

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-68710-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Edited by Philip Swanson

Excerpt

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PHILIP SWANSON

## Introduction

Gabriel García Márquez is much more than a writer: he has become something of an icon in his native Colombia and throughout Latin America, as well as a darling of the chattering classes throughout the world. The towering success of his 1967 novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*), the wide popular appeal of his best-selling *Love in the Time of Cholera* (*El amor en los tiempos del cólera* [1985]), his Nobel Prize triumph in 1982 and his general association with the assiduously promoted Latin American New Novel and the marketing of the related phenomenon of magical realism – all of these factors were key in his national and international projection as the voice of Colombian, Latin American and even ‘Third-World’ identity alongside his identification with a new type of globally influential tropical, exotic, fantastic literature. By the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, his status as icon was solidified by a number of big ‘events’: the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the much-hyped publication by the Real Academia Española and the Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española of a special commemorative edition (including a reprinted essay by Mario Vargas Llosa, which helped generate more publicity as it fuelled press speculation of a possible end to the rift between the two writers prompted famously by a bout of fisticuffs outside a Mexican cinema in 1976); the appearance of what has been widely touted as García Márquez’s ‘last’ novel in 2004, coming out in English translation in 2005 under the title of *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*; and the much-anticipated arrival in 2002 (2004 in English) of the first – and, many think, only – volume of the author’s memoirs, *Living to Tell the Tale* (*Vivir para contarla*). A spicy appetiser for this culmination of a cult had begun at the turn of the new century, when a hoax message purported (falsely) to be from García Márquez began to appear on websites all over the world in 2000 in which the author had allegedly penned a gushing public farewell to life in the face of a supposedly terminal cancer. Email messages proliferated around the globe as aficionados shared in this bogus authorial lament.

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In a sense, then, at the time of writing, the consolidation of García Márquez's reputation has turned him into a myth as much as a real-life celebrity, a curiously fitting achievement, perhaps, for a writer so closely identified in the public imagination with the paradoxical notion of magical realism. This mythification is not without significance. In the Colombian context, for example, some commentators have noted a tendency to blame the fragmentation and violence that has wracked the country since Independence – unlike the cases of Brazil, Argentina, Chile or Mexico – on 'the lack of a founding national myth'.<sup>1</sup> As Daniel Pécaut has suggested, 'Colombia invented its only myth: that its entire history has been violence'.<sup>2</sup> It is probably true that the varied physical geography of Colombia – in which the region has been made up, since the arrival of the Spaniards, of diverse and dispersed population pockets – has led to what are often perceived as ineffective national structures and the proliferation of groups operating outside the conventional parameters of the state. Indeed the fundamental Liberal–Conservative tension which was at the heart of the civil conflict that took off in the late nineteenth century (and which provides the background to much of García Márquez's work) has its roots in the divide between centralism and localism and the consequent failure of a unifying project.<sup>3</sup> This, of course, is a modern manifestation of the civilisation-versus-barbarism dichotomy first predicted in 1845 by Argentina's Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in his seminal work *Facundo*, in which the future statesman expressed his anxiety about the ability of urban patches of orderly society to tame the vast and unruly interior in the post-Independence period.<sup>4</sup> The result in Colombia has been civil war, political compromise that alienated non-participants in the main parties from the state, ongoing conflict (known simply as *la violencia* or 'the violence'), the rise of guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, cartels and armed bands linked to drug trafficking and, more generally today, the pervasive presence of private security. Yet, interestingly, if the image of modern-day Colombia is tied up for many with notions of a drugs trade fired by urban capitalism and guerrilla- or paramilitary-fuelled conflict, the image created by iconic Garciamarquan fictions is often rather the opposite.

His prose fiction generally concentrates on the past (most notably the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*) and pays relatively little attention to *la violencia* (save, for example, tangentially in an early novella, *No One Writes to the Colonel* [*El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* (1957)]) or more directly in a minor and fairly atypical novel such as *In Evil Hour* [*La mala hora* (1962 and 1966)]). Indeed, the author's central creation, the timeless somnolent backwater town of Macondo in which much of his fiction is set, has generated an international Colombian archetype that is in

