MARÍA CRISTINA RAMOS

ARGENTINA´S AUTHOR CANDIDATE
HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AWARD 2022
María Cristina Ramos was born in San Rafael, Mendoza, in 1952. In 1978, she moved to Neuquén, in the Argentine Patagonia. She completed her teaching degree in Literature and won the Leopoldo Marechal first prize in the region of Cuyo, organised by renowned author Antonio Di Benedetto just one year before the beginning of the infamous last dictatorship, when he was detained and disappeared.

She has participated as a trainer in reading programmes both nationally and regionally since 1983. Her first book for children—selected and published by Graciela Montes—was Un sol para tu sombrero (A sun for your hat), continuously reprinted since and currently edited by Random House Mondadori.

In 1990, her short story Las lagartijas no vuelan (Lizards can’t fly) was awarded a Special Mention at the Antoniorrobles Latin American Awards, organised by IBBY México, and in 1991, Coronas y galeras (Crowns and top-hats) won the first prize in the same event. In 1997, De barrio somos (Our neighbourhood) was shortlisted for Norma’s Fundalectura award, and in the same year, Norma published Ruedamares, pirata de la mar bravía (Ruedamares, a pirate of the raging sea). Also in 1997, her book Un bosque en cada esquina (A forest on every corner) won the first prize in the National Contest for Children’s Fantasy Books, sponsored by UNICEF and the Secretariat of Culture, Sociedad Argentina de Lectura (Argentine Reading Association), and other institutions. In 2006, Mientras duermen las piedras (While the stones sleep) was shortlisted for the 3rd International Anaya Prize for Literature for Children and Young Adults.

Several of Ramos’ works have been selected for Argentina’s community libraries’ collections and by SEP in Mexico. They are also mentioned in book lists selected by Fundalectura, El Banco del libro (the Book Bank) and Argentina’s Ministry of Education every year. Ramos’ books have often been awarded mentions in ALIJA, the Argentinian IBBY National section. Three of them were translated into Chinese, Corean, and Portuguese. Her work is presently being studied in postgraduate courses, master’s degrees, and literature seminars in Argentinean universities.

Since 2002 she has been running Ruedamares publishing house. Since 2017, she runs ‘Lecturas y navegantes’ (Readings and navigators), a training program for the promotion of literature reading in public schools in the Argentine Patagonia, sponsored by SM Foundation.

La casa del aire, Taller literario (The House in the Air. A Literary Workshop) is her fourth and latest non-fiction book, aimed for teachers and reading promoters. In this book, Ramos offers some of her experiences at the reading and writing workshops for children she organised for 25 years, after attending workshops by Professor Nicolás Bratosevich, first in Patagonia and later in Buenos Aires.

María Cristina Ramos has received national and international distinctions. In 2016 she received the Ibero-American SM Award for Children’s and Young Adults’ Literature. The jury commended ‘her craftsmanship and her profound respect for her readers, characters, and the reality she recreates’, highlighted ‘her genuine and independent authorial voice’, and acknowledged ‘the subtle incorporation of values and cultural practices of indigenous people’.

In 2020 she was one of the author of the Short List of the Hans Christian Andersen Award 2020, representing Argentina.

... at the risk of floods and stillness
In failed calls that endorse
A greed of unharmed words
A certain literary background.

From ‘Diariamente’ (On a Daily Basis),
in En un claro del mundo (In a Clearing in the World)
A personal introduction by way of biography

I am a writer, teacher and publisher and I walk the paths in each of those worlds. I am my family, my work and the echoes that literature keeps. I am, with my writing, the inclination of the light I watch, as well as the gaze in close eyes and the search for a small horizon in every day. Crystal miniatures keep the fire and the hands that shaped them. Stones keep the mystery of centuries and the rolling that was polishing them until they fit into our hands, along with their secret voices. Everything that comes brings its history and the course of its beat. I hope my books reach you together with the barely audible but certain echo of my tour around the language and the poetic word. I hope my books tell you something of what I have received from the cultural world we inhabit. Words carry the mark of the many looks, the many voices around us. Words make us, give us the profile of the time and the dreams we go as a people, as a country and as individualities.

We drink from the fountain of the poetic word, from its brightness, to transcend every day, to be more than what we are without it. We need poetry to give roundness to our inner world and redefine ourselves in the social spaces that need us as sensitive beings.

María Cristina Ramos
Introducing María Cristina Ramos to a jury is an opportunity for its distinguished members to meet a renowned and prestigious author in the field of children’s literature in Spanish, a woman who lives by and for literature.

In a world full of falsehood, hastiness and frenzy, María Cristina Ramos’ carefully crafted, ‘slowly-cooked’ texts—enhanced by her commitment to the transformation of human beings and society—are a gift for her readers. Just like the great masters of literature, Ramos seems to write in the most natural and simplest of ways, and with the utmost honesty, while displaying the highest literary quality. Ramos’ authorial voice, both genuine and independent, is not conditioned by any aestheticical, social, or political fads. This is a voice that subtly takes in the cultural values and practices of the peoples from her native land, the Argentine Patagonia.

Through her work, María Cristina Ramos contributes to the visibility of indigenous boys and girls by making them the protagonists of her literature. A special note must be made on her meaningful work Azul la cordillera (Blue, the mountain chain). This highly poetic book affirms a commitment to the realities of a native culture. Here, learning to read and write—and literature itself—become a bridge to access the culture of an ancient people.

Because poetry runs through her veins, María Cristina Ramos helps all readers—especially the youngest ones—approach this world and use it to conceive reality from a poetic perspective, like a child’s game—i.e., unfiltered, connecting with the essence and depth of existence. Thus, starting with rhythm and by means of a strong poetic sensitivity, as she turns daily experiences into rhyme and song, the writer introduces children to the art of reading as a source of enjoyment and amazement.

The literature of María Cristina Ramos casts a true and sensitive light on Latin American reality. Her craftsmanship reflects her deep respect towards her readers, her characters, and the reality she recreates. Her works provide a unique experience, offering readers’ sensitivities a moving and enriching aesthetic perception.

Ramos is clearly committed to literature as a path that reveals painful aspects of the human condition.

María Cristina Ramos displays a remarkable skill as an explorer of genres and forms through her high quality work, aimed at a wide range of readers.

This letter would be incomplete should I fail to mention—aside from her literary merits—Ramos’ indefatigable activity in promoting reading in the most remote Patagonian areas and her dedication to training rural teachers, her contribution to reflection and literary criticism through her writing and pedagogical planning, and her personal commitment to the book industry through her own publishing house, Ruedamares.

I am honoured at the chance to introduce an author who helps transform social realities through poetry that inspires commitment and hope.
As they got off the train, we would stand on tiptoes so we could see our uncle’s hat and the silk handkerchief my aunt used to wave at people. Perhaps writing means repeating this gesture, standing on tiptoe to make out what other people see beyond common walls—at least as far as people’s eyes, as far as their hat rims, at the limit between sun and shade—in the space where life exists in a low voice.”

María Cristina Ramos
Silk Threads to Sustain Childhood. The Poetics of María Cristina Ramos

Written by María José Troglio. Included in the book Para leer el mundo. Poéticas de autor en la literatura argentina para niños. (Knitting the Nest. The Poetics of Authorship in Argentinian Literature for Children.)

With the subtle threads of language

This work is an approach to María Cristina Ramos’ poetic and narrative work, an attempt to analyse the recurrent elements that help her give shape to a social meaning in literature, the possibility of creating networks of meaning as shelters for childhood, understanding children’s vulnerability in order to sustain the asymmetry in our relationship with them, and thus provide children with strategies to speak out and of themselves, as Zelmanovich (2003) said.

Ramos’ work stages this asymmetry creating a universe of the small, the minimal, the mild. This universe, however, is highly supportive and involves an ability to transform the world or make up new dreams when none are left.

