

Current Comments®

Gabriel García Márquez Receives the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature

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It surprises most readers of *Current Contents*® (CC®) to learn that ISI® covers the arts and humanities literature. Obviously, readers of *CC/Arts & Humanities* (CC/A&H) know that we do. Nevertheless, as far as these essays are concerned, CC/A&H readers must often feel that we neglect their interests. The fact is, however, that our readers in the sciences outnumber those in the humanities by at least 100 to one. This ratio may not be characteristic of the typical academic institution, but it is a fact of life we cannot ignore.

I say this by way of introducing this atypical essay about an important literary figure. From long experience, I have learned that even the most single-minded organic chemist or engineer may appreciate an occasional reminder that there is something in the world besides science or technology. Furthermore, I like to remind them that there are important connections between the two cultures. And besides, ISI is also the purveyor of *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*™ (A&HCI™) and *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI®). These tools permit us to study scholars in a unique way. They also provide me with the hubris to comment upon a figure such as Gabriel José García Márquez. Of course, there will be some readers who will feel that this essay is no more daring than my forays into other fields in which I am not an expert.

But in these exercises, we perceive our role as that of an investigative journalist. With considerable help from many ISI colleagues, we have discussed the significant work of each of the Nobel prizewinners in science, economics, and literature since 1979.¹⁻³ We are covering the 1982 awards in five separate essays.⁴⁻⁶ Recently, we discussed the work of economist George J. Stigler.⁷ This concluding essay for the 1982 awards discusses the prize in literature. García Márquez was honored for his stories about the imaginary village of Macondo. These stories reflect, with bewildering, surrealistic, yet convincing authenticity, the human riches and poverty of Latin America.⁸

The Nobel prize in literature is awarded annually by the Swedish Academy in Stockholm. The academy is the literary counterpart of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, which presents the awards in chemistry and physics. The Swedish Academy's literature selections have sometimes been the subject of criticism and debate in the past. Certainly, not all of the literature prizewinners are among those writers most often cited in the scholarly literature. But it should be pointed out that the output of even great artists and writers may be more erratic than that of Nobel laureates in the sciences, who are generally known for the steady production of important articles throughout their careers. For example,

Elias Canetti, the 1981 literature prizewinner, published his first novel, *Die Blendung (Auto-da-Fé)*,⁹ in 1935. But between 1938 and 1960, he published almost nothing at all.¹⁰ It is unsurprising, therefore, that he did not appear in our study of the 100 most-cited literary figures of the twentieth century.¹¹

But the Nobel prize itself often serves as a spur to scholarship concerning the winner. Indeed, it is common for literary authors to become increasingly cited as their work is studied and appreciated by scholars. Thus, literature laureates may eventually become highly cited. In Canetti's case, most of the 100 citations to his work came in the period just prior to and immediately after his selection for the literature prize. This is not to imply that citation data do not have validity in the humanities. Among the 100 most-cited literary authors in our last study,¹¹ 24 have already been awarded the Nobel prize. Many more are still eligible.

No elaborate explanations, however, are required to justify the selection of García Márquez as the 1982 literature prizewinner. You might even say that we told you so much in previous essays. The world's best-selling author in the Spanish language, García Márquez was identified as eligible for the Nobel prize in our study of the twentieth century's most-cited literary figures.¹¹

Much of García Márquez's writing is political satire, and has aroused interest in scholars throughout the world. Not surprisingly then, citations to his work are not restricted to scholars in the humanities. Social scientists often refer to his stories as well. Thus, according to *A&HCI* and *SSCI*, García Márquez has been explicitly cited over 300 times since 1966, the earliest year for which such data are available. Almost 20 percent of these citations were found in social sciences journals. Over 175 were to the original Spanish-language editions. Al-

most 120 cited the English translations, while the rest were divided among French, Italian, Russian, German, and Portuguese versions. Over 80 citations came from journals published in Spanish.

