

# ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF LITERATURE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY TONY BECKWITH



*A writer, translator, interpreter, poet, and cartoonist, Tony Beckwith is a regular contributor to Source.*

*"I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library."  
—Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986)*

In the heavenly library imagined by Borges, there will of course be a Latin American Literature wing, with a large section devoted to the twentieth century. It was a modern century that ushered in a complex set of circumstances that affected Latin America in many different ways. As always, writers, poets, and artists were on hand to record what they saw and heard, and to interpret what it all meant to their countries and to their people. The art and literature they produced explored new facets of the Latin American experience and stunned the world with its originality and its brilliance.

By the end of the nineteenth century virtually all Latin American countries were autonomous, having emerged victorious from the wars of independence that had riven the continent many years earlier. Despite ambitious plans for continental unity proposed by Simón Bolívar—*El Libertador*—the vast territory that had long been a Spanish

colony remained fragmented, each region going its own way to become the individual countries we know today. Brazil had also won its independence from Portugal but kept its colonizer's language, making it one of the few Latin American nations that don't speak Spanish.

The power vacuum left by the overthrow of the Iberian colonizers was swiftly filled by the local elite, who developed *caudillo* (strongman) systems to keep them in power and make sure that they and their inner circle lived very comfortably while the rest of the population, especially the peasants and indigenous peoples, fared just as badly as they had under the Spanish and the Portuguese. This was the original template for the ugly stereotype of the Latin American dictatorship and the sad stereotype of the banana republic. Writers at that time, while still influenced by European traditions and ideas, were interested in the more local questions of national identity and pre-Columbian cultures and how the two were intertwined. As education became more widely available, women writers emerged as a potent artistic and intellectual force, as did members of the burgeoning mestizo population, to take their place in the new hierarchies being created in the melting pot of the Americas. The *criollismo* (also known as *costumbrismo*) movement and the Naturalist and Romantic traditions of the late nineteenth century gradually gave way to the *modernistas* who believed in art for art's sake, and wrote about exotic subjects in new, experimental styles inspired by the Parnassians and the Symbolists. The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío's book *Azul...*, published in 1888, is credited with launching *modernismo* throughout Latin America and beyond, and setting the stage for the modernist literature of the new century.

Given their long colonial affiliations, it was inevitable that Latin American writers would be influenced by the European literary canon. But they were also influenced by writers in North America, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Artists and intellectuals from Mexico to Argentina were impressed with the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the birth of democracy in the United States. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, they were more wary than impressed. The Mexican-American War, the concept of Manifest Destiny, the Spanish-American War, and President Theodore Roosevelt's cavalier interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine all created serious concerns about the long-term territorial ambitions

of the Colossus of the North. The feared invasions did not materialize (although the fruit and sugar plantations in Central America were a thinly disguised alternative), but the Coca-Cola imperialism that followed introduced Latin Americans to the USA's consumer society lifestyle. This was welcomed by some and condemned by others as a pernicious influence that would undermine local traditions and dilute cultural identities. This ambivalence reflected some of the deep divisions that simmered in the region and would eventually erupt into the revolutions and dirty wars that defined life in Latin America later in the century. Among those who were concerned about the negative effects of a materialistic culture was the Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodó, whose essay *Ariel*, published in 1900, was a rational appeal for a balanced relationship with the United States—the new flagship of western culture—and has been an influential classic in Latin America ever since.

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910, seven years before the Russian Revolution. Both conflicts, each in its own way, had a profound effect on Latin American politics and life in general. In Mexico, the hostilities helped to introduce land reform that set an example for many countries to the south. The Russian upheaval brought the proletariat to power and bred a fierce opponent to western values, sparking an ideological struggle that eventually turned Latin America into a proxy battleground for opposing political and social systems. In the short term, both events focused attention on the urgent social issues that had been festering for years, and fostered the rise of *indigenismo*, a movement started by writers who sought to expose the injustices being endured by indigenous populations and other minorities.

The early years of the century were thus a time when writers were finding their "Latin American" voice and speaking out on social issues and the ever-elusive theme of national identity, critiquing governments for failing their people and perpetuating long-standing inequalities. Like their European counterparts, most Latin American writers, artists, and intellectuals were leftists at the time, seeing communism as a preferable alternative to the capitalist system that, they believed, was merely a modern version of the feudalism that had favored the *haves*

at the expense of the *have-nots* since the arrival of the Europeans four centuries earlier. But not all were obsessed with expressing the social realism of, for example, Diego Rivera's Mexican muralism. A young Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, a committed communist, was writing love poems that made him a celebrity in the Spanish-speaking world and, when his work was translated into English, brought him instant fame in the United States. According to Gabriel García Márquez, Neruda was "the greatest poet of the 20th century, in any language."<sup>1</sup> He was also one of the handful of Latin American writers who have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.<sup>2</sup> Neruda's early mentor and fellow Chilean poet, Gabriela Mistral, was also a Nobel laureate.

