Girl, Interrupted and Continued

Rethinking the Influence of Elena Fortún’s Celia

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ABSTRACT

In this article I consider the characterization of Celia, the protagonist in Elena Fortún’s “Celia and Her World” series (1929–1952), and the role of Fortún as a forerunner of women writers in the 1950s. I explore the ways in which Fortún presented herself as a female author offering alternative models of femininity to her readers through the character Celia and the social context of the series. In addition, I examine Fortún’s shifting representation of Celia as a subversive character, and Fortún’s ideological influence on female writers who used similar literary strategies. Using the point of view of the girl in her texts as an insurgent protagonist to reflect different sociohistorical moments in Spain suggests a continuity in Spanish narrative instead of an abrupt change after the Civil War.

KEYWORDS

censorship, children’s literature, modern woman, non-conformism, rebel, submission, twentieth-century Spanish literature, weird girls

In late 1920s Spain, Elena Fortún (pseudonym of Encarnación Aragoneses, 1886–1952) introduced the character of Celia Gálvez de Montalbán, a seven-year-old girl from a middle-class family in Madrid. She presented Celia as a girl who encouraged children to wonder why grown-ups have to be right even in the most illogical of circumstances. The construction of Celia’s childhood innocence allowed Fortún to promote non-conformist messages directed at all members of society, starting with little girls and then their mothers. Although Celia’s world reflects a hierarchy in which adults dominate children, she finds a way to ask her readers to consider the fairness of given situations. In doing so, Fortún encourages girls to be critical of their own world during the Second Republic (1931–1939), a period of social progress that preceded the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939).

Although progressive elements were silenced under Francisco Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975) in the decades to follow, Fortún continued adding titles to the series from her exile in Argentina. Her young readers could
continue appreciating Celia’s ability to disclose how things are not always the way adults say they are, even during a period of suppressed freedom. During the 1940s and 1950s, while the final stories in the series, *Celia institutriz* (Celia governess) (1944) and *Celia se casa* (Celia gets married) (1950), were being published some of her early readers began their own careers as writers. *Nada* (Nothing) (1944), by 23-year-old Carmen Laforet, initiated a boom of autobiographical novels written by women that featured adolescents. These *bildungsroman* show the characteristic stifling context of post-war Spain, represented through an unstable family atmosphere. These young characters, as reflected in the works of Carmen Laforet (1921–2004), were modelled on Celia and written in emulation of Fortún’s literary style. Appreciating her influence on different occasions, writer and critic Carmen Martín Gaite pointed out that “a rigorous study of the work of Elena Fortún, which all writers of the fifties enjoyed in childhood, will explain what the principles of ‘social realism’ of the mid-century novel were” (1993: 37).1

I consider Fortún as a harbinger of girls’ power in the 1920s and seek to discuss how she, as a literary figure, served as a precursor to authors of the 1950s in Spain. In the first section I consider the creation and impact of Celia as an alternative character in children’s literature in the context of the role of women and girls in society in the 1920s. The second section turns to the reaction of Franco’s censorship corps to these books and their underlying ideology and considers the reception among members of the next generation of writers and the impact of these books on them. Through different examples, I demonstrate that Celia was not always the rebellious girl depicted in the first volumes, and I show how she transitioned into a misfit or what would later be called *La chica rara* (the weird girl) in an essay thus named by Martín Gaite in 1987. (I will return to this presently.)

Since the 1920s, Fortún’s stories have continued to be republished, and Celia’s adventures have been enjoyed by generations of girls. After a hiatus in the publication of the series during the Francoist censorship period, the discovery of the unpublished manuscript of *Celia en la revolución* (Celia in the revolution) (1943) at the end of the 1980s by researcher Marisol Dorao spurred interest in not only Celia but also in Fortún, and the writer’s works were published again. In 1992, film director José Luis Borau produced a television adaptation of the first volumes of “Celia and Her World,” with Martín Gaite collaborating on the screenplay. The recent re-editing of some of Fortún’s books and the publication of what is now thought of as her secret novel, *Oculto sendero* (Hidden path) (2016)2 have brought Fortún back to the forefront of the Spanish literary scene.

