

# How does it feel to grow up in a dictatorship?

The Role of Autobiography and  
Fiction in *El Diario de Noelia*

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# About Noelia's diary

- **Published by Edebé-Chile-2016**
- **Written whilst living and raising my children in England. I addressed the question: how growing up during a dictatorship is different from growing up during democracy?**
- **A semi-autobiographical account of a 10-year-old girl growing up in Chile during the country's dictatorship era**
- **Translated to Italian by Benedetta Sandroni, MA DIT - Interpretazione e Traduzione a Forlì -University of Bologna**
- **Obtained an honorable mention, Colibri medal 2017, from IBBY-Chile**
- **Included in the Archive of the Museum of Memory and Human rights in 2019**

# A taste of Noelia

Dear Diary:

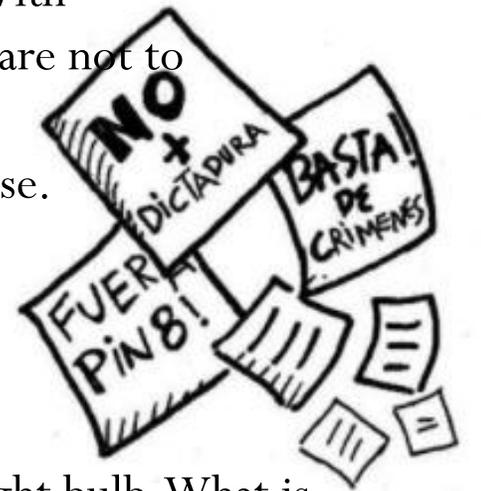
Today mum took us to the dentist. We walked to the Underground at Military School Station and got off at Manuel Montt. In the waiting room there were several magazines, they all showed photos of Henry, the second son of Princess Diana of Wales, I didn't have time to read the details, my turn came. The dentist found a cavity in my tooth and gave me a filling. Although the dentist is really sweet and says to me 'imagine that you have a little bee inside your mouth' I hate to lie there with my mouth open, dazzled by that huge light as they make holes in my teeth. Luckily it ended quickly and then mum invited us to La Foca, an ice cream parlour on the same street. I chose chocolate ice cream covered with chocolate! When we sat down Manuel laughed because it melted and stained my face and shirt. I realised that I still had the effect of the anesthetic. As we returned to the Underground Station, a rain of white papers with printed black letters began to fall from a building. With Manuel we jumped up to try to catch them, but my mum took us by the arm and told us: 'the leaflets are not to be collected'.

"What are the leaflets?" We asked as we got off the Underground and started walking back to our house.

"They're adult stuff ... papers ... with messages ... with political propaganda."

Although my mother didn't let us pick any up, I read what they said, they were more or less like this:

No more dictatorship-Stop the crimes-Out Pinochet



Who would have thrown them? They looked pretty, fluttering in the air like moths around a light bulb. What is The Dictatorship? Although I would like to ask someone, I can't think who. Also, I think that better than asking is to keep my eyes and ears wide open.

# What do I mean by semi-autobiographical account?

## Biography:

- trip to the dentist by the underground
- read magazines about the royals in the waiting room
- a cavity in my tooth
- Dentist's metaphor 'imagine that you have a little bee inside your mouth'
- eating ice cream under the effect of the anesthetic
- seen a rain of leaflets white political messages
- Read 'No more dictatorship', 'Stop the crimes', 'Out Pinochet'
- Thought they looked like moths around a light bulb



## Fiction:

- mum's reaction: 'the leaflets are not to be collected', "They're adult stuff"
- Noelia's curiosity: "What are the leaflets?", "Who would have thrown them?", What is The Dictatorship?
- Noelia's conclusion: "Although I would like to ask someone, I can't think who. Also, I think that better than asking is to keep my eyes and ears wide open"

# Blurring boundaries

- Memory as a personal filter for reimagining the past
- Fiction to re-imagining, restating and reinscribing events
- The combination of memory and fiction allowed me to:
  - navigate the tension between telling v/s protecting
  - include humour and art
  - bridge between contemporary children and the events

# Memory as a personal filter to reimagine

- **What memories could I craft into Noelia's diary?**
- **From my childhood memories, which tell something about the dictatorship?**
- **The mind cannot distinguish between reality and imagination, so memories do not necessarily correspond with 'reality' or 'what happened'**



# Fiction to re- imagining, restating and reinscribing events

Noelia's diary does not correspond to chronological time, but to the internal account of remembering

*'It is with respect to the pure element of the past, understood as the past in general, as an a priori past, that a given former present is reproducible and the present present is able to reflect itself' (Deleuze, 1994, Difference and Repetition)*

- **the facts of the dictatorship are reimagined through my lens of being an author, mother, immigrant, activist, academic, etc.**

**Semi-  
autobiographical  
allowed me to:  
navigate the  
tension between  
telling v/s  
protecting  
(Kertzer, 2001)**

- **Positioning children 'in the street' (Styles, 1998)- political agents**
- **Selecting from all the traumatic events of human rights violations perpetrated by Pinochet's dictatorship those that had some space for hope ('caso quemados' (burnt case) where one of the victims survived instead of 'caso degollados' (beheaded case)**

