

# **The Little School: Tales of Disappearance & Survival in Argentina Study Guide**

**The Little School: Tales of Disappearance & Survival  
in Argentina by Alicia Partnoy**

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## Plot Summary

The Little School is an autobiographical account of life in an Argentine prison for political dissidents. Alicia Partnoy, the author, was kidnapped and held in one of these prisons, known as the "Little School" for several months. During that time, the prisoners were constantly forced to wear blindfolds, prevented from talking to or knowing about one another, or any of the prison staff. Prisoners at the Little School were brutally tortured on a regular basis, constantly humiliated and degraded by the guards and supervisors, starved, insulted and mocked. All of the prisoners had been "disappeared", taken from their families without any explanation of their fates, and many of them were killed.

Alicia Partnoy spent three months in the Little School and was placed in a state prison for two years thereafter. The account of her experiences in the book is partly fictionalized but contains a large measure of truth and real characters. Partnoy, a poet and professional writer, explains meaningful and terrible events in her time at the Little School through brief chapters that contains character and event sketches written in a quasi-lyrical fashion. Her descriptions of torture, repression and degradation are vivid and help to place the reader in the shoes of one whose rights have been denied and dignity destroyed simply for disagreeing with the policies of the Videlo/Massera/Agosti military junta where over thirty thousand people were "disappeared".

The story takes place between 1976 and 1977, during the first years of the military rule of Argentina following the deposition of Isabel Paron. Alicia had gotten involved in politics in college as a Peronist and socialist; the military junta arose to stop the country's movement towards socialism. The Peronists had a radical guerrilla wing whose violent actions against the military led to a repression campaign in which Partnoy and her husband were captured and taken from their young daughter, Ruth. The story begins with a description of the day Partnoy was kidnapped. While she was later released, escaping the Little School, many of her fellow prisoners were not. Partnoy's descriptions of them are all that remain.

The chapters are reconstructed from the little bits of information Partnoy could glean from what she could see through peepholes in her blindfold, from what she heard and from what she could smell and feel on her skin. She became focused on little things that helped her hold on to her humanity—storing pieces of bread under her pillow, feeling the rain on her body, the enjoyment of a rare used of a toothbrush, a small match box in which she keeps an acrylic tooth of hers, the chance on a single day to recite poetry to her fellow prisoners and other such incidents. The Little School is thus a tale of attempts to degrade human beings and their attempts to withstand it in any way they could.

The book also contains two appendices which list both all the information Partnoy can remember about her fellow prisoners and the guards at the Little School.



# Introduction, Chapter 1, The One-Flower Slippers

## Introduction, Chapter 1, The One-Flower Slippers Summary and Analysis

In the summer of 1984, Alicia Partnoy returned to Argentina after four and a half years in exile. Many of her friends had been killed by the military, as were members of her family. Thirty thousand Argentines were "disappeared" between 1976 and 1979, among the most oppressive in the history of military rule. Military coups were not rare in Argentina, such as the coup that overthrew Juan Peron in 1955. For decades, Peronists were not allowed to be part of the government; no one could learn about their views. The Peronists improved the living conditions of the people with fair wages, retirement plans and good public health. It also gave women the vote. Evita Peron, Peron's wife, was responsible for some of these changes. Like most of Alicia's generation, she saw the Peronist movement leading towards socialism.

Alicia went to college in Bahia Blanca, where she became politically active as part of a movement to integrate academic life into the community. She was active in the Peronist Youth Movement, as was one of her closest friends, Zulma "Vasca" Izurieta. Some of her friends were Christians who believed in Liberation Theology. Many of her friends disappeared at this university, "the Little School".

In 1975, Peron died and Isabel, his third wife, came to power. However, she ultimately gave it over to the military. The youth movement was criticized and attacked as a threat to security. In response, an urban guerrilla movement within the Peronist movement targeted the Armed Forces and the large factory owners who refused to comply with the demands of their workers. The military thought they had to control both the youth and the workers as a result.

Going to school became difficult for Partnoy and her friends, as they were under serious military watch. Alicia stopped going to class and was very angry about it; her exile let her to become more militant despite the fact that her daughter, Ruth, was only nine months old. She helped to distribute information about workers' movements, strikes and the like.

But on January 12th, 1977, Alicia was detained by the Army at her home; her husband was detained nearby. They were taken to a concentration camp which ironically, was named the Little School (La Escuelita). They knew nothing of their daughter Ruth. For five months, Alicia and her husband were among the "disappeared".

At the Little School, the prisoners were kept in two rooms with an average of fifteen prisoners. Besides the two rooms, there was a patio and a torture room. The heat was



unbearable and they went without food constantly. Alicia lost twenty pounds, ending up at ninety-five pounds.

After three and a half years, Alicia "re-appeared". She was transferred and her family knew where she was. She could now see her daughter. She also knew that her husband survived.