The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (who was not a leftist) created something entirely original in his short pieces that writers the world over have admired and emulated ever since. These were philosophical explorations of reality and the nature of time that laid the foundations for the style that was later known as "magical realism." The literary critic Harold Bloom said, "Of all Latin American authors in this century, he is the most universal.... If you read Borges frequently and closely, you become something of a Borgesian, because to read him is to activate an awareness of literature in which he has gone farther than anybody else."<sup>3</sup> Borges was also a poet and a translator and is, to this day, a key figure in Latin American literature. There will unquestionably be a bust of Borges in the celestial library mentioned above.

Discussions on Latin American literature frequently focus so intently on works written in Spanish that Brazilian literature is sometimes overlooked. This, despite the fact that Brazil can hardly be missed when looking at a map of the continent. Brazilian culture reflects the influence of its African population—a result of the slave trade of earlier centuries—as well as the indigenous people who were there before the Portuguese arrived. Brazilian writers, of course, have also explored their country's social problems and economic inequalities, and have pondered the question of what it means to be Brazilian. Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, the grand old man of Brazilian letters, is widely considered to be the country's greatest writer, and one of the finest novelists and short story writers in the world. He was one of the founders of the Brazilian

Academy of Letters and was its president at the time of his death in 1908. The most prestigious Brazilian literary prize is named in his honor. The poet Oswald de Andrade was one of the founders of Brazilian modernism; his *Anthropophagous Manifesto's* ideas about “cultural cannibalism” — a metaphorical construct that would neither imitate nor reject European culture but “devour” it — were influential in art and literary circles when it was published in 1928.

Jorge Amado, another acclaimed Brazilian writer, started publishing his work in the 1930s and was elected to the Academy of Letters in 1961. His early writing was distinguished by a strong social realist streak, but in his later years he became less political and is best known for the modernist style of his novels that are set against the voluptuous, colorful background of Bahia’s coastal region. Clarice Lispector was born in the Ukraine in 1920 and brought to Brazil by her parents a few months later. She grew up to be a writer whose innovative Kafkaesque novels and short stories helped to introduce European modernism to Brazilian literature. The American poet Elizabeth Bishop went out on a limb and described Lispector as “better than J. L. Borges.”<sup>4</sup>

Immigration has always been a factor in Latin American life. The waves of Europeans who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, largely from Spain and Italy, swelled local populations and introduced customs and new ideas that significantly influenced the culture of their new homelands, as in the case of Argentina and Uruguay. The two world wars and the Spanish Civil War also contributed to the flow of migrants looking for a home in the New World. Some of these new arrivals became writers who would make a name for themselves regionally and farther afield, expressing universal themes in local literary styles colored by the environments they now inhabited. The plays, newspaper columns, and novels of Argentine writer Roberto Arlt, for example, a self-taught son of immigrants, reflect the tragicomic efforts of down-and-outs to “be somebody.” Elena Poniatowska was born in France but came to Mexico when she was ten years old to escape the Second World War. She started her career as a journalist and is considered one of Mexico’s foremost women writers.

Exile was also a factor for Latin American writers whose outspoken political views were not welcome in their own country. Some chose,

or were forced to move elsewhere, a process that gradually created a Diaspora of Latin American intellectuals who now wrote about their countries through a nostalgic prism from Madrid, Paris, or New York. Claribel Alegría is a Nicaraguan poet, essayist, and journalist who grew up in El Salvador after her family was forced into exile. Her works reflect the principles of the *generación comprometida* [committed generation], the literary movement that was organized in Central America in the 1950s and 1960s to demand social and political justice for the country's disenfranchised populations.

