

THE LIFE

of Nobel prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez blurs the lines between fantasy and reality. His grandmother was a secret witch doctor who often predicted the arrival of guests. His grandfather was a respected war veteran who once killed a man in a duel. And then there's the loose bull that plowed into his family's kitchen, an incident foretold by an elderly talking parrot.

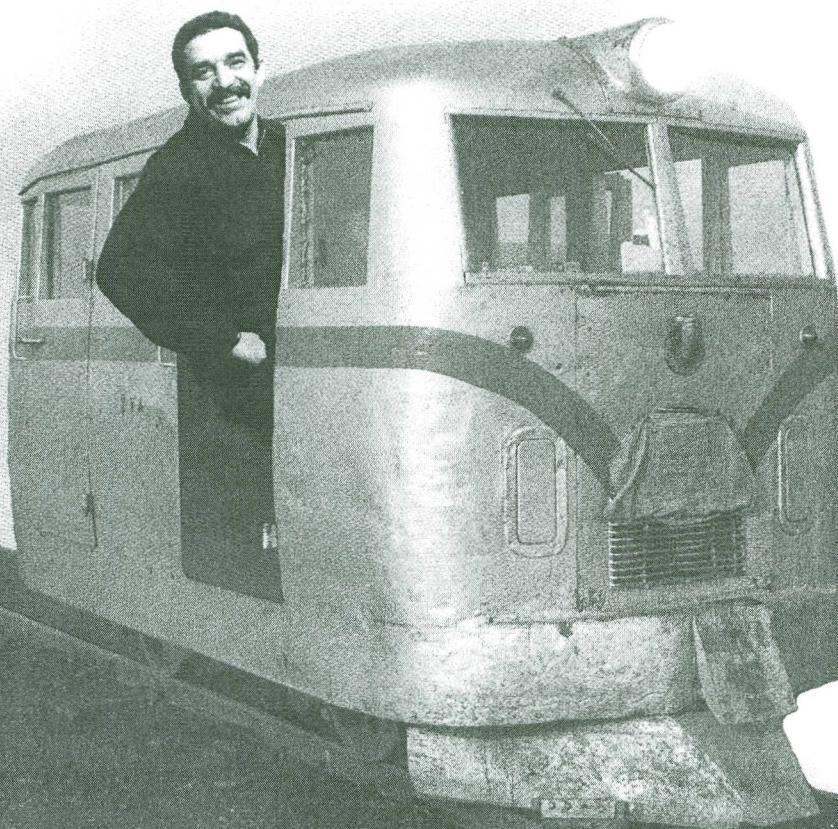
Such events, while strange, provided García Márquez with ample fodder for his epic Latin American novels, and they inspired him to reinvent the genre of magical realism.

EDUCATING GABITO

Gabriel García Márquez grew up in Aracataca, Colombia, a hardscrabble banana town that was barely a stop on the railway. His father, an undereducated telegraph operator, had fallen in love with a girl beyond his status—the daughter of Colonel Nicolás Márquez Mejía. Her family vigorously opposed their union, but that only strengthened the couple's resolve to marry. They maintained a secret relationship, communicating by telegraph and passed notes and stealing moments together at Mass. In 1926, after a priest lobbied the family on their behalf, the pair finally married. They had their first child, Gabriel, in 1927. Only a few months later, they left him to live with his grandparents while they moved to the port city of Barranquilla to open a pharmacy.

As a boy, he was simply "Gabito"—a shy child who blinked compulsively when he was nervous. He struggled to learn how to read and developed a habit of drawing his stories rather than writing them down. But he was the apple of his grandfather's eye. Whatever disdain the Colonel once had for his daughter's marriage, it had been softened by Gabito's birth. As García Márquez described it, his grandfather "took [him] to the circus and the cinema and was [his] umbilical cord with history and reality."

His grandmother, the indomitable Tranquilina Iguarán Cotes, made an equally strong impression, "always telling fables, family legends, and organizing our life according to the messages she received in her dreams." García Márquez credits her with his "supernatural view of reality." This was a woman who went blind in her old age, but successfully convinced her doctor that she could still see.



When it came time to send off the manuscript to his publishers in Buenos Aires, he could only afford to mail half of it. **Half was enough.**

When he examined her, she described in detail all of the objects in her room, convincing him that her vision had returned. In truth, she'd simply memorized the contents of the room.

When García Márquez was 10 years old, his grandfather died. So, Gabito and his two siblings went to live with their parents in Barranquilla. It was a difficult time for the boy, having only known his parents as infrequent visitors.

Things grew more tense as his mother continued to have children (she bore a total of 11), and his father relocated the family to the town of Sucre. Eventually, Gabito ended up back in Barranquilla, where he was enrolled at a prestigious Jesuit secondary school. García Márquez was a brilliant scholarship student, known to wear his father's old suits and recite long works of poetry from memory.