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many ways jarringly at odds with this harsh reality.<sup>5</sup> García Márquez's iconicity is, then, remarkably problematic. His adoption as national symbol, as with many icons, perhaps involves an emptying of real significance. A curious indicator of this is the Centro Cultural Gabriel García Márquez which opened in the centre of Bogotá in 2007. Not only was the Centre funded by Mexico's Fondo de Cultura Económica, it is decorated outside with a series of pictures of García Márquez bearing the quotation from him: 'La patria amada aunque distante' ('The homeland is loved even though one is far away from it'). This inadvertently projects García Márquez (whose main base is now Mexico) as central to Colombian national identity yet peculiarly absent from it. It echoes the experience of the visitor to Cartagena de Indias (the city most associated with García Márquez, especially since the publication of *Love in the Time of Cholera*). Here tour guides and carriage riders will possessively point out the home of Gabo, the casually adopted nickname suggesting the degree of affectionate regional and national identification with the writer. However, as they gesture to the rather flash and inaccessible property hidden behind high walls, they are also likely to comment that he is hardly ever there (and rumours circulate in early 2008 that it is to be put up for sale). Meantime the waiting staff of the local restaurant, Patios de Macondo, proudly offer dishes such as 'hierbas del último Buendía', 'pechuga de Pietro Crespi', 'langostinos en salsa Amaranta' or 'filete de róbalo en cocina de Ursula' (all containing references to characters from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), accompanied on their tables by the nationally popular chilli sauce, McKondo. However, at least on the occasion of my visit, there were no Colombians to be seen dining there, and the assembled British, Italian, Dutch and German diners were serenaded by excruciatingly poor singers attempting to rehash clichéd tourist fodder (there was even an unsightly scrap between some of the waiters for the additional tip prompted by my request for a copy of the menu). The idea of a romantic projection of Colombia is, nonetheless, important for the country, as the major official nation-branding exercise 'Colombia es pasión' ('Colombia is Passion') clearly demonstrates.<sup>6</sup> In a sense, the timeless romance associated with García Márquez and his fictional fantasies is preferable as a national myth to other less palatable realities.

The tension between myth and reality is carried on into the relationship between literature and reality in García Márquez. The Colombian author has a long history of political pronouncements and activities. Especially memorable to many was his impassioned Third-Worldist speech on the occasion of his winning of the Nobel Prize, delivered in showman style in a white 'liqui liqui' (the formal national dress for men). He has also become a particular favourite of the Left, in part because of his apparent close

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friendship with Cuba's Fidel Castro. Of course, he is also a friend of former Conservative President Belisario Betancur and has some good relations with rightist Liberal President Álvaro Uribe. And he has not followed through on all his popular declarations – not least his claim after the publication of his (extremely ambiguous) dictatorship novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (*El otoño del patriarca*) in 1975 that he would not publish another novel until after the fall of the Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet. (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* [*Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981)] appeared some eight years before Pinochet's eventual withdrawal from power after the 1989 elections.) In any case, some might feel that there is a certain unreality anyway in the maintenance of a species of pan-Latin American internationalism inspired by the Cuban Revolution in an era of globalisation and neoliberalism. Most striking, of course, is the lack of congruence between the author's sometime external political stance and the sceptical and often seemingly nihilistic content of his literary writings.

Readings of García Márquez's fiction often lurch uncomfortably between claims of radical politics and suggestions of metaphysical malaise or the reality-busting freeplay of the literary imagination. When the colonel at the end of *No One Writes to the Colonel* says that he and his wife are going to have to eat shit to survive, is he expressing the political defiance of an irrepressible underclass or revealing the hopeless futility of his world-view? When the final Buendía is wiped off the face of the earth at the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is this an image of Revolution or of absolute pessimism (or even of the realisation that this is no more than a work of fiction which will inevitably end in a blank space of nothingness)? Does the ribaldly exaggerated and often sympathetic portrayal of the dictator in *The Autumn of the Patriarch* undermine political criticism or subtly bring out the people's dangerous susceptibility to the populist strongman? Is the ending of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, in which an elderly couple defy the odds and find love, a positive subversion of bourgeois rationalism or a flight from reality into fantasy, the unreal or wishful thinking? The point is that García Márquez's literary works are supremely ambiguous and often irreducible in terms of conventional patterns of interpretation. This creates a conflict in approaches to García Márquez between what some might broadly call 'traditional' criticism (often associated with notions such as the 'universal' or the 'literary') and, equally broadly, 'political' criticism – a divide which has become especially acute in Latin Americanism since the 1980s. However, this tension is unavoidably present in the literature itself, which is always constructed around an unresolved relationship between the local and the universal, the political and the existential, the literary world and the external world, the magical and the real. An acceptance of the existence of this tension rather

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than a drive towards its resolution is perhaps a necessary starting point for an appreciation of García Márquez's fictional universe. Whatever one's position, its spectre is certainly a presence behind virtually all of the contributions in the present volume.