Her texts reveal a strong commitment to a world that, however vast and alien, can always be read, allowing us—as Ramos (2006) herself says—“[to] believe that transformation is possible, to face the signs that reality is revealing itself to us.” This is an attempt to recover the way children read, which stands on a thin line that separates the known from the unknown, the tiny from the disproportionate, silence from words, life from death. This study thus attempts to explore the creases in a work that speaks about nets, and knits them using the subtle threads of language.

“What is wound in the little things of the world”

An overview of Ramos’ poetic work invariably shows a set of signifiers building up a tiny, delicate, even invisible universe that, though minimal, can produce a number of sensations. For instance, there are no large trees in her universe— if any, they can only be noticed by means of their twigs, wisps, petals, leaves, or little flowers:

“All the bugs in the neighborhood are sticking their heads from behind a curtain of petals, from the sledge of a leaf, from under a seed.’ (2006a: 34 )

‘I'll pour on it
A drop of apple flower
'Cause scents can sooth
And petals help recover.” (2008)

‘Little balls of fluff
Pretending to be wings
When nobody’s watching.’ (1999: 34)

Although they sometimes can:

The toad was lying:
Today I will
Then he flew away.’ (2005: 22)

‘She flew again and again since then. She flew every day, only to return to her world of ordinary lizards. A world where her sisters insisted every now and then: “Lizards! Lizards can’t fly.”’ (2001: 30)

We should build nests and dare to dwell in them with children, but also leave holes in its fabric so that doubt and uncertainty can filter in, so that more questions are raised and art and play can appear.

Elena Stapich (2008) says:

‘Children cannot be wholly encompassed, but it can and must be received, welcomed, and nestled. If we are to provide an open space for childhood, I can’t think of a cozier place than a nest made of words, poems, stories, pictures, music. Perhaps art is the language of choice for building such nest, and the network that best supports children by not imposing them, giving them a chance to unfold instead’.

Moreover, a nest can be built with anything, with whatever we have at hand, as long as it is fuelled by the idea that a secret is wound in the small things of the world, as Ramos herself said. The doves in San Pedro are a proof of this, ‘knitting nails, knitting iron’—as Laura Devetach said—to make their nests, while Mar del Plata’s cathedral was/imprisoning them, giving them a chance to unfold

‘Granny Ant knits a lovely dress for her granddaughter
She’s built her a ‘nest
Instead.’

Yolanda Reyes (1999) speaks precisely about ‘providing a nest,’ or sowing meaning for children to harvest it. The nest is the padded soft background we can all build to share children as dwellers. It is not compact, though,

but full of cracks that let light and sound in. It is rootless; it is as large as we want, need, or can afford it to be. It is protected, yet not too high for us to leave it for too long—it is a place to share with others. It is a floor to stand on or to take impulsion from. After all, literature has a lot to do with flying.

Flying is also present in Ramos’ texts: actual, symbolic, impossible flights by those who can’t actually fly—like elephants:

‘its ears swing.
Rock, and stretch
Pretending to be wings
When nobody’s watching.’

Although they sometimes can:

The toad was lying:
Today I will
Then he flew away.’

She flew again and again since then. She flew every day, only to return to her world of ordinary lizards. A world where her sisters insisted every now and then: “Lizards! Lizards can’t fly.”

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‘Why is it knitting wings if it walks on its feet?’

Nests are related to nets, to weaves, to fabric. Silk threads, vegetable threads—thin but highly resistant—hold together Ramos’ poetics. In order to weave the fabric that can hold the world’s stage, as Perla Zelmanovich (2003) says, you should be moved by desire, which involves something to be conquered. Here lies the future, and here stands the poetry of the possible, of hope, inscribed in Ramos’ texts.

Consequently, for any transmission to take place between an educator and a student, the key lies in providing the latter with the necessary references and meanings that will allow them to make a difference of their own, i.e., their own words. This is where asymmetry lies: in protecting and acknowledging a child’s vulnerability. Hence the need to think and act upon our current difficulties as adults in order to sustain the asymmetry for children as a background to that protective and sheltering pattern of meanings.

Yet in order to make sense of the world in one’s terms, a desire to find it together is necessary. To do so, rehearsing—which involves experiencing other people’s desires, be it peers or adults—is a necessary condition. Having a glimpse of a single desire amounts to opening up to a new dimension where things to come are possible.’

If Ramos did not believe in things to come and that this is where the social dimension lies—in the soft but hard-wearing fabric we weave with one another—we would not have known about the oliphant who plans to sail a river on a boat made of thorns, Elephants are massive.

‘If he was this small, / he’d sleep among the ants’ green sheets, / and he’d be able to swing / from the tamarind trees.’ (2004: 15)

Together, the ants use spiders’ silk threads to weave a wicker twig boat for Eleazar so he can finally sail away feeling almost light and small. As long as the elephant is innocent enough, like a child, and as long as the leaves are closely interwoven, the journey will be possible.

Granny Ant knits a lovely dress for her granddaughter using vegetal threads (2009b); Gusanita (female little worm) knits wings but no one knows why and the garment she has woven looks like two petals (2009h).

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A similar procedure is followed in Mientras duermen las piedras, a story about a family and a community in poor living conditions. A lack of electricity and sometimes food are the driving forces for a new project. Once again, Ramos avoids a pitiful look providing an alternative based on the creation of community networks. The novel, told from a girl’s point of view, suggests that change might become possible through cooperation, solidarity, the fight for social rights, strengthening bonds among people, and—why not—happiness. According to Blanco, this attitude is based on an ethical framework in which solidarity and love become the entrance to a world where true communication and happiness are possible. This is highly significant in uninspiring or un-motivating contexts. The interesting thing about this novel is that it explores complex social issues without introducing unbearably poignant scenes or using literature to moralise or ‘teach values’—it just states that everybody has the right to a better life, to happiness:

‘On our way back, we played in the river for a while and, when we got back home, we finally saw something like green fluff on one of the furrows. In spite of our tiredness, in spite of our forgetfulness, in spite of my youngest brother’s stomping feet, the joyful green of parsley was sprouting.’ (2009a: 48)

Both novels are fragments of reality that, as Ramos says, reveal a glimpse of brightness in what’s been broken, so that we can recover whatever may have been lost.

‘With placid waters I end my sorrow’

If I had to describe Ramos’ poetics in a few words, I would say that it is a poet of ‘ending sorrow,’ since joy is present in both her poetry and her narrative work. Such joy can be found by digging in hidden places in the world, in the small things in daily life that comprise the experience of living.

A poet of the small, the light, the imperceptible, Ramos’ work holds a secret that is available to all, but especially to children who are not afraid to get their hands dirty with mud, to go into the river, to climb high on trees, or peer into trunks’ holes, touching hugs or collecting petals and seeds, twigs, feathers and foam. Ramos’ poetics uses diminutive forms not because she’s minimising her readers, but because she knows that in order to make a difference, you need to point to asymmetries, giving children the possibility to utter their own words.

Finally, a few words from the author summarizing the ideas above:

‘This should be a personal reason; to visit poetry—its rhythm games, its metaphorical synthesis, its view of the world, the music at its core— seeking the balsamic quality of magic charms or healing words, words that help us recover from the roughness of daily life in a bright instant of play and creation, of freedom for sound and concept, to remove the anchor of gloom and bring back joy, the lightness of first flights, the amazement, the sighs we need to carry on.’ (Ramos, 2006)
Literature is a window to the outside world and to human beings’ inner worlds. I think children are interested in everything. They are curious and look out that window into life in all its forms. That curiosity leads them to decipher this strange thing we call ‘adulthood’.

