

CUBA ON THE EDGE: SHORT STORIES FROM THE ISLAND

Edited by Mary G. Berg, Pamela Carmell and Anne Fountain

Critical, Cultural and Communications Press
Nottingham
2007

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First published in Great Britain by Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, Nottingham, 2007

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Publisher's website: www.cccpress.co.uk

ISBN 978-1-905510-04-7 (UK)

ISBN 978-1-60271-000-9 (USA)

First edition

Printed by CPI Antony Rowe Ltd., Eastbourne,
E. Sussex, UK.

CONTENTS

Preface		5
Antonio José Ponte Translated by Cola Franzen	Lost Places Only Afternoon in Granada	7 10
Adelaida Fernández de Juan Translated by Mary G. Berg	Before the Birthday Party Operation Dogbite My Mother the Writer	12 19 26
Nancy Alonso Translated by Cristina de la Torre	Passing Judgment	29
José Antonio Quintana Veiga Translated by Dick Cluster	My Love and My Sugarcane	38
Eduardo del Llano Translated by Louise Popkin	Unplugged Dreams of Flying	56 60
Miguel Mejides Translated by Pamela Carmell	The Man From Nowhere	70
Leonardo Padura Fuentes Translated by Anne Fountain	The Happy Death of Alborada Almanza	92
Karla Suárez Translated by Mary G. Berg	Joni Mitchell was Singing <i>Blue</i> The Collector	97 101
Alejandro Aguilar Translated by Cristina de la Torre	Waters The Colonel's Allegro	107 111
Ena Lucía Portela Translated by Pamela Carmell	A Nude in the Rain	114
Francisco García González Translated by Mary G. Berg	Women of the Federation	124
María Elena Llana Translated by Barbara Reiss	Rooms A Five-Hundred Year Old Rum	138 141
Alexis García Somodevilla Translated by Mary G. Berg	Mirages of Daily Life: The Buildings, The Chimney Sweep, The Punching Bag	151

Anna Lidia Vega Serova Translated by Mary G. Berg	The Green Violinist, After Chagall Paper Love Dreaming of Shipwreck	154 157 161
Ronaldo Menéndez Plasencia Translated by David Unger	Waiting	164
Marilyn Bobes Translated by Pamela Carmell and Anne Fountain	She	168
Mirta Yáñez Translated by Pamela Carmell	When Life Gives You Lemons	174
Raul Aguiar Translated by Dick Cluster	Figures	179
Senel Paz Translated by Anne Fountain	Under the Weeping Willow	185
Aida Bahr Translated by Anne Fountain	Black and White	192
Jesús David Curbelo Translated by Pamela Carmell	The Lady with the Pooch How Much I Love You	208 223
Notes on the Writers and Translators		229

PREFACE

Cuba on the Edge presents recent short stories by twenty one of the best Cuban writers on the island. The title refers both to Cubans' awareness of living on the brink of a new future, and their edginess as they negotiate their way through current uncertainties. These twenty one very different authors, translated here by nine translators in order to better retain the remarkable diversity of voices, write primarily about current times and the challenges of survival since the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the Cuban economy slipped into the so-called "Special Period" of 1990s scarcities and ingenious coping strategies.

Twenty one different perspectives on Cuban realities are presented here, all sharp-eyed perceptions of flaws and merits, limitations and freedoms, and the tensions of living (and defining) Cubanness on this island of eleven million people, ninety miles from the Florida coast, embargoed by the U.S. for most of the past half-century yet bombarded with images of U.S. consumer culture.

These stories reflect both light and dark responses to changing times. Some are songs of despair and surrender while others show ways to circumvent shortages and adapt to changing circumstances. Some stories are set in Havana, while others depict rural or small town Cuba. The volume includes both men and women authors, features pieces of both action and description, and projects everyday detail along with abstract concepts. Some tales are leavened by humor; many are not. Some voices make reference to the past, while some suggest the future. Awareness of the present informs all of these fictions, and many address controversial topics: homosexuality, prostitution, drugs, crime, exile, disillusionment, skepticism. But the predominant tone is of celebration of survival, one of rejoicing at the warmth and strength of human commitments, and at the complex variety of Cuban experiences.

