Let’s Talk About It

LIBRARY DISCUSSION SERIES

Voices of Latin American and Latino Literature

Sponsored by the North Carolina Humanities Council and the North Carolina Center for the Book
IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY, both Latin American and Latino writers began to attract wide audiences in countries throughout the world. This series allows us to hear voices that speak in several different languages, introducing us to cultures that are in some cases new to us, and in some cases new to them. How we “call” their literatures is also a complex matter requiring some basic definitions.

The novels by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a native of Columbia, and Isabel Allende, born in Peru of Chilean parents, represent Latin American literature. Works in this literature were originally written in a Latin based language, the primary language spoken in the author’s homeland. These novels must be translated into English for most American readers. Latino literature, on the other hand, refers to works written originally in English by writers who perhaps immigrated to the United States or were born here, but who have deep roots in Latin America. We meet Julia Alvarez, who was born in the US, returned with her family to the Dominican Republic, but came back to the US when she was ten. We meet Esmeralda Santiago, who grew up in Puerto Rico but in her early teens immigrated to New York City. And we meet Cristina Garcia, who also came to the US as a child from her home in Cuba. Thus both Latin American and Latino literatures present voices from several countries that are often divided and diverse within themselves as well.

How far we will travel in each book varies too. Allende, Garcia, and Santiago trace their characters’ migrations from one land to another, while Alvarez and Garcia Marquez embed us in the particular struggles of one town or one country. Folkways and foodways, religious and racial beliefs,
everything from courtship rituals to burial rites, differ as radically in each of these books as Cuba differs from Chile. Each author, we realize, is writing not only about a unique culture but about how we understand the concept of “culture” itself. Culture can be the face of individual self-expression and nurturing communities, but also an impersonal force capable of spreading violence and destruction. Thus each book confronts us with many voices, but at the core with one common, universal humanity.
Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* is an historical novel recreating the circumstances ending in the murder of the Mirabel sisters, revolutionaries in the Dominican Republic during the dictatorship of Raphael Trujillo. The sisters, active in the resistance movement, were killed by Trujillo henchmen in the autumn of 1960. Their commitment to freeing the Dominican Republic from his reign of terror inspired their countrymen, who named them “the mariposas,” or the butterflies, for their beauty and bravery.

Alvarez creates each sister’s first person voice in turn to tell different parts of their dawning awareness of the horrors facing their island home. We meet Patria, Minerva, and Maria Teresa as each decides to join the underground, but we begin and end with the voice of Dede, the only sister to stand apart from their activism, and the one who remains to keep memories of their courage alive. Alvarez fully explores the complex political realities that swept up the sisters and their families, but she particularizes her characters’ everyday lives with a warmth that only a strong imagination can provide. She captures the emotions that history so often omits and highlights the role of women so often ignored. The Mirabel sisters, like girls everywhere, long for love and prioritize family, but they also hope to find fulfilling work and to build a better future. Thus the novel has a feminist vision as well as an historical one.

*In the Time of the Butterflies* also contains echoes of Julia Alvarez’s own family history. Born in 1950 in New York City, she returned with her parents to the Dominican Republic when she was an infant, but her father’s activism forced them to flee back to America when she was ten years old. The Mirabel sisters were martyred shortly after their departure. Alvarez says that her return to the US was the transforming event in her genesis as a writer. Although in other works she portrays challenges that face Latinos trying to assimilate in America, *In the Time of the Butterflies* is set completely in the Dominican Republic, honoring four countrywomen who embody the struggle to end violence against women everywhere.
Cristina Garcia’s novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, is told through several voices, primarily those of a Cuban grandmother, Abuela Celia, her daughters Felicia and Lourdes, and her granddaughter, Pilar. After Fidel Castro comes to power, Lourdes insists that she, her husband, and Pilar must move to America. Felicia, her children, and Celia remain in Cuba where their experiences reflect Cuba’s diversity of race and religion. Matriarch Celia mourns her children’s unsettled lives and relives her own adventures in letters to an early lover (Gustavo) that are interspersed through the novel.

Chronological time moves both forwards and backwards in this novel, just as the characters move between countries and cultures, in disruptive waves that are held together by the narrators’ overlapping memories and dreams. Garcia incorporates flashes of magic realism in a manner similar to Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Both writers create vivid dreamscapes that play against very realistic pictures of how their characters cope with everyday challenges and times of great suffering and loss.

In the sections that portray Castro’s Cuba, his stranglehold on his citizens’ lives is woven into the narrative, balanced against songs, foodways, and folkways that capture alternative Cuban histories and customs. The Cuban members of Celia’s family, as well as those exiled to New York City, struggle to define who they want to be personally while they confront the demands of both family and government. Local and international politics, as well as changing values and artistic traditions within and beyond borders, are forces that shape and sometimes even overpower individual dreams and relationships.

