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Profile

# At the Intersection of Human Rights and Literature — A Profile of Argentine-Chilean Writer Ariel Dorfman

by Margarita Beatriz Escobar

**Ariel Dorfman is one of South America's most successful and influential living authors. His legacy is one of both literary masterpieces and human rights work, while his explicit goal is to connect with readers over shared experiences of loss and tragedy to find a connection that allows us to overcome the impossible difficulties that life throws at us. Having experienced first-hand some of the themes closer to Dorfman's heart, such as the civil unrest in Chile in the 1970s, I consider his work a fundamental stop on the way to any true understanding of political strife and the fight for freedom and democracy in our world.**

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Ariel Dorfman was born in Buenos Aires on May 6, 1942. He is the author of numerous works of fiction, essays, poems, plays and films in both Spanish and English. He is considered one of the greatest living Latin American novelists, whose writings engage with the vibrant political South American tradition of Pablo Neruda, from Chile, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, from Colombia, who are both recipients of Nobel Prizes in Literature.

Shortly after his birth in Argentina, Dorfman's family emigrated to the United States and then, in 1954, moved to Chile. He attended classes and later worked as a professor at the University of Chile, becoming a Chilean citizen in 1967. From 1968 to 1969 he attended graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley and afterwards returned to Chile.



Chilean Socialist President Salvador Allende, overthrown in a US-sponsored military coup on September 11, 1973 © Creative Commons

In the earlier '70s he worked as a cultural adviser to Salvador Allende, the Chilean president. When the latter died in a military coup in 1973 and his democratically elected government was overthrown by Augusto Pinochet, Ariel Dorfman left and went into political exile, while back in Chile supporters of Allende were being tortured, murdered or simply disappeared.

Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* (*La Muerte y la Doncella*) from 1990 is perhaps his best-known work and it was completed in Chile as he observed his country's painful transition from authoritarianism to democracy after Pinochet stepped down from power.

The play follows Paulina Salas, a former political prisoner in an unnamed Latin American country, whose husband unknowingly brings home the man she believes had tortured and raped her more than 20 years before. It is a drama based on Chile's particular human rights crisis, yet the lyrical power of Dorfman's writing makes the play a benchmark for exploring similar occurrences around the world.

An expatriate from his country, Dorfman has been a human rights activist for many years and has addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations and the main Forum of UNESCO in Paris on human rights issues.

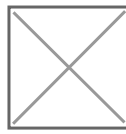
## Creating Connections through Literature

Dorfman's early works often deal with the horrors of tyranny and, later, with the trials of exile. The challenge of his art is to bring the reality of these horrors to as many people as possible, while maintaining his narratives accessible and true to the experiences he is relating. He makes this very clear in an [interview](#) for *BOMB* magazine from 1995:

I'm constantly trying to figure out how you can be true to an experience which in fact very few people in the world would understand, such as having most of your friends disappear or be

tortured and at the same time finding a way of telling that story so other people in other places can read their own lives into that.

Dorfman writes extensively on issues related to Latin American politics, American cultural dominance, war and human rights, publishing essays in both Spanish and English. As a bilingual writer, he navigates easily between the two languages. His writing in Spanish is acclaimed by his Spanish-speaking readers while his works in English are well received all around the world.



Ariel Dorfman © Creative Commons

His international success has allowed him to bring the issues that are close to his heart to an extraordinarily wide audience. His books have been translated into more than 40 languages and his plays have been performed in over 100 countries. He has also won various international awards, including two Kennedy Center Theater Awards, while in 1996 he received an award for best television drama in Britain for *Prisoners in Time*. His contribution to both world literature and the fight for human rights have been recognized by L'Academie Universelle des Cultures in Paris, of which he is a member, and by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He also works with organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

He has been a citizen of the United States since 2004 and he has worked as a professor of literature and Latin American Studies at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina since 1985.

## A Guiding Star for Understanding the Past and Building the Future

Dorfman's writing reminds us that we shouldn't forget history and its tragic events because, as we are constantly reminded, history repeats itself and learning from it is paramount to preserving human rights and dignity in the face of political turmoil and persecutions.

Totalitarian regimes have been a feature of the 20th century and the fight to preserve hard won democratic victories will never be over.

The universality of Dorfman's writings remains prevalent in our world's constantly changing political landscape and his words are directed to everybody, no matter where they were born, especially if they live in places that have suffered under a dictatorial regime.

Dorfman's time and work are particularly relevant to me. Being a university student in Chile at the time of the civil unrest described, I consider myself an eye-witness to the affairs he recounts in his narratives and essays. After the coup, citizens that opposed the oppressive regime were taken from their homes in the middle of the night, without an explanation. These people were called *desaparecidos* — the disappeared — because they never returned to their homes, leaving behind broken families and leading to devastating situations like children growing up without parents or siblings.

Now, after almost half a century since the Chilean coup of 1973, the wounds from that time still remain open, but the new generations carry a message of hope, peace and understanding for the times to come. Dorfman's work plays a fundamental part in this process of healing and building a better future, both in Chile as well as everywhere else in the world where his words can reach.