The wide variety of writing styles included in *Cuba on the Edge* offers testimony to the vibrancy of current Cuban fiction. At the same time, the mention of literary icons such as Julio Cortázar, Alfonsina Storni, Alejo Carpentier and others reminds us of the connection these works have with the wider world of Latin American writing. Most importantly, this anthology brings stories by many of the best current Cuban writers to English-speaking readers, and provides at least glimpses of Cuba in 2007, an island on the edge of change and challenge.

Mary G. Berg, Pamela Carmell and Anne Fountain

NOTES ON THE WRITERS AND TRANSLATORS

THE WRITERS

Raúl Aguiar, born in Havana in 1962, is the author of the novels *La hora fastasma de cada cual* (Ediciones Unión, 1995) and *La estrella bocarriba* [The star face up] (Letras Cubanas, 2001), the novela *Mata* (Letras Cubanas, 1995), the story collection *Daleth* (Ediciones Extramuros 1996), and other stories anthologized in Cuba and abroad. His story “Figuras” won Cuba’s 2003 Iberoamerican Short Story Prize. He graduated from the University of Havana with a degree in geography, and teaches writing at the Onelia Jorge Cardoso Center in Havana.

Alejandro Aguilar (Camagüey, 1958), although trained as a historian, has worked mainly in the performing arts, as a lecturer at U.S. universities, and as a training developer in the software industry. He is the author of three novels (*La desobediencia* [Disobedience], *Casa de cambio* [Bureau of exchange] – honorable mention for the Italo Calvino Prize, 1997– both published in Puerto Rico and mainland U.S.; and *Razones para llamar a Sandra* – finalist in the Casa de las Américas Prize for Fiction, 2001) – and two collections of short stories: *Paisaje de arcilla* [Clay landscape] and *Figuras tendidas* [Stretched out figures], which won the Manuel Cofiño Prize in 1999.

Nancy Alonso was born in Havana and graduated from the University of Havana with a degree in Biology in 1972. She was a professor and researcher at the Havana Institute of Medical Science for more than twenty years and served in Ethiopia as a Physiology professor at Jimma’s Institute of Health Sciences from 1989 to 1991. She has published two books of short stories: *Tirar la primera piedra*, [Casting the First Stone] which won Honorable Mention in the 1995 David Competition of the Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC) and *Cerrado por reparación*, [Closed for Repairs] winner of the prize for Women’s Narrative “Alba de Céspedes” in 2002. Her stories have appeared in the anthologies *Estatuas de sal* [Pillars of Salt] (Ediciones UNIÓN, La Habana, 1996), *Rumba senza palme né caresse* (Besa, Nardó, 1996), *Cubana* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1998) *Habaneras* (Txalaparta, País Vasco, 2000), *Making a Scene*

(Mango, London, 2002), *Open your Eyes and Soar* (White Pine Press, Buffalo, New York, 2003), and *Mi sagrada familia* [My Sacred Family] (Editorial Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, 2004), among others. She is a member of UNEAC and is currently preparing two books of short stories.

Aida Bahr (Havana, 1958) has recently completed a novel, *Las voces y los ecos* [Voices and echoes], and is at work on another one. She is director of a publishing house in Santiago, Cuba, Ediciones Oriente, and editor of their magazine. Her work has appeared in many anthologies in Spanish and in translation into other languages. She is the author of several collections of stories, including *Hay un gato en la ventana* [There's a cat in the window] (1984), *Ellas de noche* [Women at night] (1989), *Espejismos* [Mirror images] (1998), and several screenplays.

Marilyn Bobes (Havana, 1955) is a short story writer, poet and journalist. She studied history at the University of Havana, and worked as a journalist for the Latin American press agency, Prensa Latina, and for the magazine *Revolución y Cultura*. In 1979 she received the David Award for Poetry for her book *La aguja en el pajar* [The needle in the haystack]. For her fiction, she has received an Edmundo Valadés award (Mexico, 1993) and second place in the Magda Portal competition (Peru, 1994). Her books include *Hallar el modo* (poetry, 1989), and *Alguien tiene que llorar* [Somebody has to cry], (from which the story included here is taken) winner of the Casa de las Américas prize in 1995, and *Alguien tiene que llorar también* (2001). She was a co-editor of the anthology of Cuban women's stories *Estatuas de sal* [Pillars of salt] (1996). Her novel, *Fiebre invernal* [Winter Fever], won the 2005 Casa de las Américas Prize.

