



# History Lessons from Macondo: Magical Realism from Cólera to COVID

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*That Gabriel García Márquez has left an imprint on the world goes without question. But reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* during a global pandemic is instructive in its own right. This brief text explores how three major themes—progress, solitude, love—take on new meaning and perhaps even afford a way to navigate this moment of crisis. Presented in the form of history lessons, I look to Gabo to glean a sense of hope and guidance amid the profound uncertainty that impresses upon us.*



On May 6, 2020 the *New York Times* published a letter from Rodrigo García to his father, Gabriel García Márquez. “Not a day goes by” he writes in the letter, “that I don’t come across a reference to your novel ‘Love in the Time of Cholera,’ or a riff on its title or to the insomnia pandemic in ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude’.” (1) Reading the works of García Márquez—Gabo, as he is affectionately known in Latin America—during the pandemic resonates in a particular way. Approaching six months (but what may as well be six years) of living in a state of emergency due to the novel coronavirus outbreak, some things have become clear about the nature of the virus, but a lot remains uncertain. Given that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) neither explicitly address the trials of life in isolation nor offer a strictly historical account of a pandemic, what is it about this moment that makes reading Gabo so captivating? The generalized sense of uncertainty, along with medical precarity, and increasingly visible economic disparities set the backdrop for the constant barrage of news and social media which relay relatively little information about how to go about adjusting to this ‘new normal.’ Trends indicate a recent surge in popularity in studying the history of the 1918 Spanish Flu Epidemic, or in reading Daniel Defoe’s 1772 *A Journal of the Plague Year*, or even Giovanni Boccaccio’s somewhat more obscure collection of short stories published under the title *Decameron* in 1353 during Europe’s Black Plague. These all seem like intuitive choices given the context. But aside from these strictly historical sources, literature also provides a way of navigating the crisis. There is, for example, the existentialist take in Albert Camus’ *The Plague* (1947), or the fantastical, post-apocalyptic Stephen King novel *The Stand* (1978), two texts that figure prominently on lists of reading material that proliferated during the first couple months of confinement. Perhaps it is merely a form of escapism, but surely reading whether it be history or literature, is also part of an endeavor to devise a plan of action. As the old adage tells us, historical models often harbor lessons for the present. They can provide us with a tangible set of practices to be implemented, with appropriate modifications of course. The practice of quarantine to mitigate the

spread of disease, for example, has been available since at least the 14th Century. If one thing has become clear, it is that at a time when our most banal and routine habits, not to mention our very immediate social and political lives have been abruptly interrupted, history just as much as literature, offers solace and reassures us that, *this too*, will pass.

Perhaps of the fact that Gabo's work does not classify easily, being neither strictly historical nor exclusively literary, rather, finding a home somewhere in between, is the key to its success this pandemic. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has become perhaps the most canonical example of the genre *magical realism*. With the novel's almost immediate success and international popularity, *magical realism* became closely associated with a specifically Latin American literary style. Despite debates in literary circles about how exactly to define the genre and classify works therein, the brand of *magical realism* that Gabo employs certainly does seem to capture something quintessentially Latin American. At stake in these debates is the way fiction and non-fiction are woven together, held in tension, and then reconciled in some ways. While the 'realist' aspect of magical realism signals its relationship to reality past or present, the 'magical' component is not quite so obvious. The way the term 'magical' gets defined is integral to understanding the genre. At least for Gabo, what is 'magical' about *magical realism* is part of an effort to describe a particular experience of reality, one that is deeply indebted to Latin America's colonial history. Thus, for him, it would be a mistake to read *magical realism* as the juxtaposition of fantasy with reality. *Magical Realism* gained popularity during the Latin American literary 'boom' in the 1950's and 60's, a time characterized by intense social and political turmoil. A look at this history in broad brush strokes should help to contextualize the emergence of this literary genre. In Colombia, the decade between 1948-1958 is referred to as *la violencia*, marking a gruesome ten-year civil war between Liberals and Conservatives. Then there are the social and political dreams of the Cuban Revolution (1953-1959) which continue to reverberate today. A series of *coup d'états* were implemented throughout the region with the help of the CIA (Guatemala 1954, Nicaragua 1956, Brazil 1964, Argentina 1966). This was followed by the implementation of Neoliberal 'development' plans deployed by the United States which helped to instill military dictatorships in the 1970's and 1980's under the mandate of Operation Condor (Chile's Pinochet, Argentina's Videla, Brazil's Castelo Branco, Paraguay's Stroessner, Bolivia's Suarez, among others). This relatively thin, forty-year slice of history provides a sampling of the kind of social upheaval and violence that continue to characterize the political scene in Latin America centuries after colonization and more than one hundred years after independence.