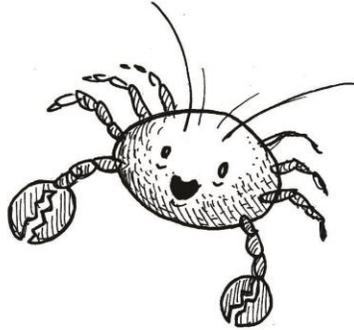


# Semi-autobiographical allowed me to include humour and art

Querido Diario 1



Querido Diario 2



**Los jaibas (High-bass)  
Los cangrejos (the Crabs)**

The word *noche* (night) in *Pinochet*  
(Andrés Anwandter's poem)

**PiNOCHET**

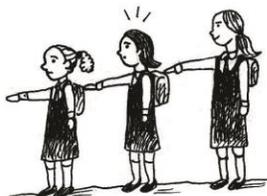
Querido Diario 10



Querido Diario 3



Querido Diario 4



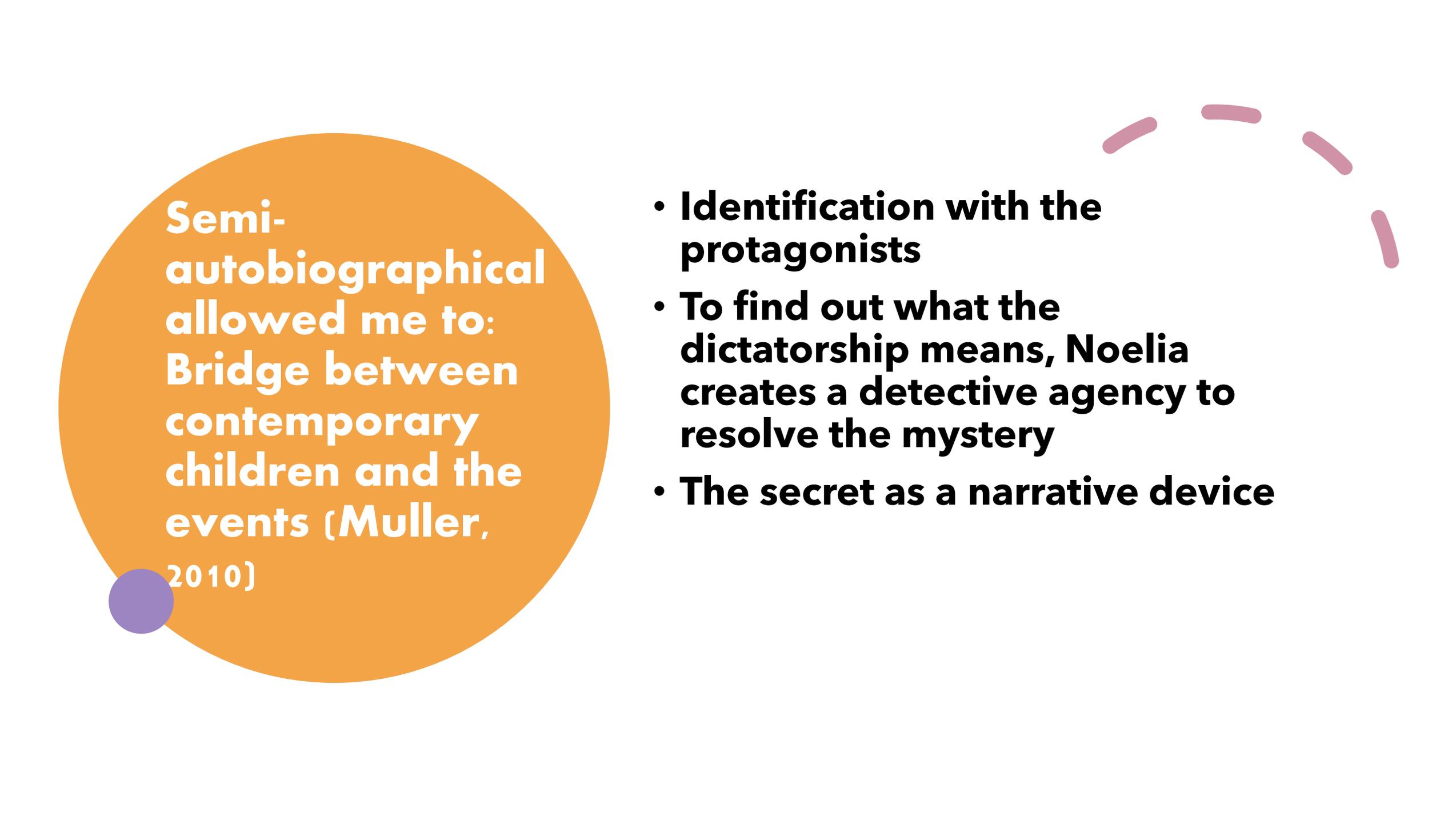
**Lived experiences of acts of protests  
contrasted with discipline, order, uniformity  
and binary lists and classifications**

Querido Diario 11



Querido Diario 12





**Semi-  
autobiographical  
allowed me to:  
Bridge between  
contemporary  
children and the  
events (Muller,  
2010)**

- **Identification with the protagonists**
- **To find out what the dictatorship means, Noelia creates a detective agency to resolve the mystery**
- **The secret as a narrative device**

# Concluding remarks

El Diario de Noelia blurs the conventional boundaries between autobiography and fiction, children's and adult literature, the private and public spheres, and the personal and collective domains.

It is a story that can engage young audiences with Chile's recent troubled past.

I argue for the need to combine many tools (the imagination, memory, archives, humour, dreams and poetry) in a quest to construct a narrative that faithfully conveys the political aspects of personal experiences for the young audiences.



# **Thanks for your attention!**

Questions? Comments?

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