The readings which follow here represent, then, a range of enthusiasms and reactions which do ample justice to the myriad possibilities presented by García Márquez, while attempting to provide a framework within which usefully to approach the man and his work. The essays begin with an authoritative account by Gene H. Bell-Villada of García Márquez's life and times, after which long-standing Latin American literary critic, Donald Shaw, offers a survey of the critical reception of García Márquez which thoroughly documents the tensions alluded to above. Our author's earlier fiction is examined by Robin Fiddian: though he recognises the refusal to cancel difference in García Márquez's writing, he draws attention to an emerging moral and political agenda in his work, ultimately from a postcolonial perspective. The editor then offers a brief survey of the key tensions in García Márquez's most famous work *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. My intention here is to cover the main bases in terms of possible readings and to bring out the different and, depending on perspective, sometimes complementary or conflicting threads that characterise the Garciamarquian canon through the filter of this his most celebrated novel. This chapter is complemented by a new approach from the well-established García Márquez critic, Raymond L. Williams: he takes a somewhat specialised revisionary approach to this seminal text, updating critical approaches to the novel by situating it in the context of ecocriticism as well as in the context of important selected predecessor novels. *The Autumn of the Patriarch* is, without question, the Colombian's most difficult novel, and Steven Boldy, while acknowledging its powerfully political content, does justice to the at-times-overwhelming complexity and irreducibility of the text. Gerald Martin considers what some would regard as the last great novel by García Márquez and the closest he has come to writing a historical fiction rooted in reality, *The General in His Labyrinth* (*El general en su laberinto* [1989]). This compelling account of the events leading up to the final days of the great Latin American Independence hero Simón Bolívar is situated by Martin organically in the context of García Márquez's earlier works, and he ultimately sees Bolívar himself as an embodiment of the author's own everyday Latin American character-heroes, as they struggle with their hopes, dreams, failures and occasional triumphs. Of course, as the earlier allusions to romance suggest, García Márquez is as much a novelist of love as of anything else, and what one might term the love novels are grouped together in Mark I. Millington's chapter which explores the complexity and contradictory nature of love in García Márquez – rebellious, spirited, but

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limited and strangely solitary. Also considered is García Márquez's considerable body of short fiction: Stephen Hart analyses the development of a characteristic style in an evolving corpus of short stories and also brings out their political dimension alongside their suggestiveness. García Márquez's massive contribution to journalism as well as his other non-fiction writings (including biography) are forensically examined by Robert L. Sims, while, in a further acknowledgement of the author's appeal beyond his own literary work, Claire Taylor provides a wide-ranging account of García Márquez's relationship to film and other media, particularly his role in the production of cinema. The final chapter seeks to emphasise the global significance of García Márquez and focuses on his relationship to world literature, especially via a study of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This probing essay by Michael Bell invites the reader to revisit the notion of magical realism and addresses head-on the issue of the tensions and ambiguities referred to earlier. In some ways, it resolves the dilemma and brings the various strands together, elaborating a persuasive argument that history and memory are revived through imaginative literary language and that literature is itself the main means of establishing a kind of national allegory. In the end, public persona and literary phenomenon exist side by side in the figure of 'Gabriel García Márquez', and that figure has an ongoing life of its own in the psyche and imagination of Colombian, Latin American and world readers and citizens.

## NOTES

1. Pécaut is quoted from *Revista Estrategia* (Bogotá), 15 November 1996, in Marco Palacios, *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875–2002*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 261. Palacios's book is one of the best available introductions to Colombian history.
2. Pécaut, *Revista Estrategia*, p. 261.
3. Though, in the Colombian context, García Márquez sometimes reinforces this sense of division in his distinction between the capital and the Caribbean, his Caribbean version of Colombian identity has become something of an iconic romantic projection of national identity. The anxiety about division and the utopian urge to unity is played out in and probably explains his fascination with the Liberator Simón Bolívar, whose pan-American ideals collapse into the realisation that 'La América es ingobernable' ('Latin America is ungovernable' [my translation]) and chaos is inevitable: Gabriel García Márquez, *El general en su laberinto*, Madrid: Mondadori, 1989, p. 259.
4. For more on the civilisation and barbarism debate, see my 'Civilization and Barbarism' in Philip Swanson (ed.), *The Companion to Latin American Studies*, London: Arnold, 2003, pp. 69–85.
5. See Palacios, *Between Legitimacy and Violence*, p. 242.
6. See [www.colombiaespasion.com](http://www.colombiaespasion.com).

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## I

GENE H. BELL-VILLADA

Gabriel García Márquez: life  
and times

Gabriel García Márquez was born on 7 March 1927 in the dusty small town of Aracataca, some 80 kilometres (50 miles) from Colombia's Caribbean shore.<sup>1</sup> For some decades hence, and for reasons unknown, he had mistakenly given his birth date as 1928.