Notably, this history operates alongside philosophy and science to solidify the methods through which reliable knowledge about the world is obtained. Any aspects of reality that do not register with these epistemic forms are relegated to the domain of literature. *Magical realism*, then, is a kind of response to this history. It can be seen as an attempt at describing the contours of a reality that diverges from the one that has been molded by our more ‘trustworthy’ sources of knowledge. By moving away from strict historical narrative, without detaching from this world in literary fantasy, *magical realism* remains in tune with the impact imposed by a particular historical narrative. If themes of circularity, fatalism, isolation, superstition, fanaticism, irrationality, corruption, and violence are prevalent in Gabo’s work, that is because they attest to his pessimism the historians’ history can fully capture Latin America.

At a time when facts and science are so fiercely under attack, a turn to literature may seem irresponsible. Indeed, there is a very real urgency to protect and defend the production of truth, especially in light of the ongoing catastrophic failure to adequately manage the coronavirus pandemic in countries whose leaders openly espouse anti-science sentiments (most notably on this continent, the United States and Brazil). But to the objective here is not to question the nature of historical fact. Rather it is to demystify the ways in which certain ‘official’ histories have erased inconvenient truths as a way of presenting a smooth, uninterrupted, linear narrative. The ongoing battle over facts surrounding particular historical events reveals the status of truth as now more than ever, far from objective or value-free. We can see this in the recent explosion of the use of the term ‘fake news’. What this dispute over facts exemplifies, aside from the value-laden nature of certain facts, is the way facts are put to use for particular political projects. But rather than an exploration of the at times-blurry divide between fact and fiction or myth and history, what is needed at present, is some guidance for navigating uncertainty. It seems that there are some lessons we can stand to learn from the ‘magical’ reality that characterizes Gabo’s Latin America. I would like to propose just three history lessons as they pertain to our present moment of uncertainty.

### **Lesson 1: The cost of progress might just be the erasure of history.**

The arrival of the innocent yellow train in Macondo marks an important moment in its history. Once lost in the midst of the jungle in Colombia’s costal region of the Magdalena, Macondo is suddenly bestowed with the gift of modernity. The train, an important symbol of progress in the industrial era, connects Macondo with the outside world, the coast, the

far-off capital city of Bogotá. Modern technology and scientific innovation that was previously announced annually by a band of travelling gypsies could now be delivered more readily and efficiently by train. Commodities that guaranteed an improved quality of life such as electricity, cinema, hot air balloons, but also people (notably gringos) looking to invest and settle began to arrive in droves. But the backdrop to this much-desired progress foreshadows the sanguinary climax of the novel. The town of Macondo would pay a steep price for the comforts of modernization.

“‘There haven’t been any dead here’ she said. ‘Since the time of your uncle, the colonel, nothing has happened in Macondo’.” (2) This reassurance of decades-long peace in the Magdalena region coincides with the official version of the events that took place on the night of December 5, 1928. Indeed, apart from a speech written by leftist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán the following year, there is no official history of an event on record. United Fruit Company workers had been on strike for several months, requesting improved working conditions, medical assistance, and legal wages in lieu of company scrip. As protests became increasingly violent, an official decree was sent by the civil and military leader of the province, to be read at the town square. But documentation ends there. Expecting settlement, the crowd listened attentively and “in three articles of eighty words [the official] declared the strikers to be a ‘bunch of hoodlums’ and he authorized the army to shoot to kill.” (3) The crowd was given five minutes to disperse the square which had been preemptively surrounded by army personnel wielding machine guns. Chaos ensued. The “panic became a dragon’s tail as one compact wave ran against another which was moving in the opposite direction, toward the other dragon’s tail in the street across the way, where the machine guns were also firing without cease.” (4) Meanwhile, according to the official investigation, the death toll does not surpass an estimated 3 to 5 people. Gabo’s character José Arcadio Segundo recalls a strikingly different scene. The train, “the longest one he had ever seen, with almost two hundred freight cars and a locomotive at either end and a third one in the middle” was piled high with corpses and then “slipped off with a nocturnal and stealthy velocity.” (5) The Colombian army had successfully executed the official order for what is now referred to as *the matanza de las bananeras*, the Banana Company Massacre. The version that lives on as part of the history of the labor movement in Colombia is due almost exclusively to Gabo’s literary rendition.

