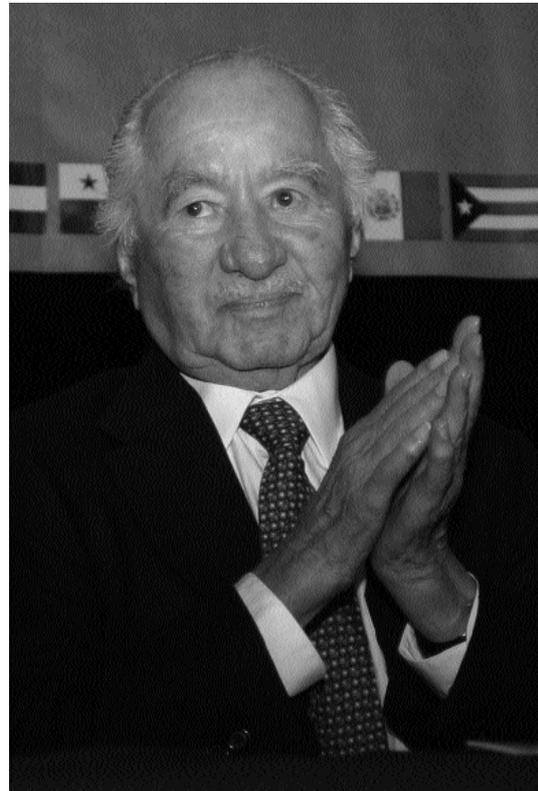


Meanderings and Memories Of Andrés Henestrosa

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In early December of last year, I went into the new Fondo de Cultura Económica bookstore where the old Lido movie theater used to be to look for Alejandro Rossi's most recent novel. I noticed a book on one of the tables of new arrivals: *Andanzas, sandungas y amoríos* (Meanderings, Revelries and Love Affairs) by Andrés Henestrosa. I went to look at it more closely, knowing that it had to have been put out by the publisher and designer Chac. And so it was. Henestrosa's book, beautifully illustrated with engravings by Juan Alcázar, had been prepared by Mariliana Montaner and edited by Chac.

I have loved and admired Don Andrés for at least 40 years. He always intrigued me. His image is emblematic: for me, like for so many others, he represents the values of Mexican culture. I relate him in my mind with Juárez, whose thinking he has made great efforts to transmit, and with indigenous cultures. With him, we have learned since childhood to respect what people are now calling cultural diversity; to know and appreciate



the indigenous languages, but also to know and love the Spanish language. The figure of Andrés, together with his wife Alfa and their daughter, Cibeles, appears in my memory and immediately brings a smile to my lips, a smile of joy, of thanks to life for having given me the chance to be near them.

I had been thinking a great deal about him, on his birthday, remembering the homage to him in 2001, when he said goodbye to the audience in the Manuel M. Ponce Room at the Fine Arts Palace saying that he hoped to see us all again in five years. I myself had had the intention once, when I worked in the National Council for Culture and the Arts (Conaculta) Wings and Roots for Children publishing program, of preparing *Andrés*

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Henestrosa for Children as part of the children's poetry collection directed by Susana Ríos Szalay. Perhaps for that reason, I thought that this book was something similar. I couldn't help but feel somewhat upset with myself for not having done it. Now somebody else had beaten me to it.

But ideas are free, and the important thing was that the book existed, I thought, as I leafed through it admiring the etchings. I remembered the exhibition of Alcázar's work that Mariliana Montaner once organized in her home. That time, I fell in love with a canvas: it was a woman with a skirt decorated with mermaids—or fishes?—that I have never seen again and have never forgotten.

Standing in the middle of the bookstore, practically caressing the book, I realized little by little that this was something else, a different idea, a very different aim. It was not a collection of texts by a Mexican author to give children their start in reading. It was a series of Andrés Henestrosa's stories told through the pen of Mariliana. Naturally, I bought it. After a few days of having it, of leafing through it, of feeling it for what it is, something unique, a complete book, a gift for the senses, I began to read it and didn't put it down until I finished it. The truth is that it is barely 60 pages long, but at the end, you have the feeling you have read a novel that goes through the entire life of our character, Andrés Henestrosa. When you close the book, you are satisfied, left with the pleasure of having been by his side, very close to him, for many years.

As I went through the pages that I enjoyed reading immensely, I saw Andrés the child, the youth, the man, and his closeness to women. I took pleasure in literally listening to the voice behind the transcribed words. I could see the gestures of their author; I remembered the Andrés I know, who I have seen close up, since a visit to my parents' house, at a party in which the guests were offered a large clay pot full of red *mole* that Josefina, the cook, had come to prepare there several days ahead of time.

