

# Gabriel García Márquez (1928-2014)

## Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature

### Overview

Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez shares with many Nobel laureates in literature a concern for the common man, an ongoing faith in the human spirit, and a commitment to telling stories that are accessible to a broad audience. Many of García Márquez's works are considered examples of "magical realism," a literary style that typically has a strong narrative drive in which the recognizably realistic mingles with the unexpected and inexplicable. García Márquez is credited with helping reinvigorate the modern novel genre.



### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Life in a Small Village Culture** García Márquez was born on March 7, 1928, in the northern Caribbean coastal region of Colombia in the town of Aracataca. He was the son of telegrapher Gabriel Eligio García and Luisa Santiaga Márquez de García (a pair whose star-crossed courtship García Márquez would later fictionalize in *Love in the Time of Cholera*). García Márquez lived with his maternal grandparents for eight years after his father left home to seek better employment. The vast majority of the population in this impoverished and strongly Afro-Colombian region of the country was illiterate and, as a result, had a strong and vibrant oral culture. National newspapers did not yet circulate in this region, and much of the news from the outside world came to Aracataca and other small towns by means of *vallenatos*, popular music that told tales garnished with real people and events. Not surprisingly, the storytelling of his grandmother, the long decline of Aracataca, and the myths and superstitions of the towns-people all played major roles in shaping García Márquez's imagination and literary style. García Márquez has acknowledged that the fictional town of Macondo, the focal point of his masterwork *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was based on Aracataca.

**Journalism and Literary Circle amidst Political Violence** Life changed radically for many citizens of Colombia in April 1948 when political violence broke out in the streets of Bogotá after the assassination of the presidential candidate of the Liberal Party, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. García Márquez was attending law school in Bogotá at the time. After the university closed and his boardinghouse was burned down, García Márquez moved to a more peaceful setting, the coastal city of Cartagena, where he took a job as a journalist. In 1950, he moved to Barranquilla and continued newspaper work. It was in Barranquilla that he befriended other young writers and became familiar with the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, both of whom would influence his writing. Partisan violence spread

across the nation from 1948 to 1956, and Colombia experienced a civil war identified as La Violencia, which led to more than three hundred thousand deaths.

**Political Dissent** García Márquez returned to Bogotá in 1954, serving as a film critic and reporter for *El espectador*, and the next year his novella *Leaf Storm (La hojarasca)* was published. During this period he also gained political notoriety for his account in *El espectador* of the experiences of Luis Alejandro Velasco, a sailor who survived the shipwreck of a Colombian naval vessel in the Caribbean. This series of reports, later published as *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor (Relato de un naufrago, 1970)*, exposed the existence of contraband cargo onboard the ship and suggested the general incompetence of the nation's navy.

Seeking to avoid governmental retribution, García Márquez traveled throughout Europe during 1955, working as a foreign correspondent for his newspaper. In 1956, however, the military government of Colombia headed by Gustavo Rojas Pinilla shut down the periodical and, fearing reprisal if he should return, García Márquez settled in Paris. During this time, many of his peers in Colombia were writing bloody accounts of La Violencia in the 1950s, but García Márquez's approach was different: he wrote stories that subtly alluded to political violence, with political conflict only a part of the general plot. In this way, García Márquez emphasized the human drama in a more universal way than had been the case in Colombian fiction of his contemporaries.

**Anti-U.S., Pro-Cuba Writings** During the late 1950s and early 1960s, García Márquez wrote journalistic pieces criticizing the U.S. government and celebrating the Cuban Revolution. Like many Latin American intellectuals of this period, García Márquez viewed the Cuban Revolution as a model for the Latin American nations establishing economic and cultural independence from the United States, which had since the turn of the century taken an aggressive role in Latin American politics. During the Cuban Revolution of 1958, Fidel Castro led a successful Communist insurgency against the U.S.-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista. Because this occurred during the height of Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, the United States government was greatly disturbed by the presence of a Communist nation just ninety miles from the American border. The United States attempted to facilitate the overthrow of the new Communist regime in 1961 by giving CIA backing to a botched, embarrassing invasion attempt known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion. One year later, the Soviet Union installed nuclear weapons on Cuba, sparking the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of the most perilous superpower showdowns of the Cold War. The crisis was resolved without violence, but relations between the United States and Cuba have been frosty ever since.

As a result of his pro-Cuba writings and a visit to Cuba (which led to a lifelong friendship with Fidel Castro), García Márquez has had difficulty most of his adult life in acquiring visas to visit the United States; for many years, he was on a State Department blacklist of leftist intellectuals.

**A "Boom" in Latin American Literature** The 1960s were the years of the internationally recognized "Boom" of the Latin American novel. The Mexican Carlos Fuentes, the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, the Argentine Julio Cortázar, and García Márquez-- these Latin American writers "who have given to its literature a maturity and dignity it never had before," to quote John Sturrock in the *New York Times Book Review*.

When *One Hundred Years of Solitude (Cien años de soledad)* was published in 1967 by the Argentine publishing house Sudamericana, its impact was swift and broad. Critics from Argentina to Spain immediately heralded it as one of the major novels to have been published in recent years. Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, himself a Nobel laureate, was quoted in *Time* as calling the book "the greatest

revelation in the Spanish language since the *Don Quixote* of Cervantes. With the novel's publication, the Boom was at its height in Latin America and gaining an unprecedented international respect.

