

## Introduction

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Gabriel García Márquez may be the best-known, best-loved and most widely read serious writer of the last five decades. He is not only a major figure in world literature, and the most popular Nobel Prize winner of the last third of the twentieth century, but also a writer who exemplifies better than almost any other the world-historical transition between ‘modernist’ and ‘postmodernist’ fiction and the author whose work made ‘magical realism’ one of the most significant phenomena in ‘Third World’ or ‘postcolonial’ writing after the 1960s.

García Márquez’s writing is notable for its ability to reconcile things that do not usually go together. Like all great works of literature, his novels and short stories explore, both in breadth and in depth, what it is to be a human being and yet they also address specific historical moments and specific political circumstances. They are carefully structured, yet they give a sense of spontaneity and creativity. Few modern works are more evocative and more poetic, yet García Márquez’s powers as a traditional storyteller are unsurpassed in contemporary fiction. Moreover, his works refer to a world that is often grim and even sordid, yet no body of twentieth-century fiction has persuaded so many readers of the simple but sometimes elusive truth that life, despite everything, is beautiful and absolutely worth living. This book seeks to explain how this writer became the author of that world-changing novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), and thereafter a Nobel Prize winner and a contemporary classic.

Many writers and critics have attempted to sum up García Márquez’s life and work, with varying degrees of success. Even those who have succeeded in evoking the flavour of the prose and the reach of the oeuvre have only intermittently managed a coherent exposition of the writer’s recurrent obsessions (childhood, solitude, politics, love) and the interlocking nature of his works. García Márquez himself has contributed to the difficulties by persistently mythologising and indeed mystifying both his life experience and his narrative fiction in ways which lead all but the most tenacious readers down the novelist’s own garden path. Few writers have succeeded so completely in shaping their own public image and in prearranging the critical reception of their works.

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Gerald Martin

Excerpt

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For these reasons there is a pressing need for a book which goes beyond the conventional interpretations and explanations and relates the fiction more effectively both to the writer's own experience and to the different worlds – Aracataca ('Macondo'), Colombia, Latin America, the planet itself – in and against which it was elaborated. That is the task I have set myself here: to outline García Márquez's historical trajectory; to examine, explain and hopefully throw new light on his written oeuvre; and to assess his achievement.

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## Chapter 1

# The life and work in historical context

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Gabriel José García Márquez is a Caribbean writer. He was born in Aracataca, a small banana plantation town close to the northern coast of tropical Colombia ('la Costa'), on 6 March 1927.\* His mother, Luisa Santiaga Márquez Iguarán, was from a family which originated in the wild Guajira Indian territory to the east, across the Sierra Nevada, and which had emigrated to Aracataca after her father, Colonel Nicolás Márquez, had killed a former comrade from the War of the Thousand Days between the Liberal and Conservative parties (1899–1902). By the time of García Márquez's birth his grandfather, a Liberal, was one of the leading figures in the town, even though the Liberals had lost the war. By contrast, his father, Gabriel Eligio García, was a telegraphist from Bolívar province, to the west, a region more associated with Afro-Colombian than Indian culture, and had been born illegitimate to a girl of fourteen who was seduced by a schoolteacher. Gabriel Eligio, perhaps surprisingly, was a Conservative. The courtship of Gabriel Eligio and Luisa Santiaga was vigorously opposed by her parents. (They had a skeleton in their own closet: they were first cousins.) They sent her away for a year, but love triumphed in the end and their daughter's open rebellion eventually forced the colonel and his wife Tranquilina Iguarán to relent. The young couple were married in 1926 and moved to the coastal town of Riohacha, in the Guajira.

A few months later Luisa Santiaga returned to her parents' house in Aracataca for the birth of her first child. By now her husband had tired of telegraphy and had set up as a homeopathic doctor. When the baby – known as Gabito – was less than a year old the young couple left him behind with his grandparents and moved with their second baby, Luis Enrique, to another Caribbean coastal city, Barranquilla, at the mouth of the Magdalena River. Until the age of seven

\* Geographical terms relating to northern Colombia can be confusing. Its seaboard is known, indiscriminately, both as the 'Atlantic Coast' and the 'Caribbean Coast'. However, this entire region of Colombia (including the departments of Bolívar, Atlántico, Magdalena, Cesar and Guajira) is commonly referred to as the 'Colombian Caribbean' but not as the 'Colombian Atlantic'.

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Gabito saw his mother and father no more than two or three times and effectively forgot them: their place was taken by his grandfather, the colonel, and his wife Tranquilina, as well as several aunts and a collection of servants. Later his sister Margot, a sickly child, was also sent to live with him in Aracataca.

