

Gabriel García Márquez: A giant in the literature of the Americas

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Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, best known for his widely acclaimed novels *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), died April 17 in Mexico City, his home since 1961, at the age of 87. García Márquez won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1982. In the course of a long career, the author left his mark not only as a novelist, but also as a journalist, scriptwriter, moviemaker and writer of short stories.

García Márquez's body was cremated the next day in a Mexico City funeral home in a private ceremony. An urn containing his ashes was later taken to the Palace of Fine Arts, where thousands of Mexicans waited in line to bid the beloved author farewell. They were kept out of an official ceremony attended by VIPs and the presidents of Mexico and Colombia and subjected to stringent security measures.

Mario Gómez, a 19-year-old student who was among those coming to pay tribute to the author, told the Mexican daily *La Jornada*: "Gabriel García Márquez has been my guide, because, like a teacher, with his books and his writings he was guiding me to follow my dreams. His death really hurts me, even though I will continue reading him, his parting is very sad."

García Márquez, a leading figure in the surge of Latin American literature in the 1960s, was born March 6, 1927 in the city of Aracataca, in the Colombian department of Magdalena, near the river of the same name.

"Gabo," as family and friends affectionately knew him, moved to Barranquilla on Colombia's Caribbean coast in 1950 to work as a journalist, having decided to give up his law studies.

That decision was undoubtedly affected by the social struggles in Colombia taking place at the time. García Márquez had been in Bogotá when Colombian liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitán was assassinated in April 1948, sparking a popular rebellion known as the *Bogotazo*, which marked the beginning of more than a decade of civil war. The conflict drew in tens of thousands of students, urban and agricultural workers and peasants into a battle against the oligarchy and the Catholic Church.

In his memoir *Living to Tell the Tale* (*Vivir para contarla*, 2002), García Márquez described the February 1948 "March of Silence"—in which 100,000 people, led by Gaitán, marched in total silence to protest repression—as well as Gaitán's assassination and the social explosion that followed.

"Bringing tears to my eyes was the caution in the crowd's steps, its breathing, and the supernatural silence," he wrote. "I had come to it with no political convictions, attracted by the curiosity of silence. A knot of tears welled up in my throat. Gaitán's speech in Plaza Bolívar Square, from a city hall balcony, was a funerary oration. Its emotional charge was overwhelming. Countering sinister anticipations from his own party, the speech confirmed the most audacious condition of the march: nobody applauded."

Gaitán had launched his public career with the denunciation of the December 1928 massacre—by the Colombian army acting under the instructions of the United Fruit Company—of a peaceful demonstration of

striking banana workers in the city of Ciénaga. His principled stance won him mass support among the Colombian people and aroused the ire of the country's ruling class, which plotted and planned his death.

García Márquez places the massacre in the fictional town of Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*), considered by many to be the author's masterpiece. He describes how the military surrounds five thousand demonstrators and proceeds to mow them down. One of the characters in the novel, José Arcadio Segundo, wakes up wounded in a trainload of corpses en route to be dumped in the ocean "like bananas gone to waste."

At the same time, however, this significant episode in Colombian history, the banana workers' strike, during which the rural workers enjoyed the support of US workers and many soldiers refused to fire on the strikers, was never thoroughly explored by García Márquez.

The class warfare unleashed by Gaitán's assassination, known in Colombia as "*la violencia*," became the theme, now open, now hidden, of Gabriel García Márquez's work.

Making the experiences of Latin American social struggle, repression and tyranny the subject of his literary effort was not unique to García Márquez. *Mister President* (*El Señor Presidente*), by Guatemalan author Miguel Ángel Asturias, exiled in Paris, was published in 1946 in Mexico. The novel details the assembly line quality of sadistic brutality meted out by an unnamed dictator in an unnamed Central American nation. The novel, a combination of surrealism and naturalism, inaugurated a new style, magical realism, which characterized the later literary boom on the continent. García Márquez became one of its masters.

By including fantasy and magic in their narratives, Asturias, García Márquez and the others sought to represent reality, including the reality of human consciousness, in all its facets and complexities. Memories, native myths and fantastic beings are all integrated in the stories. The characters travel back and forth in time and their memories of the past become activated in the present. The dead intervene in the lives of the living. All this is done not as a means of escaping or masking reality, but as a way of penetrating it.

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, myths, magic, and ghosts are used in an effort to peel away the unessential and bring out a greater richness. The "magic" is often light-hearted, as in the first paragraph of the novel, which describes the introduction of magnets into Macondo by a wandering band of gypsies.

At other points in García Márquez's work, the magical element is bittersweet, as in the novella *Nobody Writes to the Colonel* (*El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*, 1961). An impoverished, retired military man, forgotten by the pension bureaucracy, hopes that by feeding his gamecock ahead of his wife and himself, he may find fortune once more.

In 1960, following the Cuban Revolution, García Márquez went to live in Havana, working for a time at the *Prensa Latina* press agency. While in Cuba he became friends with Fidel Castro.

The novelist's stay in Cuba and his relationship with Castro prompted

predictable, right-wing attacks in the American media following his death. For example, Charles Lane in the *Washington Post* (April 23, 2014) referred to “the weird blend of literary brilliance and political rotteness that characterized García Márquez’s long career.” This, from the publication that has justified massive war crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan and every murderous undertaking of the US military and CIA!

After his Cuban stay, García Márquez, accused of being a member of the Communist Party, was denied entry into the United States and set up residency in Mexico.

