

## 'Shorts': *Dislocated Characters*

By Lenora Todaro

Nov. 6, 2005

### SHORTS

Stories.

By Alberto Fuguet.

Translated by Ezra E. Fitz.

327 pp. Rayo/HarperCollins Publishers. Paper, \$13.95.

If you're going to beat a dirge to Latin American magical realism, you'd better have the chops to give it a proper burial. The Chilean novelist Alberto Fuguet and the contributors to his anthology "McOndo" toasted magical realism's demise in 1996 with cups of Coca-Cola in a McDonald's in Santiago.

The youngish McOndo writers, influenced more by Homer Simpson than by Augusto Pinochet, see their elders, the stars of "El Boom" (Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa), as writers of a time to which they can no longer relate, a provincial period in which language levitated characters, politics infused waking dreams and inbred villages like García Márquez's fictional Macondo figured prominently. The McOndo stories, typically urban, are filled with characters steeped in American pop culture. For his part, Fuguet replaces magical realism with the magic of movies.

Fuguet's most recent book, a novel called "The Movies of My Life" (2003), dramatized bicultural dislocation in finger-snapping vignettes. Ready and action! A Chilean seismologist raised in California uses the 50 most important movies in his life as his madeleines to help him sniff out recollections of his dysfunctional family and describe the hardships of assimilation. But where a magical realist might employ an image of fishing nets pulling up circus animals after a flood, Fuguet deploys movie sets: under an entry for "The Poseidon Adventure" he describes suburban kids recreating the film's tsunami with trash cans full of water. Magical? Not really. Real? Perhaps.

In his new book, "Shorts," a collection of stories, Fuguet again uses movies as cultural shorthand: from "Christine" for a son who drives "almost on autopilot" to confront his abusive father to "The Blue Lagoon" for fantasizing young lovers. (Some of these stories are

presented on the page in dialogue, like screenplays.) One story unfolds in "scenes" in a Denny's restaurant on Oscar night in Los Angeles, as two failed Chilean documentary makers commiserate over their lives. Fuguet links the young men in both subtle and overt ways (they went to film school together) with much boo-hooing about how hard it is to be an artist. In another story, a young man laments: "I ended up as a field producer. . . . But it's not quite what I had planned. Does anyone out there ever realize his plan?"

In "Shorts," which has been translated by Ezra E. Fitz, Fuguet comes across as a clever writer -- an old-fashioned cafe realist -- who portrays a certain stratum of Latin American society on its bruised knees: the haves who have little in the way of personal happiness and less in the way of love, and egoistic 30-somethings who prolong adolescence beyond its expiration date. He grinds on about the sense of alienation and professional dissatisfaction they feel as they jet between their native countries and the United States. ("There's nothing worse than rich people from poor countries: they're the most solitary, disconnected and sad people on the planet.") Along the way he sounds other themes, of course: love, lousy fathers, being lost.

While his observations about cultural dislocation seem spot on, intrusive bits of conventional wisdom flicker through the stories like news crawl. ("If you're able to conquer solitude, you can conquer anything.") But just when you have decided that Fuguet has the soul of a greeting-card writer, he seduces with an odd love story. In "Truth or Consequences," an embezzler whose marriage has self-destructed wanders across the United States and meets an unlikely partner in a lying, dying woman. Stealthily, even romantically, they fib their way from town to town, falling in love.

To set Fuguet against the outsize talents of García Márquez & Company is unfair, but by fronting McOndo, he raised the gloves. This round goes to the elders.

Lenora Todaro is a former editor of The Voice Literary Supplement.