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Colombia's brilliant successors to García Márquez



After Gabo: the world has changed since Gabriel García Márquez's heyday. Photograph: Guillermo Arias/AP

A long-awaited authorised biography of Gabriel García Márquez, *A Life* by Gerald Martin, is out next week. Yet, more than a quarter-century after his Nobel prize, ensuing generations of Colombian writers have adapted their styles to a changed reality. Their voices too should be heard.

When García Márquez began writing in the 1950s, Colombia was largely rural. But Macondo's banana plantations are worlds from the downtown skyscrapers and sprawling shanty towns of the capital Bogotá. Jorge Franco, in his 40s, is among writers embraced by the 1990s urban movement known as "McCondo" (as in McDonald's, Apple Macintoshes and condos). As the Medellín-born Franco told me recently in the cafe of the new Gabriel García Márquez Cultural Centre in Bogotá's colonial quarter of La Candelaria, his generation respectfully threw off the magic realist mantle of "Gabo".

Franco's bestselling novel *Rosario Tijeras* (1999) bracketed him as a "narco-realist" - though a highly lyrical one - and was made into a film. Looking back to the most violent period in Medellín, before the drug lord Pablo Escobar was killed in 1993, its focus was a teenage "sicaria", a hit woman for a cartel. His next novel, *Paraíso Travel* (2001) - the film version of which has been this year's box-office hit in Colombia - traced an illegal immigrant's journey to New York.

The turmoil of war and drug-trafficking, displacement and emigration, has remapped the country since Gabo's heyday. Evelio Rosero is among writers taking part this weekend in a Colombian cross-arts festival, Colombiage, at London's Riverside Studios. His haunting novel *The Armies* (2007), published by MacLehose press on November 6 in a translation by Anne McLean, is about the war still being fought in the countryside, despite the record of President Álvaro Uribe in making cities safer. It was based on news bulletins and tales from some of the country's 3.8 million "desplazados". In a high-rise Bogotá hotel, Rosero told me he was spurred on by the rise of paramilitaries and private armies, and "the unarmed being gunned down by the armed". His elderly protagonist is the "memory of a time that's vanished - the shock of an older person horrified by the world a new generation is creating."

That new world is another reason to pay heed to these writers.

Reflecting on decades of conflict and extremity can lead to profound truths. Juan Carlos Botero is the son of South America's most famous artist, Fernando Botero. His mother was kidnapped (then freed) in 1973, and since 2000 he has lived in Miami, where we met. One of his interests is the imperceptible step into bloodshed: "It's very easy for the line to be crossed - it begins casually. Then it's too late." In a short story, two teenagers stumble on a police torture chamber, growing fascinated, then bored. Botero says, "if you're bombarded with violence, you become numb to it, and finally a participant. People try to solve domestic issues that way. It becomes a culture. Yet as a writer, you have to add something more than the anecdote - a deeper truth."

That culture is also questioned by Mario Mendoza, whose psychological thriller novel *Satanás* (2002) became a hit film last year. It was based on the Pozzetto massacre of 1986 in Bogotá, when a Vietnam veteran murdered 29 people, mostly strangers, before committing suicide. For Mendoza, whom I met in a bar in La Candelaria, the novel was an exorcism. As a friend of the killer (a fellow student whose thesis was on Jekyll and Hyde), he was beset by guilt at the thought that he might have averted the massacre. Driven to writing urban, apocalyptic fiction about the "dark side of Bogota", Mendoza sees political violence as reflecting "domestic violence, joblessness, what happens in streets, buses, in your house".

Not all these writers are yet translated. But that, as we pay due homage to Gabo, is all the more reason to lend them an ear.

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