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The Problem of the Modern Woman

Fortún’s biography (Dorao 2001) illustrates the many lives lived by the author of “Celia and Her World,” her constant pursuit of peace, happiness, and identity, and her personal struggle to remain true to her feminist values without neglecting her writing career while trying to be a virtuous mother and wife. Fortún’s role as a mother and wife was troubled given the death of her youngest child, Manuel (Bolín), at the age of ten. Furthermore, this was not the only unexpected death in the family. Her husband Eusebio Gorbea, struggling with depression, committed suicide in 1948 in Argentina, where they had lived in exile for almost ten years because of his allegiance to and service with the Republican faction during the war. In 1951, months before her death, she wrote to her friends Inés Field and Mercedes Hernández regretting the “nonsense” (Dorao 2001: 73) of getting married and, later, not getting divorced, and explaining that she had never enjoyed motherhood.

It was Hernández’s children, her daughter Florinda especially, who inspired Celia’s adventures. However, as Martín Gaite has pointed out, it is unlikely that Fortún would have written these stories if she had not met other intellectuals at the Feminine Lyceum Club in Madrid, a socially progressive, cultural institution where women could organize and collaborate on intellectual events (1993).

At different points throughout “Celia and Her World,” Fortún’s biographical details are recognizable through the words of her protagonist. In this way, Fortún explores the creative subjectivity of women and the problematic role of motherhood in a society that is beginning to discuss the emancipation of women and the importance of education as a means to regenerate the nation and the individual (Capdevila-Argüelles 2009). As an example of the faithful portrayal of the society of the time depicted in the stories about Celia, Fortún introduces Celia’s mother as a member of the Lyceum. In a scene from Celia, lo que dice (What Celia says) (1929), Celia’s mother cannot stay and play with her daughter because she has many things to do: “Paying the cook, writing two or three letters and going out at six to have tea with my friends from the Lyceum” (64). If the girl reader was not familiar with such a modern institution as the Lyceum, she would learn about it from Celia. In this subtle way, Fortún spread the idea of a progressive society.

One of the most interesting relationships in the books is that between Celia and her mother. Pilar de Montalbán is educated and spends a lot of time away from home and from her daughter. This relationship illustrates the role of women in the Spain of the 1920s and the uncertain role that
motherhood had in the life of the new modern woman. Celia’s mother represents a desire to be active outside of the home, to have a life separate from her family duties, and independent of her husband; she shares these desires with Fortún. As a consequence, Celia is left with Miss Nelly, her English nanny, who embodies traditional education. She is used by Fortún as a way of criticizing and exploring different forms of pedagogy.

Aligned with the philosophy of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (The Free Educational Institution) (1876–1936), a significant educational project based on the ideas of Krausism, Fortún followed its guidelines and collaborated with their mission in different ways. At an institutional conference Fortún read about the importance of telling stories to children and worried about how little time mothers were spending at home and their lack of contribution to their children’s education. She wrote, “It would be desirable for it to be the mother who told the first stories because the faculty of attention is acquired in the first years of life … but in modern times the mother is too busy … or infinitely unoccupied, and either way she does not have time to tell stories to her children” ([1946] 2008: 19). Fortún knew about the importance of nurturing and the benefits that children receive from having a close relationship with their mother; she herself was dealing with a problematic relationship with motherhood. She presents Pilar de Montalbán as a modern woman combining motherhood with the development of her social and independent self. In contrast to the role of the domestic angel praised by conservative elements of society, Celia and her father respect and admire the kind of independent woman she is but at the same time they feel her abandonment of them. In this way Fortún shows the tension between children’s emotional needs and the pull of female emancipation.