Owing to family conflicts, 'Gabito' (his childhood nickname) was at first raised by his maternal grandparents, Colonel Nicolás Márquez and Tranquilina Iguarán. The grandfather was an imposing figure. A hero on the Liberal side in Colombia's 1899–1902 civil war, he was also a natty dresser with fine manners, who served a term as Aracataca's mayor. In addition, he was an excellent paternal surrogate, teaching the boy to use the dictionary, telling him war stories and leading him by the hand hither and yon about town.

For his first nine years, Gabito grew up in a loving household, surrounded by aunts who encouraged his curiosity and storytelling bent. They filled his mind with much of the folklore and family lore that eventually enriched his fiction. In Aracataca he attended the local Montessori school, learning to see and examine with discipline. It was the only elementary institution that he would recall with great affection.

At age nine, Gabito went to live with his parents in the town of Sincé. (Grandpa Nicolás passed away a short while later.) The boy scarcely knew the couple. His birth, in fact, had been the culmination of a long chain of events. His father, Gabriel Eligio García, was a medical-school dropout who had then become a telegraph operator, and finally ended up in his calling of homeopathic pharmacist. A newcomer to Aracataca in 1924, he had from the outset taken a fancy to the town beauty, Luisa Santiaga Márquez, daughter of the Colonel. He wooed her with serenades. She reciprocated after some resistance. Her mother and father, however, doggedly opposed the courtship, in great measure because the young suitor was poor, illegitimate and a Conservative. Colonel Márquez did everything in his power to separate the starry-eyed pair, even sending Luisa off for a spell in distant

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Valledupar. But a wily Gabriel Eligio, using his knowledge of the telegraph network, always managed to make secret contact with his sweetheart.

Luisa's parents in time resigned themselves to the situation, and the love-birds were wedded in June 1926. Gabriel Eligio nonetheless resented his in-laws and refused to live in Aracataca, 'ese moridero de pobres' ('that charnel-house for the poor').<sup>2</sup> As a concession, however, he sent his young wife to have their first-born in her home town, where the child then spent his early years. Their strange courtship would serve as basis for the adolescent *amour* of Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza in the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (*El amor en los tiempos del cólera*).

Though Gabito had at last settled in with his immediate kin and five siblings, his father-son tie, it seems, was not a happy one. Gabriel Eligio felt that the Colonel had 'spoiled' the child and saw the boy's love of telling tales as mere 'lying'. Meanwhile, Gabito was started on what would be nearly three decades of nomadism, due initially to his father's incessant pursuit of homeopathic, money-making schemes. In two years the family of eight transferred to Barranquilla, on the Caribbean coast, later moving once again to Sucre, a small, inland river port that serves as the model for the nameless 'town' in several of the author's classic stories and in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (*Crónica de una muerte anunciada*).

The family, still growing at the rate of roughly one baby per year, stayed in Sucre for twelve years, though in 1940 Gabito was sent back to Barranquilla to study at a Jesuit boarding school. In 1943 he received a full scholarship at the Liceo de Zipaquirá, a prestigious secular academy located in a beautiful, neo-Castilian town an hour's train ride from the capital. Gabito now saw his family only during holidays, usually needing to get reacquainted with his siblings as well as to meet a brand new tot. In one of those summer vacations he met a neighbour, an exotic-looking thirteen-year-old girl of Egyptian descent named Mercedes Barcha, to whom he proposed marriage on their very first encounter. Mercedes did not take him seriously at first; yet they did in fact wed thirteen years later.

In his personal columns and interviews, the great novelist often assumes an anti-academic stance. It must be said, though, that Gabito was a top pupil who got the highest marks and very much impressed his teachers. At school he was so unathletic and shy that his peers dubbed him 'el viejo' ('the old man'). Meanwhile he read vast amounts on his own, devouring *The Arabian Nights*, Grimm's fairy tales and Dumas's novels by age ten. His own verse efforts in student magazines had faculty members detecting in them a budding literary genius.

Gabito's four years at Zipaquirá were his first direct experience of Andean Colombia and its vast contrasts with his own world. At the time, getting



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there from the northern region was a long journey that required over a week of river and rail travel. The chill and thin air at 3,000 metres above sea level, moreover, came as an initial shock to the tropically raised youngster.

These geographic differences bear a close look. Gabo (as he now became known) heralds from Caribbean Colombia, where the heat is a constant presence, and the physical and human atmosphere resembles that of the Antilles. The inhabitants, as do other Caribbean Hispanics, drop their final 's' in speech, and also demonstrate the breezy informality that one finds among Dominicans and Cubans. Last but not least, the African background in northern Colombia is ubiquitous and can be seen in the local peoples' many shades of dark-skin pigmentation. African place names pepper the local maps, and African drumming can fill the sultry evening air.