Jesús David Curbelo (Camagüey, 1965) has published many volumes of poetry as well as collections of short stories (*Cuentos para adúlteros* [Stories for Adulterers] in 1995 and *Tres tristes triángulos* [Three Sad Triangles] in 2000) as well as novels: *Inferno* in 1999 and *Diario de un poeta recién cazado* [Diary of a Newly Caught Poet] in 1999. The many prizes he has won include the David Prize for Poetry in 1991 and the José Soler Puig Award for fiction in 1998.

Eduardo del Llano (Moscow, 1962) has lived in Havana since 1964, and has a degree in Art History from the University of Havana. A writer of fiction, poetry, essays and film scripts, he has published collections of poetry (*Nostalgia de la babosa*, 1993), six novels (some in collaboration with others), the most recent of which are *La clessidra di Nicanor* (1997), *Obstáculo* (1997) and *Tres* (2002). His eight collections of short stories include *Criminales* (1994), *El beso y el plan* (1997), *Cabeza de ratón* 1998 and *Los viajes de Nicanor* (2000). He has taught Latin American art, photography and film studies at the University of Havana and elsewhere, has won many prizes and awards, and has participated in many international film festivals.

Adelaida Fernández de Juan (Havana, 1961) is a physician specializing in internal medicine, and author of many short stories, including those published in the volumes *Dolly y otros cuentos africanos* (1994) about her experiences in Zambia 1988-90. It appeared in English as *Dolly and Other African Tales*. Her second story collection, *Oh vida* [Oh life] (1998) won the National Short Story Prize of the Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists. Her story "El beso" [The kiss] received Honorable Mention in the 2004 Julio Cortázar Short Story Competition. *La hija de Darío* [Darió's Daughter], her third book of stories, won the 2004 Alejo Carpentier Prize. *Nadie es profeta* [No one is a Prophet], her first novel, was published in 2006.

Mylene Fernández Pintado (Havana, 1963) is a practicing lawyer who represents the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC). Her stories have won prizes in the *La Gaceta de Cuba* competitions, in the Spanish 1998 III Premio de NH de Relatos awards, and the Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists' Premio David in Cuba for her collection of short stories, *Anhedonia* (1999). Her novel *El otro lado del espejo* [The Other Side of the Mirror] has just been published. Her work has appeared in many anthologies in Spanish, and in translation.

Francisco García González (Havana, 1963) has a degree in History from Havana University. He is a writer, editor, and screenwriter. His short story collections include *Juegos permitidos* [Games Allowed] (1994), *Color local* [Local Color] (1999) and *¿Qué quieren las mujeres?* [What Do Women Want?]

(2003). He has also published a historical essay, *Presidio Modelo, temas escondidos* [Model Prison, Hidden Agendas] in 2002, and *Historia sexual de la nación* in 2006. His stories have appeared in anthologies in Cuba, Spain, and the U.S. He won Cuba's Hemingway Short Story Prize in 1999, and has served as editor of the cultural journal *Habáname*. His articles have appeared in periodicals in Cuba, Mexico, Chile and the U.S. He is the author of many film scripts.

Alexis Sebastián García Somodevilla (Havana, 1964) won the Caimán Barbudo prize in 1989, for his collection of short stories, *El deshollinador* [The Chimney Sweep], published in Cienfuegos in 2000. His collection *Senderos virtuales* [Virtual paths] was published in 2002. He is the Librarian of the Archivo Provincial Histórico of Cienfuegos.

María Elena Llana (b. 1936), journalist and poet as well as a short story writer, is the author of *La reja* [The Gate] (1965), *Casas del Vedado* [Vedado Homes] (1983) winner of that year's Critics' Prize, and *Castillos de naipes* [Houses of Cards] (1998), which includes "The Rooms." Her latest two collections, *Ronda en el malecón* [Loitering on the Malecón] and *Apenas murmullos* [Barely Murmurs], which includes "A Five-Hundred Year Old Rum," were published in 2004.

Ronaldo Menéndez Plasencia was born in Havana, Cuba in 1970. His stories have appeared in numerous anthologies in Cuba including *Los últimos serán los primeros*, *Anuario UNEAC 1994*, *Fábula de ángeles*, and *El ánfora del diablo*, among others. He is the author of four books: *Alguien se va lamiendo todo*, winner of the Premio David (Ediciones Union, 1996); *El derecho al pataleo de los ahorcados*, winner of the Premio Casa de las Américas (Lengua de Trapo, 1998); *La piel de Inessa*, winner of the Premio Lengua de trapo de Narrativa (Lengua de Trapo, 1999); and *De modo que esto es la muerte* (Lengua de Trapo, 2002).