However, Celia’s father is generally more sympathetic to her, and their relationship is very close since they find common ground in missing Celia’s mother when she is away. Interestingly enough, it is Celia’s father who presents her with a notebook so she can begin writing down her fantasies and become a novelist. This gesture is especially representative of Fortún’s modern spirit since the father not only gives the girl permission to have her own ideas and a space in which to write about them, but he also encourages her to do so. Writing is considered a transgressive act since it fosters autonomy and individuality and can be used to create alternative realities. In contrast to the depicted support of Celia’s father, Fortún had to start writing secretly to avoid disturbing her husband who was fairly well known as a writer and who did not take it well that she was becoming more successful than him (Dorao 2001).
Alternative Femininities

I want to be a Greta Garbo … or the cook, or a witch, but not a daughter.  
(Fortún [1929]1993: 69)

During the 1920s and 1930s, when the “Celia and Her World” stories were published, children’s literature was being consolidated as a genre in itself. Public initiatives such as the National Book Festival in 1926 under Primo de Rivera proclaimed the advantages that the promotion of reading in children would bring to the publishing business. The commercial strategy devised in Spain during this period shows how children’s literature could be lucrative given the collective will to spread reading practices among the young. The instating of the Second Republic in 1931 confirmed and accelerated the process of promoting reading since the potential to educate Spanish citizens was a key element of the Republic. Developing a love of books from childhood was fundamental to creating future readers who could become educated adults and it contributed at the same time to the increasing marketability of commodities targeted at children. This social and political aim overlapped with a period of creativity and renewal of literature in general in which children’s literature and Celia the character were fully immersed. Manuel Aguilar, who founded his publishing company in 1923, discovered the stories in *Gente Menuda* (Little people), the weekly children’s supplement to the journal *Blanco y Negro* (Black and White), part of the *ABC* newspaper, and decided to publish them in the form of books. The first compilation, *Celia, lo que dice* (1929) consisted of eighteen stories and was the first in the series “Celia and Her World.” They were considered to be the best children’s books of the time (Escobar 1990; Sánchez 2001).

Fortún was also influenced by pedagogy and a great part of her success as an author was closely related to her education in the newest pedagogical strategies. Instead of providing a lesson in her stories, Fortún used children’s logic to raise questions about socially acceptable concepts or institutions and to denounce the belief that logic and normality were relative concepts rarely shared among children and adults. With the reader, Celia shares her view of the world in which she grows up and she demonstrates her (and Fortún’s) great social commitment represented in a responsibility to share with the less privileged. According to Fortún, stories awaken children’s attention and imagination, and their intellectual and (possibly) moral future depend on them ([1946] 2008). Her presentation of Celia in first person narration as the voice of the author herself enables her to take sides among adults and children and allows her to refer to the silence always demanded of the latter.
In this way, she contests the restraints of her age and gender; she creates her own spaces and has her own opinions.

In Fortún’s writing, the role of readers is an active one; they complete the written story by building on it as they read. Throughout this series, the character presents her readers with familiar dialogues and an evaluative conclusion of what has just happened. For example, in the story “El modelo de París” (The outfit from Paris), Celia argues with her mother because she does not want to wear a blue dress.

‘Girls shut up.’

‘Ok, girls shut up, but I say that this dress is ugly, and old, and it’s not mine.’

‘Can you shut up?’ – said mum, very angry. … ‘Shut up, my head is aching!’

Grown-ups always have headaches when you want to tell them something. Mum went out to buy I don’t know what; Juana went to the kitchen, to tell stories to the cook, who never has headaches, and I stayed in my room looking terrible in the blue dress. (Fortún [1929]1993: 88–89)

In this example, Fortún uses a variety of strategies such as different kinds of perspectivation (first person dialogue and narration), a topic of interest for children, and an evaluation of the scene after an unsuccessful interaction with a grown-up. The child reader can react to the passage by recognizing the context and the role of the characters but also by empathizing with Celia’s evaluative use of reported speech as a conclusion to the scene. Fortún felt that individuals are more persuasive when they tell stories. In many scenes, she portrays Celia along with her mother as a representation of an old system that needs to be revised. Celia is aware that the role of the daughter in that relationship is terribly underestimated so she will avoid being in that position as much as she can. The scene while playing in her friend María Teresa’s house in Celia, lo que dice provides an amusing example of this. In this passage, Celia refuses to play the character of the daughter, usually a passive personality condescended to by her mother (according to María Teresa, she would be taken, taught, and probably beaten). Instead, Celia suggests three interesting female characters: Hollywood star and femme fatale archetype Greta Garbo, who was a questionable model for a little girl; a cook, a submissive servant and representative of the role she is supposed to play later in life; and a witch, practically the opposite of the conservative ideal of the domestic angel. In this way, Fortún, through Celia, proposes different types of femininity for her readers, and, moreover, shows that she prefers other options over the one that she is expected to uphold.