Alicia does not know why the military spared her; even many Argentine elites could not save their own. Her degree of involvement was not a good reason either. No charges were brought against her.

Human rights groups launched an international campaign to denounce Argentine repression. Domestic and international pressure forced a release of prisoners. In 1979, Alicia was released and forced to leave the country. Ruth and Alicia were flown to the United States on Christmas of that year. Her husband had come just two months before. When Alicia arrived, she started to work for the release of the remaining prisoners.

In 1983, the dictatorship collapsed and in December, a democratically elected president took power. Lawsuits were filed against the repressors in 1984. Many unidentified corpses were found, some with signs of torture. Alicia helped identify the site of The Little School, which had been bulldozed.

Today most criminals still enjoy freedom. Alicia published *The Little School* to tell the stories of the people who were disappeared and oppressed and their family. The book pays tribute to those Argentines who lost the battle for social change.

Chapter one opens when the soldiers came to Alicia's house to arrest her. Despite hiding, she was quickly captured. Her daughter was removed and she was taken to the Little School. The soldiers mocked her, but she was mostly afraid of the torture. She was blindfolded overnight and was taken to a room with blood on the tiles, which she was forced to walk on.

Alicia eventually became accustomed to life at The Little School. After mealtimes, she could speak a few words to Vasquita, who was in the bunk next to hers. She reported that after losing her shoes, she was given two slippers, one with a flower and the other without. The daisy slipper was with Alicia for more than a hundred days until she was given "more decent shoes". Even the daisy slipper was disappeared.



## Chapter 2-3, Latrine, Birthday

### Chapter 2-3, Latrine, Birthday Summary and Analysis

All the prisoners suffered from constipation due to immobility, poor food and no privacy. Cliché, the shift supervisor, came to visit the prisoners often and asked about their treatment. Early on the prisoners could use the guards' indoor bathroom and could sometimes wash their hands. Alicia was given sandpaper instead of toilet paper in the bathroom. Pato, a guard, was watching her. Bruja, another guard, was busy placing everyone in line to create a "choo-choo train" for the latrine. On the way out, Alicia shook Vasca's hand and then Hugo's. The handshakes were meant to encourage one another to persevere.

Often the prisoners were demeaned at the latrine. One day, guards tried to force Alicia to slap Hugo with her blindfold on. She refused and was beaten. On another day, Alicia slept so long that she wet her bed.

On Alicia's birthday, she was permitted to sit down on her bunk bed. A visitor asked the prisoners which foods they craved. Alicia said she would love a soda and thought the visitor would bring it to her. She could only dream about it. Alicia was surprised that she was even allowed to sit down given that her room was used for those who behaved badly generally. Alicia said to Patichoti that she had been "bad" because she would not sell out her friends. By granting privileges, the guards thought they would break the prisoners when they took them away. Patichoti was a strong man with a great sense of humor who was missing a leg. The two looked at each other from under their blindfolds.

A guard walks into the room. Alicia asks for her soda and the guard tells her to wait. The guard turned on loud music to cover the screams of torture. Patichoti told her to take heart.



# Chapters 4-5, My Names, Benja's First Night

## Chapters 4-5, My Names, Benja's First Night Summary and Analysis

Alicia had not heard her full name since she was kidnapped. When she did political work, she rarely used her real name, as many activists had aliases that they could change when captured. Alicia's alias was Rosa. But over time, members of the resistance knew each other in many more ways than their names; this meant that torture would often give the torturers and authorities relevant information.

No one at The Little School had a last name; they were referred to by numbers. After a shower, a guard saw Alicia with a white blindfold, a torn dress and bones sticking out of her cheeks and elbows. The guards started to call her Death as a result. Each day she had to remind herself that she was alive.

The prisoners were served good food when a new prisoner was brought to the Little School. One day, Alicia ate quince jam and cheese, as the new prisoner, Benja, arrived. Benja was one of the youngest activists. The guard tortured him by keeping him in the latrine. Alicia saved some food to give him at night. Later a guard, Abuelo, entered the prisoner room and beat Benja. To stop him, Alicia challenged Abuelo to arm wrestle her. She won the first time, barely lost the second and quickly lost the third. The guard left but returned an hour later wanting to arm wrestle again. He easily won due to Alicia's weakness. But she had stopped Benja from being beaten.



# Chapters 6-7, Telepathy, Graciela: Around the Table

## Chapters 6-7, Telepathy, Graciela: Around the Table Summary and Analysis

In Alicia's agony, she struggled to telepathically communicate with her family, though she was unsure whether it worked. The first time she tried, she failed. She tried on the following day as well after waking up from a dream where she was free. Alicia wanted to reach further into her mind in order to let it escape. That afternoon, Alicia made her third attempt by trying to imagine her parents' house and her family busy inside. She repeated that she was okay and that she was alive. At that point, she opened her eyes to see some of the other prisoners through a peep hole in her blindfold. She had the feeling the one of her grandfathers had just died.