The number of citations to García Márquez's work is unusually high for a literary author. But it is especially so for one publishing primarily in Spanish, since neither the *A&HCI* nor the *SSCI* claims to be comprehensive for Spanish-language journals. Even so, his best-known work, *Cien Años de Soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude)*, 1967,¹² which has sold ten million copies in 32 languages, has been cited over 175 times since 1967 in various editorials, interviews, critiques, book reviews, notes, and biographical items. One hundred of these citations were to the Spanish-language edition, 65 to the English, and the rest divided among the French, German, Italian, and Russian versions. Over 50 came from Spanish-language journals. In the discussion that follows, we have indicated the number of citations received by each of García Márquez's novels and certain of his other works. All data were obtained from the *A&HCI* and *SSCI* data bases.

García Márquez was born on March 6, 1928, in the village of Aracataca, near the northern Caribbean coast of Colombia. The eldest of 16 children, he was raised until age eight by his maternal grandparents. His grandmother's stories of ghosts, spirits, and ancestors, combined with the military tales of his grandfather, a retired army colonel, greatly influenced García Márquez's development as a writer.

His first efforts at writing came at the age of five, when he was given a toy printing press. Little hindered by his inability to spell, García Márquez turned out a page of gibberish daily, which he sold to his indulgent grandfather for one

centavo. Later, he began to write down his grandparents' stories in comic strip form. In high school, García Márquez acquired a reputation as a writer, although he "never in fact wrote anything" of consequence, as he put it in a 1981 interview for the literary journal *Paris Review*.¹³ Still, he continued, "If there was a pamphlet to be written or a letter of petition, I was the one to do it because I was supposedly the writer." It wasn't until García Márquez read Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*¹⁴ in 1946, while attending the University of Bogotá, that he began writing seriously. His first short story was published a year later in the literature supplement of the Bogotá newspaper *El Espectador*.

On April 9, 1948, the assassination in Bogotá of a national political leader touched off a civil war that sputtered for a decade. Referred to as *la violencia*, the war bled the country and took the lives of perhaps 300,000 people. The war affected García Márquez deeply, politicizing his writing and serving as source material for three books, including *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The war forced García Márquez to leave Bogotá for Cartagena, where he resumed his studies and took up journalism. In 1950, he moved to Barranquilla, where he wrote a column for the daily *El Heraldo*. The experience of rubbing elbows with other journalists and writers in local cafés and bookstores continued his literary development. It was during this period that he first read the authors who were to influence his later writing: William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce.

The influence of Faulkner is evident in the first of García Márquez's major works, a novella entitled *La Hojarasca* (*Leaf Storm*, first published in 1955; translated into English and published in the collection *Leaf Storm and Other Stories*¹⁵ in 1979). The story centers on

the funeral of a reclusive village physician and the desire of the town's citizens to avenge themselves on his corpse for a wrong they believe he committed. According to many literary critics, the complexity of *Leaf Storm*'s narrative and its gothic phrasing and atmosphere are clearly Faulknerian.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ So too is the imaginary village of Macondo, introduced in this story, which is often compared to Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha County." However, according to Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, author of perhaps the most searching and authoritative critical study of García Márquez's work to date,¹⁹ García Márquez's stories are far more accessible to the average reader than many of Faulkner's works. They benefit from an exuberant sense of humor wholly absent from Faulkner's stories.¹⁹ Vargas Llosa, a great novelist in his own right, is best known for his novels, *The Green House*²⁰ and *Conversation in the Cathedral*.²¹