The effect of the girl’s voice in these stories is reinforced throughout the series by her asking the readers direct questions that invoke a sense of
confidentiality and intimacy. In *Celia, lo que dice*, Fortún deliberately considers the reader as part of the plot and addresses her in the feminine: “Tú, lectora, lo comprenderás mejor” (“You, reader, will understand it better”) (1993: 53), “Presta atención, lectora” (“Pay attention, reader”) (70). With this inclusive formula the author directly challenges the child, and the reader approaches this incomplete text that must be built as it is being read. These two examples of interaction are offered at the beginning of the book and give the impression that the author/character is reading her story to the audience, inviting the participants to give their opinion. By using children as her main protagonists and focusing on their seemingly naive point of view, Fortún offered new visions of Spanish society and social change and established a dialogue with her audience, rather than writing books to be read without interrogation.

**Girls under Dictatorship**

**Obedience, Submission, and Censorship**

And the tone they use! ‘When adults speak, children must be quiet’. ‘You should never contradict an adult’.

At the table: ‘Eat and be silent’. I don’t know where things would end up if we always had to shut up. (Fortún [1929]1993: 42)

After being lauded in the 1930s, Celia’s naturally rebellious personality did not escape Francoist censorship. As opposed to the guidelines of the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*, Franco imposed a model of compliance and domestic education for girls based on the conservative norms of the *Sección Femenina* (Women’s Section), a branch of the fascist political party Falange, which appeared in 1934 as a reaction to the modern woman. Girls were now considered only in their future roles as mothers and nurturers, and the principal features of national Catholic women were chastity, submission to men, and lack of rationality (Craig 1998). Far from these requirements, Fortún’s early books advocate for the liberation of girls and women and question patriarchy and authority in general. Celia’s rebellion represented a threat to the Francoist understanding of feminine submission and Fortún was in a dire situation in the new circumstances in which her books were published: she was a woman (dealing with the prejudices about what kind of literature women should write); she portrayed a girl protagonist behaving contrary to the official model and showing initiative; and she presented contemporary Spain as the context for her stories—the same context as that of the child
reader (1998). The fact that the readers could relate a fictional story to their immediate environment, therefore acknowledging different ways to build their identity was a dangerous idea in the eyes of the censors.

Francoism celebrated obedience as virtue. In a society in which men should obey their superiors, children should obey adults and show respect by self-censoring their words. A woman’s role as housewife, mother, and supporter of the husband erased the advances won by the feminists during the Republic (Bravo-Guerreir and Maharg-Bravo 2003). In contrast, the stories about Celia that had been in circulation since 1929 offered an opposing model of behavior with a protagonist who questions the authority of grown-ups, shows a lack of conformity, and confronts the adults with a child’s logic. In contradiction to the lack of rationality projected by the Falangist prototype for girls, Celia’s opinions are reasonable if they are heard. The imposition of silence among children was one of the abuses Fortún had denounced in “Celia and Her World” from the beginning, and this now also challenged Francoist precepts. Celia rebels against the continued burden of silence and feels frustrated when her complaints are not heard and she is not allowed to negotiate a new situation. In this way Fortún does not appear to be indoctrinating, but encouraging a critical perspective for the child reader.

Not surprisingly, there was some difficulty getting some of these books published and even reprinted under the dictatorship. The figure of Elena Fortún was suspect, a feminist writing in exile under a pseudonym, and married to a Republican. Ian Craig (1998) provides evidence of a letter from Aguilar in 1943, in which after being asked about Fortún’s political tendencies, he would try to describe her as a modern woman who would never have included “antifascist” (73) content in her stories. Two years later, Celia institutriz (Celia governess) (1944) was censored, as well as the rest of Fortún’s works. Fortún showed her surprise and indignation regarding this decision and resolved to change her strategy for the next book, El cuaderno de Celia (Celia’s notebook) (1947), an odd novel in which Celia goes back to being her nine-year-old self and displays submissive behavior. Months later, the ban on Celia institutriz was lifted, but the book would be considered suitable only for adults, and the rest of the stories were censored.

