

## A SEARCH FOR TRUTH

a review by Lisa Wenger Bro

Ariel Dorfman. *The Suicide Museum*. Other Press, 2023.

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ARIEL DORFMAN is the Walter Hines Page Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus of Literature and Latin American studies at Duke University. He is the author of several books, most recently *Allegro* (Other Press, 2025), and plays, including *Death and the Maiden* (1990), which was adapted into a film (1994).

Ariel Dorfman's *The Suicide Museum* is a novel of hybridity. It's at once a work of fiction and a memoir, a detective and a quest story, and an exploration of the blurring of fact and fiction. This hybridity is reflected in the thousands of refugees who fled Chile in 1973 after Augusto Pinochet's US-aided military coup and the death of President Salvador Allende, refugees taking their homeland with them as they sought safety and asylum in other countries. Those Allende supporters who didn't escape faced torture and death, thousands becoming the *desaparecidos* (the disappeared), the hybrid "missing" but dead. A fictionalized Ariel Dorfman narrates the novel thirty years after he searches for the truth about Allende's death for enigmatic billionaire Joseph Hortha and fifty years after Pinochet's coup forced Ariel to flee Chile. As Ariel sets out to discover the truth – was it murder or suicide? – the journey makes both Ariel and Hortha confront the ghosts of the past. *The Suicide Museum* is an exploration of not just Allende's death, but also of the sociopolitical and economic state of Chile that led to that death and of human nature, identity, and healing.

Joseph Hortha is a Jewish man who escaped the Holocaust as a child when he was smuggled into a Dutch Christian family as their orphaned relative. He's a man who later made his fortune developing plastics, and he's the man who hires Ariel to return to Chile after Pinochet is voted out and

Patricio Aylwin is elected Chile's new president. Hortha sees the folly of human nature, particularly through the destruction of the natural world and climate change. In Hortha's view, humanity is committing mass suicide. Consequently, he wants to create a suicide museum, contrasting the beauty of the natural world with the horror of human suicide, showcasing the suicides of both prominent and notorious figures from around the world. Allende's death, if a suicide, would be the linchpin of Hortha's museum. Because the stories surrounding Allende's death vary so much, Hortha hires Ariel to uncover the truth about whether Allende was murdered or committed suicide during the coup.

As a blend of fiction and memoir, the essence of *The Suicide Museum* is an examination of how fact and fiction blur, how, as Ariel thinks, "fiction and reality entangled and mirrored and echoed each other" (117). Delving into the mystery of Allende's death, Ariel finds that those aligned with Pinochet, particularly the military and the wealthy, readily accept the fact that Allende was a coward who committed suicide rather than face defeat. Allende, a member of the leftist Unidad Popular party, was the first democratically elected socialist, and as a socialist, he introduced programs to aid the oppressed, poorer Chilean citizens. He also began nationalizing corporations and industry, believing that doing so would safeguard those vul-

nerable citizens from capitalism's exploitation. The poor had much to gain, the wealthy much to lose. Hence, when Ariel speaks to those in the lower classes, Allende was murdered. After all, the sole Allende supporter who witnessed his death, Patricio Guijón, only corroborated the suicide story because Pinochet forced him to do so – or so those supporting the murder belief claim. Alberto Cariqueo, a Mapuche and Chilean whose family and people live in poverty, tells Ariel during an encounter at Allende's gravesite, "I will return to saying thank you to him each morning, out in the air, frankly, with joy, like it should have been all this time if they hadn't murdered him, hadn't murdered our democracy" (277). But how can both versions be true and coexist simultaneously? Which is the truth and which a lie? Or as Ariel discovers, who needs which truth?

This blurring of fact and fiction is also central to Pinochet's rule and his elimination of all leftist opposition. Those who didn't get out of Chile in the aftermath were captured, imprisoned, tortured – raped, if they were women – and then executed. For several thousand of those executed, Pinochet had another story; they were simply missing, just one of the *desaparecidos*. In this way, Pinochet had clean hands, since he obviously hadn't ordered any deaths. For the families of the *desaparecidos*, the government's refusal to acknowledge the deaths kept hope alive.

Thousands of dead but alive Chileans, thousands of bodies missing with no answers, even after Aylwin's election in 1990.

On a smaller scale, the blurring of fact and fiction touches individual lives regarding beliefs and even identity. We see this impact with Hortha, a man who no longer uses his real name, a man whose mother tells him as a child, "Make sure nobody notices you, fade into the shadows whenever possible. . . . Become a ghost" (167, 171). Her words are proven true when Hortha watches a Jewish boy interact with and become a favorite of a Nazi officer who frequents the school/church where the Jewish children are housed. Hortha keeps to himself, makes himself unnoticeable. He escapes; the other boy does not. Later, he blends into the family in Holland who takes him in, becoming a beloved and orphaned Christian family member rather than a despised Jewish boy. While this fiction saves him, it's also the source of trauma and guilt after learning of his mother's death in a concentration camp – a trauma and guilt that shapes his life, identity, and beliefs.

Hortha's trauma and guilt are compounded when, as an adult, he discovers that the plastics he developed to help people are now destroying the natural world. This discovery, conjoined with his wife's suicide, fuels his desire to build the suicide museum. Yet, it's a desire and museum founded on both fact and fiction. Hortha believes that he can change the world through

museum exhibits that juxtapose the beauty of the natural world with the despair of famous suicides, that he can show people how they're committing suicide and how they can change. The numerous fairytale references associated with Hortha underscore that his belief that he can bring about mass human change is a fiction, an idealized outcome and oversimplification of complex issues. Hortha even compares himself to Scheherazade from *The Thousand and One Nights*, for like Scheherazade, he is "spooling out stories . . . a thousand and one stories to save our Earth and our future . . . so the executioners won't cut the heads of all those innocent . . . virgin forests . . . won't rape the planet anymore" (344). Yet, he doesn't understand that this "story" is truly a fiction. How can there be a "happily ever after" given humanity's frequent unwillingness to look toward the future or even consider climate change? Given that the topic of climate change itself is also trapped in a fact/fiction quagmire?