Miguel Mejides (Camagüey, 1950) won the David prize for his 1977 book *Tiempo de hombres* [Time of Men], the 1981 UNEAC Rodríguez prize for *El jardín de las flores silvestres* [The Wildflower Garden] and the Juan Rulfo short story prize in 1994 for "Rumba-Palace," published in 1996. He has also published

novels such as *La habitación terrestre* [Inhabiting the Earth] and *Perversiones en el Prado* [Perversions in the Prado].

Leonardo Padura Fuentes (Havana, 1955) essayist, journalist, and novelist is famous for his series of detective novels ("The Four Seasons") featuring the exploits of Mario Conde. He has received numerous national and international prizes and has published two books of stories: *Según los años pasan* [As the years go by] and *La puerta de Alcalá y otras cacerías* [The Alcalá Gate and other hunting scenes]. He has published books of interviews about salsa and baseball, as well as many critical essays. Recent works include: *Adiós Hemingway* [Goodbye Hemingway] (2001), *Culture and the Cuban Revolution* with John Kirk in 2001, and another Mario Conde novel, *La neblina del ayer* [The Mist of Yesterday] (2005). His works have been translated into numerous languages.

Senel Paz (Havana, 1950), one of Cuba's best-known writers, won the Juan Rulfo Prize for best short story in 1990. His prize-winning story, "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo" [The Wolf, the Forest, and the New Man], became an international success as the popular movie *Fresa y chocolate* [Strawberry and Chocolate], directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. Paz was co-author of the *Fresa y chocolate* script and has continued scriptwriting in both Cuba and Spain. He has written a novel scheduled for release in early 2007.

Antonio José Ponte, poet, fiction writer and essayist. Two collections of his poems have been published: *Poesía (1982-1989)* (Ediciones Letras Cubanas, 1991) and *Asiento en las ruinas* (Ediciones Letras Cubanas, 1997). He has published five collections of essays. Two volumes of his short stories have been published in English translation: *In the Cold of the Malecón*, translated by Cola Franzen and Dick Cluster (City Lights, 2002) and *Tales From the Cuban Empire*, translated by Cola Franzen (City Lights, 2002). His first novel, *Contrabando de sombras* [Trafficking in Shadows] was published by Mondadori (Barcelona, 2002). He recently completed a second novel titled *La fiesta vigilada* [The Closely Watched Fiesta], to be published in Spain by Anagrama in 2007. He lives in Havana.

Ena Lucía Portela, born in Havana (1972) where she still lives, is a novelist and short story writer. She won the UNEAC National Novel Prize in 1997 for her first novel, *El pájaro: tinta china y pincel* [The bird: Chinese ink and pen], published in 1999, as was her collection of short stories, *Una extraña entre las piedras* [A strange woman among the stones]. She was the recipient of the Juan Rufo Short Story Prize given by Radio France International in 1999 for her short story, "El viejo, el asesino y yo" ["The old man, the assassin and I"]. Her novel *La sombra del caminante* [The walker's shadow] was published in 2001, and a third novel, *Cien botellas en una pared* [One hundred bottles on a wall], won the Jaén Novel Prize in Spain in 2002.

José Antonio Quintana Veiga lives in Nueva Gerona on Cuba's Isle of Youth. He has published three books of short stories including *Precio de los zapatos* [The Price of Shoes] (Nueva Gerona, 2002) and the novel *Callejera*. His story "Mi amor y mi caña," included here, won the first honorable mention in the annual best short story contest of *La Gaceta de Cuba*, magazine of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists.

Karla Suárez was born in Havana in 1969, and presently resides in Paris, where she is a systems engineer, much of the year. Her collections of stories, *Espuma* [Foam], published in 1999, and *Carroza para actores* [Carriage for actors], which includes the stories included here, published in 2001, have won many awards. Her first novel, *Silencios* [Silences], received the Lengua de Trapo Fiction Prize in 1999, and has been translated into many languages, and her second novel, *La viajera* [The traveler] was published in 2005.