The next chapter is told from Graciela's perspective, one of Alicia's friends and fellow inmates. Early in Graciela's pregnancy, when she was arrested, they used an electric prod on her abdomen to make her afraid of miscarrying and causing her baby pain. But later the guards stopped beating and molesting her. They had even spent a few days not screaming at her. Instead, she was forced to "exercise" by running around a table thirty times. Graciela had also been allowed to use the guard bathroom for the past month since she couldn't keep her balance in the latrine.

While Graciela was running around the table, she thought of her daughter, Adrianita. She thought of a fellow freedom fighter, Maria Elena, who was taken to a concentration camp. Graciela's brother, Vasca, did not want to talk about it. He would tell Alicia not to worry, that he was okay. He encouraged her to survive for Adrianita. Alicia had Graciela mention that she wanted to divorce her husband Raul before going to the Little School but that now she missed him terribly. Graciela thought about the baby within her as she ran around the table.





# Chapters 8-9, My Nose, Religion

## Chapters 8-9, My Nose, Religion Summary and Analysis

Alicia always hated her large, Semitic nose. It did not seem to fit on her face. But when she could use a mirror in the shower every twenty days, she noticed other features of her face to be concerned with. She also had respiratory problems. A 'doctor' gave her an antihistamine and gauze to blow her nose. The advantage of Alicia's nose was that it allowed her to perceive what her eyes could not, which allowed her to, for instance, smell the smoke of the guard's cigarettes as they snuck in the room. Alicia and her nose had reconciled.

Alicia is Jewish and the guards sometimes threatened to make soap out of her, but she was not afraid because the Little School did not have the technology to do so. And in any event, she could have been killed at any moment.

When Alicia was very afraid, she sometimes wished she could believe in God, one that protected and rescued people, not one who would make her a martyr. Before she was a prisoner, a Christian friend of hers, Néstor, asked her how she found the strength to risk being killed without believing in God. Liberation theology helped him. Néstor and his wife Mary had been taken away to another camp when she arrived. They were dear to Alicia; she had known them since they were all teenagers. They shared many beliefs with Alicia, save their belief in God.

When the guard, Chiche, found out that Alicia was Jewish, she realized that her race had never come up before. Religion seemed independent of the political struggle, as there were priests and rabbis on either side. In such a situation, Alicia was fairly sure that God was simply a pretext for domination.



# Chapters 10-11, A Conversation Under the Rain, A Puzzle

## Chapters 10-11, A Conversation Under the Rain, A Puzzle Summary and Analysis

One day, rain changed Alicia's experience at The Little School. The smell of the damp earth helped remind her of freedom, as did the rain drops. The roof leaked so Alicia could catch water and wash her hands and wet her lips. The leaks kept multiplying as the day went on and the prisoners claimed leaks for themselves. The sound of rain also allowed them to speak. Maria Elena helped Alicia to practice yoga, to detach her mind.

Maria told Alicia that Pato and the guards, Bruja and Loro, offered to bring Benja to Maria so they could watch the two have sex and masturbate while watching them. Alicia suggested letting it happen so Maria and Benja could see each other and so Maria could tell Benja she was probably pregnant.

The guard Peine came in and took Maria to the kitchen and then another room where he forced her to take off her clothes.

Alicia reports that she met Maria when Maria was fifteen. Alicia was five years older and carrying a baby. Two years later she wanted to protect Maria, and did not know she was involved in politics.

After masturbating to the sight of Maria naked, the guards made her dress. Peine kicked her several times. Maria was just happy to have talked to Alicia.

Alicia could not always recall what her daughter Ruth's face looked like. She hadn't seen Ruth for two months. Alicia asked Vasca if he could remember her face and he said he did.

After the rain, the guard brought a puppy to the prisoners' room. Alicia was permitted to keep one in her bed for a little while. This made her very happy and made her think of Ruth. While playing with the dog, she recalled some scenes of her life with Ruth. When night came, the guards did not let the prisoners have the shower they were promised; the radio was on for a time and the news reported that family groups traveling at strange hours should be reported to the military.

Alicia had been one of those family groups. She had been afraid someone would report her. While in her room, she wished she could have her daughter's picture, though she thought it might be better not to see her face as it would make her cry and crying made her weaker.



# Chapters 12-13, Toothbrush, Bread

## Chapters 12-13, Toothbrush, Bread Summary and Analysis

Alicia had one non-edible belonging in the world: a small box of matches that contained a tooth she knocked out of her mouth on an iron grate. The tooth was acrylic; she had lost the real one several years before.

When Alicia's real tooth broke, her mother cried. It happened at an amusement park when she was twelve; she went without a replacement tooth for three years. She was then able to have her first boyfriend, Roberto, because her confidence returned. The tooth helped Alicia to feel whole and avoid being destroyed by the Little School. They could have taken her bread, but not her tooth.

