

Life and death meld as a son seeks his father

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By TONY BECKWITH / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

After reading *Pedro Páramo* I wondered whether I'd been dreaming. Or whether perhaps I had inadvertently stepped through a mirror into a mysterious dimension where the boundaries between life and death had melted away, and where "time had turned backward." Such is the mood created by Juan Rulfo in his 1955 novel.

Rulfo (1918-1986) was by no means prolific, but his work was so intensely original that he is considered one of the most important writers to have come from Mexico, and, indeed, Latin America. He is credited with pioneering the style that became synonymous with Latino fiction in the mid-20th century: writing with a magical, surreal touch that challenged the literary conventions of his day.

The story begins with a deathbed scene: A son promises his dying mother that he will go in search of Pedro Páramo – the father he never knew. He meets a guide on the road who accompanies him on the final descent to his mother's childhood home, "a town that smelled like spilled honey." Once there, he is drawn into the murky shadows of a ghost town, a grim landscape strewn with metaphors and inhabited by the souls of the restless dead who roam the village and the graveyard, still tormented by their troubled lives.

Pedro Páramo
Juan Rulfo; Margaret Sayers Peden, translator; Josephine Sacabo, photographer (University of Texas Press, \$35)

In a disembodied flow of thoughts and descriptions, we sense rather than hear what's going on, "but silently, the way you hear words in your dreams." We meet the ruthless, wealthy landowner and the one woman he loves, who chooses the path of madness over the tortured reality she is destined to live. We witness the inner struggle of the village priest, beholden to his benefactor and not relevant enough to sustain the faith of his parishioners.

Death and despair loom large in this drama, not surprisingly since it is set in the 1920s, when Mexico was enduring the turbulent aftermath of her savage revolution. Though Rulfo writes, "we can't lift up our eyes because they're filled with shame," he actually does, frequently, giving us beautiful descriptions of this blighted land, and the wind and the rain and the sky, "filled with fat stars, swollen from the long night."

This classic novel reappears in a splendid new edition, magnificently illustrated with a whole gallery of haunting photographs by Josephine Sacabo. The English translation is by Margaret Sayers Peden, who deserves *un aplauso* for her faithful interpretation of Rulfo's lyrical prose.

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