His education continued outside the classroom, as well. At age 13, he was introduced to the world of women when he lost his virginity to a prostitute. (She later informed him that his younger brother was a frequent visitor to her bed.) Two years later, he began an affair with an older married woman, who came up with an ingenious system for getting him to do his schoolwork: Failing grades meant no sex. He graduated with honors and went on to win a scholarship to a prestigious college outside of Bogotá.

Not surprisingly, the seeds of García Márquez's later novels were all planted in his youth. His grandfather, grandmother, parents, siblings, assorted aunts and uncles—even the prostitute—all make appearances in his work. His hometown of Aracataca would famously become the Macondo of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and *Leaf Storm* (1955), and his parents' troubled courtship was thinly veiled as the centerpiece of *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985).

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLVENCY

In 1947, 20-year-old García Márquez decided to abandon law school and pursue writing. Much to his father's dismay, he dropped out and became a reporter for *El Heraldo*, a liberal newspaper in Barranquilla. This was during the days of *La Violencia*, a period of bloody civil unrest that threatened to tear Colombia apart. With daily reports of rape, murder, and the government's oppressive sanctions on the press, it was a challenging time to be a journalist. Earning just three pesos a story, García Márquez often went hungry.

He was also writing a novel. In his spare moments, García Márquez tapped out the manuscript for *Leaf Storm*. It took seven years to find a publisher, but the book finally came out in 1955. Although it garnered good reviews, the novel never sold well. That same year, García Márquez serialized the true account of Colombian sailors who'd been shipwrecked. The news story directly contradicted a government report of the incident and revealed that corruption in the navy had led to the sailors' deaths. García Márquez became so unpopular with the government that the newspaper sent him abroad for his own safety.

He spent the next several years desperately poor in Europe, living mostly in Rome and Paris and briefly in communist Eastern Europe. While overseas, he wrote *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1961) and *In Evil Hour* (1962), had a torrid affair with a Spanish actress, and continued to starve. When he finally returned to Colombia, he married his longtime love, Mercedes Barcha Pardo. García Márquez had first proposed to her when he was 18 and she was only 13. After more than a decade of

courtship, most of which had been spent writing letters to one another, she consented to marry him.

García Márquez continued to work as a journalist, first in Havana at the start of the Cuban Revolution and then in New York. From there, he, his wife, and his infant son traveled by bus to Mexico. The trip opened his eyes to the American South and the homeland of William Faulkner, one of García Márquez's greatest influences. (Some literary scholars have suggested that García Márquez lifted much of his style and lyricism from Faulkner.) It also inspired him to begin his breakthrough book, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

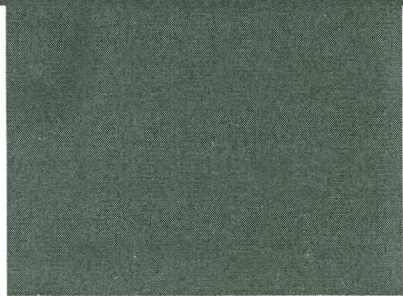
On June 26, 1961, Gabriel's family arrived at a railway station in Mexico City with their last \$20 and "nothing in their future." García Márquez started writing, and in just 18 months, he'd completed the novel that would change his life. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he used all of the storytelling techniques he'd picked up as a reporter. As he would later tell *The New York Times*, the "tricks you need to transform something which appears fantastic, unbelievable into something plausible, credible, those I learned from journalism ... The key is to tell it straight. It is done by reporters and by country folk."

Although the writing came quickly, it was not easy. To support his family, García Márquez sold his car, his hair dryer, and anything else that would bring in some cash. When it came time to send off the manuscript to his publishers in Buenos Aires, he could only afford to mail half of it.

Half was enough. With *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez exploded onto the literary scene. While still living in Mexico, he quickly emerged as Latin America's most beloved writer and was affectionately nicknamed "Gabo."



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In Colombia, he became a symbol of national pride. The book would go on to sell more than 35 million copies and be translated into at least 35 languages.

¡VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN!

Despite the fanciful nature of his work, García Márquez's novels are firmly grounded in the politics of Latin America. He addresses guerrilla warfare, drug trafficking, the failures of communism, the evils of capitalism, and the dangerous meddling of the CIA. After the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the author began to use his status to get more involved in politics. He started publicly castigating the United States for using the "war on drugs" to intrude in Latin American affairs. And since the 1970s, he has acted as an intermediary between the Colombian government and leftist guerrillas.

García Márquez also found himself in high-powered company. While reporting on the Cuban Revolution, he became friends with Fidel Castro, and over the years, their relationship has deepened. Fidel has cooked him spaghetti dinners. García Márquez, in turn, has described the Cuban president as a "king" and a great literary man. He even showed Castro an early manuscript for *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) so that Castro could point out flaws in the plot. The close relationship has led critics to call the author Castro's "literary hatchet man." However, García Márquez's influence wasn't enough to stop the

Cuban government from convicting and executing one of his friends for treason in 1989.