While writing *Leaf Storm* in 1955, García Márquez moved back to Bogotá and took a job as a film critic and reporter for *El Espectador*, which continued to publish his short stories over the years. During the year of *Leaf Storm*'s publication, he was assigned to a beat in Europe that eventually took him to Paris. There he wrote *La Mala Hora* (*In Evil Hour*),²² which he made little effort to have published. (An edited version appeared in 1962; an authorized edition did not appear until 1966.) *In Evil Hour* is a story of political oppression in a small town during the days of *la violencia*. (We could find only a few dozen citations to this work, possibly because our data is limited to the post-1966 period.) One of the characters in the book is a retired army colonel who spends his days awaiting the arrival of his pension in the mail. The character so intrigued García Márquez that he put *In Evil Hour* aside to

write a novella devoted to the colonel. The resulting work, *El Coronel No Tiene Quien Le Escriba (No One Writes to the Colonel)*,²³ was first published in a Colombian magazine, *Mito*, in 1958, and as a book in 1961. After finishing it in 1957, he went to Caracas, Venezuela, where he worked for various periodicals and continued to write short stories.

Although *Leaf Storm* and García Márquez's other early work had brought him recognition among critics as a writer of extraordinary talent, he had not yet attracted much attention outside literary circles. That changed, however, with the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967. In a 1973 interview with William Kennedy for the *Atlantic*,²⁴ he said that the complete first chapter of the book suddenly came to him while driving his car between Aca-pulco and Mexico City, where he had moved in 1961 and where he still makes his home. Upon his return home, he instructed his wife not to distract him with any problems—especially concerning the state of their finances—and shut himself away eight to ten hours a day for the next 18 months. "I didn't know what my wife was doing," he said, "and I didn't ask any questions. . . . We. . . lived as if we had money. But when I was finished writing, my wife said, 'Did you really finish it? We owe \$12,000.'"²⁴

One Hundred Years of Solitude spans six generations of the Buendía family, founders of the mythical town of Macondo. In this spectral village, flower petals fall like raindrops from the sky, children are born with little pigs' tails, dictators seem immortal, and memory vanishes from one day to the next. In one of the more memorable scenes in the book, Rebeca Buendía is levitated heavenward while folding bedsheets outdoors near her washline. Her sister-in-law can only grumble that the sheets,

which rose with Rebeca, are now lost forever.

More recent works by García Márquez include: a novella entitled *La Increíble y Triste Historia de la Cándida Eréndira y de Su Abuela Desalmada*²⁵ (*The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother*, 1972, republished in 1978 in the collection, *Innocent Eréndira, and Other Stories*);²⁶ *El Otoño del Patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1975);²⁷ and *Cronica de una Muerte Anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*),²⁸ published in its entirety in the March 1983 issue of *Vanity Fair*,²⁹ and more recently in book form as well. *Autumn of the Patriarch* has been cited in at least 75 editorials, interviews, book reviews, critiques, and notes since its publication. Over 35 quoted the Spanish edition, and 25 quoted the English translation. The rest are divided among the French, Italian, and Russian editions. Almost 20 of these came from journals published in Spanish—undoubtedly only a fraction of the possible sources. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, in spite of the recent date of its publication, has already received more than 20 citations, of which almost half were to the Spanish edition.

In the humanities literature, the majority of the articles citing García Márquez's work consists of book reviews, editorials, and interviews. A significant number also came from in-depth analyses, commentaries, and essays concerning various facets of García Márquez's work. For example, an article by García Márquez's English translator, Gregory Rabassa, Queens College, New York, discusses the blending of the literary and journalistic traditions in much of García Márquez's writings, and in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* in particular.³⁰ "What unites so much of García Márquez's writing," according to Rabassa, "is the

sense of inexorability, of fatefulness. Things often come to an end that has been there all the while—in spite of what might have been done to avoid it—and often [do so] mysteriously and inexplicably.... [*Chronicle*] shows many aspects of life and literature and how one is essentially the same as the other: life imitates art."³⁰