Anna Lidia Vega Serova was born in 1968 in St. Petersburg, Russia, daughter of a Cuban father and a Russian mother. She has lived in Havana since she was 20, and writes exclusively in Spanish. She is also a painter. She won the 1996 Special Prize of the Asociación Hermanos Saíz, and the 1997 Premio David for her collection of stories *Bad Painting* (1997). Her second volume of stories, *Catálogo de mascotas* [Catalog of mascots] was published in 1998, and the third, *Limpiando ventanas y espejos* [Cleaning windows and mirrors] in 2001. Her most recent book is a novel, *Noche de ronda* [Nightwatch], 2004.

Mirta Yañez (Havana, 1947), has written fiction, poetry, literary criticism, and children's books, and has taught Latin American literature at the University of Havana. In 1988 and 90 she won the Critics' Prize for the story collection *El Diablo son las cosas* [To the devil with it] and for the essay *La narrativa del romanticismo en Latinoamérica* [Romantic narrative in Latin America]. Other books she has published include *Las visitas y otros poemas* [The visits and other poems] (1986), *Una memoria de elefante* [An elephant's memory] (1991). She is the co-editor of the anthology of Cuban women's stories *Estatuas de sal* [Pillars of salt] published in 1996, and the editor of *Cubana: Contemporary Fiction by Cuban Women* (1998).

THE TRANSLATORS

Mary G. Berg's recent translations from Spanish include editions (*Open Your Eyes and Soar: Cuban Women Writing Now* (2003), novels: *I've Forgotten Your Name* (2004) by Martha Rivera (Dominican Republic); *River of Sorrows* (2000) by Libertad Demitrópulos (Argentina); and *Ximena at the Crossroads* (1998) by Laura Riesco (Peru), as well as stories, women's travel accounts, literary criticism, and collections of poetry, most recently *Quincunx* and *The Book of Giulio Camillo* by Carlota Caulfield (Cuba) and *Antonio Machado's The Landscape of Castile* (with Dennis Maloney). She teaches at Harvard Extension and is a Resident Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University, where she writes about Latin American writers, including Clorinda Matto de Turner, Juana Manuela Gorriti, Soledad Acosta de Samper, and contemporary Cubans.

Pamela Carmell teaches Spanish in St. Louis. She has translated Luisa Valenzuela, Manuel Puig, Gloria Fuertes, and Delmira Agustini, among others. Her translations have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. Her translation of Antonio Larreta's novel, *The Last Portrait of the Duchess of Alba* was a Book of the Month Club selection. Her translation of poems by Belkis Cuza Male, *Woman on the Front Lines*, received the Witter Bynner Prize. She is co-translator of *With Eyes and Soul*,

poems by Nancy Morejón, published by White Pine Press in 2004. Carmell's translation of *The Last Cato*, the best-selling novel in Spain by Matilde Asensi, was published by Rayo/Harper Collins in 2006. She is at work on the translation of José Lezama Lima's *Oppiano Licario*, forthcoming from Dalkey Archive Press.

Dick Cluster's translations of Cuban fiction include *Cubana: Contemporary Fiction by Cuban Women* (Beacon, 1998, ed. Mirta Yáñez, tr. with Cindy Schuster); Pedro de Jesús, *Frigid Tales* (City Lights, 2002); Alejandro Hernández Diaz, *The Cuban Mile* (Latin American Literary Review Press, 1998); Antonio José Ponte, *In the Cold of the Malecón and Other Stories* (City Lights, 2000, tr. with Cola Franzen); Leonardo Padura, *Mascaras* (selection, Whereabouts Press, 2002); and Abel Prieto, *The Flight of the Cat* (Random House Mondadori, 2005). He is also the author of the novels *Return to Sender* (Dutton, 1988), *Repulse Monkey* (Dutton, 1989), and *Obligations of the Bone* (St. Martins, 1992), and, with Rafael Hernández, of *History of Havana* (Palgrave MacMillan, November 2006), a popular social history of the Cuban capital.

Cristina de la Torre has translated novels by Rosa Montero (Spain), Carmen Riera (Spain) and Nora Strejilevich (Argentina) as well as numerous short stories, many of them by authors from Cuba where she was born. She has received translation fellowships from NEH, the Howard Foundation, and the Banff International Centre for Translation. De la Torre lives in Atlanta and teaches Spanish and literary translation at Emory University.