Ariel also is stuck in the fact/fiction limbo. Most notably, there is the truth that Ariel hides about the day of the coup, a truth that eats at him. He was supposed to be at *La Moneda*, the palace that served as the government's seat and the presidential residence, the day the coup occurred but had switched hours with another man. When he learns that the coup is underway, he hurries to the palace, but an officer manning barricades in the plaza turns him away. Rather than pushing his way past the officer and joining in, Ariel instead turns and leaves.

For the next seventeen years of Pinochet's reign, there are those at the palace that day, including one of Allende's own daughters, who swear they saw him during the fighting, yet nothing Ariel says convinces them otherwise. He refuses to talk about the day, guilt and shame eating at him, especially since those who believe they saw him consider him a hero. For Ariel, the plaza in front of the palace "remained forever in my mind as the place where I had been tested and failed the test – my willingness, as I had so often declared, to fight for that revolution to my last dying breath" (127). Ariel's inaction haunts him as does the "ghost of himself" that others "conjure" whenever they recall seeing him fight that day.

Ariel's guilt lies in the knowledge that another man died in his place, while his shame comes from knowing he turned and ran that day rather than standing his ground and fighting – fighting a losing battle that would have culminated in his death. These feelings, combined with his inaction, lead to his view of himself as inadequate. However, his inadequacy comes from his acceptance of another fiction, that of what/how a "true" man should be. Even the healers – Allende himself once a doctor – turn into warriors when called upon. The intertwining of violence and masculinity, as Ariel points out, is "[f]rom the very beginning, the story of Chile. Even when they lose, the men on horseback, they end up winning" (439). A "true" man fights until the end, violence the only recourse, which makes Ariel less of a man since he turned away from the fighting. Ariel's view of himself

and his view of masculinity as linked to violence raises myriad questions once he returns to his homeland and sees the outcome of both the abandonment and retention of those views. Those who stayed and fought are now dead, or like his friend Abel, imprisoned and still focused on the past. Those who fled, like Abel's brother Adrián, have focused on healing both the self and others and have turned toward the future.

This fiction related to masculinity draws on ideas about strength and weakness that intertwine with and bleed into many aspects of Ariel's identity and insecurity. Moving from the US to Chile as a child, his family originally from Argentina, he's dropped into a new world and immediately an outsider in a position of weakness. Even further, he fears confrontation but also fears others will label him a "sissy." So begins his façade where external masculine bravado masks internal insecurity about identity, place/belonging, and masculinity. This insecurity only grows as he reaches adolescence, and linking all three, Ariel says, "This confusion over my precarious masculinity increased in adolescence, when I began dreaming about dating . . . maybe it was just that the trauma of changing countries and cities and homes and languages had left me wallowing in a paralyzing incertitude about who I really was and whether I could ever truly belong anywhere" (186). There's unmasculine weakness found in not having a place and not knowing where you belong, aspects that also warp his sense of self. This issue haunts him throughout his life. When fleeing Chile after the

coup, he chooses to be an exile rather than a refugee. A refugee is passive, homeless, and weak; whereas, an exile has agency, strength, and a home. Calling himself an exile, Ariel believes, "would preserve my dignity and freedom, place me in a romantic and heroic tradition" (536).

These ideas were also embedded within the revolutionary movement, persistently telling Ariel both how to be and how he was not a "true" man. Upon his return, these ideas about masculinity – the fictions rather than facts – still plague Ariel. When he visits his former friend Abel, a man still clinging to his revolutionary ideas and a man still imprisoned for his actions, Abel gives Ariel a picture of their revolutionary friends. Ariel finds, though, that the picture "accused me of weakness, the dead asking me why I was alive and they were not" (599). Ariel's return to Chile, then, becomes not just about sorting out the fact/fiction related to Allende's death, but also sorting out the fact/fiction related to the ideas about masculinity that impact both his identity and sense of belonging. He must explore how the country's ideas about men and masculinity have influenced him as he confronts his own past and inaction. And with those ideas about masculinity come the ideas about place and belonging. Strength is returning to Chile and continuing his work to help rebuild the country he loves. Weakness is abandoning Chile and returning to the US, even though the US is the only home his children have known.



ABOVE The first page of an interview with Ariel Dorfman" by Robert Siegel in *NCLR* 2004 (available for purchase)

Ariel's return to Chile becomes a personal quest and exploration of ideas about masculinity, about place, about belonging and the concepts of strength and weakness tied to the choices he's made throughout his life.

*The Suicide Museum* is a novel that raises complicated questions about masculinity, identity, climate change, political and economic ideologies, and more. As Ariel searches for answers about Allende's death, he must also confront the various questions related to the world around him, as well as

wrestle with the fact and fiction that blurs all. Sometimes, Ariel discovers, it's easier to make fiction the truth, and sometimes it's hard to untangle the truth from fiction. In the end, as Ariel tells Hortha, "[W]e all choose what we want to remember or misremember from the past to make sense of the present" (318). It's Ariel's quest to make sense of the present that paves the way for a reexamination of the past – a reexamination of both country and self – that brings about new understandings and healing. ■