

Gabriel García Márquez: Cultural and Historical Contexts

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Amy Sickels offers a time line of García Márquez's achievements, paying attention to the ways he has reacted, throughout his life, to important artistic and historical trends. She places the Colombian novelist firmly as a leader of the so-called Latin American Boom and recognizes his influence on a younger generation of the region's writers. — I.S.

Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian author of more than fifteen highly acclaimed books, is a Nobel laureate, master of Magical Realism, and one of the most the most widely read and critically acclaimed contemporary authors in the world today. His best-known work is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; its popularity and critical success almost single-handedly fostered his international esteem. When *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published, it shook apart the literary scene in Latin America, and soon its impact reverberated around the world. Critics also hold in high esteem García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, *No One Writes to the Colonel*, and *Love in the Time of Cholera*, as well as his memoir *Living to Tell the Tale*. García Márquez, who has become a symbol of contemporary Latin American literature, has had a great impact on the state of literature in both Latin America and abroad, influencing writers around the world.

To understand fully García Márquez's contribution to literature, one first must understand the personal, literary, and political landscapes that have shaped his work. Gabriel García Márquez was born on March 6, 1927, and spent most of his childhood living with his grandparents in Aracataca, Colombia, a small, dusty tropical town on the coast that he would later turn into the magical, doomed town of Macondo. A town grappling with poverty and abandonment, Aracataca was the site of the infamous Banana Strike Massacre in 1928, in which a U.S. cor-

poration, the United Fruit Company, gave consent for the Colombian army to open fire on a workers' demonstration, murdering hundreds of workers. From an early age, García Márquez was aware of the political history and violence in his country; Colombia, like most Latin American countries, possesses a complicated, exhausting history of civil wars, dictators, coups d'état, and social revolutions. Yet growing up in Aracataca was also magical. García Márquez felt close to his grandfather, a steadfast Liberal who fought in the Thousand Days' War of 1899-1902 and would be the subject of his novel *No One Writes to the Colonel*. His grandmother also influenced him with her countless stories of ghosts and the dead. Between the violent war memories of his grandfather and the fabulous tales of his grandmother, García Márquez learned the art and power of storytelling at a young age.

García Márquez attended the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá to study law, but he spent most of his time reading literature and writing stories. A significant influence on his decision to become a writer was his reading of Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*. In a *Paris Review* interview, he told Peter Stone that the first line of the story, in which Gregor Samsa awakens as a cockroach, "almost knocked me off the bed I was so surprised. . . . When I read the line I thought to myself that I didn't know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago" (319). He was also inspired by the modernists, particularly by Virginia Woolf's use of interior monologue and, even more important, William Faulkner's narrative techniques, themes, and small-town settings. García Márquez's first novel, *Leaf Storm*, is his most Faulknerian in terms of plot pattern and style, echoing the narrative structures of *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Macondo, the setting of his first four novels and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is comparable to Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha County.

García Márquez developed as a writer during one of the most violent periods in modern Colombian history. After he dropped out of college, he spent the 1950s writing for various newspapers and living in

Europe. In 1955, *Leaf Storm* was published, marking the beginning of his literary career; however, not many people read the book, and he continued to make a living by writing for newspapers. He also worked on *In Evil Hour* and *No One Writes to the Colonel*, which were directly influenced by *la violencia* he had witnessed in Colombia and were more outwardly political than his first novel.

While in Europe, García Márquez interacted with other writers from Latin America, each of them regularly publishing work in the principal Spanish-language literary magazine, *Mundo Nuevo*. Several of these figures, including García Márquez, would make up the so-called Latin American Boom, a literary movement during the 1960s when Latin American fiction received much international recognition. The major players, in addition to García Márquez, were Julio Cortázar from Argentina, Carlos Fuentes from Mexico, and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa. Their diverse work produced a superb body of literature that received impressive critical success and attention, and now some of these major novels are considered modern classics in the Hispanic world, including *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, Vargas Llosa's *The Green House*, and Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, all of which are also in the process of being canonized in American, Latin American, and European academia. The Boom authors were not members of an organized movement, but they were grouped together as their work became well known around the world.

