



Introduction to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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“Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” This opening line of Gabriel García Márquez’s novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, translated into English by Gregory Rabassa, is among the best known and most remarkable opening sentences in literary history. I remember when, as part of my application to PhD programs in the United States over a decade ago, I took the GRE subject test in English literature, and one of the questions quoted this line, asking us to identify the novel and its writer. I mention this little anecdote because I think it’s important to highlight, from the outset, that you’re reading a novel in translation, but one that has become so integral to English literature, that a prospective student who plans to undertake a serious study of the subject is expected to be intimately familiar with it. When it was first published in Spanish in 1967, Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian novelist, and a contemporary of García Márquez, said the novel represented “a literary earthquake.” Vargas Llosa, García Márquez, and a number of other Latin American writers, such as the Mexican Carlos Fuentes, the Chilean José Donoso, and the Argentinian Julio Cortázar, were part of a generation of writers associated with a literary movement referred to as the “Boom.” One of the defining characteristics of the “Boom” was a so-called magical realism, a term that was used to describe the narrative backdrop and events in these writers’ literary creations, including *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. García Márquez, however, doesn’t really agree with this characterization of his novel. In order to explain why, we need to move further back in time, to his birthplace and childhood.



Gabriel García Márquez was born in 1927, in Aracataca, a river town in Northern Colombia's Caribbean Coast. His mother's family had been living there since the early 1900s. A short while after he was born, his mother and father left him and a younger sister behind for seven years, so he was effectively raised by his grandparents. His maternal grandfather, Colonel Nicolás Márquez, was involved in Colombia's War of the Thousand Days, a civil war fought from 1899 to 1902 between the country's liberal and conservative parties. As a young boy, García Márquez learned a lot from his grandfather about this war, and another central event in Colombia's history, namely, the massacre of the United Fruit Company workers in 1928 by the Colombian army. As you read the novel, you'll notice the role that these historical events play in the fictional town he's created. In fact, one could read his fictional Macondo as a recreation of Aracataca, with elements of García Márquez's childhood and family history finding its way into the narrative. His maternal grandmother, Tranquilina Iguarán and her folkloric storytelling also had a strong impact on him (you'll notice, by the way, that she shares a last name with Ursula, the matriarch in the novel). In an essay in 1983, he writes that he got to know his first ghosts in the big house in Aracataca and that his grandmother had a "credulity which allowed her to live in a supernatural world in which everything was possible and where rational explanations were totally lacking in validity."

So, the reality that García Márquez is depicting in his novel, has a foundation in both the larger socio-political history of Colombia, as well as the personal and intimate history of his family. The reality he depicts is, simply put, a representation of how humans experience the worlds they inhabit.

Part of this experience, especially in a Latin American context, is to think about the effect that violence, and especially colonial violence, has had on society. Instead of offering gratuitous



representations of violence, however, García Márquez focuses on its effect on those who survive it. In this way, he manages to create a poignant narrative that is universal at the same time that it is preoccupied with local histories and realities, and thus privileges the perspectives of the local inhabitants. Professor Philip Swanson, in writing about García Márquez's novel, says "magical realism is about rethinking rather than negating reality," and that as readers, we're being invited to exercise our imaginations "in order to invent an alternative and more just reality for the continent."

Toni Morrison has mentioned García Márquez as an influence and mentor, and Salman Rushdie and Orhan Pamuk have spoken of his influence on their work, as well. In 1982, García Márquez won the Nobel prize in literature, and in his lecture, he mentions William Faulkner as his master; he was influenced by writers as varied as Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and Ernest Hemingway, and he was equally fascinated by the Greek classical tragedies as he was by Middle Eastern classics such as *A Thousand and One Nights*. And this, I believe, is one of the reasons for the novel's endurance and widespread enjoyment by readers across the globe: it draws inspiration from multiple literary traditions, without being reducible to any one of them, and it simultaneously creates a uniquely powerful and visceral narrative that continues to influence writers all across the globe.

I hope you enjoy reading it!

Works cited:

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