The title of the novel, and the viewpoint of Pilar, reflect Garcia’s own bilingual identity. Language, she shows, is not only how we communicate but also the primary marker of our selfhood. Garcia was born in Cuba in 1958 but moved with her parents to New York City when she was three. In college she focused on international studies, then became a journalist, and finally turned to fiction writing. *Dreaming in Cuban*, the first of six novels to date, was a finalist for the National Book Award and reflects her Latino experience of living both within and between two cultures.
Isabel Allende’s *Daughter of Fortune* tells the story of Eliza Sommers, an orphan supposedly “left on the doorstep” of an upper class British brother and sister living in the Chilean city of Valparaiso. In spite of a strict upbringing, at fifteen a pregnant Eliza runs away to find her lover, who has left to gain his fortune in California. His “gold fever” is connected to one of many meanings of the word “Fortune” — wealth, luck, opportunity, or destiny — all of which are important to the novel’s main characters. Eliza’s mysterious parentage means that she embodies a “mixing” of identities that will complicate her “fortune” wherever she goes. Almost everyone in the novel is a “transplant” like Eliza, moving not just from one place to another but from one culture to another. Cross-cultural experiences become confrontations with racial and class prejudices not just for Eliza, but many others, including her lifelong Chinese friend, Tao Chi’en, her lost lover, Jaoquin, and the immigrants who come to California to try to make a new life.

In addition to dramatizing prohibitions based on race and class, Allende in *Daughter of Fortune* considers one other powerful barrier to good fortune: the patriarchal codes that restrict women’s freedom and opportunities. In wild and wide open California, Eliza reinvents herself during several adventures. With her disguise as a deaf mute boy, she acknowledges that, as a woman, she has neither voice nor power. She must use her wits to forge her own escape from her gendered destiny, insisting on a “fortune” that will not be incompatible with her desires as a woman.

Allende embraced both feminism and multiculturalism as a journalist exiled from Chile. Forced in 1973 to flee the repressive regime of General Pinochet, she has since lived in many countries, finally settling in the US, where she became a citizen in 2003. She always writes her works in her native Spanish, beginning with her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, published in 1982. Along with this work, *Daughter of Fortune* and *Portrait in Sepia* (2004) constitute Allende’s “California Trilogy.” Together these novels (not written in chronological order) form a sprawling narrative that moves back and forth across time, countries, and continents, beginning with Eliza’s travels in 1843 and ending with the military coup in 1973 that began Allende’s own creative odyssey.
Sierva’s dual heritage embodies the clash of cultures within many Latin American countries, dramatized by Garcia Marquez in a fictional South American seaport. This place, like many of his settings, is made a nightmare through stifling colonialism, the enslavement of indigenous and African peoples, and the relentless fanaticism of the Church. The town and its inhabitants, animal and human, are rendered with Garcia Marquez’s trademark mixture of fantasy, reality, horror, and transcendent beauty. In this world, love is as demonic as hatred, but the truly malevolent demons are bigotry, superstition, fear, and cruelty. At home, in the streets, and in the convent, Sierva (a name that means both “servant of God” and “slave”) encounters extremes of self-indulgence and sacrifice, fecundity and sterility, love and pain.

Garcia Marquez, who died in April of 2014, was born in 1928. He grew up in a large family in a remote district of Colombia, where he was taught family legends and also learned his country’s long history of political upheaval. His early career as a journalist made him a close observer of the life around him. As he began writing fiction, he remained grounded in realism but also added the dimensions of the grotesque and the phantasmagorical, becoming his continent’s, and the world’s, most famed practitioner of the genre known as “magic realism.” He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982. One of his contemporaries has written, “Garcia Marquez is speaking about all the people who are marginal to history, who have not had a voice,” and that indeed, “he gives a voice to Latin America.” He wrote in his native Spanish language, and while he lived all over the world, the voice that we inherit celebrates most what he called the “outsized reality” of Latin America.
Esmeralda Santiago’s autobiography begins with her memory of a favorite food associated with her childhood in rural Puerto Rico. As an immigrant in Brooklyn, she remembers her youthful freedom to explore the tropical wilderness and to feel secure with a loving, if explosive, family. During school years in more urban neighborhoods, she endured the teasing of other children as well as the force of “Yankee” dominance. Still, she remained loyal to the customs and stories that held her family together and became a very “un-girly” fighter when challenged.

When her parents’ volatile relationship finally ends, Esmeralda’s “Mami” takes her children to join her mother and a burgeoning Latino community in Brooklyn. Here the full force of change hits the thirteen-year-old, who as the oldest child must take the lead in navigating the barriers of a completely different, often hostile culture. A new language and social norms challenge Esmeralda just as she is beginning to experience the sensations of being “almost a woman.” Thus this book is not only an autobiography but a “bildungsroman,” a coming of age story where a girl creates a new identity by meeting the tests of an alien environment. Santiago has also called her saga an epic, an adventure tale that follows the exploits of a hero as she overcomes various obstacles. In Esmeralda’s odyssey, she is paradoxically both aided and thwarted by her strongwilled mother, a model of courage but also an example of how past habits can be as inhibiting as the imperatives of the new and unknown.

Santiago was born in 1948 in Puerto Rico and lived in both rural Macun and a more urban district of San Juan until, in 1961, she moved with her mother and seven siblings to Brooklyn. She began to spread her wings when she was accepted to New York City’s Performing Arts High School. After graduation, she worked as an actress and secretary, eventually gaining admission to Harvard University. Her writing career grew out of her training as a documentary filmmaker. *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993) is the first book of an autobiographical trilogy, followed by *Almost a Woman* in 1999 and *The Turkish Lover* in 2004.
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