However, Celia en el colegio (Celia at school), originally published in 1932, would be denied publication on several occasions and finally rated as appropriate only for readers older than 16 (Craig 1998). The importance of silence and obedience is manifest in many books in this series, but perhaps more importantly in this one. Respecting the silencio mayor (great silence) was a disciplinary measure at the Catholic boarding school Celia attended,
where students had to remain silent in order to allow for reflection and prayer. The school as a social institution served as a site of traditional female socialization. Beatriz Caamaño (2007) explores the influence of religion and traditional education in the construction of femininity in “Celia and Her World.” The model promoted by the Institución Libre de Enseñanza, followed and practiced by Fortún, was an instruction based on communication between student and teacher, with the objective of raising children capable of critical thinking who deciphered reality on their own terms. Instead, traditional education denied children's agency and trained them to adapt to oppression. This model is depicted in *Celia en el colegio* (1932), in which the nuns deprive girls of their individuality and educate them in submission and domesticity. Celia, who represents the new woman, experiences many difficulties in enduring the physical and behavioral limitations forced upon her by her superiors. Rigid timetabling and having to walk in line contradicts her desire for independence and her resistance to indoctrination is continually juxtaposed with what is expected of her. According to the censorship report in 1956, the book was “anti-pedagogical by continuous disobedience [and] disrespect,” and the over patience and tolerance of the nuns with the “rebellious” (Craig 1998: 74) girl put discipline at risk.

According to Martín Gaite (1993) and María Jesús Fraga (2013), the point of view of the girl was incorporated by Fortún to criticize society through the use of naivety and irony. However, Francoist censorship did not forgive the lack of childlike innocence in Celia so some books were banned or altered. In her study of the tradition of novels written for girls, Ana Díaz-Plaja explicitly mentions Celia as an inquisitive heroine who “glimpse[s] some alternative path to the traditional role of women” (2011: 392). Moreover, the figure of the adolescent who wants to become a writer is particularly interesting, just as in *Celia, novelista* (Celia, novelist) (1934) since here she wants to be the writer and protagonist of her own adventures and this ensures her independence. Although Díaz-Plaja warns that novels written for girls are hardly valued in the literary canon, the truth is that “Celia and Her World” was acknowledged by writers like Laforet and Martín Gaite in the 1940s and 1950s.

In fact, the series stands out because of the complex construction of characters that displays their evolution or their regression. In the first book, *Celia, lo que dice* (1929), she is naughty and rebellious, while the orphaned *Celia, madrecita* (Celia, little mother) (1939) realizes her responsibilities in life and abandons her dream of being a writer. Pilar de Montalbán dies giving birth to Mila, and at fourteen, Celia takes responsibility for raising her little sisters. The problematic role of motherhood for Pilar is, in the end, sym-
bolically lethal, and this role is then prematurely passed on to the next female character in the family, Celia. Her father, who once was her ally in her dream to become a writer, is now a limiting and discouraging figure who needs her at home and has come to represent a patriarchal force of submission.

This change in Celia’s behavior is incomprehensible for Ana María Moix (1976) and it also disappointed María del Prado Escobar who explained this dramatic change by asserting that “after the Civil War came other stories, although in the latter the meaning of the fortunian creation is completely distorted, and Celia, who is older, appears to be a vulgar female hero from a novela rosa (romance novel)” (1990: 328). However, in Celia, madrecita, Fortún finds a way to criticize the genre of the romance novel in the words of one of Celia’s friends, who dislikes “the engineer who marries the little duchess” (1941: 40). Progressive girls refused this kind of literature, which was consumed in vast quantities after the war, and fought against by the chicas raras (weird girls). Moreover, Celia’s orphanhood links the character with the teenage girls Andrea and Natalia in the 1940s and 1950s bildungsroman created by Laforet and Martín Gaite.

In contrast with the first novels, where the free and naughty character of Celia was revolutionary, Celia, madrecita presents a regression by Celia’s taking part in the patriarchal family by assuming the role of the mother. Although her transition from girlhood to womanhood is abrupt and traumatic, she understands that she is not allowed to rebel against this new situation by showing resilience. The stories of these two Celias coexisted under dictatorship and depicted contradictory roles—active and passive, inquisitive and submissive—of femininity, showing how the historical context and Fortún’s personal experiences interfered in the building of Celia’s identity.