Alicia was also able to play with her tooth to quiet her boredom. The little match box also gave her something to do. The smell of phosphorus pleased her as well. The guards were sometimes suspicious of the box; Alicia felt sure that one of them would take it from her.

One day, while Alicia was being beaten, she thought desperately of her daughter, wondering about where she was. To help her endure, Alicia repeated a popular children's poem in Argentina to herself. Alicia was punched in the kidneys, which had already put blood in her urine. Alicia tried to imagine herself as a frog but wanted to not feel like an animal. She begged for her body to be left in peace. Alicia felt terrible because her tongue hurt too much for her to say 'rib-bit rib-bit' which was part of the poem.

Alicia kept imagining that Ruth would learn the poem when she was two years old.



# Chapters 16-17, Forms of Address, Poetry

## Chapters 16-17, Forms of Address, Poetry Summary and Analysis

The term "Señor" was typically used for formal address in Argentina, but the prisoners had to use it to summon the guards, which they found demeaning. Alicia said it aloud for the first time when she needed to ask a guard to pee in a can. "Señor" was also the name they had for a nameless guard who helped them when they called but was a cruel sadist. Alicia describes how Señor would randomly attack them and even fired a gun in their prison room. Alicia reminded herself that this man was only a little Señor and that the big Señor was the then present leader of Argentina, Lt. General Jorge Rafael Videla.

Around the time of the Señor incident, new prisoners were brought to The Little School. They had yet to be badly beaten and Chamamé, the guard, allowed them to talk that morning. The prisoners asked Alicia to recite a poem, as they knew that Alicia had written them. Alicia recalled her mother proudly bragging that her "little Alicia" wrote poems and that her son Daniel illustrated them. Alicia started writing poems about plants and birds when she was nine and wrote about her sorrows when she was twelve. In the Little School, she could no longer write poems because poetry made her feel too real; if she felt she would hurt too horribly.

But Alicia repeated some of her poems, which she reprints in the book. Chamamé told the prisoners to quiet down and Alicia said one more poem quietly. Vasca said he didn't know that she wrote poems. Later while Vasca was being tortured, he was asked who Alicia wrote one of the poems for, as they suspected it was written for a guerrilla.

Eventually a guard came into the prisoners' room and beat one of the new prisoners. Alicia felt bad for repeating poems when she could have warned the new prisoners about what was coming and that they would be beaten if their blindfolds were ever loose.

As the chapter ends, Alicia reports that Zulma "Vasca" Izurieta was killed on April 12th, 1977.



# Chapters 18-20, The Denim Jacket, A Beauty Treatment, Nativity

## Chapters 18-20, The Denim Jacket, A Beauty Treatment, Nativity Summary and Analysis

One day Alicia received a denim jacket which helped her feel protected for the first time since being arrested. But she was full of rage because Benja, Maria, Braco and Vasca were taken away, likely to be killed. The jacket was Vasca's. She had asked for a blanket a few days before and yesterday they had brought her the jacket, which was familiar to her. This meant Vasca was probably dead.

The morning before, the guards had brought Alicia's husband to her. They had been arrested on January 12th, which was three months and two days prior to the time she was describing. They had never been in the same room during that time. The guards tried to tempt them into talking so they could catch and beat them. They cracked their knuckles to acknowledge each other's presence. Alicia said that she didn't know if she would ever love him again.

Later in the day, the shift supervisor, Chiche, came by to talk to his prisoners. He taunted Alicia about whether Vasca was killed. She asked him where they took Vasca. Chiche responded that he would kill her. He then asked how Alicia and her husband became subversives. Alicia's husband related their experience at the university. Chiche reported that he went to the university and Alicia interrupted, saying that he became a fascist. Chiche gave a sarcastic laugh and left, rather than hitting her.

The next day, Alicia waited all morning to be allowed to talk. Only Alicia, her husband and Chiche were left in the building. Chiche left and Alicia and her husband talked. Alicia's husband reported that Ruth was left at home crying when he was taken away. He didn't know what happened next.

After a short while, Peine came in and caught them talking. He had Alicia's husband taken away and the guards beat him horribly. After the beating, the guard came in and began to hit her with a rubber stick. The denim jacket, representing Vasca's courage, helped her to not feel the pain.

By April 16th, Alicia noted that she had been at The Little School for ninety-six days. Chiche told her to take a shower and shave her legs, to have a "beauty treatment". Alicia notes that there was no longer any flesh between her skin and her leg bones. No one showed up to look at Alicia as she bathed. Alicia was convinced that she would be killed.

As Alicia was dressing, a guard came in wearing a hood. New personnel were coming to replace the old guards. Alicia would have to learn their eccentricities again to identify



them. As the guard dragged her away, Alicia notes that people were scared, thinking that she looked like a ghost even despite her shaved legs.