The aesthetic experience strikes personal chords in us that touch upon the collective unconscious. The search for the aesthetic is an expression of freedom. Moreover, as any activity that pivots on a quest to unfold the sanest part in us, it dignifies us as human beings and it saves us from self-destruction.

FL: In your opinion, what is the place of literature at school? What should it be?
MCR: School should create spaces for children to interact with literature. Teachers who remember their own childhood or teenage years, and the intimacy that you can develop with a book you love better understand how important it is to be in close contact with books. Books provide an opportunity to dive in them until you find something that resonates with you at a deeply personal level. When schools allow for this exploration and foster freedom, they are opening doors and broadening horizons for children to value literature, thus helping ‘build’ readers.

FL: How do you include topics that have to do with social exclusion or conflicts in children’s stories?
MCR: Each author develops their own alchemy. I think that is a question of keeping a delicate balance between social awareness, and aesthetic realization. Besides, I do not think writing can be purposefully channelled towards a given objective. The author’s ideology becomes apparent, even when they are writing about topics that seem to be about things other than social issues or human oppression. In any such situation, the underlying issue is that others are not considered valuable. The principle of respect for one another appears even in the most trivial communicational situations, such as a story about fish or buttons. Literature is metaphorisation. Only that, maybe, we have become used to accepting the explicit, the obvious. There is a lot of ‘consumer literature’ intended not to shake readers, not to demand an effort from them. I believe that a true artist will trust human nature and people’s power to overcome obstacles, as well as a lucid perspective and a desire for freedom. We throw our work into that sea of possibilities.

FL: How do you think we should talk about children’s literature or is it simply literature? And in any case, how would you define children’s literature?
MCR: It is important to focus on the possibilities a child has to build everything an adult reader builds when they receive a text. Of course, there are infinite nuances, but in general there is a significant gap between a child and an adult, as regards their life experiences. Anyway, children’s literature is, first and foremost, literature. Its contribution, however, is not equivalent to that of the narrative. You have to dare explore it, enjoy it, and make it available to children. Then, poetry takes off on its own.

FL: When did you start writing for children? When did you start writing for children?
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FL: As a teacher and a trainer, what are your specific strategies to stimulate reading in children?
MCR: Those that entail inspiring group interactions in the game of words, those that feed the idea of connecting images with words, those where literature pushes children to delve into their imagination and progressively lead into a fruitful silence that encourages reading.
Lecture given by Marí­a Cristina Ramos on May 5, 2013, at the 2nd Forum on Children and Young Adults’ Literature at the Knowledge Centre in the Province of Misiones, Argentina

Why ‘autumn butterfly’?

We receive the world from the hands of those surrounding us. The world is designed and valued according to the voices and the perspectives of those who are close to us.

Our way of looking at the world is shaped by those who define it around us in our daily lives through their way of naming, of asserting and denying; their ways of considering or disregarding, the forms in which they express love or lack of affection.

Family is an intimate territory of relationships, and it shapes our little ones. In it, children learn and they feed their curiosity; they develop skills and behaviours before they start school. Then comes the time of pencils and chalk, of lost erasers and notebooks, of eyes wide open to a blackboard horizon, of the school scenes that launch us into the adventure of literacy.

Some people say there is no time for literature, no time to read stories and poems that are distractions from what’s important. Is literature really a detour from what’s important? Let’s give that a second thought.

Our perspective of the world keeps broadening, expanding, deepening, thanks to this live trail that is literature. Literature is a space where the author’s imagination meets children’s craving for imagery; it allows for children to become birds or inhabit a little corner where anything is possible. That space where fears and desires float, where there are characters that dare navigate unchartered waters, is and will be the indispensable sounding board to renew the desire to read. It is also a balm to mellow individual efforts made in order to read and write.

Reading out loud creates harmony, it cheers you up—it is a caress that shelters you. An important person in their lives—such as a teacher—reading out loud to children builds trust, consolidates ties, brings closeness and unites.

Even more to that point, frequent contact with the literary language contributes to enhance communicational skills, awakens verbal tools that sustain thought and imagination, and benefits group interaction by adding expressive nuances. Literature is also a platform for exploration to know and design the boundaries of our own subjectivity.

Our voice should be the best call for children, an irresistible invitation to delve into the world of reading. We need to muster all the expressiveness we are capable of; our skill to whisper, to exclaim, to use an appealing intonation for questions. During the breaks at school, in the teachers’ lounge, our voices grow small to whisper secrets or grow big to proclaim expectations, and those are the voices that read out loud. Sometimes those voices become dull and reluctant, as if they were detached from their inner fruitfulness. These countless possible nuances heard during the breaks at school should be available when it comes to reading.

It is true that poems have a core that contains their meaning, sustained by a fabric of images, metaphors and other rhetorical devices. The suggestions that lead to that meaning are scattered throughout their rhythmic structure: in the words chosen, in what each word evokes, in how one word is woven into the next one, how they are bound together by syntax, and in how language resources lend themselves to

Poetry burns under the sun

Mariposa de otoño (Autumn butterfly)

The butterfly dances
and burns – with the sun – sometimes,
flits and flies flaring in a swirl, now still,
on a leaf that rocks it.

(...) Its warm tongue enveloped me. And then I said: “You persist.”

The butterfly dances,
shudders, disappears.

Pablo Neruda (fragment)
Translated by Robert Arquini and William A. Sigler
Since the beginning of time, poetry has healed the wounds of the body and the soul. Accompanying readers into the world of poetry not only means enabling them to exercise the right to pleasure, but also implies generating encounters with the best in our literary cultural tradition.

The poetic quest. If we read a text intended to be soft in a hasty or rough manner, the text will lose those features.

A poem creates a special world endowed with a meaning, but it is also a sound unit, which contains a rhythmic structure, a musical beat, and a stream of cadences that leave a trace in children’s memories. That’s why, in the light of the text’s content, as readers we should try and find the most adequate tone to convey its meaning, and relish the words, with their consonant clusters and their vowel valleys. We can discover how fast to read a given stanza, and how slow to utter another one, how to play on speed to evoke the sensations that the poem suggests.

We read when we come back from the bottom of the text immersed in its meaning, which is built between the words’ pulse and our sensitivity. We read when the air in our breath can touch the text without hurting it. We read when we place ourselves between the text and our listeners, and we are able to blur our individuality to generate a space for meaning to keep resonating. We read when the flow of our voice is tempered, acknowledging low voices as part of a repertoire of intensities. We read when our voice pulses with the intent to share a ray of light, and the words’ pulse and our sensitivity. We read when

Reading Sana que sana (There, there): A healing process

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Few years ago, I participated in an event with children from different schools who had read some of my books. Considering that they were between 6 and 12 years of age, I decided to read a poem called ‘El gallo azul’ (The blue rooster).

The event was particularly moving, since the children’s teacher had generated a lot of expectations and the children’s eagerness to hear was symbolized by a respectful silence, eyes wide open, a whisper here and there, and a few fugitive sighs. There were some adults too, namely parents, reading coordinators, and librarians.

I read the poem the way I like to do it: going from the text to their eyes and back, refreshed by the feeling of being in that point of the mountain range that Patagonian ibises choose to perch. When I came to the end of the poem, I stopped and looked at them. Silence. One moment, two... At some point a 6-year old girl raised her hand calmly and left it hanging in mid-air.

I attempted an explanation: ‘The thing is that the rooster had a problem: he was blue. So he couldn’t find a girlfriend. That’s why he decided to go up the roof and turn into a weathercock.’ The girl listened to him in absolute earnest and asked: ‘And he stayed there, all alone?’

The girl raised her hand again: ‘Can anybody share what they understood, and see if you can help our little friend?’ Many hands rose. A boy, who was around ten, said in an utterly confident voice: ‘The thing is that the rooster had a problem: he was blue. So he couldn’t find a girlfriend. That’s why he decided to go up the roof and turn into a weathercock.’

