

BY JESSICA TEISCH

"I discovered very quickly that criticism is a form of optimism," Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012) told NPR's Terry Gross in 1987, "and that when you are silent about the shortcomings of your society, you're very pessimistic about that society. And it's only when you speak truthfully about it that you show your faith in that society."

Fuentes, a towering figure in Latin American and world literature, died May 15, 2012, at age 83. In more than 20 novels, plays, short stories, and nonfiction, Fuentes chronicled a violent, postrevolutionary Mexico where the insurgents had transformed themselves into bourgeois businessmen, the ruling class had grown progressively corrupt, and the nation had increasingly failed to adhere to the ideals that had precipitated the revolution of 1910 to 1920. He combined human comedy, political satire, global history, and magical realism to form a complex, contradictory, and cinematic portrait of Mexican society, politics, and economy. "The imagination exists and social commentary exists," he said. "They are not at war with each other." With Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia, Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru, and Julio Cortázar of Argentina, Fuentes pioneered the experimental Latin American literary movement known as "El Boom" in the 1960s and 1970s.

A glamorous global citizen who hoppedscotched between London, New York, and Mexico, Fuentes was a lifelong adventurer. Born in Panama City to Mexican parents, he spent his childhood in various capital cities, including Washington, D.C., as his father fulfilled his diplomat duties. Fuentes returned to Mexico as a teenager. "In the

tension between my imagination and reality [of Mexico in the 1940s], my literary possibilities as a novelist were born," he said, "because I started dealing with this tension, with this rupture between reality and the imagined that I experienced" (*NPR*). He embraced the bohemian life as a youth and became an outspoken advocate of social justice. Although he initially supported Castro's Cuba and Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution, he was more ideologically rather than politically driven, as reflected in his fiction. Fuentes started to write as he served in various government positions in Mexico and, in the mid-1970s, as Mexico's ambassador to France; he later taught at Brown, Princeton, and other universities, and achieved renown as an eminent public intellectual.

"To speak about Carlos Fuentes is to engage inexorably in Mexican history and culture," Rubén Beltrán, former consul general of Mexico in New York, said, on the occasion of Fuentes's 80th birthday. "We cannot fathom a debate on Mexican literary and humanistic traditions in which his name and work are absent" (*New York Times*, 5/15/12).

MAJOR WORKS

Where the Air Is Clear (1958)

Fuentes wrote his first novel—nothing less than a "biography" of Mexico City—when he was just 30, and it established his reputation as a social critic and novelist. A literary sensation and instant classic (though controversial for its loosely Marxist critique of postrevolutionary Mexico City's inequality), the book combines Mexican myths and contemporary society and draws heavily on interior monologue and explorations of the subconscious. The message of the book: "Mexico must find her origin by looking ahead, not behind."



THE STORY: In this kaleidoscopic portrait of Mexican life in the 1940s and 1950s—from the Spanish, indigenous, and mestizo cultures to the rich and the poor, the workers, the aristocrats, and the intellectuals—Mexico's history represents a compilation of its different characters' pasts and futures. At center is Ixca Cienfuegos, a Greek chorus observer who embodies the Aztec war god and, in seeking revenge for Mexico's overthrow by the Spaniards, hopes to find a suitable sacrifice. Other voices include Federico Robles, a former revolutionary turned millionaire financier; Gladys Garcia, an Aztec descendent and prostitute; a society lady; a wealthy family impoverished after the revolution; and Mexico City itself. Their "confessions" to Cienfuegos address the personal and political upheaval caused by the revolution.

“The words, like streams of hot lava, pour through various levels of society and illuminate a wonderful country that few tourists and perhaps not all Mexicans know. Reading it is in itself an adventure. ... Mr. Fuentes uses Ixca brilliantly to bear witness for the past and to confront characters at crucial moments in their tangled identities.” CHARLES POORE, NEW YORK TIMES,

12/27/1960

Aura (1961)

Aura, a supernatural and horror novella, was initially well received, though it later sparked controversy for its depictions of witchcraft and inescapable love. About the fluidity of time and identity, as well as a parable about Mexican unity and a possible utopia achieved through sexual unions, *Aura* is a chilling tale, masterfully told.