The Boom authors were influenced by modernism, leftist politics, and Latin American writers from the 1940s and 1950s, particularly the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and Alejo Carpentier from Cuba, whose fiction reacted against traditional narrative form. Carpentier often used myths and Afro-Indian folk tradition in his work, and he is considered by some to be an early practitioner of Magical Realism. Borges was a stylistic innovator who employed techniques of detective fiction and fantastic literature and evoked themes of cyclical time and the universe as labyrinthine. Though García Márquez and other Boom writers disliked Borges's conservative politics, his work had a profound impact

on them. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez makes references to some of his literary forebears, including Borges, Carpentier, and Mexican author Juan Rulfo, who also influenced the style of Magical Realism with his single book *Pedro Páramo*.

Politics were of major importance to the Boom writers. The Boom occurred during the 1960s, between the populist regimes of the 1940s and 1950s, and the devastating wave of military dictatorships in the early to mid-1970s. The 1960s was symbolized in Latin America by hope and cultural innovations, and the Cuban Revolution played a big part in the Boom's formation. After right-wing dictatorships fell in both Venezuela and Colombia, the defeat of Cuba's dictator Fulgencio Batista followed. Fidel Castro had secretly returned to Cuba from exile, and with a small group of followers, including Che Guevara, he fought against the brutal regime of Batista. On January 8, 1959, Castro and his supporters entered Havana in triumph. Like many Latin American intellectuals and writers, García Márquez favored the socialist revolution and was an early ally of Castro. During this exciting period of political and cultural changes, a great amount of Latin American literature appeared, helping to create the Boom.

In the 1960s the success of the Latin American novel was recognized with zeal in the international world, and the Boom writers, including García Márquez, helped to develop Latin American literature. The authors benefited from English translations and the fact that their books were published in Europe and by Harper & Row in the United States, which helped to widen the readership. There were also important publishing houses based in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Havana, and Santiago, Latin and South American cities that became strong cultural centers during this period. Furthermore, American and European universities began teaching the Latin American Boom authors, and scholars and critics took an interest in their work. Though the Boom writers' styles were quite different, many of their literary ideas were similar, as they experimented with forms of realism and narrative structure. The four main writers of the Boom—García Márquez,

Cortázar, Fuentes, and Vargas Llosa—along with several others, began to enjoy critical and commercial success both in Spanish and in translation.

Before *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez wrote four books: *Leaf Storm*, *Big Mama's Funeral*, *No One Writes to the Colonel*, and *In Evil Hour*, for which he won the Esso Prize, a literary prize in Mexico. He was not well known outside of his small circle, however, and no one could have predicted the impact he would have on literature or foresee the international fame that was in his near future. After the Cuban Revolution, García Márquez was living with his family in Mexico, earning money by writing film scripts. He had not written any fiction for about six years. Then in 1965 he isolated himself to write the complete story of Macondo, which had been building in his head for so long that he wrote the novel in eighteen months. The novel chronicles the saga of the Buendías living in the mythical town of Macondo; as the town progresses from a primitive village to a modern town, it also suffers from the troubles experienced in Colombian (and Latin American) history.

Fellow Boom author Carlos Fuentes followed the development of the book closely and wrote an influential article in *Mundo Nuevo* praising the book before its publication, yet he too would be astounded by its runaway success. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* first appeared in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1967, and, in Vargas Llosa's words, its arrival provoked "a literary earthquake throughout Latin America." The publisher began with a modest printing of eight thousand copies, far more than any of García Márquez's other novels, and then quickly added new editions after the initial run was sold out within hours. In Latin America, García Márquez had become famous overnight; he was regarded as if he were a legendary soccer player or singer. When he visited Buenos Aires shortly after the book's release, people shouted support and applauded him.