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The girl listened to him in absolute earnest and asked again: ‘And he stayed there, all alone?’

At this point the silence was like a snow avalanche and brought us all together in perplexity, in awe,
and possibly in pain. What should I do to break this silence? How could I go on? As a shrewd teacher, experience tells me that silence has to be treasured too, so I waited. Another boy with curly hair and wind-kissed cheeks, who was around 6, stood up and proclaimed:

‘No! He was blue so he went up the roof to look further so that he could find a hen that is blue, just like him’...

I was happy then and I am happy now, remembering what happened in that gathering. I am pleased to see that I knew better and waited for the girl’s question to resonate with the group and find its path.

It is possible to analyse reading through what those children expressed. At first, the girl tormented by the ending of the poem was the only one that captured the deep meaning of what was not said in the poem, because the poem points out to being different and to loneliness as its consequence. What did she mean when she said ‘I did not understand’ in this context? Did she mean ‘I didn’t understand the text’ or ‘I don’t understand how someone can tell a story with that ending’? At her age, a desirable ending is a happy ending, which provides compensation. However, as we know, not every story has a happy ending.

On the other hand, the other children contributed in their own way. The first one did not perceive the ending as a conflict, staying on the roof was fine for him. The other boy, on the contrary, did perceive the idea of loneliness, but found a possible resolution to avoid getting upset about a character that is different from the rest and therefore has to endure loneliness.

Literary reading unleashes scenes that are as intense as this one. From them, we get glimpses of the meaning that provides guidance in the complex and progressive construction of each reader’s individual subjectivity.

If we give in to the temptation of hastily intervening and fail to yield the space for the text and each listener’s world to come in contact, part of what is dormant in the text will not be realised.

Mediators are the ones who prepare the scene for that encounter to happen; they select the book and the occasion, they offer their voice and sensitivity, they move as tightrope walkers between silence and words. They make themselves available for children to ask questions and wait for them to take the steps to discovery at their own pace, illuminated by literature.

Any mediator who accompanies and follows the steps of someone venturing into the world of reading is giving back a part of what life gave them—the bright arch stretching from intensity to subtlety. They are sharing a spark that will give birth to the instant when a reader embraces a book and becomes a bird or a coati or a seafarer, getting lost and finding the stories that sustain our culture and weave into the dynamics of language, its essence and its excellence.

Reading is building yourself, from intimate corners to faraway shores, following the subtle revelation shaping us, turning our eyes to the mystery of what we are and the hope of what we can be.

We can give books and instill a desire to read, but readers are the ones who conquer what lies beyond, in a faraway horizon that is unique to each of us and our subjectivity.

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I should start by saying that María Cristina Ramos was born in San Rafael, in the south of the province of Mendoza, the land of the sun and the good wine, and that after graduating as a Literature teacher, she went to Neuquén, in Patagonia, where she has lived since then. Both provinces, which embrace the Andes Mountain Range, are part of the poetic landscape that she recreates masterfully but without hiding the way the inhabitants of that landscape struggle for their daily life.

And she tells about it in “Camino corto, camino largo” [“Short Path, Long Path”], a story included in her book Azul la Cordillera [Blue Mountain Range]. A little girl’s voice says:

“From a distance the mountain range is blue, if you don’t remember the stones and the frozen soil. That colour blue is the distance, the teacher says. There is a long way from the lodge to my home. I go round looking at the mailboxes (N.T: native flowers) that barely sway at the water’s edge. The mailboxes grow next to each other, close enough to have a conversation. Higher up you can’t find any. At that point you begin to see the colour of the stone and the altitude casts its shadow. We must keep climbing. The teacher says that we must be careful. He says so every time the path ends and we walk on the ledge, one by one. (…) And nature becomes omnipresent in the novel “El trashu” [Against the Light], for example when the mountain wind blows away volcanic ashes and changes the fate of the characters forever

“The maze of streets in Tres Esquinas was not enough to channel the rage of the wind which tore off the paraísos (N.T: Native tree) and locust trees and uprooted the eucalyptus. But the worst was what happened with the bell tower. A gigantic whirlwind, like the blow of a dragon tail, knocked it out with a din of soil and bells. At that moment, fear made the atheists hesitate and the believers negotiate with the saints they worshipped.

The bells were a hundred years old; they had been brought in a wagon that linked the port with remote inland areas. Sometimes, those bells tolled on their own: it was a mystery they brought over from the foundry. They rang to announce catastrophes that would happen one hundred kilometers round, and yesterday they hadn’t rung. Matías Moreno thought about this when the wind blew up.”

Although the poetic discourse is tightly entwined in her narrative, it is in her poetry where María Cristina revels in rhythm and rich sonority, because she is made up of poetry. Nothing better than bringing here “Un sol para tu sombrero” [A Sun for Your Hat] as an example. This is the first of more than sixty books that make up her work. In her dedication, which might as well be in each of her books, she tells us that she writes for naughty children, for the ones who store up inappropriate treasures, for the ones who splash nonchalantly, for the ones who are tickly but also have little holes on their sneakers.

Every day
When you comb me comb me
with first little combs, because the moon combs ruffle my eyelashes.
When you wash me wash me
with little clover soaps, for unlucky soaps slip through my fingers.
When you dry me dry me
with a big towel without lace, for little threads stick on my tickling.
Lend me every day a hat for the sun, a sun for the hat and a little shade of love.

María Cristina plays with that colloquial child language which attains the reader’s complicity, a feature of her countless poems. And the same as Juan Villoro, who shares her secret concern about socks that are lost who knows where, our writer shows interest in minimal things. In “De papel te espero” [“I wait for you on a sheet of paper”] we find this poem:

Where is the button?
I’ve lost a button and the buttonhole is scared.
Has anyone seen a pearly fatty passing by?
They say that this afternoon it rolled in threads, with his hair covered up, an absentminded look and a weird appearance.
It is said that he was carrying a clothes bundle a paper hat and a bowl for his soup. The neighbourhood pockets check their alleys, and some gossip sleeves suspect around the corners.

The cool little button arrives at night, luminous nacre in his smile and half a flower on his hat. And everyone wants to know what risks he has defied what monsters have chased him, poor lost button! But the button, very quiet, smiles mischievously as a button in love usually smiles.

And he swings on a thread, and adjusts his flower, and goes up to take his place whistling a love whistle.

Her verses get more complex within the frame of poetic play.

To make a ladybird sleep
Sleep, ladybird, spring ladybird that climbs the vine leaves. Green are the leaves and so is the ladder in case you roll down or fall on the path that leads to the door, to the outside door that faces the street and faces the garden where the jasmine flower blossoms, the jasmine flower that has a nice hammock which no one has woven either with dream water or travelling water for the ladybird.
Small beings and the sea inhabit María Cristina’s poetry. Even her publishing house, which was established in 2002, is called Ruedamares, the name of a pirate who is the main character in one of her novels. And we are surely intrigued by this feature, since she is a poet that lives at the foot of the mountain. When asked, during an interview, she answered: “I think that this is unconscious: I’m full of sea landscapes although I have never experienced them. It’s something I can’t explain; perhaps we could find the answer in some scientific studies which suggest that there is a manifestation of Nature that has a special impact on each creative spirit.”

In La luna lleva un silencio [The Moon Carries Silence] we find this poem:

Whisper
The sea wants to whisper secrets to the sand and rehearses its quietest voices on the shore.
But it remains silent.
It’s embarrassed.
The sea wants to give a gift to the sand: a hundred foam necklaces and the sweet scales that the moon leaves.
But it remains silent.
It’s overwhelmed.
So the sea hides in a big shell and barely whispers the silence of a wave.

