

UNDER REVIEW

AN ARGENTINEAN WRITER AND THE MOVEMENT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

*Selva Almada's work is central to the battle to protect hard-won victories
that President Javier Milei has vowed to overturn.*

By Graciela Mochkofsky

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The campaign Ni Una Menos (Not One Less) was founded in response to killings of women in Argentina, in 2015. Photograph by Irina Dambrauskas / Reuters

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Last year was a good year for Selva Almada, one of the most powerful literary voices to come out of Argentina in the past decade. Her novel “No Es un Río”

(“Not a River”), the final book in her “Trilogy of Men,” was short-listed for the Booker Prize, and a film version of the first in the trilogy, “El Viento Que Arrasa” (“The Wind That Lays Waste”), which she loves, hit theatres. But 2024 was also a devastating year for Almada. Her work, which also includes an earlier nonfiction book about the high number of murders of women in Argentina, “Chicas Muertas” (“Dead Girls”), was published around the time that Ni Una Menos (Not One Less), the feminist movement founded in response to those killings, spread throughout Latin America and beyond, spurring social and legal change. In Argentina, that period came to an end in December, 2023, when the far-right libertarian Javier Milei became the President and unleashed a relentless backlash that has included disparaging rhetoric about feminists from government officials and Milei himself, the defunding of women’s-rights and gender-equality programs, and support for an attempt to ban a number of books by female writers.

The backlash came as a shock to Almada and her fellow-feminists; Milei won, in part, owing to his following among young men. Mercedes Funes, a journalist who is one of the original organizers of Ni Una Menos, described the feeling that has descended over the movement: “We are beaten down, exhausted, and deeply disappointed.” Almada agrees. “Perhaps our happiness about the victories we had achieved didn’t let us see that nothing was really that entrenched,” she recently told me. “We thought the whole country agreed on certain issues, but evidently there was fierce resistance underneath the surface in some sectors.” How did they miss it? A good place to look for an answer is, in fact, Almada’s books, which portray a country marked by repressed male violence that inevitably, and tragically, erupts.

Almada was born in 1973 and raised in Villa Elisa, a small town (the population was some six thousand people at the time) in Entre Ríos, a subtropical province in the northeast, on the Uruguayan border, in an area that Argentines call *el litoral*. The distinct local vocabulary is sprinkled with Guaraní, an Indigenous language widely spoken in neighboring Paraguay. (Almada’s fiction is set in the region, and her English translator, Annie

McDermott, often came across words she did not know.) Almada's mother worked as a maid, a nurse, and, eventually, a schoolteacher; her father had a full-time job painting signs for the municipal government. After finishing high school, she moved to the provincial capital, Paraná, to study communication sciences at the public university; she had intended to become a journalist, but abandoned that plan to focus on literature. A decade later, she moved to Buenos Aires, where she worked as a pharmacy clerk in a hospital and wrote short stories and poetry in her spare time.

At thirty-seven, determined to publish her first novel, she quit her hospital job and started a writing workshop (a common occupation for local writers, who often host workshops in their homes). Her breakthrough came two years later, in 2012, when "The Wind That Lays Waste" was published by the small independent imprint Mardulce. Her body of work now includes short stories, novels, a film script, a children's book, and a book of notes on the shooting of "Zama," a film by the Argentinean director Lucrecia Martel.

"The Wind That Lays Waste" takes place over the course of a day, as a storm gathers. An evangelical pastor is travelling with his teen-age daughter when their car breaks down and they stop at a garage run by a man who is helped by a teen-age boy. The tension between the two men builds slowly—around their beliefs, their views of life, their objectives—and then bursts with the storm. In the second book of the trilogy, "Ladrilleros" ("Brickmakers"), two young men who were childhood friends lie dying after facing each other in a knife fight. One is visited by the ghost of his father, who died violently years earlier; the other has dreams about his abusive father, who abandoned him. "Not a River," the last book, involves three men on a weekend fishing trip. Two have been friends for years; the third is the son of another friend, who drowned during a previous fishing trip on the same river. They shoot a stingray with a revolver and hang it from a tree. When local islanders see their catch, described at one point as a "bride" (the ray's wide body and tail resemble a wedding dress), they resent the men. Another tragedy seems inevitable.

Almada's work won immediate critical acclaim for its original voice, and also

for taking on the subject of male violence. As the *Los Angeles Review of Books* noted:

An unflinching awareness of death compels the work of Selva Almada, infusing her deeply moral and socially conscious writing with an immense pathos. She is not concerned with the somber death of old age, however, nor with the showy, indiscriminate death found in so much contemporary pop culture. Rather, the death that drives her narratives is born out of violence fueled by misogyny and misplaced ideals about masculinity that appear endemic to the society of her native Argentina...