**International Celebrity After One Hundred Years of Solitude** Following the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and its international success, García Márquez assumed the lifestyle of an international celebrity, with homes on several continents. When García Márquez received the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature, he returned to Colombia a national hero, and the entire country celebrated. Because of his popularity after receiving the Nobel Prize, he was named an ambassador for the Colombian government and political groups within Colombia. Though García Márquez was most vocal about his progressive agenda in the 1970s (his 1975 novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* was, for example, a pointed critique of Latin American dictatorships), he was a more moderate political voice for the downtrodden in the 1980s and 1990s. He promoted dialogue among such diverse political forces as the United States, Cuba, and France.

After being treated for lymphatic cancer in 1999, García Márquez continued writing and published *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* in 2004.

### Works in Literary Context

Because of his training as a journalist, García Márquez smoothly incorporates social and historical elements into his fiction, a skill that allows him to promote the central themes of his work: violence, solitude, and mankind's need for love and companionship.

**Journalistic Influence** Although known as a novelist, García Márquez began his writing career as a reporter and still considers himself to be one. *The Reference Guide to World Literature* asserts that the evolution of García Márquez's individual style is based on his experience as a correspondent. In addition, this same experience has led Regina Janes and other critics to compare the Colombian to Ernest Hemingway, a famous American journalist-turned-novelist. Critics have also pointed out the similarities between García Márquez and William Faulkner, the American novelist famous for his books about the Deep South.

**Magical Realism** The term "magical realism" has become somewhat controversial in literary criticism because it has been perhaps too liberally applied. In a basic sense, magical realism in fiction is marked by realistic settings and everyday scenes in which sometimes the illogical, impossible, or miraculous occurs. However, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is considered quintessentially magical realist. The novel is on the one hand a perfectly realistic fictional chronicle of Macondo-- a microcosm of Colombia and, by extension, of South America and the world-- from its harmonious beginnings under founder José Arcadio Buendía to its increasingly chaotic decline through six generations of descendants. But in addition to reflecting the political, social, and economic ills of South America, the novel is filled with fantastic events, including a baby born with a pig tail and flocks of yellow butterflies that follow certain characters. The genre continues to be popular in Latin American literature, as it allows writers to blend the hard political and economic realities of their home regions with the folklore of their cultures and the often wild, grand natural landscape of their countries.

### Works in Critical Context

*Tribune Books* contributor Harry Mark Petrakis described García Márquez as "a magician of vision and language who does astonishing things with time and reality. He blends legend and history in ways

that make the legends seem truer than truth. His scenes and characters are humorous, tragic, mysterious and beset by ironies and fantasies. In his fictional world, anything is possible and everything is believable." In addition, the critic asserted: "Mystical and magical, fully aware of the transiency of life, his stories fashion realms inhabited by ghosts and restless souls who return to those left behind through fantasies and dreams. The stories explore, with a deceptive simplicity, the miracles and mysteries of life."

***One Hundred Years of Solitude*** *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is García Márquez's best-known contribution to the awakening of interest in Latin American literature. According to an *Antioch Review* critic, the popularity and acclaim for *One Hundred Years of Solitude* signaled that "Latin American literature will change from being the exotic interest of a few to essential reading and that Latin America itself will be looked on less as a crazy subculture and more as a fruitful, alternative way of life." Similarly enthusiastic was William Kennedy, who wrote in the *National Observer* that "*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the first piece of literature since the Book of Genesis that should be required reading for the entire human race."

***The Autumn of the Patriarch*** In *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (*El otoño del patriarca*, 1975), García Márquez uses a more openly political tone in exploring the isolation of a political tyrant. "In this fabulous, dreamlike account of the reign of a nameless dictator of a fantastic Caribbean realm, solitude is linked with the possession of absolute power," described Ronald De Feo in the *National Review*. Some critics, however, found both the theme and technique of *The Autumn of the Patriarch* lacking. Newsweek's Walter Clemons considered the novel somewhat disappointing: "After the narrative vivacity and intricate characterization of the earlier book [*The Autumn of the Patriarch*] seems both oversumptuous and underpopulated. It is-- deadliest of compliments-- an extended piece of magnificent writing."

***Love in the Time of Cholera*** Another blending of fable and fact, based in part on García Márquez's recollections of his parents' marriage, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (*El amor en los tiempos del colera*, 1985) "is an amazing celebration of the many kinds of love between men and women," according to Elaine Feinstein of the *London Times*. In relating both the story of Fermina Daza's marriage and her later courtship, this "is a novel about commitment and fidelity under circumstances which seem to render such virtues absurd," recounted Times Literary Supplement contributor S.M.J. Minta. Although the basic plot is fairly simple, some critics have accused García Márquez of over-embellishing his story. Chicago Tribune Books contributor Michael Dorris remarked that "it takes a while to realize this core [plot], for every aspect of the book is attenuated, exaggerated, overstated." Still, the book is seen as García Márquez's being true to himself. As *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani described it, *Love in the Time of Cholera* "has revealed how the extraordinary is contained in the ordinary, how a couple of forgotten, even commonplace lives can encompass the heights and depths of grand and eternal passion."