In Nativity, Graciela's birth pains and contractions became constant. Her child wanted to be born. The guards said that she would be transferred to a regular prison where she could care for the baby. Graciela was outside on a sunny day without her blindfold. Freedom lay sixty feet away. The doctor was not coming. Graciela decided to start pushing and begged that her baby would not be taken away; she hoped that she and her child would survive. Eventually, her child's cry rose above the noise caused by the then fighting guards. Alicia wondered what would happen to the child and noted that a prisoner child has been born wearing a "poncho of injustice". She wondered how often children are born at The Little School.



# **Appendices 1-2: Cases of the Disappeared at the Little School, Descriptions of the Guards at the Little School**

## **Appendices 1-2: Cases of the Disappeared at the Little School, Descriptions of the Guards at the Little School Summary and Analysis**

In the two appendices, Alicia describes the disappeared that she knew of at The Little School. Graciela Alicia Romero de Metz and her husband Raul Eugenio Metz were arrested December 16th, 1976 at age twenty-four. They had a daughter, Adrianita, who was two or three years old. They were transferred to the Little School on January 12th. Graciela gave birth on April 17th, but her son was removed. On the 23rd, Graciela was removed, as her husband was early in January. They were both disappeared.

Zulma "Vasca" Aracelli Izurieta and her companion, Cesar Antonia "Braco" Giordiano (twenty-four and eighteen respectively) were arrested the first week of December, 1976 and were sent to the La Perla concentration camp. Alicia shared a room with them. They were with Alicia for several months, then given anesthetic, taken away and were reported by the newspaper as killed on April 13th, 1977.

Maria Elena Romero and Gustavo Marcelo "Benja" Yoti were arrested February 6th, 1988 at age 17. Maria was Graciela's sister. On the night of April 12th, both were shot.

Nancy Cereijo, Stella Maria Ianarelli, Carlos Maria "Batata" Illaqua and Hugo Daniel Lovfall were arrested on February 2nd, 1977. Carlos and Hugo were seriously tortured. They were disappeared on the afternoon of April 13th, along with Elizabeth Freres and Maria Angelica Ferrari.

Maria Angelica Ferrari was arrested at the end of January, 1977 at age twenty-six. She was taken away from the Little School on April 13th.

Elizabeth Freres was arrested at the end of January 1977 at age twenty-four. After two and a half months at the Little School, she was disappeared and reported killed on the guards' radio several days later.

Alicia reports on a number of unnamed high school students and lists a number of arrested and disappeared individuals she did not know. She also mentioned a person imprisoned after her detention who was later released.



Next Alicia lists the cases of the fates of those arrested prior to January 1977. Graciela Iuzrieta and her friend were arrested in mid-October, 1976. She was disappeared in December in the fifth month of pregnancy and was later reported killed. Maria Eugenia Gonzalez de Junquera and Nestor Junquera (22 and 25) were arrested on November 13th, 1976. They had two young children who were given away. They were both tortured severely. They were taken away in mid-December 1976 and never heard from again.

Juan Carlos Castilla and Juan Pablo Fornazari were arrested somewhere between September and October, 1976. They were savagely tortured with electric shock. They were reported killed in a military confrontation in December 1976. Manuel Tarchitzky and Zulma Matzkin was said to have died in a confrontation but they were actually kidnapped and assassinated sometime between October and November, 1976.

Horacio Russin was captured around the end of November, 1976 at twenty-six. He was brutally tortured and had to be sent to a hospital where he died the next year. Patichoti was brutally tortured and sent to the Little School for four months before he was transferred to a standard prison. He was eventually released.

Several others came and left the Little School but were freed. Alicia declines to reveal their names so as not to place them in danger.

The next appendix describes the Little School Guard. They mostly came from the Gendarme Nacional, the Army division that patrolled the border. There were two two-month shifts of twelve guards, but the Little School had two permanent shift supervisors who led the interrogations and torture and also helped kidnap and transfer people. Two intelligence officers assisted. The guards were divided into three groups of four and worked every other day.

The guard in charge of transfer was Nuñes. The interrogators were named Tio and Pelado. Chiche was the first shift supervisor and Turco the second. The three main guards in the first shift in charge of them were Viejo, Vaca, Gordo-Polo. There were others, however. The guards in the second shift were Abuelo, Zorzal, Chamamé, Pato, Loro, Bruja, Peine, Tino, Dog and three others.





# Characters

## Alicia Partnoy

Born in Argentina in 1955, Alicia Partnoy is a Jewish writer, poet and human rights activist. In college in Argentina, Partnoy became an active political dissident who opposed the Argentine military junta between 1976 and 1979, but she was a political prisoner during most of that time due to her previous activism. She rose to prominence for poems and stories she wrote in prison that were smuggled out and anonymously published in human rights journals. She has lectured all over the world and helped to spur increased investigation of disappeared persons.