The Rise of the Weird Girls

In 1944, Carmen Laforet, who had read the “Celia and Her World” stories as a young girl, continued the tradition with a misfit character in her novel Nada, the story of teenaged Andrea who witnesses the misery and the suffocating atmosphere of post-war Spain. At 23 years of age, Laforet won the Nadal literature prize and emerged as one of the most important writers in Spain, challenging the conventions of the popular romance novel and reincorporating the figure of the marginalized girl whom Fortún had portrayed in her stories. In contrast to the first Celia, Andrea does not feel free to speak for herself and is trapped in silence. Her apparent lack of agency dealing with problematic relationships with family and friends during her time in Barcelona invokes the notion of nothingness. Nada was the first of a series
of novels by Laforet and others that portrayed teenagers who could not adapt to the society of their time, thus encouraging girls’ defiance.

In her 1987 essay “La chica rara” (The weird girl), Spanish writer and critic Martín Gaite coined the term to refer to the protagonists of the post-war novels like Laforet’s Andrea and her own Natalia, from her 1957 novel Entre visillos (Behind the curtains) and those of Ana María Matute and Dolores Medio. The orphan Natalia in Entre visillos is depicted as a misfit by her own actions; she is not willing to attend parties with her girlfriends and sister, and feels out of place among girls her age. She rejects social hypocrisy, tediousness, and conventions such as the way she is supposed to dress, and she gets bored during conversations about clothes and fiancés. As pointed out by Nuria Capdevila-Argüelles (2009), orphanhood is a common feature among the weird girls and it is also shared with later representations of Celia. The lack of the mother as a feminine model forces the protagonists to figure things out on their own by fleeing their claustrophobic households and rejecting the patterns of the romance novel. In the words of Martín Gaite, “They want to go out, simply, to breathe, to distance themselves from what is inside by looking at it from the outside … to sidestep their point of view and expand it” (1987: 113). It is no coincidence that both Andrea and Natalia are presented arriving on a train at a destination where no one is waiting for them. The sense of loneliness and adventure is reflected at the beginning of Nada: “It was the first time I had traveled alone, but I wasn’t frightened; on the contrary, this profound freedom at night seemed like an agreeable and exciting adventure to me” (Laforet [1944] 2008: 3). Living their girlhood in a post-conflict scenario, these characters are marked by marginalization and violence. However, they question the normalcy of domestic conduct and construct strong responses through their non-conformist behavior, challenging both the expectations that society has over them, and the rules of the romance novel.

Both Laforet and Martín Gaite read “Celia and Her World” in their childhood and acknowledged the decisive impact Fortún had had on their writing. Moreover, Martín Gaite wrote the prologue for the reprinted works of Fortún in the 1990s, vindicating the influential figure that Fortún represented for writers in the 1950s. She also studied the figure of Celia and her author (2002, 2006) and was in charge of the screenplays for the adaptation of “Celia and Her World” for television (1992). Laforet was also a great enthusiast of Fortún’s works and shared correspondence with her. Their relationship of mutual admiration provides evidence of the trace of Fortún’s children’s books in the history of Spanish Literature. After receiving the Nadal prize for Nada, Laforet wrote a letter to Fortún to share the award...
with her since she had learned how to write by reading about Celia, to which Fortún reacted with pride and surprise and expressed her admiration for “the best Spanish writer!” (Laforet and Fortún 2016: 29). Moreover, Patricia Molins (2012) considers Andrea as a continuation of Celia, whose stories offered a *bildungsroman* of the modern woman, trapped between her will for independence and the restrictive familiar circumstances. Celia would then be a rebel girl who transformed into the first weird girl in whom authors like Laforet and Martín Gaite found inspiration.

