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## In search of memories lost

*Renowned Bolivian author Juan de Recacoechea has just published his new book "Andean Express" to rave reviews. The following is an edited vision for the new book.*

*Juan de Recacoechea will be at the Mysterious Galaxy Books, 7501 Clairmont Mesa Blvd. # 302, San Diego, on May 4 at 7:00 p.m.*

**By Juan de Recacoechea**

The first time I saw the sea was when my father took me to the Pacific Coast. I was barely seven years old. Back in the 1940s and 1950s, few Bolivians had ever been to the coast. The only way to get there was the railroad connecting the city of La Paz, in Bolivia with the small port of Arica in northern Chile. The railroad had been built by Chile as meager consolation for the cession of the "lost territories" during the War of the Pacific, a conflict in which Chile crushed the joint armies of Peru and Bolivia in barely one year's time.

The railroad was built by the British and owned by Bolivian Railway Company. The train carried cargo, second-class passengers and, in the rear, a few sleeping cars with first-class passengers. I always used to travel in one of the sleeping cars, in a pleasant, heated cabin equipped with comfortable mattresses. The train's dining room was known for its impeccable service and excellent food. Up until the age of fifteen, I would ride that train with my family each year during holiday vacations. I was still in high school when my father sent me away to Spain and then, later, to Lima, Peru, where I finished my studies at a British boarding school. I had my first contact with good literature in Lima. During my last year of high school, in my Universal Literature class, we were given the exclusive task of studying Melville's *Moby Dick*. I'll never forget that novel and its characters. They were permanently etched in my memory.

I returned to Bolivia for a few months before traveling to Europe, where I spent the following twelve years, most of this period in France. It was during my time in Paris, while studying at the School of Journalism, that I started to take reading seriously. First I read the French classics, followed by the contemporary French novels. During the years of Cold War between the democratic countries and the Soviet bloc, which coincided with France's colonial conflict in Algeria, Paris experienced a literary boom that, in my opinion, is without parallel in the history of Europe, if not that of the entire world.

During the 1960s and 1970s, however, writers in French weren't the sole architects of the City of Light's transformation into the world's premier literary center. Writers in English, both British and Americans, also contributed to the French capital's intellectual ascent.

All of a sudden, like a gigantic storm, a renewed Latin American literature burst onto the scene: names like García Márquez, Mutis, Onetti, Vargas Llosa, Arguedas and Rulfo. There were novels in Spanish, my native language. In reality, I hadn't read any books in Spanish since I settled in France. It was like a revelation about my own culture, an encounter with myself. And yet, their themes were distant and even alien. The "magical realism" of Márquez, a fantastic and captivating fresco of the village of Macondo, might have been a microcosm of Latin America, but it had no real significance to me. I was looking for the same answers as my Italian, Polish, Greek or Hungarian friends, answers to the concerns of young Europeans in search of their identity in a polarized world dominated by the struggle between democratic capitalism and socialism.

After finishing my journalism studies, I won a scholarship to study television production. I spent a year working as a director's assistant in the studios of the largest network in France. Upon returning to Bolivia, after an absence of more than ten years, I co-founded the country's first state-run TV network and dedicated myself to producing documentaries and short films. It was the era of an endless rosary of left and right-wing military dictatorships. They were all the same in the end; lacking a specific ideology, they shared an uncontrollable passion for enriching themselves at the expense of the Bolivian people. One of them, whose name I don't recall, fired me from the TV network without explanation. It was around that time, when I began working for a local airline, that I sat down to write my first novel. Seven more would follow. Meanwhile, I had married and my daughter was born. We would make a number of trips together to Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Miami and other locales, but the idea of returning to northern Chile, especially to Arica, did not excite the rest of my family. Despite being a small city without major cultural attractions or spectacular beaches, it had a special meaning for me. I finally convinced them to make the trip one summer. The legendary and splendid Bolivian Railway had disappeared. Nationalized in the 1950s, the train line quickly became a burden for the state. The railroad had been replaced by an express bus which made the uncomfortable 13,000 foot descent in a single day, leaving La Paz in the early morning hours and arriving at the Chilean coast at dusk.

Forty years later, I had returned. Arica was no longer the same. When I used to spend summers in the company of my father and my mother, the port didn't yet exist. The ships unloaded their cargo onto enormous barges a hundred yards off the coast, which would then be charged with depositing it at an old, wood wharf. The authorities had built a modern port where steamers from all over the world dropped anchor, especially from Asia. The old train station for the La Paz-Arica line was still in use; it had been turned into a museum. A couple of wagons, relics from a bygone era, were the object of tourists' intense curiosity. In front of the station, in the middle of a tiny park, I spotted one of the English locomotives which used to power the train of my memories. It was in that moment that I recalled one of my trips, perhaps the most original, dramatic and bizarre of all the trips I ever made to the Chilean coast. At the time, I was nearly eighteen years old. I had finished high school "with flying colors," as the English saying goes, and my father rewarded me with the last vacation of my adolescence. Once the train left La Paz,

I visited the dining car to drink a beer and ran into a former classmate from my neighborhood. I hadn't seen her in years. She had attended high school in Buenos Aires and was preparing to ship out on a New Orleans-bound freighter from the city of Arica. She was the same age as me, and curiously, she had married a man who was much older than she and from a different social class. Her wedding had taken place a few days before. All this struck me as odd and unconventional. I was even more surprised when I met her husband that very afternoon.

Her new husband had worked as an accountant for her father, whom had gone to a better place months before, completely done in by alcohol. She was traveling with her mother, who was to accompany her to New Orleans. She visited my cabin a while later and confessed to me, amid laughter and tears, that she had been forced to hitch up with the accountant, a crass nouveau riche with a violent streak. She added that she was still a virgin and wasn't about to lose her virginity to the man she had married, whom she didn't love and was planning to leave soon anyway. She seemed very distressed and nervous, and I asked her how I could help. She answered that she would visit my cabin after dinner, and that she wanted to make love to me. I was speechless; it seemed like a ridiculous and dangerous proposition. However, I accepted despite the risks it implied. She wanted to get her revenge for reasons that she did not explain me. It was around eight pm, while her husband was playing cards in the dining car, when she appeared in my cabin. We made love amidst terror, fear and exaltation. Afterward, she went back to her cabin. I saw her the next day on the station platform beside the La Paz-Arica train. That night, she boarded one of the exclusive Grace Line ships. I never heard from her again.

The locomotive of the old train that used to cross the Altiplano, and that led me to discover the beauty of the sea for the first time, not only brought back memories lost, but also gave me the idea to write a novel based on the events of that time and on my own imagination. Only months later, Altiplano Express was born, a novel which was selected as the runner-up for Bolivia's National Book Prize, and which has finally been translated to English by Adrian Althoff for Akashic Books in New York.



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