Over the next two years, García Márquez's fame grew exponentially, not only in Latin America but throughout the international com-

munity. Sales of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* skyrocketed, and awards and honors rained down on the author. The novel has been translated into more than thirty languages and has sold more than twenty million copies; its critical acclaim and popularity have forever changed García Márquez's life. An epic novel about memory, community, myth, history, and nostalgia, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is considered by many critics to be the greatest of all Latin American novels, with the story of the Buendía family functioning as a metaphor for the history of Latin America. Critic Gene H. Bell-Villada praises the novel "as a glorious instance of literature's possibilities, of what prose narrative can do for our imaginations and emotions, our politics and pleasures, our knowledge of life and our sense of humor" (204). The novel examines native and popular cultures as valid forms of knowledge and depicts the tension between the written and the oral word. Critics have praised the work as "biblical" in its scope, an epic that has delighted readers across the world, taking them through one hundred years of the lives of the Buendía family.

Unlike the other books of the Boom, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* moved beyond an academic audience and elite writing circles to reach popular audiences across the world. In Latin America, García Márquez gave literature to the people, as people from all socioeconomic classes and various backgrounds were reading the book and recognizing their world. Though several Boom authors were important during this period, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was the only book that truly won popular and critical success. Immensely popular with Latin Americans, the novel also transcended any notion of regionalism, and it soon captured international attention.

García Márquez's technique for writing *One Hundred Years of Solitude* had a significant impact on contemporary literature, both in Latin America and around the world. García Márquez is often credited as the master of Magical Realism, the literary technique in which no distinction is made between reality and the fantastic. Magical Realism is a somewhat vague literary label that has been applied to many writers,

including Franz Kafka, Salman Rushdie, Borges, Italo Calvino, Günter Grass, and Julio Cortázar, but García Márquez has emerged as the name most associated with the style. The movement itself is typically credited to García Márquez, although aspects of the technique appeared earlier, most notably in the work of Alejo Carpentier.

When he was working on the novel, García Márquez, who repudiates fantasy writing, did not set out to write a “Magical Realist novel.” He simply wanted to capture the stories of his grandmother and the calm tone of her voice, without leaving the realm of reality. He has often said that if a writer makes something specific enough, he can make the reader believe anything, no matter how fantastic or exaggerated. For example, he told Peter Stone that he struggled with the scene of Remedios the Beauty ascending to heaven. Then one day he went outside and saw a woman hanging up the sheets to dry on a windy day: “I discovered that if I used the sheets for Remedios the Beauty, she would ascend. That’s how I did it, to make it credible. The problem for every writer is credibility. Anybody can write anything so long as it’s believed” (324). In Latin America, he has explained, Magical Realism is perfectly ordinary—the strangest, oddest things happen every day. By incorporating mythical elements into realistic fiction, García Márquez reveals both past and present problems in Latin America.

Most critics consider *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the greatest novel of the Boom, even though it may not be as structurally or technically complex as some of the other Boom books. Critic Philip Swanson considers the work to be more of a transition book, from Boom to Post-Boom. He argues that it contains many features of typical Boom books, including radical questioning of the nature of reality and literature’s ability to describe it, yet is also a mostly linear narrative and an entertaining novel, which breaks with the elitism of typical Boom writing: “The novel, in other words, posits on the one hand a complex literary-intellectual problemization of the relationship between literature and reality; while on the other hand, it seeks to put forward a popular and in some ways authentically Latin American demystification of literature

and reality” (86). No other book in the Boom garnered such support or popularity; it was a novel that had a significant impact on scholarship and readership around the world.