In the book, the reader can see Partnoy's personality primarily from the inside out. One knows that Partnoy is creative and particularly resistant to submit to the whims of the guards. She is also unafraid to be confrontational. She frequently worries about her husband, her daughter and her fellow prisoners, and she does everything she can to retain a feeling of being alive and a sense of meaning throughout her time at the Little School.

Partnoy survived by relying heavily on her sense of compassion, sense of beauty, anger and her ability to compartmentalize her emotions. Her sense of compassion causes her to share her food with others, distract guards to prevent them from beating others, lie on behalf of other prisoners, and so on. Her sense of beauty leads her to compose poems and focus on the beauty of little things like feeling the rain on her skin.

## Graciela Alicia Romero de Metz

Graciela is perhaps an even more important character than Partnoy's husband, as Partnoy's husband is separated from her for much of the book. Graciela is also the only other character from whose perspective Partnoy writes. Chapter seven, Graciela: Around the Table, is written from Graciela's perspective. In the chapter, Graciela is forced to run around a table in the Little School for 'exercise'. At this point, Graciela is heavily pregnant, with a huge belly. The guards had stopped beating her for now, though initially they used an electric prod on her stomach which made her fear her baby's pain. While the real Graciela did not write the chapter, Partnoy attempts to describe her feelings of desperation to protect her child, to be near her husband and to survive.

Partnoy reports in the appendix that Graciela and her husband, Raul Eurgenio Metz, was arrested December 16th, 1976. Armed soldiers stormed into their home and captured them. They were arrested when they were twenty-four and taken from their two or three-year old-daughter, Adrianita. After being imprisoned, they were not told about her. Graciela was already present at the Little School when Partnoy arrived on the twelfth. On April 17th, Graciela's son was born without medical assistance. Partnoy was



not allowed to help her but instead she was helped by the guard. On the 23rd, Graciela was taken away from the Little School. Partnoy never heard from her again; apparently her son was given to one of the interrogators.

## **Partnoy's Husband**

Oddly, Partnoy does not name her husband, though perhaps the most emotionally intense moment in the book is when she can hear her husband being tortured. They are almost never allowed to speak, save in a single chapter. Partnoy notes that she was considering divorcing him before they were imprisoned but that she still missed him.

## **Zulma**

Twenty-four when she was arrested, Vasca was one of Partnoy's closest companions and was killed around April 13th, 1977.

## **Maria Elena Romero**

Another one of Partnoy's closest friends, only seventeen when she was arrested, Maria was shot the night of April 12th.

## **Gustavo Marcelo**

Arrested at the same time as Maria Elena, Benja was also only seventeen years old and was shot the same night.

## **Maria Ferrari**

One of Partnoy's fellow prisoners who was taken away from the little school on the thirteenth as well. She and her friend Elizabeth Freres were studying biochemistry at college when they were detained.

## **Patichoti**

A young man who was a prison mate of Partnoy's and who was brutally tortured by the guards. His name (which means 'bad leg') referred to the fact that one of his legs had been amputated. He survived and lives in Argentina.

## **Chiche**

Around twenty-three at the time of Partnoy's imprisonment, Chiche was the first two-month supervisor during Partnoy's stay.



## **Turco**

Around twenty-seven, Turco was a large man and the second two-month shift supervisor.

## **Vaca**

A fat, sadistic guard in the first two-month guard shift.

## **Abuelo**

A large, short man, around thirty-five, who was an abusive member of the second guard shift.

## **Peine**

A particularly brutal soldier in the second shift.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Argentina**

The Latin American country where Partnoy lived and was imprisoned.

### **Bahia Blanca, Argentina**

Partnoy's hometown and near the Little School.

### **The Little School**

The name for the small prison camp that is the setting of the book.

### **Partnoy's room**

Partnoy lived in a prison room with several bunks and many other prisoners.

### **The Latrine**

The guards regularly accompanied the prisoners to the latrine and sometimes harassed them there.

### **The Torture Room**

One room in the Little School was used for torture.

### **The One-Flower Slippers**

Partnoy was given a pair of slippers early on in her stay at the Little School, one of which had a flower emblem on it.

### **Partnoy's Nose**

Partnoy had always been conscious of her "large, Semitic" nose which she later was thankful for as, she joked, it helped her to smell when she could not see.



## **Rain**

The feel of rain on Partnoy's body helped her to feel alive.

## **A Toothbrush**

For several days, the guards made the prisoners brush their teeth with toothbrushes and toothpaste. The feeling of a toothbrush helped Alicia feel clean and somewhat dignified.

## **Bread**

The prisoners at the Little School had little food, and the little bread they received they often divided and shared with one another along with even being played with to pass the time.

## **Partnoy's Matchbox**

Partnoy has only one non-edible possession: a small matchbox where she kept her acrylic tooth, a replacement for a tooth that was chipped when she was a child.

## **Poetry**

Partnoy is a renowned poet who wrote some poems in prison.