Fortún and Laforet’s works overlapped in time, and *Nada* was published the same year as *Celia institutriz* (1944), which, in the line of *Celia, madrecita* (1939), portrays a Celia who had finally to adjust to the world of adults. Fortún’s and Laforet’s books share the literary strategy of using childhood to express a deep sense of isolation and lack of understanding of the world that the child reader could understand easily thanks to her or his viewpoint. In some way, both protagonists show a lack of intellectual freedom, childlike at the beginning of the “Celia and Her World” series, and totalitarian at the end as in the case of Laforet. At the beginning, Celia is a free-thinking girl who introduces radical thoughts into a conservative society, and Andrea is a girl who somatizes trauma through silence in post-war Spain. The will of the characters to disobey social representations is often misunderstood and punished by adults relating to an oversimplified vision of the nature of girlhood and an authoritarian reaction by grown-ups and educational or religious institutions towards personal empowerment.

**Conclusion**

Seen in its historical context, Elena Fortún’s “Celia and Her World” remains a unique and entertaining children’s book series which should be explored through a feminist lens. The story of Celia sheds light on the pre-war era in Spain, but also on the period during and after the conflict. For the contemporary reader, it also provides an important vision on how historic and cultural events such as war or death can change the life of a child. Read as a character study of the protagonist the books are essentially stories about resolution in which Celia is an example of someone who uses the events of her own life to create her future and overcome oppression, thus encouraging agency in her readers. However, the character created during the liberal period as an emancipatory figure undergoes a regression as she grows older from book to book because of personal events in Fortún’s life (her exile) as well as historical ones
like the Civil War and the state’s system of repression through censorship. Although there is a tendency to recall the non-conformist girl created before the Civil War, this is not the same Celia in later volumes. In these stories, the adolescent is an aberration of the original and is forced to conform as she grows up in an increasingly hostile world. The historical, social, and cultural circumstances in which the stories are written shape their characters who show themselves not only as dynamic psychological entities, but also as dynamic entities located within that particular social and cultural context.

Fortún’s work led to the creation of the weird girls in Spanish literature of the 1940s and 1950s. The style of her dialogues, the social commitment, the point of view of children, and, most importantly, the point of view of the girl and the empowering messages of independence emerge years later in literature for and by female youth who refuse to watch the world from behind the curtains. Based on girls’ and women’s participation, not marginalization, Fortún’s literary corpus is not only essential to understanding the history of children’s literature in Spain, but also post-war Spanish literature. The fact that Celia was the first weird girl even before Laforet’s Andrea, offers us the opportunity to observe changes in the social construction of girlhood through time and space. The point of view of the girl as a non-conformist subject is used as a mirror of what took place in Spain before, during, and after the Spanish Civil War and reflects literary continuity, instead of abrupt change. Moreover, the continuous, and yet shifting, presence of weird girls in twentieth-century Spanish literature encloses the concept of girlhood as a historical and social construction. Often classified as rebellious, nonconformist or non-submissive misfits, Celia, Andrea and Natalia emerge as characters as they construct their own individual experiences as a way to position themselves in relation to social and cultural expectations.
Notes

1. I have translated all the extracts from “Celia and Her World” and all quotations from secondary literature published in Spanish.
2. David William Foster (1999) mentions Fortún among “a number of modern writers, lesbian or bisexual” who explored sexual identity in their writing. He also introduces Spain’s hidden homosexual tradition, “the hidden path” (18). Fortún’s Oculto Sendero (2016) about a woman’s discovery of her true sexuality is probably related to this tradition.
3. Juan Aguilera (2011) explores feminism and female activism in 1920s Spain when intellectual and politician Clara Campoamor (1888–1972) advocated for women’s rights and suffrage. The Lyceum connected Fortún with the writer María Lejárraga and Matilde Ras, a graphologist with whom she allegedly had a relationship, and a study of whose correspondence can be found in El camino es nuestro (The way is ours) (Fortún and Ras 2015).
4. Fortún studied library science and taught storytelling at the Residencia de señoritas, directed by pedagogue and founder of the Lyceum, María de Maeztu. Her son, Luis, attended the Instituto-Escuela.
5. For the complete list of titles in “Celia and Her World” see Capdevila-Argüelles (2009). For a complete list of Fortún’s publications and journalistic collaborations, see Fraga (2013).
6. For studies on the adaptation of Celia for television, see Harvey (2011) and Vernon (2015).
7. This has been published recently in De corazón y alma (Of heart and soul) (2017).

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