By the early 1970s, the unity among the writers of the Boom began to dissipate, and some of them were no longer friends or political allies. The hopeful myth that surrounded the Cuban Revolution began to fade away, symbolized when the poet Heberto Padilla was arrested in 1971, inciting an outrage. Sixty intellectuals who had supported the revolution signed an open letter to Fidel Castro, demanding Padilla’s release. Several Boom authors, including García Márquez, signed the letter. Though the Boom reached its end, the major writers continued with stellar careers that show no signs of diminishing.

After the momentous success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, critics and audiences eagerly awaited García Márquez’s next book. Initially, he planned to write this novel in a year; it actually took seven, during which time his fame continued to burgeon at a rapid speed. The long-awaited *The Autumn of the Patriarch* was published in 1975 and quickly sold half a million copies; however, its dense, difficult prose turned off many readers who had hoped to return to the magical world of Macondo. Structured in six unnumbered chapters comprising long, dense sentences, without separate paragraphs, it is a difficult book and somewhat inaccessible. Some critics also expressed disappointment at first; however, over time, opinion has changed and many consider this novel to be a major work of García Márquez’s oeuvre as well as of contemporary Latin American fiction. “All of his works are well crafted; this novel is his most refined project of technical virtuosity,” attests critic Raymond Leslie Williams (100).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, several writers of the Boom published novels about dictators, a powerful subject for the region, as Latin America has a painful, long-standing history of tyrannical dictatorships. For example, in 1973 the democratically elected president of Chile, Salvador Allende, was overthrown and replaced by General Augusto Pinochet, a dictator who remained in power until the end of

the 1980s and was infamous for torture and human rights abuses. *The Autumn of the Patriarch* is based on several dictators in Latin America. The General, the main character, is dead from the first line of the text, and the rest of the novel is told in flashbacks and a series of anecdotes that relate to the General, with none of them appearing in chronological order. Writing this novel allowed García Márquez to distance himself from the literary world of Macondo and also proved to critics his wide range of literary style and technical experimentation.

After this publication, García Márquez returned to journalism. In 1980, he began writing columns dealing with such subjects as the “disappearances” of intellectuals under the Argentine military regime, articles that were syndicated in a couple of dozen Latin American newspapers and magazines. His dedication to journalism has influenced many young journalists and writers in Latin America. In 1999, he purchased a struggling Colombian newsmagazine, *Cambio*, with his Nobel Prize money, and today the magazine continues to thrive. García Márquez’s devotion to journalism and nurturing of young journalists is symbolized by his founding of the New Journalism Foundation, which has a school in Cartagena, Colombia, and sponsors workshops and scholarships throughout Latin America. His major link to journalism is politics, which has always informed not only his outlook on the world but also his writing.

Though it is for his long-lasting impact on literature that García Márquez is most widely known, he is also famous for his political ideologies and journalistic background. García Márquez has always been outspoken about politics. Early on in his career, he committed himself to several years of vigorous journalistic activity in support of revolution, and over the years, his fame and journalism have provided a platform from which he can fight against human injustices and support leftist causes. He has been outspoken about U.S. involvement in Colombia and other Latin America countries, and for many years he was denied a visa by the U.S. government. Though García Márquez is well respected for serving as an intermediary between governments and

revolutionaries, he is often criticized in Latin America for remaining close to Castro; unlike many artists and writers who later changed their views about the Castro regime, García Márquez has always supported the Cuban Revolution.

Though García Márquez is a social critic in his fiction and assertively leftist in politics, his fiction is not didactic or overtly political. Turning to journalism instead of fiction to deal directly with political and social issues, García Márquez rejects social-protest literature, believing it limits artistic expression and freedom. Yet nearly all of his work addresses social-political concerns in some way—though often subtly. His fiction examines the realities of late-colonial and post-colonial history and cultures in the Americas while also exploring the truths and myths of national histories. Though critics focus on the Magical Realism of his work, García Márquez claims he writes “socialist realism,” and critic Raymond Williams agrees: “*One Hundred Years of Solitude* might seem at first like a book of fantasy, but it is one of the most historical books of the Boom and it abounds in social and political implications” (96). Constant political discontent, national instability, and Colombian history and myths have shaped not only García Márquez’s ideology but also the grand scope and depth of his fiction.

