

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 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