

SARAH HIRSCHMAN

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It is a great pleasure and an honor for me to introduce Sarah Hirschman this evening. For over thirty years, Sarah, along with a group of loyal collaborators, has devoted herself to developing the much admired program GENTE Y CUENTOS. She has also recently published a truly inspired and inspiring book on that experience, *People and Stories/ Gente y Cuentos*. It is a book that teaches us a great deal about how to read particular short stories by Latin American writers such as García Márquez, José Luis González or Juan Rulfo. But it also teaches us profoundly about the role of the reader in literature, about the relation between literacy and orality, and especially about what Sarah calls in her book “encounters through literature.”

Let me begin by saying a few words about her project:

First of all, Gente y Cuentos is about reading and talking about short stories with groups that have traditionally been marginalized from high culture. In essence, this project is very much akin to what Borges called the “happiness of the reader.” Over the years, Sarah and her collaborators have been working with diverse groups that have had little access to books and lettered culture, but who possess a wealth of social experiences and other forms of knowledge as well as rich oral traditions that they bring to their understanding of the stories. Gente y Cuentos thus enables us to think about and through the old art of reading aloud and of listening to oneself and to others. (It is important that Sarah refers to Scherezade and the power of storytelling.)

Moreover, *Gente y Cuentos* – I would like to stress this point – has to do with democracy, with access to literature and with respecting other readers. In this sense, it is interesting to note that the book has not one but two provocative subtitles: “Who Owns Literature?” is one of them. It is, in fact, impossible to observe what *Gente y Cuentos* has been doing and to read Sarah’s book without reflecting on the democratic potential of literary texts. As she makes abundantly clear, this owes a lot to Paulo Freire. She writes: “the Paulo Freire 1969 seminar convinced me that sophisticated and critical dialogues could occur among a much greater variety of persons once their interest was engaged.”

The second subtitle is also revealing: “Communities Find their Voice through Short Stories.”

Respecting others here means reading together (and thinking and feeling) even when not knowing exactly where this might lead. And in her book, Sarah talks with admiration about the wealth and richness of those who have been too often marginalized. I would like to quote directly from her book: “Popular culture is full of forms related to literature: proverbs, fairy tales, cherished verses, ballads and spirituals. The Bible and other sacred texts, which many community adults know so much better than college students, serve as a rich introduction to literary works. Most people are accustomed to tolerate ambiguous expressions and enjoy disguised meanings.”

Last, but not least, *Gente y Cuentos* is about telling stories and reading collectively **and** also witnessing what happens when we do so. It is a socially aware project, or better, a project that makes us fully aware of the social dimensions of literature. It consists of close reading and active listening, recapturing experience and feeling through fiction while at the same time enjoying the sense of belonging to a larger community. In 1984, Albert Hirschman published a beautiful, and important book titled *Getting Ahead Collectively*, a volume dedicated to his wife Sarah. In her

own book, Sarah refers to this publication and tells us: “In his book *Getting Ahead Collectively*, he describes a number of grassroots experiences in Latin America and shows how improvements in the quality of life are often reached through unexpected routes.” What I want to suggest this evening is that perhaps this is also Sarah Hirschman’s real theme.

In my view, all this is clear from the outset in Sarah’s book, a book to be grateful for. Let me read to you from her very thoughtful introduction: “Each of us may be curious about the other in our multicultural, multiclass society but it is difficult to talk to strangers. It is even more difficult for our educators to find ways to engage and motivate voices and to establish a common ground with people that are so different from each other and where so many have been denied an orderly and complete education. Yet as democratic citizens, we have established laudable goals as expressed in Article twenty seven of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.”

Thank you very much, Sarah.

Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones