

Interview with Carlos Fuentes

March 2001

By Tony Beckwith

Special to the Austin American-Statesman

Carlos Fuentes is a busy man. He was in Mexico City when we spoke by phone, preparing for a trip to Brazil and then a visit to Austin, where he will deliver a lecture at the LBJ Library later this month.

As I listened to the phone ringing at the Fuentes residence in Mexico City, I thought about the man I was calling to interview. We had met once, about four years ago in Dallas, where he spoke at a conference of the American Literary Translators Association. I then accompanied him to Austin, and escorted him to the various functions he was scheduled to attend over the weekend in connection with the 1997 Book Fair. I was surprised to realize how clear my memories of that encounter were. I remembered him as urbane, dapper, and brisk. He had well groomed aristocratic good looks; piercing dark eyes under a patrician brow, a strong jaw, and dark hair combed back in the classic Latino style, with a touch of gray at the temples. He was trim for a man in his late sixties, with a straight back and square shoulders. He was gracious and accommodating, without a hint of condescension, which was a relief. His demeanor was serious most of the time, but when amused he chuckled appreciatively and flashed an engaging smile.

The phone was answered, and after a pause he came on the line. "Hola Tony ¿qué tal?" We exchanged greetings in Spanish and then I asked if he minded talking in English so that I could record his exact words for this article. "Of course, of course, it's always a pleasure to speak English" he said, courteous as ever. I found myself wondering if Carlos Fuentes ever felt ill at ease. It was hard to imagine.

He has led a cosmopolitan life. Born in Panama in 1928, he spent his early years in Washington, D.C., where his father was with the Mexican diplomatic service. The young Fuentes was educated in Mexico, the United States, and various Latin American cities. He completed his university studies in both Mexico City and Geneva, then went on to a distinguished career that included serving as

Mexico's Ambassador to France. But he is best known in this country as a writer, the prolific author of an eclectic body of work that has earned him a host of prestigious awards from many institutions and countries around the world.

His latest book, *The Years with Laura Díaz*, is a portrait of twentieth-century Mexico as seen through the eyes of a woman. Why a woman? Fuentes refers to his own history: "I come from a family of strong, battling women. During the summers when I was young I was sent to live with my grandmothers in Mexico City so that I wouldn't forget my Spanish, and they told me most of the stories I write about in this book. So the stories have a feminine source to begin with. Laura Díaz grew up in a very macho-oriented society. Mexico comes from three misogynist sources, the Aztecs, the Spaniards, and the Arabs — and you can't be more misogynist than that. It is actually quite remarkable to consider that in fact the greatest poet that Mexico has ever had was a woman, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the nun who lived and wrote in a convent here in the early eighteenth century. In my book, Laura Díaz has an uphill struggle. She makes mistakes, she gives herself to passion, she abandons certain obligations, and in the end she succeeds in finding herself. It is a tale that I think has come to fruition in our time. I wouldn't say that Mexican womanhood is fully liberated, because that hasn't happened anywhere in the world, has it? And yet these days, if you look at Mexican society, at the Cabinet, at Congress, the professions, the arts and literature, you will see a bevy of women holding the highest positions in the land. This is an enormous change from a hundred years ago, when Laura Díaz was born, and it is something we must celebrate in Mexico."

The idea of celebrating change is certainly relevant to current US-Mexico relations, which Mr. Fuentes will speak about during his forthcoming visit to Austin. His biographical notes say that 'he is intimately in touch with both the gringo and the Latino souls, and he speaks with a particularly international voice.' Although Latinos do not consider the term 'gringo' to be derogatory per se, some Americans still find it offensive. Fuentes' *The Old Gringo* was the first novel by a Mexican author to become a best seller in the States, so I asked him about the origins of the term. "The most widely accepted version comes from the British occupation of Buenos Aires, in the very early eighteenth century, when the British soldiers sang a

marching song called 'Green Grow the Rushes O.' Ever since then all foreigners, not just Americans are called 'gringos' in Argentina. The term evolved from the words 'Green Grow' in that song, and then spread throughout Latin America."

And what of public opinion in Mexico these days, now that President Fox has celebrated his first hundred days in office? "This new government has a lot going for it because it's the one that overthrew the seventy-one year authoritarian regime of the PRI. So there is a great element of hope in the country that previous governments have not enjoyed. In certain quarters, of course, there is concern that right now President Fox is too hypnotized by the Zapatista movement. The law of Indian rights is certainly an all-important law, and I hope the Congress passes it. But Subcomandante Marcos is a very impatient man. I hope he understands the workings of a pluralistic democracy." There was gravity in his voice, and I was reminded that he has long been involved in the peace process in Central America, and is a member of Mexico's Commission on Human Rights.

Latinos have historically been typecast in the United States in certain specific ways, which Fuentes explored in his earlier book *The Crystal Frontier*. What effect will the latest demographic statistics have on these long-entrenched views? "The classic Latino stereotypes are being diluted, if not entirely washed away, by the fact that there are thirty-five million Spanish-speaking citizens in the United States. Politicians have to make speeches in Spanish now, because the Latino vote is so important. Latinos in the US are no longer just poor migrants, but increasingly are affluent middle class citizens. You can't stereotype Latinos in the old ways when you have knockouts like Salma Hayek, Jennifer Lopez, and Penelope Cruz on your screen." The names ripple easily off his tongue, followed by a roguish chuckle. "And, if I were a woman I would add Ricky Martin, of course. I mean, they aren't tamale vendors or anything like that, are they? There is also a far greater cultural presence these days. The best thing Latin America has to offer is its culture."

How do you explain the fact that cultural expression is so openly celebrated in Latino society, as compared to the more restrained attitudes found in this country? "The United States is officially an egalitarian, democratic country which would seem, in certain minds,

to mean that you exclude eggheads. Some very intelligent American politicians have not been able to demonstrate their cultural level for fear of being considered eggheads, and therefore elitist. One example is Adlai Stevenson, and another is Bill Clinton who is an extremely well read and intelligent man, but he can't show it."

Speaking of eggheads, Fuentes has written more than twenty books and one inevitably wonders which of them might be his personal favorite. "*Terra Nostra*. It is the hardest to read. Many readers shy away from it, but my best readers are the readers of *Terra Nostra*." He will soon be attending the book fair in Poland, and I asked how his books were received in Europe. "Very well," he said, "except in England, where they only like crime stories and biographies." He chuckled again.

And finally, what does one sacrifice in order to do the kind of work to which Fuentes has devoted his entire life? "Following one's vocation isn't a sacrifice. I claim to be a person who has never done a day's work in his life, because I've always done what I like to do, which is to write. That's not work, although it's an extraordinary pressure and challenge sometimes. But, as an individual, you know that you have not loved enough. As much as you have tried to give love, you have not given enough. You know that internally. You have given a lot of time to your work, and a lot of time to your wife and your children and your friends, but not enough. If this were a perfect world, we wouldn't write novels or poems or make films. We would live them, through love of others."

Interviewer Beckwith is a writer and translator living in Austin.