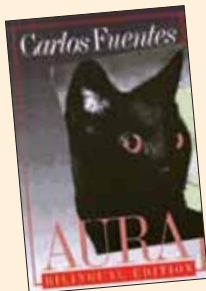
THE STORY: Felipe Montero, a young historian, accepts what appears to be a dream job in a dilapidated house in a poor section of Mexico City to edit the memoirs of General Llorente, the odd, elderly Consuelo's deceased husband. Felipe soon meets her enticing young niece, Aura, and while he organizes the general's papers—which recount late 19th- and early 20th-century Mexican history—by day, he fantasizes about Aura by night. But the general's papers suggest that Consuelo and Aura are not quite who they seem to be, and as Felipe digs deeper into the papers, a terrible eroticism spreads throughout the house. Soon, the secret of the general's memoirs and Felipe's, Consuelo's, and Aura's relationship to each other become terrifyingly clear.

“There is an appropriately ghoulish atmosphere pervading the tale, and there are some telling moments in the depiction of the old woman. So too with Aura—skillfully drawn, the essence of vacillation between her own real self and her possible incarnation of her aunt.” ALEXANDER COLEMAN, NEW YORK TIMES,

11/28/1965

The Death of Artemio Cruz (1962)

Many call *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, Fuentes's fourth novel and a milestone in Latin American literature, his masterpiece. It brought him international acclaim and repute as a leading avant-garde novelist. Making use of experimental narrative techniques (such as variations in perspectives and tense, long interior monologues, and Aztec mythology), the novel touches on Fuentes's trademark themes: the corruption of Mexico's ruling class, the abuse of power, and the failure to implement revolutionary ideals.



The novel was modeled, in part, on Orson Welles's 1941 movie *Citizen Kane*.

THE STORY: In 1959, Artemio Cruz, a powerful, unscrupulous newspaper magnate, land baron, politician, and lieutenant during the revolt against Porfirio Díaz, lies on his deathbed, hovering between delirium and lucidity. In his more coherent moments, he contemplates his tumultuous life and his part in the revolution. He recalls his heroic, revolutionary campaigns, his climb out of poverty through bribery and ruthlessness, the transformation and loss of his revolutionary idealism—and the true love of his life. In the end, Cruz represents the contradictions of Mexican history between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries—the clash between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the powerless—and comes to understand how he destroyed everyone around him.

“It is not the plot, or the subsidiary plots, or the confusing technical tricks that make this novel remarkable, but the scope of the human drama it pictures, the corrosive satire and sharp dialogue, the occasional reach for the stars. ... If you can make your way through the shuffling of timespans, endure the earthy vocabulary and the sentimental counterpoint, you will find within this book a passionate echo of the inchoate protest which causes young Mexican intellectuals to find themselves ... disenchanted with material affluence and yearning for a cause worthy of their devotion.” MILDRED ADAMS, NEW YORK TIMES,

5/24/1964

Terra Nostra (1975)

✦ RÓMULO GALLEGOS PRIZE

Latin for *Our Earth*, *Terra Nostra*, Fuentes's eighth novel, offers a sweeping history of Spain and South America over 20 centuries. Unclassifiable in genre (and equally hard to describe, though we'll try), this epic novel of more than 700 pages blends stories within stories, Spanish and Mexican myths, and magical realism, while asking existential (and ultimately unanswerable) questions.

THE STORY: Though it crisscrosses the centuries, the main event in *Terra Nostra* is the construction of El Escorial, Spain's 16th-century monastic palace just northwest of Madrid. Commissioned by the degenerate Spanish King Philip II, El Señor, the grandly austere edifice originally served as a means of seclusion from the moral chaos of the secular world (and the advent of Protestantism). Fuentes, however, reminds us: “Perfect order is the forerunner of perfect horror,” and his narrative doesn't disappoint. The first part of *Terra Nostra* explores Philip II's family, friends, and intriguing, back-stabbing court. But the central action focuses on two betrayed rebellions, 20 years apart, and follows spiritual, dangerous pilgrimages through the Old World and the New, then back again to relate the pilgrims' stories to the Spanish king.