The young girl who used to take care of us—she was in charge of killing the turkey during the night, as my mother had asked her to so we

children would be asleep and not see the crime, to the horror of Beatriz, my younger sister, and my mother's being upset when we told her what had happened—went to wake us up to show us the recently executed turkey.

The day of the party, which I remember as one of the best of that entire time, my mother and Aunt Berta sang *La llorona* (The Weeping Woman) with Henestrosa. (That image has always stayed with me as a symbol of happiness.) Before that, my brothers and I had been hypnotized watching Andrés, standing in front of the table, eating a *mole* taco: he wielded the tortilla very ably. When he finished, he used it to clean his plate, and before the last mouthful, he also wiped his mouth with it. "Gee," my brother Joaquín said, "the tortilla as a plate, food and a napkin."

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Now, with this book in my hands, I could look upon another facet of that Andrés, decipher it through its lines, aspire to know him. His stories, his lies—as he says—his histories showed me this man who understands women, enjoys their friendship and knows how to love them.

This book is not the *Andrés Henestrosa for Children* that I had imagined. What I have is, rather, the *Andrés Henestrosa for Ladies*, which is difficult to classify: a kind of erotic book for women, a book of good loving. An oral tradition testimony. A book of stories in which the reader navigates between fiction and memory. In effect, an authentic "unexpected gift," full of wisdom, magic, love and sensuality, where the beauty of the story reigns supreme.

Mariliana has understood how to let Andrés speak. When we read it we can be certain that we are there with him, that he is the one telling us

those stories. We can hear his happy laugh, hear his words that a directed only at us, his female readers.

And this brings me to another memory: once, a long time ago, I came across a little book by Andrés Henestrosa at home and began reading it. I remember it clearly. The cover, of course, was not the most appropriate: letters in different typesets and colors strewn across a white background. (I wanted to see how exact my memory was, but I couldn't find it again.) It contained a series of short stories and, I think, was named after one of them: "El temor de Dios" (The Fear of God). I liked it very much. In literature class, we had an hour a week of reading aloud. The teacher would select what was to be read and ask one of the students to come to the front of the room and read to the rest of us. One day, we asked her if we could pick

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what we were going to read and she said yes. So, I proposed we read Henestrosa. The teacher, a Spanish Republican *d'une certaine âge*, said yes, that she was delighted, that she was very fond of his prose. My friends and I, with the arrogance of teenagers, laughed, thinking that she probably didn't even know who that writer was. I was convinced he was my discovery. I thought he was just a friend of my parents who I admired but who nobody else knew about, surely.

I practiced reading aloud. I asked my father how to read a text with swear words in it in public, and he said that I should read it very naturally, without emphasizing the words, since, if they were part of the text, there was no need to explain them. I started reading the story, standing on the schoolroom's platform. Miss Estrella, the teacher, came up behind me, as she used to do, grinding her teeth in my ears, and pointing with her finger

to the place up to where I should read. I thought that she had noticed already and that she wanted to stop me from continuing, but then I realized that it wasn't that. She was pointing exactly to the end of the dangerous sentence. Then the bell rang announcing the end of class. However, I continued reading in front of the silent, attentive group, and finished the paragraph with the following sentence: "Yes, if I rail against God, how much more should I rail against that bitch who gave birth to me, shithead that I am." Everybody was silent. Then came the teacher's slapping the book shut, and finally, general laughter. At home I said that it was all Andrés Henestrosa's fault that they threw me out of literature class.¹

Now, looking at *Andanzas, sandungas y amoríos*, I say that it is a book that we must fervently keep in order to be able to reread it. It is a work that we should be take pleasure in and enjoy. A book about love, about the small things in life, the moments that are soon gone, evaporated, but that give meaning to the days. Through its pages, the character talks to us, that character that we thought we knew and that we have to discover again. Mariliana has the ability to make us feel that it is to us, to each one of his readers, that Andrés is speaking. In the intimacy of a small room, with the Venetian blinds half open to let a little light in but not enough to hurt your eyes or inhibit you, Andrés tells his women readers, almost in secret, his erotic stories, sometimes sad, sometimes tender, and invites us to love life, to learn to laugh, to be joyful.

Like the Juchitecas, the women he most admires, Andrés Henestrosa tells us "naturally," "without prejudices of language or of attitude, about his love life." And in this book, he transmits it to us "openly and freely." Even if he may have only been pulling our legs. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Our readers can enjoy this short story in this issue of *Voices of Mexico*. [Editor's Note.]