Post-revolutionary Mexican governments showed a great deal of tolerance for such exiles, and Mexico City became a haven for displaced intelligentsia of all political stripes. It was also fertile ground for local writers, such as Carlos Fuentes, who was that quintessential Latin American figure—the public intellectual. One of his close friends was Emir Rodríguez Monegal, the Uruguayan scholar and literary critic. Monegal founded the literary magazine *Mundo Nuevo* that was published in Spanish in Paris and contributed to the “Boom” in Latin American literature by introducing unknown writers to a wider audience. In 1966, for example, the magazine published a chapter of *Cien Años de Soledad* [One Hundred Years of Solitude], the now legendary novel by Gabriel García Márquez. Fuentes and Monegal were important figures in twentieth-century Latin American literature because they facilitated a literary dialogue between North and South America at a very difficult time in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, an event that brought long-seething tensions into the open throughout the Americas at both a political and an intellectual level. Literature and politics—always closely intertwined—were uneasy partners in a complicated relationship, and initiatives such as *Mundo Nuevo* provided a channel for dialogue.

Some suggest that the Boom was the Big Bang of Latin American literature but, as we've seen here, that was not the case. Carlos Fuentes said: “The so-called Boom, in reality, is the result of four centuries that, literally, reached a moment of urgency in which fiction became the way to organize lessons from the past.”<sup>5</sup> It was certainly, however, what brought Latin American writers and their works to the attention of the rest of the world, and made superstars of several of them, including some—like the

Chilean-American author Isabel Allende— who came later but were still influenced by the “magical realist” style of the mid-twentieth century. Many writers were involved in the Boom, and several are credited with contributing to its creation, including Julio Cortázar (Argentina), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), who coined the term “marvelous realism,” Juan Rulfo (Mexico), Augusto Roa Bastos (Paraguay), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), Fuentes, and of course, Gabriel García Márquez. Of all the books written by these and other writers, it is *Cien Años de Soledad* by García Márquez that remains the most iconic, described by Borges as “the *Don Quixote* of Latin America.”<sup>6</sup> Its nonlinear approach to time and its effortless segues from everyday life to fantastic situations captured the imagination of readers in every language and made “magical realism” a household word.

But, ironically, its portrayal of life in the exotic tropical setting described by García Márquez ultimately became a caricature that had nothing to do with the reality of life in the 1970s and beyond. Most Latin Americans now lived in cities, where life was anything but sleepy and picturesque. The backdrop of traditional paternalistic *caudillo* politics had given way to a far grittier experience as revolutionaries and military juntas battled each other to the death and civilians got caught in the crossfire. The Latin America that the rest of the world saw in *Cien Años de Soledad* became just another stereotype, embodied in the word *Macondo*, the name of the fictional town in the book. To paraphrase Newton’s third law, for every literary movement there is a subsequent and opposite movement and so, in time, the *McOndo* movement was born, taking its sarcastic name from the title of an anthology of short stories published by two Chilean writers, Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, in 1996. This new movement sought to portray the modern, urban reality of Latin America’s consumer society and its evolution as part of the new, globalized “McDonald’s” world.

The post-Boom generation of writers presented the world with a distinctly different view of Latin America than their predecessors had done. Authors like Roberto Bolaño (Chile) wrote dark novels that satirize and critique the political structures that emerged from the revolutionary years, describing a modern realism that bears no

resemblance to its magical forerunner. Meanwhile, Mario Vargas Llosa, the surviving grand old man of the Boom generation, rounded out the century with a dictator novel, the classical genre that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and has been a consistent thread in Latin American literature ever since.

In just one hundred years, Latin American writers emerged from relative obscurity and now enjoy international recognition. There were a great many of them—men and women who wrote memorable works in a prodigious variety of styles—and there is not enough room to list them all here. Those whose names appear above are the main ones who introduced new ideas, started new movements, and wrote works that dazzled readers and critics far beyond their national boundaries. But everyone's books will be on the shelves of the library that Borges imagined, where presumably there will be time enough to read them all.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza (1 March 1983). *The Fragrance of Guava: Conversations with Gabriel García Márquez*. Verso. Page 49. [<http://tinyurl.com/n5zqo>]
- 2 The full list: Gabriela Mistral, Chile (1945); Miguel Ángel Asturias, Guatemala (1967); Pablo Neruda, Chile (1971); Gabriel García Márquez, Colombia (1982); Octavio Paz, Mexico (1990); Mario Vargas Llosa, Peru (2010).
- 3 Harold Bloom. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994. Page 439.
- 4 Fernanda Eberstadt. *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*. August 19, 2009.
- 5 Frederick M. Nunn. *Collisions with History: Latin American Fiction and Social Science from El Boom to the New World Order*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2001. Page 122.
- 6 *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*. Ed. Richard Burgin. Jackson: University Press of Miss., 1998.