A 1981 article in *Latin American Literary Review* by Gene H. Bell-Villada, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts, discusses the significance of the names of García Márquez's characters and his narrative patterns.³¹ Bell-Villada notes that the repetition of names in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* helps illustrate the personality traits linking the book's characters. Michael Sexson, Montana State University, Bozeman, argues that García Márquez's juxtaposition of realism and fantasy denotes an attempt to write in the style of various former periods without adopting the cultural assumptions of those periods.³² A 1982 article by Eduardo González, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, in *Modern Language Notes*, published by Johns Hopkins, analyzes the structure of García Márquez's prose.³³

Many literary articles which cite García Márquez do not deal with strictly literary concerns. Such articles include, for instance, a comparison of García Márquez's treatment of death and mourning in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with the way death is experienced in the real world.³⁴ It was written by Laurence M. and Laura Porter, both of Michigan State University, East Lansing, for a special issue of *Mosaic*, a literary journal published by the University of Manitoba, Canada. The issue was devoted to topics concerning death and dying. An article by Howard M. Fraser, College of William and Mary, Williams-

burg, Virginia, discusses ritualistic violence in society, and examines the motif of cockfighting in Latin American literature³⁵—including García Márquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel*. An essay³⁶ by S. Meckled, University of Essex, Colchester, England, in *Crane Bag*, a literary review journal, examines the psychological elements in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Leaf Storm*, *Autumn of the Patriarch*, and García Márquez's earliest short stories. One of these is the psychic split of the self by the ego as a defense mechanism against the fear of death.

A number of authors in the social sciences also refer to the works of García Márquez. These include articles on the role of literature in Latin American and Third World politics.³⁷⁻³⁹ One article in *Social Praxis* by E. San Juan, Brooklyn College, New York, notes that literature reflects the dynamic political processes in the developing countries.³⁷ The relationship between Latin America and the developed world is explored in two other articles,^{40,41} including another by Bell-Villada. His paper discusses the communication gap between the intellectuals of North and Latin America.⁴⁰ The use of literary works in teaching Latin American geography⁴² is discussed by Don R. Hoy, University of Georgia, Athens, and Gary S. Elbow, Texas Tech University, Lubbock. The authors argue that properly selected literary works can spark student interest in regional geography.

Fundamentally a storyteller in the tradition of his grandparents, García Márquez stresses that he is not interested in conveying deep, hidden messages or in handing down moral judgments, but simply in reporting the behavior of his characters.¹³ Thus, his early stories were written for his friends. "In general," he told *Paris Review*, "I think you usually do write for someone. When I'm writing,

I'm always aware that this friend is going to like this, or that another friend is going to like that paragraph or chapter—always thinking of specific people."¹³

But *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has made writing "terribly hard work, more so all the time," as he told journalist Rita Guibert in an interview for her book on major Latin American literary figures, entitled *Seven Voices*.⁴³ Much of his difficulty stemmed from an acute awareness that, after the astonishing success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he was no longer writing only for friends, but for millions of strangers. This upsets and inhibits him so much that "every letter I write weighs me down, you can't imagine how much."⁴³ Indeed, in his interview with *Paris Review*, García Márquez confessed, "On a good working day, working from nine o'clock in the morning until two or three in the afternoon, the most I can write is a short paragraph of four or five lines—which I usually tear up the next day."¹³

One hopes that in spite of these difficulties, García Márquez can continue to write of the magical Latin America he created almost 30 years ago. As Rabassa

notes, "Of contemporary Latin American writers, García Márquez is probably the most accomplished. Certainly, he is at the forefront of the new, original novelists coming out of Latin America today."⁴⁴ Rabassa believes that the literature prize recognizes not only García Márquez but also the entire group of contemporary Latin American writers represented by García Márquez and others, such as Carlos Fuentes and the late Julio Cortázar. "García Márquez and the others have taken the novel to places it had never gone before," says Rabassa. "The Latin American novel had not really come into its own until this group—and García Márquez in particular—revolutionized it."⁴⁴

This completes our look at the 1982 Nobel prizewinners in science and literature. In the near future we will begin our series on the 1983 Nobel prizes, including the literature award to William K. Golding.

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