María Cristina has received national and international awards for her novels and poetry but we must highlight her theoretical perspectives, which are put forward in books such as “La casa del aire. Literatura en la escuela” [The Air House. Literature at School], where she tells about her vast experience in reading workshops for children and teachers. In this work she says: “We need a school that doesn’t forget ‘the air house’, that space of imagination which reigns in the silence of children, in their games and in the light shadow of whatever they can’t share. This is a space whose exercise also implies a way of knowledge for which literature is anchorage and containment”.

To conclude, I’d like to say that ringing bells, wandering ships, magic mirrors and ghosts are objects and beings that María Cristina rescues from the collective imaginary. Let’s take the example of the legend about the curse that hangs over the seventh son, who turns into a werewolf on full moon nights.

Full Moon
On moonlit nights the werewolf wanders (people say it’s a shadow that loses its mind.)
It could be a man bitten by a snake, who’s defeated Death in an uphill fight.
(…)

We have to shut the doors we mustn’t walk in the open, we have to bolt the doors and listen to the silence. When it appears it’s covered in bright hair. Everyone fears its steps as no one knows their route. Its insatiable thirst drinks from a hollow where people mix lies and truth.
(…)

It has devoured deer and also some wanderers who were walking alone round the world. Be careful with the moon! In her tin suit she fears those beings that she herself unites.

She shelters in the shadows and begins to decline, and we think we are alone with no monster to fear. (But anyone of us—we don’t know who that is—is keeping the werewolf hidden under their skin.)

Thank you, María Cristina, in the name of all of us who love your work. And thanks to the jury, who has acknowledged her commitment and her poetry.

Cecilia Repetti
Literature teacher, editor and children and young people’s literature specialist.
In an online dialogue with ContArte Cultura, the writer takes us to her world of books and reveals her next steps.

—To start with, we would like to give you an imaginary seed. A poem that represents you lives inside that seed, ¿what are the first words that appear at the moment it germinates in your hands? —It is best not to disclose them. Words, as everything that is born, must be looked after until they are sustained, consistent, until they can look at the world and keep being on their feet.

—When exactly did your fondness for words and the music that constitutes them appear? —Very early, thanks to the conversations that always took place in the quietness of my mother’s home. I do believe in sowing conversations, in their swing of words, the waiting phrases, the background of looks and smiles. It was also possible because back then there was a different time management. “In my time there was time”, as María Elena says.¹

¹ T. N. She refers to María Elena Walsh, a famous Argentine poet and writer.

—Do you think that it is necessary to stop and observe details to perceive the poetry that surrounds us? ¿Does your gaze capture that poetry? Poetry, harmony, mystery are there. Some of us are more sensitive to them than others; children are. Their gaze is able to stop in order to drink that singular instant in which a drop of water is precipitated or the alarm turns on in the cat’s eyes. They can see the minuscule and follow its trajectory silently, while their imagination and their thoughts are at work. That construction is the threshold of the poetic. Ideally, the background shouldn’t disable that ability and we adults should know how to value and accompany that sensitivity we all need so much.

—How do you experience a text development and growth process, from the image or the word that give rise to it up to the very end of the text? —Naturally, because I have always done it, although my background was not always favourable. I need to write because this is what supports the rest of my world; the inner wall of daily life is woven with words. What relieves and feeds my thirst is the poetic that I read or unveil, little by little, in my own writing.

—Nature is present in many of your works. Please, tell us about “Aguamundos” [Worlds of Water] and “Airemundos” [Worlds of Air], the collections en which words and images merge in verses that awaken the senses. The worlds of water as well as the worlds of air are spaces to be filled with the poetic imagery. This is what I believe, and I like to share with other perspectives the wonder that sometimes springs from a hidden spot in nature but also from the secret world that moves inside us. These are attempts to bring poetry to the readers in a more intimate and playful way. Ever since I started sharing these collections I have received accounts and comments from mothers and teachers telling me about the impact that the texts cause on boys and girls. They even send me photos of the moment children plunge into the games enabled by poetry. Boys and girls readers also write to me, as if we have always known each other. And I want to believe that we do. That proximity is very reassuring to me.

—How does your editorial Ruedamares start and what are your plans for this year or the next one? —It started at a time of crisis, in 2002. And from then on we have been working hard but we have always stuck to our convictions. Now we are facing the challenges ahead. We have some books on hold; hopefully, we will be able to contribute to the idea of a more lucid and sensitive country through reading.
—“Aroma en su laberinto” [Scent in its Labyrinth] is one of your books. What can we find in each “tecito” [cup of tea] turned into a poem?
—It is an attempt to revive the tea as an “air and scent bell”: the nearness of what you love, the home and memory rituals, the brief quietness, the white napkin. It is also a balm, embodied in my mother and her words. That is what we attribute to tea time, the “tecito” we choose to warm the heart.

—“La casa del aire” [The Air House] is a collection that brings together a number of works aimed at teachers and librarians, what did they think of them?
—This collection is for literacy mediators. For now it is made up of three books that contain practice to accompany and deepen the reading experience. They have been welcomed and they are a small contribution we wanted to make to our fellow teachers, whose hands tune the music of reading.

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—How do you work with illustrators? Is there an exchange of perspectives over each text?
—I try to have a dialogue with them, to make room for discovery, so both languages, words and images, can enhance one another. Later on, the editing sustains and configures the proposal of the book. We have to find a work that hosts the readers, that allows them to inhabit it.

—Are you working on a book or project these days?
—Yes, but I’d rather talk about it later…

—Finally, if you could choose some essential nutrients to fertilize the soil where the readers sprout, which ones would they be and why? Where would you like to sow that seed we talked about at the beginning of this dialogue?
—We don’t really know the nutrients they need, but I should mention diversified reading, in solitude and in company. Also we mediators must nourish ourselves. We have to grow up a lot to live up to the children readers.
LIST OF AWARDS AND OTHER DISTINCTIONS

-First prize in Poetry in the literary contest ‘Leopoldo Marechal’, in the region of Cuyo, 1975
-Honourable mention for Las lagartijas no vuelan in the Antoniorrobles Latin American contest organised by IBBY México, 1990
-First prize for De coronas y galeras in the Antoniorrobles Latin American contest organised by IBBY México, 1991
-ALIJA Honour List 1991 for Un sol para tu sombrero
-Destacados ALIJA Award (for outstanding books, writers, illustrators and publishing houses selected by ALIJA, the Argentinian IBBY National section) for Azul la cordillera (Blue, the mountain chain). Category: Text. 1996
-Finalist at the Norma-Fundalectura Children and Young People Latin American Literature Awards in Colombia, for the book De barrio somos (Our neighbourhood). 1997
-Winner of the Children’s Fantasy National Award in the category of Poetry for the book Un bosque en cada esquina, Sponsored by UNICEF, the Argentinian Secretariat of Culture, Asociación Argentina de Lectura (Argentine Reading Association) and other institutions. 1997
-Honour List in San Miguel de Tucumán Secretariat of Culture for Del amor nacen los ríos. Province of Tucumán, Argentina. 1998
-Destacados ALIJA Award for Del amor nacen los ríos. Category: Recreation of oral texts, 2000
-Pregonero a Especialista award for promoting children’s literature, by Fundación El libro, 2002
-Finalist in the 3rd International Anaya Award for Mientras duermen las piedras (While the stones sleep), 2006.
-Destacados ALIJA Award for La escalera. Category: Poetry. 2009
-Destacados ALIJA Honourable Mention for La luna lleva un silencio (The moon holds silence), Category: Poetry. 2010
-La hormiguita viajera Children and Young Adults National and Latin American Literature Award for National Educator in Literature for Children and Young Adults. 2014
-Destacados ALIJA Award for Dentro de una palabra. Category: Poetry. 2014
-12th Ibero-American SM Award for Children and Young Adults’ Award. 2016
-Short List of the Hans Christian Andersen Award 2020, representing Argentina.
Un sol para tu sombrero (A sun for your hat)
(Buenos Aires, Libros del quirquincho, 1988)
(Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1999)

