

# Love in the Time of Cholera: Magical Realism

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

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[Richard Eder, "The Love-Dream of a Prodigious Sleeper", *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*, April 17, 1988]

The city, ancient, decaying, tropical, lies at the mouth of Colombia's Magdalena River. Weeds grow in the cracks of 17th-century palaces; the sewers are open, and the corpses of victims of endemic cholera float downstream from the hinterland. It is a city "where flowers rusted and salt corroded."

It is scene of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's magnificent new novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a book that moves a triple romance, spanning more than a half-century, through a rich, comical and totally still world that could be the dream of a prodigious sleeper lashed to the bed.

Garcia Marquez's universe is organized around a fundamental element: stasis. It replaces oxygen, it produces a brilliant anaerobic life. It has a tacit political connotation. The evolution of liberal, capitalist, consumerist Westernism has submerged the authentic life of the Latin American Third World, while remaining alien to it. Perhaps only a revolution will deliver it. Garcia Marquez, a leftist, doesn't say. Meanwhile, it will remain inert.

Inert in everything except the imagination. Magic realism is what moves when nothing else does. It is what a stage director looks for when he instructs a performer to keep the hands or feet still; to bind them, so that the features or shoulders can make a more expressive performance. Garcia Marquez's art is a mighty transfiguration of these bound movements.

There is no external order. There are no proportions, limits or hierarchies of logic or feeling. Everything is tangled together, and when you finger a thread, you have no idea what it will be attached to. There are no roads in this artist's jungle because there are no destinations. There is profuse life that goes on in spite of the absurd and ramshackle forms assigned to it.

The sole principle of order belongs to Garcia Marquez. It consists of the extraordinary sweetness he finds in his characters; a sweetness that provides energy, and does not cloy, thanks to his feverish spirit of play and his willingness to let his tall tales grow taller.

*Love's* 50 years center around the turn of the century. The city, loosely modeled on a mix of Cartagena and Barranquilla, is a microcosm of Colombian provincial society with its extremes of extravagantly moneyed families, abject poverty, recurring civil war between liberals and conservatives, a superficial faith in progress, and a monumental inertia.

A Spanish galleon lies, according to legend, at the bottom of the mouth of the Magdalena, with a cargo of gold and jewels valued in the billions. (As in any dream, all figures are vastly inflated; one of the three main

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characters numbers his love affairs at more than 600.) The image hovers throughout: a fabulous sunken treasure stuck like a plug to bottle up the energies of a people and their river.

The three sides of the love triangle are occupied by three prominent citizens. There is Juvenal Urbino, scion of a mighty family, the town's leading doctor and the herald of all kinds of progressive ideas that he has used to damp down the periodic epidemics of cholera.

Fermina Daza, his wife, is the daughter of an immigrant Spaniard, a nobody who made a fortune in various unsavory ways. Snubbed at first by local society, she has become one of its pillars and the patroness of its artistic life.

Florentino Ariza, a poet and musician by temperament, has worked his way up to wealth and power in the riverboat company founded by his uncle. He has been hopelessly in love with Fermina since they were both teenagers, but since a man needs relief, he has prowled the city for 50 years picking up women.

So much for their public personas. But in Garcia Marquez's country, the externals have no solidity. Juvenal, Fermina and Florentino are fey and unpredictable spirits, haunting rather than inhabiting their positions, their clothes, their habits and even their dispositions. The play of the book is the play of these free spirits in and out of their own constrained lives.

The book starts a year or two before the climax that will end it. Juvenal, in his 80s, falls off a step-ladder while trying to catch his pet parrot. He dies with such an expression of terror that plans for a death mask have to be canceled. His terror is not for himself but for the thought that Fermina, after 50 years, will have to manage alone.

After the funeral, Florentino appears with his black suit, stiff collar and a strand of hair brilliantined across his bald pate. He reiterates his lifelong passion to Fermina—they are both in their 70s—and in shock and outrage, she throws him out.

It is an explosive beginning, though here as always, Garcia Marquez laces his detonations with diversions and sidetrips. We then go back in time, following the trio from youth to old age. Their stories snake in and out against the tropical background.

Florentino, pale and nervous, gets a shaky start with his uncle. His business letters are poetry; he switches to telegraphy and works his way up. He is splendidly suited to business, in fact, except when it involves writing. It is the author's conceit that the poetic mind is ideal for a businessman's incursions upon reality. Florentino spots Fermina, closely chaperoned by her aunt. He gets up the courage to write to her. They correspond passionately, even when her father finds out and sends her to stay with relatives in the backland. Florentino uses his fellow telegraphers around the country to relay messages.

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The passion is total, and totally abstract. Upon her return, Fermina suddenly sees Florentino in all his awkwardness; she switches to the urbane and assured Juvenal, just back from Europe. Perhaps the finest thing in the book is Garcia Marquez's story of a long, fractious, funny and powerful marriage. The quarrels are memorable; an argument over whether Fermina has put soap in the bathroom leads Juvenal to sleep at the hospital for several months.

All the servitude, conventionality and weight of a provincial Latin American marriage is there; yet underneath it, two free spirits flutter in utter originality. Society's two pillars are light as air, as erratic as a tropical breeze. Florentino, meanwhile, pursues his 600 affairs, many of them quite lunatic. Their chronicling eventually seems repetitious and even burdensome, despite their wit and quirkiness. But if the richness of Garcia Marquez's textures feels briefly excessive, the book's ending has a brilliance and audacity that more than makes up for it.

After Juvenal's death, and after Florentino's unceremonious rejection, the cycle of courtship begins all over again. He writes Fermina letter after letter. They are cool and philosophic, as befits a septuagenarian, and slowly they fill the emptiness that Juvenal's death has made in his widow's life.

Even so, it takes 140 letters—Garcia Marquez's extravagant numbers again—before she replies. A slow courtship ensues; a seduction that is gentle, quiet and astonishingly adapted to the infirmities of two aged bodies. The author gives us geriatric sex aboard riverboat, and makes it deeply comic and deeply moving. Finally, through a series of bizarre incidents, the ancient couple are set to cruise for the rest of their lives up and down the Magdalena. It is entirely real and entirely magical. It is not so much an ending as a triumphant departure in a balloon. *Love in the Time of Cholera*, beautifully translated by Edith Grossman, may be Garcia Marquez's best work since *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. If the tigers in his Rousseau-like moonscapes are less startling, because we are not seeing them for the first time, the moon, lighting his three lovers, is whiter, more mysterious and more transforming.