Anne (Anita) Fountain was born in Buenos Aires and earned graduate degrees at Indiana University and Columbia University. She teaches Latin American literature and culture and coordinates Latin American Studies at San José State University. Her recent publications include: *José Martí and U.S. Writers* (2003) and *Versos Sencillos: A Dual Language Edition* (2005). Her translations of Martí's poetry have also appeared in: *The New Anthology of American Poetry (Vol. I: Traditions and Revolutions, Beginnings to 1900)* (2003); *A History of Modern Latin America* (2nd edition) (2005); and *Bomb Magazine*, summer

2004. Her translation of Nancy Alonso's *Cerrado por Reparación* [Closed for Repairs] is forthcoming from Curbstone Press.

Cola Franzen's recent publications include *Horses in the Air and Other Poems* by Jorge Guillén (City Lights, 1999), bilingual, winner of the Harold Morton Landon Translation Prize awarded by the Academy of American Poets; *All Night Movie*, novel by Alicia Borinsky, translated with the author (Northwestern UP, 2002), and two volumes of work by Saúl Yurkievich: *Background Noise/ Ruido de fondo*, poems, and *In the Image and Likeness*, prose pieces (Catbird Press, 2003). In 2004 she received the Gregory Kolovakis Award from PEN American Center. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Louise Popkin's translations of Latin American poetry, drama and fiction have appeared in literary journals such as *Beacons*, *Kenyon Review*, *Triquarterly* and *Mid-American Review* and in anthologies of literature in translation. Authors whose work she has translated include Claribel Alegría (Nicaragua), Ricardo Elizondo and Héctor Manjarrez (Mexico), Margarita Niemayer and Sonia González Valdenegro (Chile), Mempo Giardinelli and Juan Gelman (Argentina), Mario Benedetti, Teresa Porzcekanski, Leo Masliah, Idea Vilariño, Amanda Berenguer, Eduardo Galeano, Hugo Achugar, Hiber Conteris and Mauricio Rosencof (Uruguay). Her most recent publication is a translation of Rosencof's *The Letters that Never Came* (U. of New Mexico Press, 2004). She divides her times between Montevideo, Uruguay, and the Boston area, where she teaches Spanish at Harvard Extension.

Barbara D. Riess has translated the Chicano novels *Puppet* (University of New Mexico Press, 2000) and *Sanctuaries of the Heart* (University of Arizona Press, 2004) by Margarita Cota-Cárdenas. She was the translation editor for *Postmodernity in the Periphery: Latin America Writes Back. An Interdisciplinary Cultural Focus*. (Emil Volek, ed. Routledge Press, 2002) and contributed to *Spain: A Traveler's Literary Companion*. (Peter Bush, Lisa Dillman, eds. Whereabouts Press, 2003). She received her PhD in Latin American Literature and Translation from Arizona State University in 1999 and is currently an Assistant Professor of Spanish at Allegheny College. Presently, she is

Notes on the Writers and Translators

working on a manuscript on Cuban women's short fiction during the revolution and a collection of short stories by María Elena Llana in translation tentatively titled *Havana's Survivors: Those that Neither Left nor Stayed Behind*.

Guatemalan-born **David Unger** has just completed a new novel, *In My Eyes, You Are Beautiful*. He is the author of *Life in the Damn Tropics* (Syracuse University Press, 2002, Wisconsin University Press, 2004, [*Vivir en el maldito trópico* : Random House Mondadori, Mexico, 2004; Recorded Books 2005; Locus Publishing, Taiwan, 2006 and Yingpan Brother Publishing, China, 2007]). He has translated eleven books, among them Teresa Cárdenas's *Letters to My Mother* (Groundwood Books, 2006), Rigoberta Menchú's *The Honey Jar* (Groundwood Books, 2006) and *The Girl from Chimel* (Groundwood Books, 2005), Ana María Machado's *Me in the Middle* (Groundwood Press, 2002), Silvia Molina's *The Love You Promised Me* (Curbstone Press, 1999, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Prize and shortlisted for the 2001 IMPAC Prize); *The Popol Vuh* (Groundwood Press, 1999); Elena Garro's *First Love* (Curbstone Press); Bárbara Jacobs' *The Dead Leaves* (Curbstone Press); and Nicanor Parra's *Antipoems: New and Selected* (New Directions).