

# THE QUARTERLY CONVERSATION

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## Bonsai by Alejandro Zambra

Review by Elizabeth Wadell

[Bonsai](#), Alejandro Zambra. Melville House. 90pp, \$13.00.

At one point, Chile was full of bonsais. I don't know if I liked them, but they had rare beauty, this fragility. . . . At first, the only thing I had in mind was the image of someone who had a bonsai, took care of it, wanted it to have a certain form, and understood that it was a true work of art because it could die.

—[Alejandro Zambra](#)

*Bonsai*, the novella by Alejandro Zambra, is a lot like bonsai, the Japanese art. It is both tiny and exquisite. A scant 90 pages, *Bonsai* can be read in less than three hours. And while one could certainly question why both the book and the tree should be made so small, both are undeniably fascinating.

The first novel by an up-and-coming Chilean poet, *Bonsai* won Chile's national critics' prize for best novel when it was published in 2006, and it is now available in English through Melville House's series, "The Contemporary Art of the Novella." Its plot is very basic. Zambra himself described it as "a very simple story whose only peculiarity is that nobody knows how to tell it well."<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is summed up by the very first line: "In the end she dies and he remains alone, although in truth he was alone some years before her death." As we read on, the details get filled in. We learn their names (Julio and Emilia), their age (college students), what they do together (read literature before sex), and what happens after they break up (she goes to Madrid and dies, he stays in Chile and raises a bonsai). Yet it perhaps disserves the book to splay the characters out in this way, for they are charming, wistfully funny, and completely believable. Take, for example, the narrator's remark that, "Julio and Emilia's peculiarities weren't only sexual (they did have them), nor emotional (these abounded), but also, so to speak, literary." The tone, both disarmingly intimate and bemusedly detached, is completely engaging.

At times, the book reads almost like a dream, littered as it is with so many telling and seemingly significant details. Zambra describes the emerging relationship with this passage:

The first lie Julio told Emilia was that he had read Marcel Proust. He didn't usually lie about reading, but that second night, when they both knew they were starting something, and that something, however long it lasted, was going to be important, that night Julio made his voice resonant and feigned intimacy, and said that yes, he had read Proust, at the age of seventeen, one summer in Quintero.

Here Zambra tells us everything we need to know about this relationship between built two very young people who long to seem, not simply intelligent, but profound. Julio clearly believes that the only girl worth having is the one who can be seduced by Proust. (Later, when Julio and Emilia “reread” Proust together, “they did not slow for the episodes they knew to be famous: the world was moved by this, I will be moved by that,” refusing to be just ordinary readers.) We also realize something more about Julio: he doesn’t just lie; he lies with a whole string of details, perhaps lying in such a way that he comes to believe this fiction himself.

Like his alter ego Julio, Zambra also sprinkles his narrative with clusters of details. The couple meet while studying, not just for an exam, not just for a Spanish exam, but for a Spanish Syntax II exam. They do not just pause while reading Proust, they pause on page 372 of *Swann’s Way*. These details make the story seem very “real,” but the author also slyly reminds us that he too is just stringing along so many true-seeming falsehoods. In that very first paragraph, the narrator lays it out: “Let’s say that she is called or was called Emilia and that he is called, was called, and continues to be called Julio. In the end Emilia dies and Julio does not die. The rest is literature.” In short, these words may not be lies, but they certainly aren’t the truth. They are literature.

Yet literature does not come easy. Throughout *Bonsai*, the narrator struggles to keep the fiction within the very limited bounds of the novella. This is the polar opposite of those sweeping social novels that follow each thread where it leads; here, each thread is snipped as soon as it veers away from Julio and Emilia’s tale. Some characters are dismissed outright for being irrelevant. (“But in this account Anita’s mother and Anita don’t matter, they are secondary characters.”) Other times, the characters seem to slip away from the narrator, as if destroying the literary symmetry with the messiness of real life. “That should have been the last time Emilia and Julio shagged. But they kept going,” the narrator tells us after relating what would have been an appropriately symbolic ending. Later, near the actual end, the narrator confesses that “I want to end Julio’s story, but Julio’s story doesn’t end, that’s the problem,” as if this were, after all, real life being shoehorned into the frame of fiction.

While these metafictional comments might lead one to believe that the story is chaotically bulging out of the narrative, the opposite is in fact true. Like a fable, everything fits together in perfect symmetry. The beginning of the end of Julio and Emilia’s relationship comes when they read [Macedonio Fernandez’s](#) story “Tantalia,” which describes a couple who buy a plant to symbolize their love, only to realize that if the plant dies, their love will too. Years after their breakup, Julio meets with a famous novelist who is looking for someone to transcribe the handwritten pages of his latest work. Delighted, Julio begins that very day to imagine the book he would soon be transcribing. When he unexpectedly fails to get the job, he continues “transcribing” the tale of failed love that he believes the writer *would have* written, trans-planting, as it were, his life into a novel. This manuscript, called “Bonsai,” veers very close to the book that we are reading (just as this book in turn veered close to “Tantalia”), another hint that Julio is the author’s alter ego. At the same time, Julio also begins to research the art of bonsai and cultivate his own bonsai tree.

Here, the obvious comparison to make is the one with which I began the review, between *Bonsai* the tiny novel and bonsai the tiny tree. Both are lovely compressions of life down into something that could only be called art. While this comparison is valid,

the book urges us to look more deeply at the similarities. As Julio discovers in his research, a bonsai has two elements, the tree and the container, and “once outside its flowerpot the tree ceases to be a bonsai.” Miniturization is not the defining feature of a bonsai; containment is, the strict boundary between the bonsai and the rest of nature. So, too, with the novel. After all, Julio and Emilia’s love story is so closely contained that when a minor character ceases to think about the couple, “she begins to disappear forever from this story.” Those things that do pertain to the story, however, are preserved fastidiously. We see why it was so important that Julio and Emilia met in Spanish Syntax II and not mathematics, that they read Proust and not Joyce. Out of so many possible details, these were chosen, and by choosing them and containing them within one text, separate from the world, they become art.

The final message of this love story is that love is another kind of bonsai, defined not so much by what it is as by how much is kept out. Their first night together, Julio and Emilia discover “the emotional affinities that any couple is capable of discovering with only a little effort.” Any two individuals could find something in common, the narrator hints, if they only have a motivation to try. Those affinities that seem so significant are really irrelevant; love is nothing more than keeping the rest of the world out. When that boundary erodes, so too does love. Although love may be fragile, accidental and dependent on interpretation, however, it is certainly real. Like the bonsai, love is precious because it can die.

These themes and symmetries, forever folding in on each other like a work of origami, may sound overly clever or contrived. They are not. The novel can be read on many levels, and is delicately unsettling, the kind of story that lingers in the mind for weeks after being read. To echo Zambra’s own words, it is a simple story that is only peculiar in that it works so very well.