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Review/Reseña

Michael K. Schuessler, *Elena Poniatowska: An Intimate Biography*.
Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007.

Poniatowska: A Living Kaleidoscope

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Michael Schuessler's biography of Elena Poniatowska is a welcome addition to the small, but growing, literature available in English about a woman who is today probably the most famous and most cherished living female writer in Mexico. In his preface Schuessler explains that his intention is "to create a living kaleidoscope, a mosaic composed of [...] the voices of her mother, nanny, fellow writers, literary critics and most important, herself" (p. xiv). To those who already know Poniatowska's work, this is in many respects the most fitting tribute as it adopts the style that she has made her own: telling a story by using the voices of others in order to

recreate as complete a picture as possible. Into this, Schuessler has added his own observations obtained during his “sincere and fruitful” fifteen-year friendship with Poniatowska (p.xiv). This, together with the inclusion of some lovely photographs and cartoons to illustrate the text, creates the impression that this is at the very least a semi-authorised biography.

The book is a translation of an edition that was published in Mexico in 2003 and, as Schuessler underlines, Mexican readers will need no introduction to Elena Poniatowska. The book is roughly in chronological order and its greatest strength is its vivid account of Poniatowska’s early life and work. It is annotated with long extracts from conversations between Schuessler and Poniatowska, and extensive quotations from unpublished publications, from books that are not widely available, and contemporary press cuttings. In doing so, this biography differs from other works about Poniatowska, which tend to concentrate on her fiction and testimonial literature.

Schuessler understandably does not attempt to hide his admiration of his subject. In fact, he could have said even more about the important role that Poniatowska played in the Mexican Student Movement and in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake. Paradoxically, this could be because he is largely using Poniatowska for the source of this information. As Schuessler writes, Poniatowska is “unassuming and modest” (p.14). Never one to extol her own virtues, in her books *La noche de Tlatelolco* (Massacre in Mexico) and *Nada nadie: las voces del temblor* (*Nothing, Nobody, The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake*) Poniatowska does not reveal her part in these two painful episodes of Mexican history. In chapter 6, “The Year of Tlatelolco”, Schuessler focuses on the massacre of 2 October 1968, rather than following the course of the Movement as a whole. As Schuessler states, Poniatowska had given birth to her second child in June 1968 (p.159), but she nonetheless did go on some of the marches, she interviewed students and teachers who

were involved in the Student Movement, and presented their views sympathetically in the Mexican press to increase support for their cause. These interviews were published well before the massacre. Thus, even if some of her informants had not personally met her before their imprisonment, Poniatowska would not have been a stranger to those she interviewed in Lecumberri Prison. This would have made it far easier for them to entrust their testimonies to her when she was preparing *La noche de Tlatelolco*.

Similarly, Schuessler could have stressed Poniatowska's important contribution to the rehabilitation of the survivors of the 1985 earthquake. The practical help that Poniatowska gave to the victims is missing from her book, *Nada, nadie*. The role she played is, however, very apparent -albeit typically unspoken- in the extensive, personalised reports that she produced daily after the tragedy in the newspaper *La Jornada* (referred to on p.199). For nearly three months Poniatowska publicised the many services available to the victims; she helped to raise money for the survivors; she kept the victims' plight in the news to ensure that this assistance continued; above all, she gave her time to the victims, she listened to their stories, enabling them to voice their grief, and by doing so lessening their isolation. Poniatowska is perhaps less "disaster's widow" (as in the title to chapter 7) and more "disaster's angel of mercy". It is for these reasons, as well as her unassuming, open, and friendly personality, that the Mexican public holds Poniatowska in such high esteem.

Little space is given to the Zapatista Rebellion; "her beloved Zapatistas" as Schuessler puts it (p.238). This creates the impression that the biography is rather rushed towards the end, especially given the detail given to Poniatowska's early career. Yet as Schuessler indicates, Poniatowska has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Zapatista cause from the outset. Her four-part interview with Subcomandante Marcos (not two as stated on p. 223), published in

La Jornada just before the Zapatista Convention and the 1994 presidential election, presented the rebels as dignified and peaceful. This was surely a deliberate tactic designed to soothe the many Mexicans who believed that they ought to vote for the ruling party candidate, Ernesto Zedillo, to ensure that Mexico did not become “ungovernable.” Schuessler could also have said more about Poniatowska’s contribution in rallying civil society to call for a government cease-fire in January 1994. Alternatively, as the original Spanish version of this book would have been written bearing the Mexican audience in mind, Schuessler may have chosen not to discuss the more controversial aspects of Poniatowska’s work in too much detail. If this were the case, it was surely unnecessary: Carlos Fuentes no doubt voices the views of many Mexicans when he states in his foreword, “I don’t always agree with her convictions, but I always admire the conviction and courage with which she upholds them” (p. x). Throughout her life, Poniatowska has managed to walk the delicate path of egos and ideologies without stepping on too many toes. This is particularly apparent in her relationship with Octavio Paz, on which Schuessler does not dwell (pp. 229-230).

Yet *Elena Poniatowska: an Intimate Biography* is a well-written and entertaining book. In his preface, Schuessler expresses his intention to offer a study that is accessible to a general audience, while useful for literary critics. In my opinion, at least, he has largely achieved this delicate balance. The blend of voices in this “living kaleidoscope” indeed creates “an intimate biography”; moreover, the high regard in which Schuessler clearly holds Poniatowska is not overdone. The result is an interesting and enjoyable book that should invite and encourage readers to learn more about Poniatowska. The annotated biography that includes details of translations of her work is very useful in this respect (pp. 259-262). Schuessler also states his “determination to bring [Poniatowska] eternal fame or to die trying” (p. xiv). He surely does not need to go to such endeavours:

Poniatowska can and will easily do this by herself, but in bringing her closer to an English-reading audience, this book will certainly serve to enhance her growing reputation outside the Spanish-speaking world.