After a focus on journalism, García Márquez broke his literary silence with the publication of the highly acclaimed short novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, based on a 1951 newspaper article involving honor and death in Colombia. Two million copies were printed in Colombia, Argentina, Spain, and Mexico. The novel, which consists of five untitled chapters, explores why an entire town allows a senseless murder to occur. It uses many conventions of the classical detective genre but also subverts these conventions and presents the sequence of events in reverse.

On December 5, 1985, a million copies of *Love in the Time of Cholera* were released in the world’s four most populous Spanish-speaking countries. This book, one of García Márquez’s most popular, is a love

story based on his parents' courtship. One of his most straightforward and accessible narratives, it is also rich and artistic, and it received prominent critical praise in Latin America, Europe, and the United States—in the last, most notably with an enthusiastic review by the reclusive novelist Thomas Pynchon in *The New York Times Book Review*. The novel, an extensive narrative, is also an intentional re-creation of romantic nineteenth-century realism. The plot follows the love story of Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza over the course of sixty years, and love and aging are the main themes. The story is told by a single narrative voice, and the structure incorporates several temporal planes.

From 1989 through the 1990s, García Márquez published several highly acclaimed works of fiction and nonfiction, including *The General in His Labyrinth*, based on the life of Simón Bolívar; *Strange Pilgrims*, a collection of stories; and a well-received novel, *Love and Other Demons*, which centers on the transferring of burial remains from the crypt of an old convent, something the author had witnessed as a child. This was followed in 1996 with a work of journalism detailing the atrocities of the Colombian drug trade, *News of a Kidnapping*. In 2003, Knopf released the English translation of *Living to Tell the Tale*, the first of three projected volumes of memoirs. *Living to Tell the Tale* takes the reader from García Márquez's birth in Aracataca through his years as a journalist and artist in the 1950s.

For more than forty years, García Márquez has had a great impact on the scholarly and academic worlds. Numerous studies have been written about his work, both in Latin America and throughout the international community. One impressive early study was written by Mario Vargas Llosa; titled *García Márquez: Historia de un deicidio*, it is a 650-page examination of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Although for a number of years the majority of the scholarly attention focused on *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, hundreds of books and articles have now been published analyzing all of García Márquez's work. In the United States, many scholarly and critical studies have emerged in the

past fifteen years; important critics include Gene H. Bell-Villada, Steven Boldy, Harley Oberhelman, and Raymond Williams.

García Márquez has been honored with the highest awards for his writing from the international community. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* won the Chianchiano Prize in Italy and the prestigious Rómulo Gallegos Prize. In 1981 García Márquez was awarded the French Legion of Honor, and in 1982 he received the Nobel Prize in Literature, the most prestigious recognition possible for a major writer. He was the fourth Latin American to win a Nobel Prize and the first Colombian. Colombia went wild with excitement, sending García Márquez off to accept the prize with an entourage of sixty dancers and musical performers to bring a tropical celebration to Sweden. García Márquez delivered a moving speech about the political tragedies of Latin America, and the Nobel Committee acknowledged García Márquez for his global readership and humanitarianism.

García Márquez's influence on other writers in Latin America, the United States, Europe, and across the globe has been significant and lasting. In the United States, García Márquez has been well received, to say the least. Before the Boom, in the twentieth century, it was typically the French who influenced American writers. When *One Hundred Years of Solitude* appeared in translation in the United States, it was something new and wholly different. American reviews of García Márquez's work are typically positive, and writers such as Robert Coover and John Barth have praised *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as brilliant literature. García Márquez's work has influenced such highly acclaimed American authors as Anne Tyler, Jonathan Safran Foer, Oscar Hijuelos, and fellow Nobel laureate Toni Morrison. Morrison's writing in particular, which focuses on the experiences of African Americans, blends fantastical and mythical elements with realistic depictions of racial, gender, and class conflict. The influences of both García Márquez and Faulkner are apparent in such Morrison novels as *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, in which the heavy weight of the past presses down on present reality.