The enthusiasm for science, alchemy, and astronomy typified in José Arcadio Buendía’s character at the beginning of the novel, mark a stark contrast with this moment of climax. What is widely recognized today in Colombia as one of the largest undocumented massacres in its history, begins for Gabo with the introduction of the innocent yellow train. The only difference between the official version and Gabo’s

history of the Banana Company Massacre is an identification of what constitutes progress. The story of progress that is told by patriots is one of perpetual peace. It requires little more than conversation between level-headed workers unions and the equally rational corporate counterparts. On this account, progress is achieved through a careful negotiation of rights. But at the same time, and perhaps more importantly, this account of progress is measured in terms of technological and scientific advancement. Gabo warns us how these tandem stories of progress are tightly and craftily woven together, that the price of the scientific progress is often precisely what justifies the excision of social rights. And in order to craft this story, historical facts must be carefully chosen, such that they complement and do not contradict the version of progress that everyone so desperately hopes to see. But this narrative of progress will invariably take its toll. Histories comprised of facts that have been carefully picked and curated are like bushels of bananas, the rotten ones must be tossed out to sea to be forgotten.

## **Lesson 2: Solitude exists in many forms, one of which is the loss of memory.**

The loss of memory in Macondo is akin to a fatal virus and must be guarded against at all costs. But when an insomnia plague that is known to invoke the loss of memory is announced, it is not taken seriously at first. Rather than alarm or fear, the impending sleeplessness is actually celebrated. It is treated with a kind of whimsical proclivity and an insistence in carrying on with business as usual. “‘If we don’t ever sleep again, so much the better,’ José Arcadio Buendía said in good humor. ‘That way we can get more out of life’.” (6) But, fear begins to settle in as the effects of insomnia became apparent. The progression of the disease is inevitable:

when the sick person became used to his state of vigil, the recollection of his childhood began to be erased from his memory, then the name and notion of things, and finally the identity of people and even the awareness of his own being, until he and into a kind of idiocy that had no past. (7)

All that could be done was to try and contain the spread from extending beyond the limits of Macondo. Quarantine became mandatory, though it did not promise a cure. As often happens in moments of crisis, fear is overturn with the force of habit, and new daily rituals were instilled in Macondo. This led to an eerily imperceptible transformation of familiar social codes, which then paved the way for an even more fundamental shift, the loss of language itself.

The loss of memory harbors devastating consequences. On a societal level, history requires memory and the vocabulary to articulate memory is effectively what makes history possible. José Arcadio Buendía, the industrious experimenter that he was, took it upon himself to come up with an invention that could remedy the increasingly severe memory problem in Macondo. He called it the “memory machine,” and it resembled something like a history textbook, only it would help to preserve the major life events of each individual inhabitant of Macondo. With the flip of a switch, memories would flash on a screen in sequence. By contrast to his scientific sensibilities, Macondo’s promiscuous brothel matron, Pilar Ternera, proposed an alternative technique. Hers was a trick of mysticism which resembled a tarot card reading, only instead of reading the future, she would read the past in the cards. Rather than making the constant effort to keep reality in check, the insomniacs began living in a world dependent on the deal of the deck. But given the circumstances, maintaining any semblance of a grasp on the past was more comforting than the alternative, a state of idiocy, even if it was known to be not wholly reliable.

Mysticism, like history, is proven effective as a technique for shaping understanding, despite their divergent methods. As such, both ought to be seen as powerful tools, capable of shaping reality. But Gabo warns against a wholesale acceptance of either method, as a complete remedy for the loss of memory. In the end, it would be neither history nor mysticism that posed a cure the insomnia epidemic in Macondo. It was only with a mysterious remedy provided by Melquíades, the wandering gypsy who unexpectedly returned to town one day, that Macondo would recover its memory, its language, its past. As quickly as it had appeared, the insomnia plague was magically eradicated. The lesson being, that without the words to describe a past in common, the entire community would be at risk of spending eternity in solitude.