During these seven years Gabito became his grandfather's pride and joy and the boy, in return, idolised Don Nicolás and learned about life in general, and Aracataca in particular, through the old man's eyes. In particular he absorbed the lessons of two historical events which took on mythical status in his later life: the War of the Thousand Days, in which his grandfather had taken on a heroic responsibility; and the massacre of the striking United Fruit Company workers in Ciénaga by the Colombian military in December 1928, which took place when the child was eighteen months old. Both events would be key points of reference in his literary works down the years.

He was also strongly influenced by his rather eccentric grandmother, whose world view was a mixture of Catholic folklore and local superstition, allowing him to combine the rational world view of Nicolás with the mythological perspective of Tranquilina. Two decades later García Márquez would recreate Aracataca in his fiction under the name of 'Macondo' and would use his extraordinary childhood experiences to breathe magical life into his representation of that small, forgotten town; and give birth to his best-known character, the incorrigible Colonel Aureliano Buendía.

Gabito had recently started his education at the local Montessori school when in 1934 Luisa and Gabriel Eligio returned to Aracataca from Barranquilla – none of Gabriel Eligio's economic ventures ever prospered for long – with another son and daughter. By then Colonel Márquez was ailing and in 1937 he died: later García Márquez would famously comment that after his death, 'nothing else of importance ever happened to me'. Now he and Margot had to adjust to life with a family they barely knew.

That family – now a mother and a father and five children – returned to Barranquilla. Gabriel Eligio set up another homeopathic pharmacy, which soon failed, and set off around the interior as a peripatetic quack doctor to keep the family finances afloat. Gabito, as the eldest, had to assist his mother in every way possible at a time when they were living in real poverty. Eventually Gabriel Eligio found a river town called Sucre where he could set up as a practitioner, and the family moved there in 1940 and stayed for the next eleven years. Gabito, however, was sent back to school in Barranquilla and then in 1943 won a scholarship to study at a national boarding school in the highland town of Zipaquirá, near the capital Bogotá. It was in the light of these experiences that he would later insist that he barely knew his family, which, by the time he had finished in Zipaquirá, in 1946, had almost grown to its final

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total of eleven sons and daughters – without counting Gabriel Eligio's separate brood of four illegitimate children.

At the national college in Zipaquirá, García Márquez lived and studied with boys from all over Colombia and noted the difference between his own *costeño* (coastal) culture and the cultures of other parts of the country, most notably the highland culture of Bogotá, whose inhabitants were known, pejoratively, as *cachacos* (fops, dandies). Like most *costeños*, he would always insist that the *cachacos* were devious and pretentious and that Bogotá's Andean climate was unbearably cold and forbidding. He was always relieved when the summer vacations came and he could travel back down the River Magdalena by steamboat and re-encounter his beloved Caribbean world. Nevertheless, in Zipaquirá he received an excellent education, and although he was an erratic student his intelligence soon became evident and he was recognised as one of the most talented boys in the school.

In January 1947, very reluctantly, he returned to Bogotá to study Law at the National University. (Law and Medicine were really the only options in most Latin American universities of that era.) He had already started writing poetry in Zipaquirá and now he began to write short stories, one of which, 'The Third Resignation' ('La tercera resignación'), was published in one of Bogotá's leading newspapers, *El Espectador*, in September of that year. At the age of twenty he had suddenly become one of the country's most promising literary talents, an extraordinary experience for a boy from his background who was finding it difficult to make ends meet in the chilly and somewhat intimidating capital city. Other stories followed, but in April 1948 García Márquez's stay in Bogotá was curtailed by the *Bogotazo*, the extraordinary insurrection which followed the assassination of Colombia's most charismatic politician, the Liberal populist Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. This inaugurated almost twenty years of undeclared civil war known as the *Violencia*. The university was closed and García Márquez moved back to the Costa, to the old colonial city of Cartagena, with its faded grandeur, where he found a job on a recently founded Liberal newspaper, *El Universal*. For the next thirteen years he would earn his living as a journalist, both in Colombia and abroad, while writing his stories and novels in his spare time.

Cartagena was really too traditional and conservative for his taste and he moved in 1950 to Barranquilla, at that time Colombia's most dynamic city, to work on *El Herald*. There he found a bohemian literary set later known as the 'Barranquilla Group', which provided a stimulating and fun-filled background for his intellectual development. Soon after his arrival, a visit with his mother to try to sell the old house in Aracataca had an extraordinary effect on his view of the world. He had been working for some time on a novel called 'The House' – which would never be completed – but now he set about a new work which he would entitle *La hojarasca* (translated into English as *Leaf Storm*). It

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was a story about a man something like his grandfather who finds himself in conflict over a moral issue with the inhabitants of the small town in which he lives (the town is called Macondo and is based quite directly on Aracataca); the other main characters have an unmistakable likeness to García Márquez himself and his mother. The novel would be published in May 1955.

