

***One Hundred Years of Solitude* I: Gabriel García Márquez on Chance and Order**

The Colombian Gabriel García Márquez is the most well-known and successful Latin American writer of the twentieth century, perhaps ever. When he died, at 87, in 2014, the obituarists saluted the passing of a man *The New York Times* called “a giant of 20th-century literature” (Kandell, “Gabriel García Márquez”) and the BBC reported being “perhaps the best writer in Spanish since Cervantes” (“Obituary”). His biographer, Gerald Martin, suggests that he is “the best-known writer to have emerged from the ‘Third World.’” Martin adds that “if we look at the novelists of the twentieth century we discover that most of the ‘great names’ on which critics currently agree belong to its first forty years (Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Faulkner, Woolf); but in the second half of the century perhaps only García Márquez has achieved true unanimity” (*Gabriel García Márquez* xix). García Márquez combined literary and critical prestige—signalled by the many books and articles dedicated to his work, and sealed with the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982—with extraordinary sales figures running to the tens of millions, surprising accessibility, and widespread name recognition, even among those otherwise unfamiliar with Latin American literature. His books have featured twice on US TV host Oprah Winfrey’s “Book Club”; only one other writer from the region has featured at all, and that is Isabel Allende, whose work (especially her bestseller, *The House of the Spirits* [*La casa de los espíritus*, 1982]) is deeply indebted to that of García Márquez. Indeed, such has been García Márquez’s success that a problem for his contemporaries and for younger authors has been how to escape his outsized shadow. Especially in the English-speaking world, almost any aspiring writer from the region is automatically compared to or read within a framework established by García Márquez. He even shaped the way in which we read earlier writers, who are almost inevitably presented as his precursors. The reception and celebration of his novels under the label of “magic realism” has indelibly associated this style with Latin American literature as a whole. His has been a hard act to follow.

Amid García Márquez’s voluminous output—which, as well as novels, includes short stories, journalism, and reportage—his acknowledged masterpiece is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*), which was acclaimed as what literary sociologist Álvaro Santana-Acuña calls a “global classic” almost from the moment of its publication in 1967,



Gabriel García Márquez with his Nobel prize

and certainly on the appearance of its English translation in 1970. The most famous review of the novel, with an excerpt still plastered on the book's back cover now, is that of the US novelist and journalist William Kennedy, who, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, declared 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." Even forty years after this breathless instant canonization, Gerald Martin can look back to claim that "the novel is [. . .] the axis of Latin America's twentieth-century literature, the continent's only undisputable world-historical and world-canonical novel." He attributes to it truly epochal significance: "more grandiose still, but nevertheless true, it is part of a worldwide phenomenon which marks the end of all 'modernity' with the post-colonial arrival of the Third World and its literatures on the global stage; the end of the period, we could say, that began with [the sixteenth-century French author] Rabelais" (336). Yet García Márquez's novel is in its way also Rabelaisian, if we consider Rabelais's association (thanks to Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*) with the carnivalesque: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a carnival that encompasses great variety and takes delight in turning it all upside down.

The novel can seem confusing, but as in a carnival the confusion is part of the point: this is a book that appeals to many senses and generates many affects. For all its title's stress on "solitude," if anything the narrative is over-full, excessive and both endlessly new and insistently repetitious. Among its repetitions are recurring attempts to impose some kind of order on what can otherwise appear to be chaos, even madness. Many characters try to renounce the past and make a new start, to escape the fate they fear awaits them. But from the outset, we know that their (and our) agency is limited, if also sometimes enhanced, by the things that surround us. We are but small cogs in the machine, lines of flight that are almost inevitably reterritorialized, brought to heel at least for a while until new flows arise. In the meantime, we take our chances, with the novel and with life.

1. *An Intricate Game of Confusion*

On the novel's very first page we are told that "Things have a life of their own [. . .]. It's simply a matter of waking up their souls" (1-2). And it is this that is the essence of García Márquez's magic realism: the acknowledgement that objects, too, have their own lives, their own desires and destinies that can both compete and collude with human plans and expectations. The scene is set in these opening pages, as gypsies arrive at the remote

backwater of Macondo, somewhere in the swamp near the Caribbean littoral, bringing everything from magnets and telescopes to flying carpets and ice to the bewildered gaze of the small town's fascinated inhabitants. Indeed, seeing ice for the first time makes such an impression on at least one of them that we are told (in the novel's famous opening line) that "many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía" remembered it still (1). But the ice is just one of a panoply of wonders, some brought by the gypsies and others that seem to arise as if from nowhere, that are scattered through the novel and are enduringly remembered by its countless readers: a plague of insomnia; small fish made of gold; a pianola; a line of blood that crosses streets and climbs over curbs; and, almost exactly at the novel's halfway point, a locomotive that fearful townspeople describe as "like a kitchen dragging a village behind it" (222). Some of these phenomena are more "magical" than others, but the point is that they are all treated (more or less) equally, as mechanisms and apparatuses that both expand and frustrate human desire.