"The book itself is closed, circular and tightly structured. ... Its conception is truly grand, its perceptions often unique, its energy compelling and the inventiveness and audacity of some of its narrative maneuvers absolutely breathtaking; the animated paintings, the talking mirrors, the time machines and metamorphosing mummies, the fusion of history, myth and fiction ... the variations on themes and dreams, the interweaving or rich, violent, beautiful, grotesque, mysterious, even magical images—not without reason has this book been likened to a vast and intricate tapestry." ROBERT

COOVER, NEW YORK TIMES, 11/7/1976

The Old Gringo (1985)

Like *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, Fuentes's 12th novel explores the corruption of Mexico's elite, the debasement of revolutionary ideals, and the tragic history of cultures in conflict. Loosely based on the disappearance of journalist Ambrose Bierce in Mexico in 1913, *The Old Gringo* was the first novel by a Mexican writer to appear on the *New York Times* best seller list. In 1989, it was made into a film starring Gregory Peck, Jane Fonda, and Jimmy Smits.



THE STORY: In November 1913, the American writer, journalist, and soldier Ambrose Bierce, 71, crossed the U.S.-Mexican border at El Paso and disappeared without a trace. In his letters, he had written that he had the right to pick the manner of his death, and Fuentes suggests that the reason for the old gringo's last adventure south of the border was suicide: he crossed the border to die during the Mexican Revolution. *The Old Gringo* opens with a squad of guerrillas digging up his corpse; the gringo's backstory is then told. Once he crosses the border, his main company includes Tomás Arroyo, one of Pancho Villa's revolutionary generals, and Harriet Winslow, a young American schoolteacher. "Around this unique triumvirate," commented Eyan S. Connell in the *Houston Chronicle* (11/17/1985), "Fuentes weaves his tapestry of injustice, betrayal, conceit, machismo and futility."

"... he has succeeded in wedding history and fiction, the personal and the collective, into a dazzling novel that possesses the weight and resonance of myth. ... In, Mr. Fuentes has found a form and a subject that enable him to exploit his favorite techniques and explore some of his favorite themes (from cultural and Freudian determinism to the nature of reality and art) and give them their fullest expression." MICHIKO KAKUTANI, NEW YORK TIMES, 10/23/1985

Christopher Unborn (1989)

Fuentes wrote this postmodern, magical realist, satirical novel when he was teaching at Harvard; as in *The Death of Artemio Cruz* and *Terra Nostra*, he dissects the heart of Mexico City—the city he loves to hate—to offer an irrever-

ent portrait of his native land. And as in *Where the Air Is Clear*, Fuentes explores how Mexico will enter the modern era and address its social and economic inequalities without betraying its history.

THE STORY: Between January 6 and October 12, 1992 (the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America), the "in utero" Christopher Unborn narrates the soul, spirit, and landscape of modern Mexico City as he explores his own family history and traverses the city with an unforgiving eye. In 1992 (the future), Mexico is a "skeletal and decapitated nation," and in Mexico City ("Makesicko City"), a foul acid rain falls constantly, the poor search fruitlessly for jobs, and the rich build themselves imitation department stores. In this chaotic mix of high, low, and pop culture, a vulgar mix of Mexican and American culture, and against the backdrop, possible agrarian insurrection or American invasion, Christopher comes to symbolize the failed promises of Columbus's New World—and its hopes for recovery.

"Like [James] Joyce, Fuentes pushes the form of the novel to the limits, bending language to suit his purpose. ... And we 'gentle readers,' as Christopher calls us, experience a city as intensely as we do Joyce's Dublin." ALFRED ARTEAGA, HOUSTON

CHRONICLE, 8/6/1989

The Eagle's Throne

The Eagle's Throne, a brilliantly scathing satire on presidential succession, is among Fuentes's best works. Inspired by Machiavelli's *The Prince* and other texts, Fuentes personalizes power plays through letters in which characters scheme, betray, plot murders, reveal their sexual peccadilloes, and succumb to desperation. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2006)



THE STORY: In 2020, Mexican president Lorenzo Terán challenges the U.S. superpower by keeping the cost of oil exports to the U.S. high and condemning the American occupation of Colombia. In response, the American president (Condoleezza Rice, naturally) precipitates a nationwide crisis when she cuts off all satellite power—and hence all electronic communications—to Mexico. Suddenly, all communication within Mexico reverts to handwritten letters. As revealed through the words penned by various scheming, backstabbing, and gossipy politicians, Terán, though only two years into his six-year term, faces challenges that may jeopardize more than his presidency.

"For anyone aspiring to be a Mexican politician, this should be an indispensable manual. For those seeking to apply such knowledge—if only as a vicarious pleasure—to their own circumstances, well, it can only make you wiser." FRANCISCO

GOLDMAN, WASHINGTON POST, 6/18/2006 ■