

interview with
Alejandro Zambra

Author of *Childish Literature*



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transformative experience”**

In 2024, the Chilean writer Alejandro Zambra published *Childish Literature*, a collection of short stories, essays and poems inspired by his experiences with fatherhood. For Zambra, becoming a dad opened up big questions about what it means to be close to others, and the strange nature of time. “The birth of a child heralds a far-reaching future in which we will not fully participate,” he writes in the opening essay.

In this father-to-father conversation with Michael Feigelson, CEO of the Van Leer Foundation, Zambra reflects on his early years as a father, as well as the significance of writing through and about the transformative experience of parenthood.

How did the exercise of writing about being a new dad help you process the experience?

Writing is a way of thinking, of being in your thoughts. For me, it would have been very strange not to write about such a revealing, transformative experience. “The pencil, his crutch” goes the saying by Elias Canetti. It sounds dramatic, but it is a very accurate image. Writing allows you to walk at different speeds. Sometimes slower, but also sometimes, many times, faster.

What were the first experiences as a new father that you wanted to record?

Everything, really. I already miss that time, those first days and months when you don’t know if it’s day or night because you live according to the imprecise rhythm of your child’s naps and awakenings.

What was it like to write in that state?

I would make notes in a little notebook or whisper phrases into the phone. It was fast writing, of impressions, of sketches, of odd sentences. Rocking-chair writing, so to speak, going back and forth. Writing in a state of attachment.

Can writing be useful for new moms and dads, even if they aren’t professional writers or in the habit of writing, to unpack parenthood?

I think we should all write. To write is to make mistakes, to allow oneself contradictions, uncertainties. I think there is an urgent need for a conversation about parenthood. And writing can help make that conversation happen. Maybe you don’t publish what you write, but you show it to others.

And if you don’t show it to others, what you write still influences your life in crucial ways.

In any case, I don’t like the idea of a “professional writer”. When we writers go out into the world with our newly published books, it gives the impression that we are merely producers of books, and that is not true. We write to process our lives and only sometimes publish what we write.

As someone so connected to language and stories, what was it like to read to your baby?

It was a revolution. I was always interested in children’s literature, but I didn’t have the experience of reading every day with a child. My wife and I are very different, starting with our nationality, but our common homeland is literature, which is now also our son’s homeland.

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Perhaps the first lesson is to understand that you do not read to your child but that you read together with him; that he is also reading, through images, and therefore sometimes his interpretations modify your own. It is also important to understand that children concentrate in other ways. Because a child does not concentrate like Rodin’s *The Thinker*. As Gianni Rodari [the well-known Italian children’s author] says, when a child is enthusiastic about something being read to him, when he is truly concentrating, he interrupts the reading continuously and moves his legs and asks questions or improvises answers to the questions posed by the books. Well, some of us adult readers also read like that ...

I know your book is not a self-help book, but what would you hope it offers to readers who are new parents?

The feeling of having a conversation with another parent. We are too used to how-to’s, commandments, quick advice, sermons. Motherhood and fatherhood open up a vast space of overwhelming questions, and literature welcomes those questions, allowing us to embrace their complexity without despairing.

I would like my book to contribute to those big conversations about this subject that we men especially are yet to have.

Have you had reactions from first-time dads?

Sure, there are even some who have shown me their fatherhood diaries, so I have the impression that there are a lot of secret father-writers out there. It seems that the parenting diary is not as uncommon a genre as we think.

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You’ve talked about the idea that becoming a dad not only changes your present and your future, but it also changes your past. Can you elaborate on this? How can writing about fatherhood help us to give a new narrative to our past?

It’s that the birth of a child awakens new memories, or generates new memories, and we don’t know if they are true or not. It’s very beautiful. It’s like when you visit the house where you lived as a child and you have the confusing feeling of recovering something.

And of course, the arrival of a child makes you think intensely about your own childhood. What was a whole day in your life like when you were 2 years old? Were you looked after in the same way as you look after your child, or were you just left in front of the TV? We forget those first four or five years of our lives, and then we witness these same years in the lives of our children. It is as if we were completing our biography, but from another place, dizzily different.

What have you learned from being a dad that you feel helps you in other aspects of your life?

It’s an experience that wakes you up, that revitalises you. And not because you’ve been asleep or depressed. It’s just another kind of energy that makes you redefine everything. Your ideas about the future, about happiness, about death. There is someone in the world you would die for, you wouldn’t doubt it for a second. That changes everything.

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With you in my arms, I see the shadow we
cast together on the wall for the first time.
You've been alive for twenty minutes.

Your mother's eyelids lower, but she doesn't
want to sleep. She rests her eyes for just a
few seconds.

"Sometimes newborns forget to breathe,"
a friendly buzzkill of a nurse informs us.

I wonder if she says it like that every day.
With the same words. With the same sad
cautionary tone.

Your little body breathes, though: even in the
dimly lit hospital, your breathing is visible.
But I want to hear it, hear you, and my own
wheezing breath won't let me. And my noisy
heart keeps me from hearing yours.

Throughout the night, every two or three
minutes I hold my breath to make sure you're
breathing. It's such a reasonable superstition,
the most reasonable of all: stop breathing so
your child will breathe.