besides touting its open-mindedness and

liberalism, has always prided itself on being in tune with the times—seems only fitting.

Reinhard Teichmann