## **The Blindfold**

All the prisoners were blindfolded almost the entirety of their time in the Little School.



# Themes

## Degradation

A consistent theme across a somewhat disjointed point is the demonstrated of how the guards and supervisors in The Little School destroyed the prisoners' sense of human dignity. First, they gave the prisoners little food and rarely let them shower. They also forced the prisoners to remain blindfolded the entire time during their stay. Prisoners were prevented from speaking to each other. Further, they were often watched when they were in the latrine. Guards beat the prisoners, including the women, and tortured them for information. They even shocked the pregnant Graciela in her stomach in order to terrify her with worry about her child.

But the most humiliating forms of treatment involved sexual humiliation. In many cases, the guards would force prisoners like Partnoy to strip so they could view them naked and masturbate while watching. In another case, the guards tried to get Maria and Benja to have sex in front of them while they masturbated. Other forms of degradation include constant mocking of prisoners, threatening to shoot them on a regular basis, forcing them to address them in demeaning ways and ultimately, killing them and letting the other prisoners tremble with fear about it.

Generally speaking, one of the entire points of imprisonment at the Little School was to deprive the prisoners of their dignity in order to break them. The ostensible rationale for this treatment is to get information to maintain law and order. But it is clear from the book that much of the treatment arose from guards and supervisors intoxicated with power and satisfying sadistic impulses.

## Survival

The prisoners at the Little School were degraded, to be sure. But they also had to constantly worry about their lives, about whether they would live another day. Inmates were sometimes tortured within an inch of their lives, and in other cases they were threatened with guns pointed right at their heads. The prisoners were deprived of food, water, hygiene, healthcare and positive human contact. Consequently, it was unclear whether they would physically and mentally withstand their treatment.

They were also concerned about their fellow inmates. Partnoy went out of her way to distract a guard from beating Benja by challenging him to arm wrestle her until her arm could no longer function. When Graciela was forced to give birth without medical assistance, Partnoy begged to be allowed to aid her, as it was unclear she could survive without help. In one of the most painful moments in the book, Partnoy overhears her husband being beaten by guards. When he screams, she can hardly handle it.

Survival was often empowering for the inmates. Each day was, in some sense, a small victory. Partnoy was happy to have not been shot. Sadly, many of the prisoners did not



survive. Instead, they were shot and reported to the media as having been killed in a fake military confrontation. In the first appendix, Partnoy makes sure to record all the information she knew about them so that they would not be forgotten.

## Finding Meaning

Between the degradation the prisoners endured at the Little School and the struggle to survive there, the prisoners struggled to find meaning in their experience there. It is not enough for human beings to simply survive and maintain a shred of dignity; they also need to make sense of their lives as having some sort of purpose and to see their suffering as having some greater meaning or purpose. Partnoy claims in the chapter Religion that she wishes she could believe in at least some kind of God as many of her friends did.

The Liberation Theology of some of her friends helped them to endure their suffering because they knew that God allowed it to happen for a reason. But the suffering that they endured was, for Partnoy, evidence against the existence of a benevolent God. Instead, Partnoy looked to find beauty in the world, in her poetry, in defending her fellow prisoners, concerning herself with the welfare of her husband and her family and continuing to stand up for justice and not giving up information on her friends.

Many of the other prisoners had their own methods of surviving. Many of them followed Partnoy in extending their concern to their fellow prisoners, in resisting the torture and holding out hope that their families were safe and that one day they would be reunited with them. While many did not survive, they held on until they were deliberately killed.

# Style

## Perspective

Alicia Partnoy was born in Argentina in 1955 to a Jewish family. Argentina was subject to political instability at the time, with various military juntas coming to power. Alicia grew up believing that the Peronist regime was best for Argentina and that their socialism was the best way to help the poor materially and to protect them from dangerous corporations and military rule. In college, Peronism was still unpopular among political elites, but it had a number of defenders in the Argentine university system. Partnoy and her husband were among them. When the military junta of 76-79 came into power, they strongly opposed the regime. And when radical guerrillas opposed the junta and the junta responded violently, Partnoy and her husband were radicalized and became involved in the opposition movement more directly.

As a result of their activities, Partnoy and her husband were kidnapped and "disappeared" by the Argentine military and taken to the Little School. Partnoy's perspective in the book is shaped by all of these elements in the past. She ardently and unapologetically believes in her political cause and that she was fighting for justice for the weak. She also maintained anger at the regime that was torturing her, which helped her to survive. Partnoy is also a poet, and so her creative, emotional approach to life at the Little School shapes her perspective as well, with her composing poems, creatively playing with bread and encouraging her fellow inmates.

## Tone

The Little School is composed of many short chapters which have simple themes and simple character sketches. The structure of the chapters gives the book a tone that reflects Partnoy's background as a poet. The short pieces are almost like extended lyric non-rhyming poems that offer pictures of life in the Little School. The tone of the book is therefore unlike most autobiographical works because it is written partly as an artwork. In fact, the artwork-style tone is amplified by the paintings in the book that accompany the chapters.