García Márquez's literary influence also extends far beyond the United States. For example, his works have had an impact on British Indian novelist Salman Rushdie, whose novels weave mythology, pop culture, politics, and religions from around the world. García Márquez has also been a major influence on contemporary Chinese fiction, and echoes of his style can be detected in the work of the Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri, who describes both the mundane and the metaphysical.

The success of the Latin American Boom helped set the stage for the postmodern novel and the Post-Boom novel. The Boom itself changed the way Latin American culture and arts are perceived around the world and opened doors for many new writers. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in particular, as a culmination of a modernist project, influenced the Latin American postmodern novel. Like Borges's work, García Márquez's writing was revolutionary and affirmed the power of invention. Of all the Boom writers in his generation, only García Márquez was a true Magical Realist. Now the stereotype that all Latin American fiction involves Magical Realism pervades much popular and critical opinion, which testifies to the strength of García Márquez's literary reputation. The critic Bell-Villada attests, "Because of the enormous reach of his reputation, García Márquez is now seen not just as another major author but as the prime symbol of the surge of creativity in Latin American letters in our time" (203).

In Latin America, writers cannot escape García Márquez's looming shadow, and his popularity and success are viewed as both blessing and curse. The style of Magical Realism is apparent in the work of writers such as Luisa Valenzuela and Isabel Allende, one of the first successful women novelists in Latin America. Allende's novels often focus on the experiences of women, weaving together myth and realism. *The House of the Spirits* (1982) concerns a cast of bizarre characters telling a story that covers several generations and includes psychic abilities, ghosts, and strange accidents. Allende is often compared to García Márquez, and critics have analyzed *The House of the Spirits* as a unique rework-

ing of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Many Latin American authors have tried to free themselves from the shadow of García Márquez and from Magical Realism, including the critically acclaimed writers José Manuel Prieto, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Francisco Goldman. Other Post-Boom authors include Antonio Skármeta, Rosario Ferré, and Gustavo Sainz, who have typically used a simpler, more readable style than the Boom authors or have returned to realism. Yet almost all Latin American writers have learned from García Márquez's imaginative oeuvre, and, in fact, he galvanized Colombian literature in a way that was unprecedented. For many writers in Latin America, García Márquez was the masterful Latin American writer of their youth, a hero and mentor who inspired many to pick up a pen. He raised the bar high with the quality of his novels, however, and each succeeding generation of Latin America authors runs the danger of being pigeonholed as writers of Magical Realism.

In Colombia and throughout much of Latin America, García Márquez is an icon. In Colombia, everyone knows who he is, and most people have read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or at least a story or newspaper article written by him; his work is very much in the public realm. García Márquez has greatly affected the reading public, specifically Latin Americans, who immediately respond to and recognize the world that he presents as their world—the social and cultural reality, and the specific history of their countries. Yet his work is also widely appreciated around the world by readers who can identify with the solitude suffered in modern times.

When *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published, it first took Latin America by storm, and then the world, becoming an international best seller and establishing García Márquez as an inventive, epic novelist. No South American writer or literary novel from South America had ever had such an impact. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and García Márquez's diverse, acclaimed work that followed have inspired a vast array of critical scholarship and inspired readers from around the world. García Márquez is considered one of the most significant au-

thors of the twentieth century, and his work has influenced ideas about the novel, the technique of Magical Realism, and the power of imagination. It is difficult to imagine the contemporary novel without García Márquez. One of the most famous, beloved, and critically acclaimed literary writers alive today, García Márquez has greatly contributed to and rejuvenated contemporary literature.

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