Caught up in the whirlwind of novelty, the future Colonel Aureliano's father and the town's principal founder, José Arcadio Buendía, happily installs an alchemist's laboratory in his own home, and it is this space—which becomes laboratory, workshop, and archive—that is the hub of the book's fictive universe, however much for long periods it is forgotten, sealed up, and ignored. For the liveliness of things continues whether or not we realize or acknowledge it. And collectively, house, town, and the Buendía family are all best understood as an assemblage or set of assemblages of objects and subjects that variously channel, filter, reproduce, transform, and magnify broader social forces through the mediation of a complex multitude of heterogenous parts (buildings, words, rooms, people, body parts, animals, weapons, love affairs, letters) whose interaction is frustratingly predictable at times and utterly novel at others.

The effect of all this can be quite overwhelming. For instance, if we think simply of the characters, on the one hand there is a constant procession of new arrivals, a stream of novelty: children are born, grow up, and set off on adventures or obsessions; visitors, whether they be gypsies or piano tuners, soldiers or beauty queens, come at least for a while then depart, die, or fade into the background. But on the other hand, there is also so much repetition: a character may leave, may even die, but can still keep coming back; and the Buendía children especially are repeatedly given the same names, an endless

cycle of Aurelianos and José Arcadios (with a couple of Remedioses and Amarantas thrown into the mix), such that it can take some effort to tell them apart. Two, indeed, Aureliano Segundo and José Arcadio Segundo, are twins who are so alike and delight so much in confusing all around them that even their grandmother, Úrsula (José Arcadio Buendía's wife and Colonel Aureliano's mother), wonders "if they themselves might not have made a mistake in some moment of their intricate game of confusion and had become changed forever" (182). Combined with the number of children born out of wedlock, and a cavalcade of shifting romantic allegiances (mistresses, concubines, desertions, one-night stands), no wonder this is a novel that comes with a family tree to help us to track all the moves in the game and who plays in which position and when. In fact, the family tree is wrong (portraying Colonel Aureliano as the eldest child, when he is second to José Arcadio); even the person who made it must have been confused.

My question, then, is how you found the reading experience. This is also a long book (the longest we are reading), and for this reason alone it is easy to get lost. But is this a pleasurable lostness—as the phrase "lost in a book" usually implies—or does it inspire anxiety or some other affect? Especially in that the events it depicts often fly in the face of rational common sense, the issue is as much how it made you feel as what it made you think. Were you willing to play along with García Márquez? Pause the video and write down some thoughts; also add them to the comments if you wish. While you do that, I'll have a black coffee, with no sugar, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Black Coffee

Gabriel García Márquez may be Colombia's most famous literary export—a global figure, his work translated into dozens of languages—but its biggest agricultural export is coffee, of which it is the third or fourth largest producer in the world (Brazil is the largest), with a focus on the arabica bean (of which it is the world's number one producer), which generally goes into more expensive, gourmet coffee. In 2007, coffee labelled "Café de Colombia" was the first non-EU product to be granted "protected designation of origin" by the European Union as a food or beverage "whose identity is so tied up with the region where [it is] produced that only producers in that region are allowed to use the name" ("Colombian Coffee"). The "Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia" is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Coffee is grown at altitude (the plant needs a consistently mild or

cool climate), and so in the Andean region rather than the lowland plains or swamps where Macondo is set. But coffee is drunk consistently throughout *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, most notably by Colonel Aureliano Buendía, who continues his habit even after his cup is poisoned with “a dose of strychnine [. . .] that was enough to kill a horse” (103). And though the novel will stress the ambivalent influence of the banana industry—which was indeed established on the tropical coast—in fact it was coffee, always present but taken for granted, that played the major role in the country’s economic modernization.

If the experience of reading the novel is sometimes frustrating, and if often we are tempted simply to enjoy it by going with its never-ending flow, then we are not so far removed from the characters who populate it. Some seek to find or impose order on what is often described as the “delirium” or “madness” that engulfs them. The Buendía family matriarch, Úrsula, for instance, often reflects on what she has seen over the course of her long life, and at times her expository commentary seems to reflect our own thoughts: “I know all of this by heart,” for example, as she sees her grandson going through the same motions as his grandfather, “It’s as if time had turned around and we were back at the beginning” (193). Her husband, José Arcadio, by contrast, is more willing to follow his obsessions and succumb to the flow, as in his mania for inventing a perpetual motion machine; “Only the vigilance and care of Rebeca [his daughter-in-law] kept him from being dragged off by his imagination into a state of perpetual delirium from which he would not recover” (76). Other characters, notably Colonel Aureliano Buendía, realize that the attempt to impose order, in his case with his involvement in endless uprisings and attempted revolutions, leads to its own madness. The book militantly refuses regimentation, but is aware that “proliferation” can also be a “plague” (190), even as it flirts with excess at every turn.