“Dead Girls,” Almada’s only work of nonfiction, was published between “Ladrilleros” and “Not a River,” in 2014. It investigates the unsolved murders of three young working-class women killed in different regions of Argentina in the nineteen-eighties. Andrea Danne was stabbed at nineteen, while she was asleep in her bed; María Luisa Quevedo was raped and strangled when she was fifteen, and her body was left in a vacant lot; and Sarita Mundín, at age twenty, was last seen getting into her lover’s car—her remains were found on a riverbank almost a year later. Almada began working on the book as reports that a number of women had been burned alive by their partners rocked the country, and a collective consciousness began to emerge around what had previously been described as domestic violence or crimes of passion, but was increasingly recognized as gender violence—femicide. Almada wondered how many had occurred when no one was paying attention to them. (The Argentinean government now tracks femicides, and about two hundred and fifty are reported in the country each year.) In a stunning moment in “Dead Girls,” she arrives on the outskirts of the town where Quevedo’s body was found, looking for the site. A woman directs her to a corner of the vacant lot, but gives the name of a different victim. It turns out that another woman was killed and dismembered, and her torso was left in almost the same spot, years later. “Dead Girls” may not have the same literary quality as Almada’s novels, but it makes a strong statement: if you are a woman and you are alive, she writes, it’s “purely a matter of luck.”

The Ni Una Menos movement began a year after the publication of “Dead

Girls,” in May, 2015, when a town in the northern province of Santa Fe was shaken by the disappearance of a fourteen-year-old girl named Chiara Páez. Páez’s sixteen-year-old boyfriend, who had participated in search parties for the missing teen-ager, confessed to killing her. (He is currently serving a fifteen-year prison sentence.) She had been pregnant and refused to have an abortion; he buried her body in his grandparents’ back yard, where, not long afterward, the family gathered for a barbecue.

When news of the crime broke, Marcela Ojeda, a journalist based in Buenos Aires, took to Twitter. “Actresses, politicians, artists, businesswomen, social leaders . . . women, all of us . . . aren’t we going to raise our voices? **THEY ARE KILLING US,**” she posted. It was retweeted hundreds of times. Ten women, all journalists, joined together and, in keeping with Argentina’s strong tradition of street protests, organized a demonstration. It was to be held at Plaza Congreso, opposite the seat of the National Congress, at 5 p.m. on Wednesday, June 3rd. Mercedes Funes told me that the date was chosen simply because it was the most convenient for the organizers: it was the only day one of them had child care; it didn’t conflict with Funes’s magazine closing; and so on.

They needed a hashtag, and it didn’t take long to find one. After a previous killing, in 2014—Lola Chomnalez, a fifteen-year-old girl vacationing with her family on a Uruguayan beach, had been stabbed and asphyxiated, and her body had been left on a dune—a group of women writers held a public reading demanding justice in that case and an end to femicides. They called it “Ni Una Menos por Lola” (Not One Less for Lola), a reference to a line attributed to the poet Susana Chávez: “Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerte más” (“Not one woman less, not one more death.”) Chávez was a Mexican activist who began protesting against femicides in Ciudad Juárez in the mid-nineteen-nineties. In 2011, she was tortured and killed by three young male gang members.

The organizers expected perhaps ten thousand people. They had invited family members of women whose deaths had been reported, and set aside a protected area for them. “But people started arriving at the plaza with posters of victims

that no one knew about,” Funes remembered. “At the end, there were three hundred and fifty thousand people in the plaza, and more gatherings in plazas across the country. Then there were similar protests all over the world. That day, the feeling was that there was hope.”

Almada was in the crowd. She was not one of the organizers, but “Dead Girls” had been born of the same juncture of feminist outrage that was now producing Ni Una Menos. “I think the book pushed me to throw myself, body and soul, into the reflections and preoccupations that I had, for many years, mostly on my own,” she said in an interview with PEN Transmissions, in 2020. The moment was all the more exhilarating because a generation of female Argentinean writers born in the sixties and seventies—including Mariana Enriquez, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, Ariana Harwicz, Samanta Schweblin, and María Gainza—were receiving unprecedented international attention. Carolina Orloff, the co-founder and publishing director of Charco Press, an imprint in Edinburgh, Scotland, published the work of some of those writers in translation, making it available to English readers for the first time. She told me recently that readers were “looking at Latin America and realizing that very radical, very important things are happening—things that serve as a model for other societies. Argentine women writers and intellectuals are absolutely at the forefront, with their literature and their activism. That’s what defines them, what sets them apart: women who don’t hold back when it comes to speaking and writing about what needs to change radically in our societies in order to make them more equal.”

