

***Cracks in 'The Crystal Frontier':
Fuentes shines light on delicate relationships among Americans,
Mexicans***

DATE: 10-19-1997

PUBLICATION: The Austin American-Statesman

Translated by Alfred MacAdam
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$23.

THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER

By Carlos Fuentes

reviewed by Tony Beckwith

Between Mexico and the United States there is a river. The Americans call it the Rio Grande; Mexico calls it Rio Bravo. It is the dividing line that separates these countries, the frontier shared by two nations with a turbulent history and a mutual fascination.

In his new book, "The Crystal Frontier," Carlos Fuentes takes this border zone as his starting point to examine the literal and metaphorical frontiers that lie not only between countries but between people as well. He explores the customs, attitudes and circumstances that can encircle us and cut us off from one another, separating brother from brother and the dreamer from her dream. He suggests that some of these frontiers can be as fine and fragile as the most delicate crystal, whereas others can be as strong as plate glass windows. Sometimes they are clear, sometimes cloudy, sometimes stained -- with lipstick, with blood, or with simple misunderstanding.

Fuentes calls this work a novel in nine stories. Each one stands alone, but the author weaves certain characters into most of them, presenting them in different contexts so that we gradually come to understand them more thoroughly -- just as we do when we hear people discussing someone we know. The stories deal mainly with

characters who are in some way influenced by the relationship between Mexico and the United States, and are set both along the border and farther afield, in New York, Chicago and Spain. Fuentes treats his characters and events like glass tiles, gradually piecing them together to form a huge, sprawling mosaic which looks like a history of modern Mexico.

The uneasy marriage of American demand and Mexican supply is one of the underlying themes of the book. The title story places a young Mexican man in Manhattan on a cold winter's day. He is a middle class victim of Mexico's recent economic roller-coaster ride of dizzy illusions, broken promises and shattered dreams. Deprived of a more dignified source of income, he signs on with a team of contract workers flown in for the weekend to clean office buildings in New York. In this highly symbolic story, Fuentes directs his plot to an extraordinarily powerful climax when the two protagonists come together in mid-air for a kiss separated by a sheet of glass.

In "Girlfriends," Josefina represents the strength of character and spiritual depth of Mexico, qualities which are so often overlooked by those who cling to traditional stereotypes. She is the housekeeper for Miss Amy Dunbar, and in spite of her employer's prejudice and meanness, Josefina's moral compass never flickers off course. The throat-tightening tenderness of the final scene is a beacon to brighten the darker moods of some of the other stories.

"Pain" is the story of a Mexican medical student who lives with an American family while studying at Cornell University. The author peels away layer after layer of illusion and comfortable deceit until all the characters are seen as they really are. Fuentes taps a mother lode of cynicism when the lady of the house is impressed by her guest's implied pedigree: "Charlotte never called Juan Zamora Mexican. She was afraid of offending him."

But these are not simple tales of ugly Americans and downtrodden Mexicans. Although the stories deal to some extent with the treatment that Mexico endures at the hands of its northern neighbor, Fuentes speaks very strongly about inequality, injustice and corruption within Mexico. He points to the lines that divide social and

economic classes, the government from the people, those who are educated from those who are not, even one generation from another.

Fuentes can also be playful and funny. In “Spoils” we find the author as satyr and satirist, spoofing the American way of cooking and eating in an earthy, bawdy and quite hilarious style. His biting wit is bubbling as he rails against gringo cuisine, gleefully taking potshots at easy targets with unashamed delight. He includes a deadpan reference to himself which is reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's amusing signature cameos.

The novel ends with “Rio Grande, Rio Bravo,” a sort of epic musing on the major themes of the book. The author gathers up many of the characters he has woven into the preceding stories and flashes their lives before our eyes in a dramatic and rather apocalyptic finale. He closes with a reworked version of the Mexican saying, “Poor Mexico, so far from God and so near to the United States.” Apparently wanting to say that a successful partnership is based on equality, Fuentes distributes this idea more fairly by writing, “Poor Mexico, poor United States, so far from God, so near to one another.”

Reviewer Beckwith is a writer and translator living in Austin.