Cuentos de la Buena Suerte (Tales of good luck)
(Buenos Aires, Alfaguara, 1991)
(Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2011)

De papel te espero (Made of waiting-for-you paper)
(Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1991)
(Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2011)

El árbol de la lluvia (The rain tree)
(Buenos Aires, Alfaguara, 1993)
(Buenos Aires, Alfaguara, 1997)

Azul la cordillera (Blue the mountain chain)
(Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1995)
(Buenos Aires, Norma, 2006)
(Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2017)

El libro de Ratonio (The book of Mousiebald)
(Buenos Aires, Alfaguara, 1999)
(Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2014)

De barrio somos (Our neighbourhood)
(Buenos Aires/Bogotá, Norma, 2003)
(Buenos Aires, Planeta, 2017)

Un bosque en cada esquina (A forest on every corner)
(Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1997)

Ruedamares, Pirata de la mar bravía (Ruedamares, a pirate of the raging sea)
(Bogotá, Norma, 1997)
(Buenos Aires, Norma, 2006)
(Buenos Aires, Siete Vacas, 2007)
(Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2017)

Del amor nacen los ríos (From love are rivers born)
(Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1998)

Belisario y el violín (Belisario and the violin)
(Buenos Aires, Alfaguara, 1999)
(Buenos Aires, Loqueleo, 2016)

Las lagartijas no vuelan (Lizards can’t fly)
(Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2001)

Cuentos del bosque (Tales from the forest)
(Buenos Aires, Santillana, 2001)
(Neuquén, Editorial Ruedamares, 2013)

Las sombras del Gato (The cat’s shadows)
(Bogotá, Panameciana editorial, 2002)

Maíces de silencio (Kernels of silence)
(Neuquén, Editorial Ruedamares, 2002)
(Madrid, SM, 2018)

Corazón de grillo (Cricket heart)
(Neuquén, Editorial Ruedamares, 2002)

Belisario y los espejos de agua (Belisario and the water mirrors)
(Buenos Aires, Alfaguara, 2003)
(Buenos Aires, Loqueleo, 2017)

Eleazar y el río (Eleazar and the river)
(Buenos Aires, Ediciones Eldébó, 2004)

La rama de azúcar (The sugar branch)
(Buenos Aires, Santillana, 2004)
(Córdoba, Comunicarte, 2013)

Papelitos (Little pieces of paper)
(México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005)

La luna lleva un silencio (The moon holds silence)
(Madrid, Anaya, 2005)
(Buenos Aires, Anaya Aique Grupo Editor, 2010)

Barcos en la lluvia (Boats in the rain)
(México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007)

Historias de hormiguero (Tales from the ant’s nest)
(Buenos Aires, Siete Vacas, 2007)
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<td><strong>Mi mano (My hand)</strong></td>
<td>(México, CIDCLI, 2007)</td>
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<td><strong>Una mariposa risa que riza (A brew betterly that fries)</strong></td>
<td>(México / Barcelona, Océano Travesía, 2008)</td>
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<td><strong>Sana que sana (There, there)</strong></td>
<td>(México / Barcelona, Océano Travesía, 2008)</td>
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<td><strong>Gato que duerme (Sleeping cat)</strong></td>
<td>(México / Barcelona, Océano Travesía, 2008)</td>
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<td><strong>Rondas del agua (Water songs)</strong></td>
<td>(México, Nostra Ediciones, 2009)</td>
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<td><strong>Mientras duermen las piedras (While the stones sleep)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Edelvives, 2009)</td>
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<td><strong>La escalera (The ladder)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Politas y alas (Wings and little legs)</strong></td>
<td>(Neuquén, Editorial Ruedamares, 2010)</td>
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<td><strong>El balle (The dance)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Edelvives, 2011)</td>
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<td><strong>Do agua no es (Not made of water)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Edelvives, 2011)</td>
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<td><strong>Belisario y los fantasmaes (Belisario and the ghosts)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Edelvives, 2014)</td>
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<td><strong>Los días de Guille (Guille’s days)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Tinta Fresca Ediciones, 2012)</td>
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<td><strong>¿Dónde está? (Where is He?)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Macmillan, 2012)</td>
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<td><strong>Pétalo de nube (Cloud petal)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Macmillan, 2012)</td>
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<td><strong>Emilia y la zapapilla perdida (Emilia and the lost trainer)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Artepiana, 2012)</td>
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<td><strong>El rey y la rebelion de las margaritas (The king and the rebellion of the daisies)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Artepiana, 2012)</td>
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<td><strong>La princesa de papel (The paper princess)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Artepiana, 2012)</td>
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<td><strong>La reina de las abejas (The bee queen)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Artepiana, 2012)</td>
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<td><strong>Encantado, dijo el sapo (Pleased to meet you, said the toad)</strong></td>
<td>(Córdoba, Comunicarte, 2012)</td>
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<td><strong>Una gota de azul (A drop of blue)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>El trasluz (Up to the light)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Secretos de los que van y vienen (Secrets of Those Who Come and Go)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>De coronas y galeras (Of crowns and top-hats)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Caminaditos (Little long walks)</strong></td>
<td>(Madrid, Los cuatro abejas, 2013)</td>
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<td><strong>Desierto de mar y otros poemas (Sea desert and other poems)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires SM, 2013)</td>
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<td><strong>El mar de volverse a ver (The sea of seeing you again)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Dentro de una palabra (Inside a word)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>El rey que no sabia sonar (The king who could not dream)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Edelvives, 2015)</td>
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<td><strong>Nafragios (Castaways)</strong></td>
<td>(Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2015)</td>
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<td><strong>Aluminio en la creciente (Little poplar in the flood)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Edelvives, 2016)</td>
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<td><strong>Duraznos (Peaches)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Quipu, 2016)</td>
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<td><strong>Guila en el recore (Crane at break)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Para llegar hasta el sol (To reach the sun)</strong></td>
<td>(Buenos Aires, Losqueles, 2018)</td>
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<td><strong>Francisco Solar Madriga</strong></td>
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<td><strong>La lagartija y el mar (The Lizard and the Sea)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Aroma en su laberinto (Scent in Its Labyrinth)</strong></td>
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**BOOKS FOR TEACHERS AND READING PROMOTERS**

- Aproximación a la narrativa y a la poesía para niños, Los pasos descalzos (An approach to narrative and poetry for children, The barefoot steps) (Buenos Aires, Lugar editorial, 2012)
- La casa del aire, Literatura en la escuela. Nivel Inicial y Primer ciclo (The house in the air, Literature at school, kindergarten and 1st to 3rd grades) (Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2013)
- La casa del aire, Literatura en la escuela. Segundo y tercer ciclo (The house in the air, Literature at school, 4th to 10th grades) (Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2013)
- La casa del aire, Taller literario (The house in the air, Literary workshop) (Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2018)

**BOOKS FOR ADULTS**

- La secreta sílaba del beso (The secret syllable of kiss) (Neuquén, Editorial Ruedamares, 2003)
- En un claro del mundo (In a clearing in the world) (Neuquén, Editorial Ruedamares, 2009)

**TRANSLATED BOOKS**

- **Korea**
  - Sana que sana
  - Una mariposa risa que riza

- **China**
  - Sana que sana

- **Brazil**
  - Una mariposa risa que riza
  - Translated by Valentina Cayota
  - Adapted by Penelope Martins

- **Eleanor y el río**
  - Translated by Flavia Savary
FIVE-BOOK LIST

Un sol para tu sombrero (Poems)

Azul la cordillera (Novel)

Ruedamares, pirata de la mar bravía (Novel)

La luna lleva un silencio (Poems)

De coronas y galeras (Short story)
Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2013.