In 1951 the García Márquez family left Sucre following the savage murder of a neighbour's son, seen by them as the last straw in an increasingly threatening environment. They installed themselves in Cartagena and Gabito briefly accompanied them but later returned to Barranquilla and in 1953 took a job as a travelling salesman touting encyclopedias around the Guajira, where his maternal grandparents had been born. This experience would be crucial in his understanding of his identity and of the culture in which he had been raised. The next year a Bogotá friend, the writer Alvaro Mutis, got him a job in Bogotá working for another Liberal newspaper, *El Espectador*. By now there was a dictatorship in charge of the country. García Márquez worked first as a film critic and then as a reporter and in just a few months, in difficult political circumstances, was recognised as one of the most talented investigative journalists in the country.

In July 1955 the newspaper sent him to Europe. After a brief visit to Geneva he moved to Rome, where he was interested in studying cinema, especially Italian neorealism; he also made a clandestine trip to Eastern Europe (by now he was taking a serious interest in socialist politics) and then moved to Paris at the beginning of 1956. Only weeks into his stay the government closed down *El Espectador* and García Márquez cashed in his return ticket, determined to scrape by in Paris while trying to write more novels. He began with a work which would eventually be entitled *La mala hora* (*In Evil Hour*) but set it aside for another more focused novel, to be entitled *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* (*No One Writes to the Colonel*), which he completed by the end of the year though it would not be published until 1961. Set in an unnamed town closely based on Sucre, it was a book whose claim to classic status would not be recognised for many years.

After completing the novel García Márquez made an extended visit to Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, and then spent a few weeks in London where he wrote some of the stories which would eventually make up the collection *Los funerales de la Mamá Grande* (*Big Mama's Funeral and Other Stories*). After that he moved to Caracas, Venezuela, where his friend Plinio Mendoza had found him a job on a magazine called *Momento*. His first days coincided with the overthrow of the notorious dictator Pérez Jiménez and at the end of the year the most momentous event in twentieth-century Latin American history was to take place: the Cuban Revolution. By then García Márquez had married his childhood sweetheart, Mercedes Barcha.

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Nevertheless, he flew to Cuba in the early weeks of the revolution and accepted a job as a representative of its new press agency, Prensa Latina, in Bogotá. He spent several months in Cuba and was then sent to the Prensa Latina office in New York at the time when US-backed mercenaries were about to launch an unsuccessful invasion at the Bay of Pigs.

Despite the revolution's triumph, García Márquez had difficulties with the communist hard-liners in the office and eventually opted to leave Prensa Latina and look for work – hopefully in the cinema – in Mexico. There he, Mercedes and their sons Rodrigo and Gonzalo, born in 1958 and 1962, lived a difficult existence – he worked in tabloid-style journalism, public relations and eventually script-writing – until finally, in mid 1965, he had an epiphanic experience while driving his car to Acapulco and returned to Mexico City, inspired, to write what he would later call *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), one of the twentieth century's most important novels and undoubtedly the most celebrated book ever published in Latin America. It took him a year to write, full time, with Mercedes pawning many of the family's possessions while he did it, but by the time the novel was finished friends of his like the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, a leader of Latin America's so-called literary 'Boom', were hailing it as one of the masterworks of the continent.

The novel was published in Buenos Aires in 1967 and caused an immediate sensation. Realising that he was going to be able to live off his writing, one of the first Latin American writers ever to do so, García Márquez took his family to live in Barcelona, Spain, where his literary agent lived and where the Franco dictatorship was in its last decade. A new friend, the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, would soon follow him to the city. García Márquez, now a celebrity, began to write his next novel, about an ancient Latin American dictator, and this book, *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*), with hundreds of thousands of readers impatiently waiting for it, was finally published in 1975. By the end of the 1960s Latin America had fallen prey to a new era of dictatorship and García Márquez's novel, produced under the pressure of huge expectation, was not only a portrait of a Latin American tyrant but also an autobiographical work written by a man who had been sucked from one day to the next into a whirlwind of celebrity previously unknown in the continent.

By that time the so-called Padilla Affair in Cuba (1971), a litmus test for the relation between literature and politics in Latin America, had divided the continent's writers into two hostile camps and helped to put an end to the 'Boom', of which García Márquez was the brightest star. He took the side of the Cuban communist regime during the Padilla Affair, a decision which would have far-reaching effects on the rest of his life. In 1973, when Salvador Allende's socialist government was overthrown in Chile, García Márquez vowed that

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he would publish no more fiction after *The Autumn of the Patriarch* until the leaders of the coup were themselves overthrown. He turned to political journalism and campaigning and founded a radical socialist magazine in Bogotá called *Alternativa*; he also left Europe and took up residence again in Mexico City, this time for good.