Caribbean Colombia includes the gorgeously well-preserved, old colonial city of Cartagena (once a centre of the African slave trade), the historically rich and varied port of Barranquilla, the holiday-resort culture of Santa Marta (the town where Independence leader Simón Bolívar died), and the frontier town of Riohacha on the desert of La Guajira, where descendants of the indigenous Wayrú (hence 'Guajiro') peoples constitute a majority. In addition there are inland settlements such as Ciénaga (where a 1928 massacre of banana workers took place), and, of course, Aracataca and Sucre, Gabo's first hometowns. These localities, suitably reimagined, would serve as settings for most of the author's work.

Northern Colombians are known as *costeños* ('coastals'), a label they wear with some pride. They thereby distinguish themselves from the denizens of highland Bogotá, who are referred to casually as *cachacos*. The latter term, though technically neutral, in certain contexts can convey scorn. In the *costeño* world-view, *cachacos* are stuffy, arrogant, cold and overly concerned with power and prestige. The prejudice reflects the fact that Bogotanos regard themselves as speaking the most correct Spanish in the hemisphere; moreover, official rhetoric praises their city as 'the Athens of South America' ('la Atenas sudamericana'). Bogotá natives do in fact tend to be more formal and rule-bound than their coastal compatriots. And while the indigenous legacy there is demographically present in local, copper-skinned *mestizaje* ('race-mixing'), African traces among the highland population are rare. The *costeño/cachaco* dichotomy is but an instance of the age-old split between provinces and capital city, a pattern one finds in almost every country.

Following graduation from the Liceo in 1946, Gabo matriculated as a law student at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá. His interest in the law was nil; he enrolled merely to please his father, who wanted the elder child to learn a saleable trade and eventually help support the ten other offspring. Gabo, however, took his law studies less than seriously, having other plans.

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Since his teens he had been writing both poetry and fiction. His dramatic discovery of Franz Kafka had opened his eyes to the potential of non-realistic narrative. And by sheer luck he had published in the literary supplement of *El Espectador* two youthful stories – ‘La tercera resignación’ (‘The Third Resignation’) and ‘Eva está dentro de su gato’ (‘Eva Is Inside Her Cat’) – that earned him the esteem of his classmates and of Eduardo Zalamea Borda, a novelist and the nation’s leading book critic. Still uncertain as to his direction, Gabo was nevertheless launched as a writer. Meanwhile he hung around literary cafés and immersed himself in the European and Spanish literary classics.

Gabo’s life would take a horrific turn on 9 April 1948, when the fiery, charismatic Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated point-blank in front of a Bogotá café. The brutal murder sparked a vast, apocalyptic riot in which untold thousands of enraged Liberal sympathisers took to the city’s streets, burning, smashing and looting whatever they could lay their hands on. Among the accidental casualties was Gabo’s rooming house, where his books and manuscripts were reduced to ashes.

The event, known as *el nueve de abril* in Colombia and as *el bogotazo* (‘the Bogotá crash’) in other countries, was of enormous significance. It signalled the arrival, in the capital, of *la violencia*, a destructive, undeclared, almost hidden civil war that had been raging between Liberal and Conservative forces in portions of the countryside since 1946. The conflict had now spread visibly. In addition, even as a radical populist insurgency within the Liberal ranks had been decapitated, at the same time left-wing revolutionary juntas sprouted in many a small town. Though the alleged assassin was trampled to death by an angry mob, to this day serious doubts remain as to his culpability. In time, the growing turmoil would lead to a military coup by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in 1953.

In the wake of mass chaos, the Universidad Nacional temporarily shut its doors, and Gabo’s social life in Bogotá was up in smoke. He promptly took a flight back to the northern coast (the region was scarcely affected by *la violencia*) and duly enrolled at the Universidad de Cartagena’s law school. Soon thereafter he found employment in that venerable city, writing a six-days-per-week personal column for *El Universal*, a new daily. Despite the meagre wages, he thoroughly enjoyed the scribbling for hire and all but stopped attending his law courses. In time, he began the process of rediscovering his *costeño* roots, absorbing whatever he could of the geography, folklore and peoples of Caribbean Colombia.

Within a year, Gabo met a group of bright, young literati who lived in Barranquilla. The cenacle’s reigning spirit, an ageing Catalan émigré book-seller by the name of Ramón Vinyes, knew intimately the Euro-American