Secretos de los que van y vienen
(Secrets of Those Who Come and Go)
Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2013.

Una mapira risa que riza (Poems)
Korea Schneizler, 2008.
San Pablo, Nova Alexandria publishing house,
2009.

Sana que sana (Poems)
Hanshian Culture Publishing Corporation, Taiwan,
2008.

Mientras duermen las piedras (Novel)
stones sleep

Maeces de silencio (Poems)

La luna lleva un silencio = The moon holds silence
(Buenos Aires, Anaya, 2005)
(Buenos Aires, Anaya Aique Grupo Editor, 2010)

Mientras duermen las piedras = While the stones sleep
(Buenos Aires, Edelvives, 2009)

Secretos de los que van y vienen = Secrets of Those Who Come and Go
(Neuquén, Ruedamares, 2013)

’María Cristina Ramos’ production is characterised principally by recreating the voices and thoughts of childhood. Through a careful selection of poetic words, she binds together with subtle threads the everyday speech of children and her deep poetic voice, a voice that flies off to create fantastic settings in regions that are seldom visited by people from the big cities. Nature is part of her stories, bringing credibility through a discourse that feeds from fresh air, little puddles, and leafy trees. Children wander freely, barefoot or wearing trainers, coming in and out of their homes, and their lives fold and unfold nourished by Neuquén’s beautiful landscape. Their talks, dreams, falls, and conflicts raise from the generosity of a nature that offers adventures and builds the realistic background from which the fantastic emerges in triumph.’

Lidia Blanco
Specialist in Literature for Children and Young Adults
‘Reading is woven with the inner world of the reader, the edges of existing concepts, the underlying sentiments that haven’t yet been named, the excitement of our own questions. Reading walks barefoot into our inner yards, taming threatening shadows, setting up a castle with a bridge that leads to certainty, moving the moat aside to cultivate a new field of doubts; reading adds ladders for a new search. The reader is wonderfully bound to hundreds of presences that sustain culture, though completely alone, accompanied by a voice that wanders with someone else’s solitude.’

Maria Cristina Ramos

Aproximación a la narrativa y a la poesía para niños. Los pasos descalzos
(An Approach to Narrative and Poetry for Children. The Barefoot Steps)
Azul la cordillera (Blue, the mountain chain) tells us a story about a place, and about a way of looking at that place.

The narrative is composed by the different voices of the protagonists: a boy who crosses the mountains to his stay-in school; the Mapuche woman who, as a member of the indigenous people of the region, does not forget she is the owner of that land; the teachers, the cleaning lady, an illiterate woman. We get to know them through their thoughts, their memories. It is a materiality emerges from a choral discourse format, where the characters contribute their stories, their thoughts, their musings and their memories. It is a shared fabric that may seem to mimic the technique of the loom, where multiple colours are woven in horizontally across the tapestry’s vertical lines.

Apart from this special labour of love with words, reproducing cadences and turns of phrase that come from the real people’s use of language, it seems that the cohesive element that binds the novel together is the convergence of these individual discourses into one single shape that represents the whole constellation of an integrated community and their ties of solidarity, as in a mosaic or kaleidoscope.

Recommended for children from 11 years old, and older.

About Azul la cordillera (Blue, the mountain chain) by María Cristina Ramos

Review of Azul la cordillera (Blue, the mountain chain), written by Marcela Correa, and published by Imaginaria magazine (www.imaginaria.com.ar) on March 1, 2006.

Azul la cordillera (Blue, the mountain chain) is a novel written for children and teenagers, built on the basis of oral expressions. These spoken utterances point to the margins in two ways: because they come from a region at the border of Argentina, and because they are pronounced by characters that live in precariousness and isolation, and have to climb mountains and cover huge distances, or stay-in far from their families to attend school.

These pages unveil moving scenes as the one about the rookie teacher in “Deletrearte” (The Art of Spelling) who contemplates in awe the twinkle in her student’s eye, dazzled by the discovery of knowledge as the little girl reads her first sentence ever. These pages also illuminate fragments of the Mapuche culture, such as the legend of Nahuel, a mythical figure—half human, half tiger—who helped José’s grandfather, guiding him to safety when the old man got lost in the mountains in the middle of a storm.

Structurally, María Cristina Ramos’ novel contains 14 stand-alone short stories, told by different characters who are part of a small community in a town in the middle of the Andean Mountain Range. It is precisely that structure that makes it so interesting, since there are virtually no unifying elements of the type that would be traditionally expected in a novel, such as a single plot line, or an introduction, middle and end, which provide a progressive, cohesive, linear direction to the narrative, in particular with an omniscient narrator.

On the contrary, in Azul la cordillera (Blue, the mountain chain) the narrative fragments are scattered (in fact, they could be read in a different order), not tied to a strict, progressive and linear order, and above all, they do not follow the pattern of a single phonological enunciation, but their materiality emerges from a choral discourse format, where the characters contribute their stories, their thoughts, their musings and their memories. It is a shared fabric that may seem to mimic the technique of the loom, where multiple colours are woven in horizontally across the tapestry’s vertical lines.

I believe that the purpose of this novel is to connect us with a significant part of our identity, by means of words acting as a ‘bridge’—as in the title of the last chapter—to cross over leaving discrimination and intolerance behind, a utopia of integration through the communion of literature.

Gustavo Lespada[1]

Nota al pie:
[1] Gustavo Lespada has a PhD in Literature from the University of Buenos Aires. He won the Juan Rufio Award in 2008, for his literary essay on Radio Francia Internacional – UNESCO Archives Collection. He is a researcher and lecturer, teaching Latin American Literature at the School of Literature and Philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires.
Knowing a neighborhood is like knowing a world. Manuel, his family and his friends live in the neighbourhood that is opened in this novel. The days pass between games and adventures, the characters play and display childhood daily life but at the same time get into the complexity of adults relationships. It happens that a fire breaks out at the heart of that small community. How to deal with such a difficult situation? Sometimes, the family effort and assistance are not enough but luckily the neighbours are there, accompanying to understand that it is possible to meet again in a kite flight, in unusual hiding places and in the friendly gestures that help you to fly and grow.

The story has a first person narrator, a boy that finds out he has a secret power. His voice lets us go into his imaginary world and explore the neighbourly relations that build a small universe of the possible and the impossible.

We can see how, as the plot moves forward, some characters who at first remained distant show then their lucidity to understand the others and contribute the appropriate gesture to modify reality. Literature can reconsider discords in those areas of thinking where prejudices overload our attitude towards others and favour a new perspective: this is the case with Ramos’s novel. In these troubled times, when the tendency to demonize those who are most vulnerable has grown, De barrio somos brings us a tale about small gestures of accompanying and overcoming as a counterpart. We will find in it micro-stories of neighbours that still exist in outlying districts, people who are ignored by the hegemonic thought and yet support the essential human value in society.
This book is illustrated by Paula Alenda, who manages to create surprise by means of subtle outlines. The writer brings us closer to the big pot where “ten bees stir the honey… sweet with sun drops”. After the feast of literary and visual images, we visit the butterflies and their light-and-shadow rooms, woven by creepers.

The coming and going ants are also guests. They march in convoy to their shelter, where they keep food and a secret box where they treasure some wonders: “…a bundle of honeysuckle threads, a green shoe that a centipede lost”. Tiny things are transformed by María Cristina’s words. She manages to give shine to unnoticed things. Her characters are full of life. They appreciate beauty and seek it. That is why some crabs make a ladder “to reach a star”.

In turn, the beetles play, and their “Olly, olly, oxen free, / free, free, rat tail, tiger tail” filters while they are hiding in the grass, and we readers become children again in the summer afternoon.