### **Lesson 3: Against all odds, love.**

The Cholera epidemic lurks in the background of Gabo’s romance novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, until the end where it takes center stage. The novel concludes with the lovers self-quarantined on a steamboat, fraudulently waving the yellow Cholera flag as a means of evading restrictive social mores. Upon arrival at their final destination, the lovers agonize over their immanent return to life in society which would inevitably squander the perfect harmony that they had finally established together in isolation aboard the *New Fidelity*. Ironically protected rather than threatened by the Cholera epidemic, Florentino and Fermina propose to endlessly sail up and down the Magdalena river so as to remain together in perfect isolation. And so it is that after exactly “fifty-three years, seven months, and eleven days and



nights” (8) of relentless unhesitating love, Florentino Ariza is finally able to put rest to the solitude that has plagued him since his youth and ensure a life in old age with Fermina Daza.

While the world spins out of control, isolation sometimes feels like the perfect solace. After all, Florentino and Fermina’s love only flourishes during their extended, self-imposed quarantine, which is in turn made possible by the ongoing Cholera epidemic. In Spanish, the connection between the disease and the character of their love is much more readily apparent, *cólera* being one of the few nouns to change its meaning with a shift in its article. As it were, *el cólera* signals the infectious disease, while *la cólera* is an extreme passion or a violent rage. Because of the nature of their love and the context of the disease, *el cólera* and *la cólera* become curiously intertwined. For starters, the novel is staged during the period of *la violencia* near the town of Cartagena which witnessed two rounds of Cholera epidemics. The combined effects of military intervention and a fifty percent survival rate with the Cholera diagnosis left casualties in perhaps equal numbers. Added to this historic fact, the way Gabo describes Florentino’s passionate love that spirals out of control symptomatically mirrors an advanced stage contamination of Cholera. If there ever was a love so strong that it could not only survive a multidimensional attack of *cólera*, but thrive because of it, then surely hope remains. After all, it was on their first trip up the Magdalena river that the steamboat got stuck for a week. And in the unmoving tropical heat, Florentino Ariza remembered that he “had once read: ‘Love becomes greater and nobler in calamity’.” (9)

History lessons only serve a purpose if they can be put to use to answer a concern pressing on present life. These days, it seems relevant to ask: to what extent does this moment posit a radical break from the past, as opposed to a continuity with the past in march toward an uncharted future? How lasting will the effects of these crises last? Will our ways of thinking and social interaction be permanently altered? Put slightly differently, *just how new is the ‘new normal’ and is it here to stay?* Surely the answer to this this overly simplistic dualism between continuity and rupture, repetition and progress, fatalism and freedom, follows the trend it almost always has. That is to say, the answer is necessarily both. But after sampling three of the most canonical passages from Gabo’s most widely referenced works during the pandemic, one aspect of the present that gets elucidated is a tendency to all to quickly seek resolution, to mask the uncertainty that undergirds even our most fundamental and trustworthy sources of knowledge. Given uncertainty, it seems worthwhile to seek models that speak to different ways of living with tension, or perhaps ways that require a bit of magic to understand reality.



In the sign off to his letter, Rodrigo fondly recalls his father's outlook on life, noting how he could look to the past without losing sight of the present in order to affirm life. According to his son, Gabo was driven by a profound curiosity of the strange ways that humans have invented to interact, build relationships, and connect with one another. Looking at the fundamental instability of the world, a little refrain allowed him to remain stable amid the chaos, a refrain that might resonate in just the right way with the current moment: *nadie le enseña nada a la vida* (nobody teaches life anything). With seven little words, Gabo reveals his insatiable drive to see what happens next, to try and understand what motivates people to react in different ways and give an explanation for their reactions. This little refrain does this without losing the humbling attitude toward life's at times unwieldy unpredictability. Both the drive to know and the resignation to let life take its course persist together in tension in how we navigate moments of crisis. Together, they keep each other in a kind of balance that maintains momentum, going back and forth, as we look to history to teach us lessons about how to act and feel, diligently marking each moment with a touch of the present. In the same way that both the inhabitants of Macondo and the lovers amid calamity constantly learn to escape the pessimistic grips of solitude, we too might learn a lesson or two about how to maintain reality always invested with a little bit of magic.

## NOTES

1. García, Rodrigo. "A Letter to My Father, Gabriel García Márquez." The New York Times. May 6, 2020, sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/opinion/coronavirus-garcia-marquez.html>
2. García Márquez, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1967, 308.
3. *Ibid.*, p.304
4. *Ibid.*, p.306
5. *Ibid.*, p.307
6. *Ibid.*, p.43
7. *Ibid.*, p.44

8. García Márquez, Gabriel. *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Translated by Edith Grossman. New York: Vintage Books, 1985, 348.
9. *Ibid.*, p.338