

Reviews

Anita Brenner. *A Mind of Her Own*

Susannah Joel Glusker

Foreword by Carlos Monsiváis

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The last 50 years of the twentieth century saw a boom in women's biographies in Mexico. These stories, almost always written by journalists or people of letters, have revealed the particularly intense lives of figures like Antonieta Rivas Mercado, Machila Armida, Frida Kahlo, Lupe Vélez, Tina Modotti, Isabel Villaseñor and Lupe Marín. Not all have been written by women,

however: we have Tomás Zurián and his works on painters Nahui Ollin and Rosario Cabrera, or César Delgado Martínez and Julio Villalba Jiménez, who wrote about “the dancer of legend,” Yol-Izma. Seemingly, the recovery of these women's lives has also fallen more to writers than to historians or social scientists.

We should note that in Mexico —except for a few specialists like Sara Sefchovich, Julia Tuñón or Carmen Gómez del Campo— in this genre, writers seldom base themselves on rigorous documentation or follow an academic plan. They usually tend to emphasize the literary dimension of history, just as Fabienne Bradu does as she seems to share the views of Guillermo Cabrera Infante when she quotes him:

Gossip —essential, of course, in literature, where it is dubbed anecdote, event or data— must be central to that other literary genre, history. You see, the historian, both now and in the past, is nothing more than a writer with hindsight.¹

Anita Brenner. A Mind of Her Own occupies the exact place where tension exists between the academic and the testimonial, between what can be proved using positive documentation and what comes out of personal experience. In her attempt to draw an overall portrait of her mother, incorporating not only her intense personality and the times and places she lived in, but also her petty faults and contradictions, Susannah Joel Glusker tries to go back to the roller coaster whirlwind that was Mexico from the 1920s to the 1940s through the eyes of Anita Brenner. She then attempts to take a distance and rethink what it meant to be a Jewess committed to the noblest causes of her time, like the Spanish Civil War or the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners.

Since it aspires to being an intellectual biography, the book reviews what is underlying Anita Brenner's three most important works, *Idols Behind Altars*, *Your Mexican Holiday* and *The Wind that Swept Mexico*. But above all, she seeks in both Brenner's diaries and the testimony of many of her contemporaries, the motives and obstacles faced at a time when everything seemed possible except remaining motionless. And even though many judgments and assertions seem to point to a justification of the most important work and celebrities of “official Mexican art,” undoubtedly this book's central merit is the recovery of the personality and work of Anita Brenner in Mexico and the United States from the 1920s to the 1940s, but above all the particularly important look it takes at the construction of many of the myths that have populated and continue to populate the history of twentieth-century Mexican culture.

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NOTES

¹ Fabienne Bradu, *Damas de corazón* (México City: FCE, 1994), p.12.