The tone also reflects Partnoy's background as a political activist. She routinely expresses anger at the injustice of the guards and their fascist torture methods. She ardently defends her fellow prisoners and shares whatever she can with them. She often helps them to "take heart". The tone in the more social and political parts of the book have a harder edge to them and seem more realistic. In some ways, these passages belie the overall lyric tone of the book as the prose becomes more like prose and less like poetry.

There are two exceptions to these generalizations. The introduction to the book is more matter-of-fact because it outlines the historical and geographical setting of the book.



The two appendices at the end of the book also reflect a distinct tone, but in this case the tone almost resembles that of a police report as Partnoy actually reports the information she has about both her fellow inmates and the guards and staff supervisors.

## Structure

The Little School is a short book, containing an introduction, twenty short chapters and two appendices. As stated above, the chapters are short character and event sketches. They are not intended as literal accounts, down to the finest details. Instead, they are partially fictionalized in order for Partnoy to give the chapters a more lyrical form.

The chapters' content is often shorn of detail, rarely explaining who characters are and even not naming some of them. Many of the chapters are simply meant to illustrate experiences of particular elements of life at The Little School, so even character details are sidelined.

The chapters themselves are numerous. Examples include chapters like A Conversation Under Rain when rain comes to The Little School. Some of the rain seeps into the prisoners' rooms and Partnoy is able to feel water on her body. Showers were rare at The Little School and the feeling of real rain water on Partnoy's body helped to remind her of her freedom. She is also able to speak with other inmates in this chapter, which gives her a further sense of genuine human connection.

Another chapter is written from the perspective of Partnoy's friend Graciela. Graciela was pregnant and she was forced to exercise by running around a table dozens of times. Partnoy imagines herself as Graciela in Graciela: Around the Table, having her think about the child she was taken away from and the child inside of her as she does her best to make it around the table enough times for the guards to leave her alone.



## Quotes

"Almost 30,000 Argentines 'disappeared' between 1976 and 1979, the most oppressive years of the military rule."

Introduction, p. 11

"Beware: in little schools the boundaries between story and history are so subtle that even I can hardly find them."

Introduction, p. 18

"There is also talk of 'disappeared' persons who are still held under arrest by the Argentine government in unknown places of our country. All of this is nothing but a falsehood stated with political purposes, since there are neither secret detention places in the Republic nor persons in clandestine detention in any penal institution."

Introduction, p. 23

"The one-flowered slippers remained at the Little School, disappeared ..."

Chap. 1, p. 28

"Courage. For today and for the rest of the days we'll have to endure here."

Chap. 2, p. 31

"Take heart."

Chap. 3, p. 37

"I, Alicia Partnoy, am still alive."

Chap. 4, p. 43

"The baby walks around this table with me, within me."

Chap. 7, p. 55

"Sometimes when I'm very scared, I wish I could believe in God: the Christian God, my family's God, any God .... The truth is that I would like to believe in a God that protects and rescues me from here; I don't want a God that makes me a martyr."

Chap. 9, p. 62

"She thought he was upset because in spite of the blows and restraints, in spite of the filth and torture, both women had had that long and warm conversation under the rain."

Chap. 10, p. 73

"Give us this day our daily bread, the one that, yesterday, you took away from us."

Chap. 13, p. 83

"To be whole is to keep my tooth, either in my mouth or inside the match box, my sole belonging."

Chap. 14, p. 88



"And it was, after all, during this period that the most senior of the Señors was Señor President of the Republic Lt. General Jorge Rafael Videla."

Chap. 16, p. 99

"If I don't see her again, give your daughter a kiss for me. Make her a happy child, strong but sensitive, and teach her to give to others."

Chap. 17, p. 102

"I don't know whether I'll love him again, but yesterday we didn't talk all day long."

Chap. 18, p. 105

"A new cry makes its way through the shadows fighting above the trailer. Graciela has just given birth. A prisoner child has been born. While the killers' hands welcome him into the world, the shadow of life leaves the scene, half a winner, half a loser: on her shoulders she wears a poncho of injustice. Who knows how many children are born every day at the Little School?"

Chap. 20, p. 118



## Topics for Discussion

What were the national political circumstances that led to Partnoy's imprisonment at the Little School?

What had Partnoy and her husband done that had gotten them arrested?

Pick three small sensory pleasures that Partnoy used to help herself survive. How did they do so?

Pick any two of Partnoy's fellow prisoners. Whose personalities were the most vivid and why? Mention at least two characters.

What were two ways in which the guards humiliated Partnoy? How did she withstand the degradation?

What is the most intense, climactic event in the book? Explain in detail.

How does Partnoy's poetic style contribute to her descriptions of life at the Little School?