Crickets and the butterfly princess give us sound and colour. The crickets dance at night, and the one that counts the stars writes in his blue notebook while the beautiful butterfly gives us her magic wings, which let her fly or “descend onto the yellow circle of a flower”.

Our tour continues and now we curious explorers are taken to the world of vertebrate animals and there we find out the rabbits’ secrets. They are alert to “the call of a lost bunny”. Also the walking hen “looks for something among the stones, seeds and ponds” when she wakes up. What does she look for? We have to unveil the mystery.

Then we follow the owl and her lost feather. She looks around with her big eyes “to see if her feather comes back”.

In the course of our voyage we have watched the life of small, hardworking, happy little beings. Their lives are simple and immersed in beauty, affection and solidarity. This book connects us with wonder and poetry. It builds a broad reality and it is through literary and plastic procedures that we get into the text through the window—as Gianni Rodari says—and we agree with him that “it is more fun and therefore more useful”.

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Secretos de los que van y vienen [Secrets of Those Who Come and Go]
Review by Marianela Valdivia and Rocío Malacame.
January 2021
Available in http://www.jitanjafora.or.ar

"It is very hard to discover their hiding places, although sometimes some feelers and little legs peep out", reads “The Beetles”, one of the beautiful texts included in Secretos de los que van y vienen. It was published by Ruedamara, the editorial house that belongs to Ramos herself, and was illustrated with subtle watercolours by Paula Alenda. But hard as it maybe, each of its components discovers poetically those hiding places and brings us closer to small characters such as ants and crickets, or big ones such as rheas; all of them along with birds, insects and so on come and go and are displayed to the readers. The book invites us to spy on fourteen secret scenes where the behavior of those animals painted with María Cristina Ramos’s poetic prose is described. The writer tells us what the butterflies’ rooms are like, as well as the ladders made by the crabs to reach the stars and the boxes where the ants keep their treasures or how the sun paints the partridges’ feathers…

Secretos de los que van y vienen falls within the poetics of the light, almost unnoticeable things, but it is available to those who have curious eyes and a sensitive perspective. Once more, Ramos’s pen proposes small universes, capable of transforming the world or conceiving new dreams. Secrets, like trails to be followed, are also a basting in her work. Secrets like enigmas, secrets that invite to discover, to imagine things that are barely sketched, as in ¿Dónde estás? [Where is it?] (2012), El baile [The Dance] (2011) or in many of her poems: “little worm weaves wings / nobody knows for what” [¿Para qué?] en La escalera [What for? in The Ladder], 2009. Ultimately, “The nicest thing about a secret is to share it” (The Dance); perhaps that is why Ramos, who is a connoisseur and accomplice of children’s curiosity, proposes once again sensitive and subtle ways of inhabiting the poetic word within a weave open enough to let the reader keep playing and imagining.

La luna lleva un silencio
This book is a poetic quest that delves into life’s mysteries without losing the harmonious and playful sonority of children’s poetry. Nature appears sometimes as a conciliatory element and sometimes as a hazard. In many of these texts poetic questions are involved that can be food for thought and a trigger to readers’ sensitivity.

This book received a Special Mention in the Poetry Category in the Alija Awards 2010.


I would normally start my review of this book, which I cannot put down, by telling you that it is a poetry book for children. However, when I first discovered Maria Cristina Ramos Guzmán (and I say first discovered because it is a well-known fact that writers are discovered and rediscovered several times; the more times, the better), I reaffirmed a few considerations. First of all, children’s literature is a genre on its own right. Stating otherwise would be as foolish as considering that detective stories are stories for detectives. Children’s literature as a genre can be enjoyed by anyone, including children, of course.

Secondly, the book is worth its weight in lines. Poetry is poetry, and children have no issue with it. It is often adults who find issue with it, and we should be thankful that publishing house Anaya has refused to join the ranks of the latter. Also, children are not only thrilled about anything that sounds like a poem, they really get it. And this book sounds and smells like poetry. It smells like rain and sun, it sounds like sand and sea, it contains the tension of opposites that generates a creative force; it is a force that emerges from the chaos of a poetic universe where the sun and the rain jump from verse to verse, where words glistening with renewed beauty can be discovered. María Cristina Ramos is not limited by form; she uses form in a way that serves sound and music, and suddenly you understand why in some shopping malls books are placed next to the CDs.

Very good debut of Paula Alenda, as an illustrator. Her work suggests, since her drawings emerge from the page as timid shapes with shy contours. There are no sharp lines. Paula Alenda politely asks for permission to come in, and hers is an ideal complement to this delicate work that can be enjoyed by children and detectives alike.
Mientras duermen las piedras
(While the stones sleep)

Three children and their mother are living in poverty. They have neighbours who surround their daily lives with solidarity and affection. These characters are capable of imagining a way out in the face of unfair situations. These characters...
old but every other day she would get her canoe to go fishing, and when she came back, she always left something for us. She had many grandchildren, but they were all make believe grandchildren, because all of her children had moved away and did not come to visit.’

In the novel, the way out for each of the problems they have to face, as well as to painful situations and even to the small but essential joyful events, is not individual but communal. The hopes and dreams about better times do not translate as inaction; on the contrary, they are a call to action: there are petitions, demonstrations, cooperation between neighbours, a communal orchard, and above all, words with their power to transform.

‘Her laughter was made up by the joy we all felt. That joy was going to be the engine to continue fighting against the dryness of the land.’

We find words used to claim, to shelter, to caress, to engage in dialogue. And we also find that the ties, the love and affection and the cooperation are supported and sustained by language.

‘In my dream, there was a rabbit. He was as small as a coin, and he was playing in our orchard. He hopped among the leaves and he dug little holes. And then, the carrots appeared and said hello to him. The carrots were together as a bunch, so that he could see that they were people and should not eat them.’

Lucía wonders why there are no footprints in the quiet grey stones in the riverbank. It is words that leave an indelible print, a trail that contains the voices of those who came before, the voices that contribute in building our identity.

María Cristina Ramos draws and paints with the colours of nature and the colours of feelings, with their smells and music notes. She weaves and embroiders the fabric of language, offered as a space for freedom.

In a workshop led by Mirta Colángelo in Bahía Blanca, she told us how she worked on poetry with children:

‘We all go outside to watch the trees, to see what they are made of. They are made of leaves, so we picked them up. Then we picked up feathers. The children played with the fallen leaves (...), in sum, they discovered lurking beauty.’

In an interview that Silvia Juri conducted for Edelij, the author said that ‘Poetry rescues the value of silence. You could say that it is that mysterious something that is between words and silence. It is that attempt to slow down time by delaying the next word for a few seconds so as to listen to the next poetic bit, which also harbours silence. I think that this is where the value of a whisper resides.’

As I was reading the novel, I felt that Lucía’s whispers came to me, as the rhythm of the narrative gently made its way, without haste, delayed in precious instants between words and silences, surrounded lurking beauty [1].

Silveyra, Carlos. ‘María Cristina Ramos’. Entry in the Gran Diccionario de Autores Latinoamericanos de Literatura Infantil y Juvenil, SM.
'The thread came in and out
The thread would come and go;
The needle, a white bird;
Its tail of silence, bowed.

Her Granny doesn’t know
Her sewing thread’s the size
The girl just needs to find
Her little dreaming eyes.

Before the thread runs out
The air has stopped to meet
The butterflies that perch
When the girl is asleep.

Just like a sloping petal
Just like a bending flower
Just like a kiss that nests
Into the loving light’s hour.

It may have been of white thread
The little dream she dreamt
With eyes coming and going
With secrets the two shared.

Maria Cristina Ramos
‘De hilo blanco’ (fragment), in La escalera.
Translated by Daniela Bentancur