In a 1982 article in *The New York Times*, the author explained that, as a Latin American writer, it's his duty to be politically active. "The problems of our societies are mainly political, and the commitment of a writer is with the reality of all of society, not just with a small part of it," he explained. "If not, he is as bad as the politicians who disregard a large part of our reality. That is why authors, painters, writers in Latin America get politically involved."

García Márquez's works continue to be politically charged. In 1996, he published *News of a Kidnapping*, a journalistic account of 10 people abducted by Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar, and the convoluted machinations involved in rescuing them. The same year, he wrote an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* recounting the Elian Gonzalez situation, in which his sympathies were clearly aligned with Cuba: "The real shipwreck of Elian did not take place on the high seas, but when he set foot on American soil."

To a certain extent, García Márquez's political activism is also about cultivating his own legend. In the mid-1970s, the author famously claimed that he wouldn't publish anything again until Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet was no longer in power. Gabo's friends agreed that the declaration was made for a "calculated effect." Moreover, García Márquez didn't even stick to it. He published *Love in the Time of Cholera* not long after that.


GABO IN HIS LABYRINTH

These days, Gabriel García Márquez, like his friend Fidel, is getting old. In the 1990s, he had a cancerous tumor removed from one of his lungs and lived through

a bout of lymphatic cancer. Then, in July 1999, rumors of his impending death grew after someone took a sentimental poem about dying and attached García Márquez's name to it. The poem quickly turned into a hoax e-mail that circulated the world and unleashed a hailstorm of headlines. It also touched a raw nerve. As García Márquez has gotten older, his output has slowed. Readers have been waiting since 2002 for him to produce the second part of his memoirs. His most recent novel, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, was published in 2004 to critical and commercial success. But at just 115 pages, audiences were left craving more. Even the controversies García Márquez has stirred up lately have been disappointing. In 2004, the author was banned from the International Congress of the Spanish Language for allegedly suggesting that they should scrap their focus on spelling, which he called "that terror visited on human beings from the cradle onwards."

In his 2008 biography of García Márquez, Gerald Martin revealed that the author has been suffering from progressive memory loss—no doubt a serious problem for a man who calls himself a "professional rememberer." Martin writes, "It seemed clear to me that he could no longer write books."

And then there are García Márquez's own statements. In 2006, he told the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia*, "I have stopped writing. Last year was the first in my life in which I haven't written even a line." Yet recent reports contradict that. When the Colombian paper *El Tiempo* called the 82-year-old author this spring to ask if the rumor of his retirement was true, García Márquez replied, "Not only is it not true, but the only thing I do is write." He concluded by saying, "I'll know when the cakes I am baking are ready." 🍰

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WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

Many of the scenes in Gabriel García Márquez's novels come straight out of his own strange life. Here are a few examples.

The Little Girl Who Eats Dirt

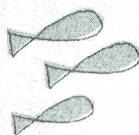
When he was 3 years old, García Márquez's little sister Margarita moved in with Gabito and his grandparents. She refused to speak or eat, and the family wondered how she didn't starve. It wasn't long before they discovered the answer—she'd been sustaining herself on dirt from the garden and the whitewash off the walls. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the orphan character Rebeca does the same thing when she moves in with the Buendia family. She eventually gets better, just like Margarita did, once she “surrendered to family life.”

The Banana Plantation Massacre

One of the more shocking passages in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* describes the massacre of 3,000 men, women, and children during a workers' strike at the Macondo banana plantation. There was, in fact, such a plantation near García Márquez's childhood home in Aracataca, and he grew up hearing about a massacre that supposedly happened when he was an infant. No one seemed sure how many people died (1,000 or 3,000), but the official government record, which was suspect for several reasons, showed only nine deaths. In the novel, the government denies the event altogether.

Death by Gold Cyanide

At the beginning of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the aged Dr. Juvenal Urbino is called to the scene of a suicide. The victim is a crippled war veteran who has killed himself using gold cyanide vapors. García Márquez witnessed a similar death firsthand. As a child, his grandfather brought him to meet “the Belgian,” a World War I veteran who'd lost the use of his legs. The image of the man—his crutches laid neatly next to his cot and his Great Dane lying dead next to him—was recreated in detail in the novel's opening scene.



The Solace of Little Gold Fish

The Colonel, García Márquez's beloved grandfather, was also trained in metallurgy and spent many years as a jeweler, crafting small gold fish that became a symbol of his family. Those same fish, crafted by Colonel Aureliano Buendia, make a memorable appearance in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The Mark of Ash Wednesday

One of García Márquez's most vivid childhood memories was one Ash Wednesday when the illegitimate sons of his grandfather visited his family with crosses of ash still on their foreheads. This visceral image inspired the 17 illegitimate sons of Colonel Aureliano Buendia and their mysterious assassinations. Each of them died after being identified by the permanent mark of the cross on their foreheads.