Argentina was already a leader in gender-equality legislation—it was the first nation in Latin America to pass same-sex-marriage laws, and the first in the world to identify trans rights as human rights. But Ni Una Menos spurred further government action, including budget allocations to support victims of gender violence; the creation of an official record to track femicides across the country; the provision of government-sponsored, free legal assistance to individuals experiencing domestic violence or sexual abuse; educational efforts to bring gender-equality awareness to public schools; and, in December, 2020,

in a historic victory for women's rights in a majority-Catholic country—one that produced the sitting Pope—legalized abortion.

Since the advent of the movement, hundreds of thousands of women have marched to the Palace of Congress, many of them wearing green kerchiefs, the symbol of the movement. (This gesture was an homage to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who wore white kerchiefs starting in the nineteen-seventies, when they began protesting the disappearance of their children under the country's military dictatorship.) For Argentines like me, the sense of relief when the abortion law was passed is hard to describe. On the morning that the Chamber of Deputies (the equivalent of the House of Representatives) approved it, I was sitting outside a coffee shop in Harlem, and I happened to be wearing a green dress. Moments after I received a phone notification about the vote, a woman dashed out of the building next door. She was Argentinean, and the news had so astonished her that she was looking for someone with whom to share the moment. She saw my green dress and assumed that I was a fellow-countrywoman. "It passed!" she cried, and embraced me tightly.

The legalization of abortion felt like the culmination of the movement's efforts—as if something had changed in Argentina and there was no going back. But even at the time Almada had her doubts. "I travel a lot around the country, and I had the feeling that things weren't as joyful as they seemed from Buenos Aires," she told me. "Not all the girls wore the green kerchief, nor were all the boys beginning to deconstruct themselves." She found resistance among evangelical Christians, and the deeper she went into the country the more she felt that "something was brewing that could explode at any moment. And it exploded."

In January, 2024, a month after assuming office, Javier Milei, in his first appearance at the Davos summit as President, said, "The only thing this radical feminist agenda has led to is greater state intervention to hinder the economic process, creating jobs for bureaucrats who contribute nothing to society, whether in the form of ministries for women or international organizations dedicated to promoting this agenda."

Milei is personally against abortion and has called it “aggravated murder.” He has already dismantled the Ministry of Women, Genders, and Diversity, and has defunded programs that combat gender violence. “There is now no active policy in place to guarantee the rights of girls, women, or L.G.B.T. individuals,” Ana Correa, a lawyer and activist who is part of Ni Una Menos, told me. In November, during a hearing at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Argentinean human-rights organizations argued that the decisions of the Milei administration “consolidated a severe setback, putting the lives of thousands of girls, teen-agers, women, and queer and trans individuals at risk.”

And, as the administration’s first year in office was coming to an end, it launched a campaign against women writers whose books had been suggested reading in public high schools in Buenos Aires Province. It targeted, in particular, four books that contained sex scenes. Milei’s Vice-President, Victoria Villarruel, tweeted, “Stop sexualizing our children, remove from the classrooms those who promote these harmful agendas, and respect the innocence of children.” Villarruel was most incensed by a passage in a novel by Dolores Reyes, “Cometierra” (“Earth eater”), which features a teen-ager who, by eating dirt, can locate missing girls and women; in one scene, the book describes oral sex. Reyes received hundreds of insulting messages and death threats. “We will burn you and your book,” one read. The reaction seemed “so out of step with the times,” Almada told me. “For a high-school student not to be able to read those books when they’ve had a cell phone in their hand since they were six years old, is absurd.” However, something “very positive came out of it,” she added. In late November, more than a hundred and twenty writers staged a public reading of the books in a Buenos Aires theatre—and “Cometierra” became a national best-seller.

In the epilogue of “Dead Girls,” Almada tells the story of another girl—one who survived. She was walking in a cornfield not far from her home, during siesta time, when her cousin, who was much older, suddenly appeared. He grabbed hold of her arms and began dragging her into the field. He was drunk

and wouldn't let go of her. She was terrified but gathered the strength to break free and escape. That girl was Almada's aunt, and in the epilogue she walks with Almada through the same cornfield, telling her the story. That's where the book ends, with this sentence: "The north wind made the rough leaves of the corn rub together and the stems sway from side to side, producing a menacing sound that, if you listened closely, could also be the music of a small victory." ♦