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A Week in October

Elizabeth Subercaseaux
Marina Harss, translator
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Clara Griffin has not written since she was a child, when she crafted fairy stories filled with odd characters and even odder outcomes. But like a writer, Clara observes: walking on the street, she guesses after the names and lives of those who pass by her to make up for the emptiness in her own life. After she learns that she is terminally ill, her husband, Clemente, suggests that she pick up a pen and write, and she does. Within the pages of a notebook, which she entitles *A Week in October*, a tale of her weeklong affair with one of her husband's colleagues unfolds, as well as the knowledge of her husband's own affairs. When Clemente discovers the notebook, and her affair with his colleague, it is so mysteriously structured, he does not know if it is merely a tale or if it is a skilled interweaving of both truth and untruth. He begins to ask if the self-centered and acquisitive husband described within its pages could be him.

Clara occupies a haunted country. The political unrest that shadowed so much of Chile's history into this century is made visible with small, deft strokes and speaks to Clara's deep sense of loss. Her depressed mother committed suicide and her charismatic father faded away. Having miscarried and remained childless, she writes of how she and her husband returned to visit what was left of her expropriated childhood home—the woods she once wandered in now razed for firewood.

To combat her own emptiness, Clara chose the steady confines of a marriage that was to be blighted by infidelity and grief. "The trouble is," she writes, "I'm a liar and always have been." But her imaginative self is less repugnant to her, and in the process of writing, she is able to discover the flawed aspects of her nature without judgment, as well as those of others, including Clemente.

Subercaseaux's language is simple, yet adept. In her inventive plotting, Clara entices her husband to return to the notebook again and again to sample a taste of his own betrayal, and he becomes more and more confused. Is it real, or is it fiction? The reader obtains few clues along the way, but certainty does finally come to light. The novel's magical realism, its ghost-like imagery, and its themes of longing, revenge, and resilience will draw the reader in.

This Chilean has authored ten books. This novel, first published in 1999, is her first to be translated into English. It will be a delight to a new audience to be able to enjoy her work at last.
SARAH CHRISTENSEN (August 15, 2008)

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