In 1975 – shortly after the time, ironically enough, when he completed *The Autumn of the Patriarch* – García Márquez forged a relationship with Fidel Castro, the leader of the Cuban regime, and put his pen at the service of Latin America's leftist revolutions, including the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua (1979). But this was an era of counter-revolution almost everywhere in the world and by 1981 he had recognised that his contribution had to be more subtle: he published a new, brief novel, *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*), apparently devoid of political militancy, whose first edition sold more copies than that of any previous novel in history and whose title is quoted or paraphrased in newspaper headlines every day. At the same time he began to seek a more discreet political role behind the scenes. He was assisted in this transition from politics to diplomacy by the award in 1982 of the Nobel Prize in Literature. His journey to Stockholm was nothing short of an apotheosis and he was recognised as perhaps the most popular winner of the accolade in recent times.

Up to this point he had concentrated in his fiction on the themes of power, solitude and political violence. Now, aware of the need to keep up morale in an exceptionally bleak era for socialists, and thus complementing his move away from overt political militancy, he turned to writing about personal relationships and more specifically about love, a theme largely absent from his earlier work. Late in 1985 he published perhaps his most popular book, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (*Love in the Time of Cholera*), an historical novel inspired in part by his parents' anecdotes about their dramatic courtship in the 1920s. With this he demonstrated that he was not going to be one of those writers distracted or intimidated by the Nobel award.

In 1989, as the events leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall began to develop, García Márquez published one of his most risky and ambitious books, a novel entitled *El general en su laberinto* (*The General in His Labyrinth*) about the last months in the life of the great Liberator, Simón Bolívar, a Latin American leader even more famous and influential than García Márquez's friend Fidel Castro. Some readers protested that the book distorted Bolívar's profile by turning him into a Caribbean personality like García Márquez himself but most critics were astonished by the work's achievement in painting a convincing and eventually influential portrait of so notable a central character.

By now García Márquez was one of the four or five best-known and most admired writers in the world. He counted many presidents and other celebrities



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among his friends, including Spain's Felipe González and France's François Mitterrand. To coincide with the celebrations in 1992 marking the five hundredth anniversary of Spain's 'discovery' of the Americas, he published a collection of stories, *Cuentos peregrinos (Strange Pilgrims)*, which took an ironic view of the relation between the New World and the Old. He followed this up in 1994 with another historical novel about love, *Del amor y otros demonios (Of Love and Other Demons)*, a drama about the affair between a teenager accused of witchcraft and a Catholic priest in late eighteenth-century Cartagena.

Meanwhile Colombia, as if its twentieth-century experience were not already dark enough, was undergoing one of the worst periods in its entire history: a time of drug traffickers, guerrilla movements, paramilitary atrocities, a national army barely under civilian control and countless bomb explosions and political assassinations. García Márquez, who never had much faith that Colombia could reform itself, as Mexico had done, still less revolutionise itself, as Cuba had done, broke the habit of almost forty years and once again wrote a work (like *In Evil Hour*, or *The Colonel*) about the contemporary situation. *Noticia de un secuestro (News of a Kidnapping)* was a kind of documentary novel about the wave of political kidnappings which had hit the country at the beginning of the 1990s and was another international success for its author.

In 1999 García Márquez was stricken with lymphoma – he had had an earlier brush with cancer in 1992 – and retired from public life for almost three years while recovering from the illness. He began to write a more nostalgic kind of work suffused in part by the sense that his vital trajectory was coming to a close and in part by his tacit renunciation of political activism in the era of post-socialist globalisation. He had been talking for decades about writing his memoirs and concentrated now on the first volume, which he would entitle *Vivir para contarla (Living to Tell the Tale)*. The work became an international bestseller on its publication in 2002. In the following years García Márquez began to appear again in public but no longer gave interviews to the always insatiable press. He worked on what appears to be his last novel, *Memoria de mis putas tristes (Memories of My Melancholy Whores)*, a somewhat startling account of the relationship between a ninety-year-old bachelor and a fourteen-year-old virgin procured as a prostitute for the purpose of satisfying the old reprobate. Even this book was well received, on the whole, when it appeared in 2004, though it lacked the brilliance and the hypnotic power of earlier works.

In 2007 the Spanish Royal Academy marked García Márquez's eightieth birthday with a special homage at its conference in Cartagena, Colombia, where the writer had had a large house built as a Caribbean holiday home. Explicitly comparing him to Cervantes, the academy published a special edition of a million copies of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The king of Spain,

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ex-president Bill Clinton of the United States and several ex-presidents of Colombia were in attendance, as well as literary friends such as Carlos Fuentes and the Argentinian writer Tomás Eloy Martínez. García Márquez made a speech in which he recalled the hard times during which he had written his most famous novel and expressed astonishment at the direction his life had taken. By now his memory was failing and after this he never again subjected himself to such public challenges.