2. *A Gigantic Organization of Games of Luck and Chance*

When the settlement of Macondo is first established, it is an almost utopian, planned community. The young José Arcadio Buendía, for instance, “had set up the placement of the houses in such a way that from all of them one could reach the river and draw water with the same effort, and he had lined up the streets with such good sense that no house got more sun than another during the hot time of day.” Hence, “within a few years Macondo was a village that was more orderly and hard-working than any known until

then by its three hundred inhabitants" (9). A sign, moreover, of the intent to keep things this way is the fact that "The only animals that were prohibited, not just in [José Arcadio's] house but in the entire settlement, were fighting cocks" (8). For it had been a tragedy born of cockfighting that had first impelled him to gather up his wife and a few friends and embark on an "absurd journey" across the mountains, trekking for months on end in search of some new place to live, "the land that no one had promised them" (23). Failing in their quest to find the sea, camped by "a stormy river whose waters were like a torrent of frozen glass," Buendía dreams of "a noisy city with houses having mirror walls," with "a name that he had never heard, that had no meaning at all, but that had a supernatural echo in his dream: Macondo" (24). He convinces his men that this should be the site of the new village. It is here that they will make a new start, and not repeat the mistakes of the past. Hence no more cocks, no more cockfighting.

Back where they had come from—"the old village that both of their ancestors, with their work and their good habits, had transformed into one of the finest towns in the province" (20)—the young José Arcadio would "take care of his fighting cocks" while his wife Úrsula "would do frame embroidery with her mother." But tragedy strikes when Prudencio Aguilar, a man whose bird has been defeated by one of José Arcadio's, retaliates by taunting his opponent, throwing in his face the rumour that he has yet to sleep with his wife. José Arcadio vows revenge for this insult: "You go home and get a weapon, because I'm going to kill you" (21). Minutes later, he makes good on his threat, killing Prudencio with a single throw of his spear. But, as often in the novel, it is hard to put an end to things; the repressed always returns. Prudencio's ghost starts haunting both José Arcadio and Úrsula, and on seeing him Buendía is "tormented by the immense desolation with which the dead man had looked at him through the rains, his deep nostalgia as he searched for living people" (22-23). This is what spurs José Arcadio to kill his fighting cocks, "trusting that in that way he could give some measure of peace to Prudencio Aguilar" (23), and then set off on the mad expedition that leads to the founding of Macondo. For all the delight and wonder that otherwise characterize the novel, from the very start guilt and shame, and the impossible desire to escape the consequences of the past, lurk uneasily in the background.

After all, Úrsula had indeed been "refus[ing] to consummate the marriage" (21), for fear that interbreeding (she and José Arcadio are cousins) may lead to them giving birth to a

child with the tail of a pig. It is this premonition that haunts the family down through the generations, as they take their chances—when José Arcadio finally convinces Úrsula to take off her chastity belt, she murmurs “You’ll be responsible for what happens” (22)—always with the sense that fate will catch up with them one day. Each time they spin the wheel (another child, another hare-brained scheme), they play the game with the hope that they can continue staving off whatever doom shadows them. This is a novel that opens with the image of a firing squad, and although when we finally (over a quarter of the way into the book) reach the scene that the novel’s famous first sentence announces, it turns out that this is not the day that Colonel Aureliano dies, we know that he has only temporarily forestalled his destiny. It is as though the entire first section of the book takes place in an eternal moment as we are waiting for the firing squad to shoot.

When the guns do not go off—or when they go off for others, such as Aureliano’s brother, José Arcadio—we hardly feel that we are home and free. The cocks are back fighting in Macondo. Prudencio Aguilar’s ghost tracks down the Buendías even there, though by this time the patriarch José Arcadio Buendía has long lost contact with the world (speaking in Latin; for many years tied to a chestnut tree outside the family home), and the killer and the man he once killed come to an accord in their mutual frailty: “Almost pulverized at that time by the decrepitude of death, Prudencio Aguilar would come twice a day to chat with him. They talked about fighting cocks. They promised each other to set up a breeding farm for magnificent birds, not so much to enjoy their victories, which they would not need then, as to have something to do on the tedious Sundays of death” (139). Death is everywhere in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but at times it is as if the real enemy were tedium, or some other catastrophe that can scarcely be imagined. In the meantime, we play the game of life, a “vagabond carnival transformed now into a gigantic organization of games of luck and chance” (38). Everything around us has its own agency and the capacity to surprise. The book is long, there are many pages still to go. Enjoy it while you can.

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Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Garcia_Marquez_in_liqui_liqui.jpg

Song: “Macondo” (Celso Piña ft. la Orquesta de Baja California)