

Gabriel García Márquez interviews Subcomandante Marcos

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A Zapatista Reading List

by Gabriel García Márquez & Subcomandante Marcos

The following remarks are excerpted from a longer interview between Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, representing the Mexican magazine Cambio, and the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos. The full text appeared in Cambio earlier this year.

García Márquez: Do you still have time to read in the middle of all this mess?

Marcos: Yes, because if not...what would we do? In the armies that came before us, soldiers took the time to clean their weapons and rally themselves. In this case, our weapons are our words, so we have to depend on our arsenal all the time.

García Márquez: Everything you say--in terms of form and content--demonstrates a serious literary background on your part. Where does this come from and how did you achieve it?

Marcos: It has to do with my childhood. In my family, words had a very special value. The way we went out into the world was through language. We didn't learn to read in school but by reading newspapers. My mother and father made us read books that rapidly permitted us to approach new things. Some way or another, we acquired a consciousness of language not as a way of communicating with each other but as a way of building something. As if it were more of a pleasure than a duty or assignment. When the age of catacombs arrives, the word is not highly valued for the intellectual bourgeoisie. It is relegated to a secondary level. It's when we are in the indigenous communities that language is like a catapult. You realize that words fail you to express certain things, and this obliges you to work on your language skills, to go over and over words to arm and disarm them.

García Márquez: Couldn't it be the other way around? Couldn't it be this control over language that permits this new era?

Marcos: It's like a blender. You don't know what is thrown in first, and what you end up with is a cocktail.

García Márquez: Can we talk about this family?

Marcos: It was a middle-class family. My father, the head of the family, was a rural teacher in the days of [La'zaro] Ca'rdenas when, according to him, they cut off teachers' ears for being communists. My mother, also a rural teacher, finally moved, and we became a middle-class family, I mean, a family without any real difficulties. All of this in the provinces, where the cultural horizon is the society pages of the local newspaper. The world outside, or the great city, Mexico City, was the great attraction because of its bookstores. Finally, there were book fairs out in the provinces, and there we could get some books. Garci'a Ma'rquez, Fuentes, Monsiva'is, Vargas Llosa--independently of how he thinks--just to mention a few, they all came through my parents. They made us read them. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was meant to explain what the province was in those days, and *The Death of Artemio Cruz* was to explain what had happened to the Revolutio'n. [Carlos Monsiva'is's] *Dias de Guardar* to explain what was happening to the middle class. To some extent, although naked, our portrait was *The City and the Dogs*. All those things were there. We were coming out into the world in the same way we were coming to know literature. And this shaped us, I believe. We didn't get to know the world through a newswire but through a novel, an essay or a poem. And this made us very different. This was the looking glass that our parents gave us, as others might use the mass media as a looking glass or just an opaque glass so that no one can see what is going on.

García Márquez: Where was Don Quixote in the middle of all these readings?

Marcos: They gave me a beautiful book when I was 12--a hardcover. It was *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. I had already read it but in these juvenile editions. It was an expensive book, a very special present that I was waiting for. Shakespeare arrived after that. But if I could say the order in which the books arrived, it would first be the "boom" literature of Latin America, then Cervantes, then Garci'a Lorca, then there was a time of all poetry. Thus, you [pointing to Garci'a Ma'rquez] are partly responsible for this.

García Márquez: Did the existen-tialists and Sartre come into all this?

Marcos: No. We arrived late to that. Explicitly existentialist and, before that, revolutionary literature we arrived at already very "molded"--as the orthodox would say. So that by the time we got to Marx and Engels, we were already very contaminated by the sarcasm and humor of literature.

García Márquez: There were no readings of political theory?

Marcos: In the first stage, no. From our ABCs we went on to literature and then on to theoretical and political texts about the time we got to high school.

García Márquez: Did your schoolmates think you were, or could be, a communist?

Marcos: No, I don't think so. The most they ever said to me was that I was a radish--red on the outside and white on the inside.

García Márquez: What are you reading now?

Marcos: I have Don Quixote by the bedside, and I regularly carry around Romancero gitano, by Garci'a Lorca. Don Quixote is the best book out there on political theory, followed by Hamlet and Macbeth. There is no better way to understand the tragedy and the comedy of the Mexican political system than Hamlet, Macbeth and Don Quixote. They're much better than any column of political analysis.

García Márquez: Do you write by hand or on the computer?

Marcos: On computer. Only on the march I had to write by hand because I had no time to work. I write a rough draft, then another and another. You think I'm joking, but it's like the seventh draft by the time I'm done.

García Márquez: What book are you working on?

Marcos: What I was trying to write about was absurd, it was an attempt to explain ourselves to ourselves, which is almost impossible. We have to realize that we are a paradox, because a revolutionary army doesn't propose to seize power... All the paradoxes we have encountered: that we have grown and become strong in a sector completely alienated from cultural channels.

García Márquez: If everyone knows who you are, why the ski mask?

Marcos: A bit of leftover coquetry. They don't know who I am, and they don't care. What's in play here is what Subcomandante Marcos is, and not what he was.

Subcomandante Marcos or Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, was the nom de guerre used by the main ideologist and spokesman of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), a Mexican rebel movement fighting for the rights of the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Subcomandante Marcos, the character, the constructed persona, the hologram, the "colorful ruse," was created by the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee of the Zapatistas, because "[the outsiders] can only see those who are as small as they are." The Zapatista Challenge" Interview: Subcomandante Marcos, by Medea Benjamin. City Lights Books, San Francisco 1994. p. 70. "Gabriel Garca Mrquez and Subcomandante Marcos (July 2, 2001). "A Zapatista Reading List". Garca Mrquez did few interviews in subsequent years, at least for English-language publications. I like to think it was my fault. But he did talk to me again." By now, the name Gabriel Garca Mrquez is probably familiar even to those who read the daily paper but never pick up a novel. Newspapers have covered the story of Leaf Storm (La Hojarasca), which received such a favorable critical response, with a zealotry befitting its status as the greatest literary achievement our country has seen in months.