Meanwhile, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* took the literary world and beyond by storm. It had a profound effect on millions of youth coming of age during the political upheavals of the late 1960s. At one point, it was selling 8,000 copies a week.

García Márquez wrote more than forty books between 1955 (*Leaf Storm—La hojarasca*) and 2010 (*I Didn’t Come to Give a Speech—Yo no vengo a decir un discurso*)—a collection of essays written at different stages in his life). These include the critically acclaimed *Nobody Writes to the Colonel*, *Big Mama’s Funeral (Los funerales de la Mamá Grande*, 1962), *Chronicle of a Death Foretold (Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, 1981) and *Love in the Time of Cholera (Amor en los tiempos de la cólera*, 1985).

Written in Barcelona, *The Autumn of the Patriarch (El otoño del patriarca*, 1975), was an addition to the extensive list of fiction works dealing with Latin American tyrants and dictators, a list that predates the 20th century and magical realism.

The more recent include Asturias’ aforementioned novel, Alejo Carpentier’s *Reasons of State (El recurso del método*, 1974) Augusto Roa Bastos’ *I, the Supreme (Yo, el Supremo*, 1974), Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Feast of the Goat (La fiesta del chivo*, 2000) and Beatriz Bracher’s *I Did Not Speak (Não falei*, 2004).

A number of these novels explore the relationship between American imperialism and the rise and fall of Latin American dictatorships. Their general weakness from the sociological point of view is that the working class, like the Ciénaga banana workers in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is presented largely as the victim of exploitation, and not as an active revolutionary subject.

Latin America’s long and bloody encounter with US capitalism and the vicious military dictatorships the latter spawned was a central theme of the moving speech delivered by García Márquez’s in accepting the 1982 Nobel Prize speech.

The writer pointed out that since Chilean poet Pablo Neruda had received the prize in 1971, “There have been five wars and seventeen military coups; there emerged a diabolic dictator who is carrying out, in God’s name, the first Latin American ethnocide of our time. In the meantime, twenty million Latin American children died before the age of one—more than have been born in Europe since 1970. Those missing because of repression number nearly one hundred and twenty thousand, which is as if no one could account for all the inhabitants of Uppsala. Numerous women arrested while pregnant have given birth in Argentine prisons, yet nobody knows the whereabouts and identity of their children who were furtively adopted or sent to an orphanage by order of the military authorities. Because they tried to change this state of things, nearly two hundred thousand men and women have died throughout the continent, and over one hundred thousand have lost their lives in three small and ill-fated countries of Central America: Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. If this had happened in the United States, the corresponding figure would be that of one million six hundred thousand violent deaths in four years.

“One million people have fled Chile, a country with a tradition of hospitality—that is, ten per cent of its population. Uruguay, a tiny nation of two and a half million inhabitants which considered itself the continent’s most civilized country, has lost to exile one out of every five citizens. Since 1979, the civil war in El Salvador has produced almost one refugee

every twenty minutes. The country that could be formed of all the exiles and forced emigrants of Latin America would have a population larger than that of Norway.

“I dare to think that it is this outsized reality, and not just its literary expression, that has deserved the attention of the Swedish Academy of Letters. A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune.”

This last paragraph stands as a rebuke to the professors and critics who seek to reduce García Márquez’s “magical realism” to a mere literary device, merely one more variety of “narrative,” abstracted from the social reality out of which it emerged.

García Márquez eschewed a direct political role, declaring famously: “The revolutionary duty of the writer is to write well.” Nonetheless, given his world renown and his stature as a “man of the left,” he inevitably became involved in politics of a sort.

Little more than a decade after receiving the Nobel Prize, Washington lifted its travel ban against Gabriel García Márquez and the Colombian author met with President Bill Clinton in 1995 at Martha’s Vineyard, in Massachusetts.

Commentators suggested that the purpose of the 1995 visit was to negotiate a US-Cuba immigration agreement.

The meeting with the US president occurred as the people of Haiti were being terrorized by an American invading force of 20,000 troops ordered in by Clinton to restore President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power. Aristide had been overthrown in a US-sponsored coup in 1991. This time he was placed in office as a puppet of Washington’s interests.

García Márquez was a guest at the Clinton White House several times afterwards, and involved himself in ultimately unsuccessful attempts to gain American backing for a negotiated settlement between the Colombian government and the FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces) guerrillas.

García Márquez’s relationship with Clinton was in line with the perspective held by a substantial layer of the Latin American intelligentsia, and by Fidel Castro as well, for that matter. This perspective was rooted in the quixotic and futile quest to secure the independence of the oppressed countries of Latin America from US imperialism apart from the international, revolutionary struggle of the working class for socialism.

For García Márquez—like Castro—nothing revolutionary could ever be expected from the working class in the US. The best that could be hoped for was an agreement with the more liberal and “enlightened” representatives of American imperialism.

Nonetheless, in his artistic representations, García Márquez speaks honestly to Colombia’s (and Latin America’s) complex and contradictory social make-up. Colombian society is still affected by the horrific *violencia* and caught in the vise of the struggle between the rapacious national bourgeoisie, an enduring feudal oligarchy and imperialism, on the one hand, and a developing, combative working class, together with the masses of the rural oppressed, on the other.

Moreover, García Márquez’s stories and novels also explore universal themes and relationships that go well beyond Latin America, well beyond the fictional Macondo of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. His work has been translated into dozens of languages, has won many thousands of readers and will continue to provide insights and inspiration to a new generation as it enters into the struggle to understand and transform society.



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