

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

“I don’t choose my subjects. I am chosen by them.”

(January Magazine, 1/02)

BY JESSICA TEISCH

For the past four decades, Mario Vargas Llosa (1936-) has mined Latin America's violent history for larger truths about the interplay of history, culture, and geography. Associated with the Latin American writing boom that evolved in the 1960s and '1970s, Vargas Llosa—along with other Latin American writers such as Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel García Márquez—revitalized the region's fiction into self-conscious, playful writing. As a novelist, playwright, journalist, essayist, and critic, he transformed Peru's reality into a heightened, imaginative view of the world—and brought Peruvian literature international acclaim.

While many Latin American novels contain the magical realism embodied by García Márquez (profiled in Jan/Feb 2003), Vargas Llosa professes “an invincible weakness for so-called realism,” or hyper-realism (*A Fish in the Water*, 1993). His avant-garde, post-modern style, which often juxtaposes time, character, and place, sets a microscopic eye on race, class, political corruption, and violence in Latin America. Many of his novels, from *The Green House* (1966) to the tragicomic *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977), are semi-au-

tobiographical; others are satirical, such as *The Time of the Hero* (1962). Some, like *Feast of the Goat* (2000), critique contemporary Latin America. The historical novel *The War of the End of the World* (1981) showcases the potent intersection of power, religion, and rebellion.

Born in Arequipa, Peru, on March 28, 1936, Vargas Llosa was raised by his mother and grandparents in Bolivia, northern Peru, and then Lima. Throughout his childhood he believed his father was dead. His father reunited with his wife when Vargas Llosa was about ten; their strained relationship influenced many of the father-son themes in his later work.

Vargas Llosa attended a military academy and private schools until he enrolled at Lima's University of San Marcos in 1955, where he studied literature and law, worked as a journalist, and joined an underground Communist movement. In 1955, he secretly married Julia Urquidi, his uncle's sister-in-law, 13 years his senior. Their tumultuous and passionate relationship, which lasted until 1964, inspired the melodramatic *Aunt Julia*. A growing economic crisis and brutal living conditions in Peru, then under the conservative

WHERE TO START

AUNT JULIA AND THE SCRIPTWRITER reveals Vargas Llosa at his most lyrical, while **THE FEAST OF THE GOAT** and **CONVERSATION IN THE CATHEDRAL** offer more serious commentary on the nature of dictatorship. For a sampling of the author's nonfiction, start with **MAKING WAVES**, a collection of essays on Latin America.

military dictatorship of Manuel Odría, convinced Vargas Llosa to leave his homeland. He attended graduate school at the University of Madrid, where he wrote his dissertation on García Márquez and received his Ph.D. in 1959.

That year, Vargas Llosa moved to Paris to seek career opportunities largely unavailable to writers in Latin America. He published his first collection of short stories while also working as a Spanish teacher, journalist, and broadcaster. His debut novel, *The Time of the Hero*, received instant acclaim. In the late '60s, Vargas Llosa taught at different American and European universities. He married Patricia Llosa in 1965; they had three children. In 1975, the family returned to Peru.

Vargas Llosa's return to Peru marked the start of his political career. The military dictatorship that had seized power in 1968 ended in 1980. By the late '80s, Vargas Llosa was firmly enmeshed in Peruvian politics, starting with his involvement in the Comisión de Investigación de Uchuraccay, which investigated the murder of eight journalists by *senderistas*. (Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, is a ruthless, rural-based Maoist rebel group that has killed an estimated 30,000 people since 1980.) In 1990, in an attempt to curb the violent *senderistas*, he ran for president on the center-right coalition, Fredemo, or Democratic Front. Vargas Llosa experienced a surprising defeat to Alberto Fujimori, who fled the country in disgrace in 2000 after political and financial scandals; Vargas Llosa recounts his political ups and downs in *A Fish in the Water*. Since his failed candidacy, he has taught at universities in Europe and the U.S.

Politics and the Latin American "boom"

In the late 1960s, with the publication of *Green House* (1966) and *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969), Vargas Llosa joined the rather ill-defined Latin American literary boom. During this period, novelists tried to write the "total novel," a monumental synthesis of vision, technique, and stylistic derring-do. Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, Alejo Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral*, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Ernesto Sabato's *On Heroes and Tombs*, among others, captured portraits of Latin America that, with their "total" looks at all aspects of society, extended their illusions far beyond reality.

The literary boom opened a new window into Latin America's historical social and political injustices. It also, in part, stemmed from American novelists attempting to make sense of their own past. Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and William Faulkner, in particular, influenced the boom novelists. Faulkner, for example, explored the Deep South's inequalities and exposed racial prejudices that have modern-day counterparts in Latin America's black and indigenous populations. "There also exists the extraordinary importance of the past," Vargas Llosa said, "which is always present in contemporary life" (*New York Times Book Review*, 3/10/91). Most of his novels, from *Death in the Andes* (1993) to *Feast of the Goat*, excavate the past in order to illuminate Latin America's present.

In the past few decades, Vargas Llosa has fallen out of fa-

Peruvian History and Vargas Llosa's Works

Vargas Llosa's works appear in this timeline of Peruvian history during the years in which they are set.

1821: Peru declares its independence from Spain, though much of it remains under Spanish control until 1879.

1924: Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre sets up nationalist American Revolutionary Popular Alliance (APRA), a center-left party.

1945: Civilian gov't supported by APRA comes to power.

1948: Military coup; General Manuel Odría leads gov't.

1950s: Peruvians leave rural areas for cities; high inflation, economic instability; in 1956, Odría reinstates APRA party, Manuel Prado from APRA becomes new president, and women vote for first time.

1950s Novels: * **THE TIME OF THE HERO** (1962), * **THE GREEN HOUSE** (1966), ***CONVERSATION IN THE CATHEDRAL** (1969)

1950s Novel: **THE REAL LIFE OF ALEJANDRO MAYTA** (1985)

In Peru, a present-day novelist seeks to write a biography of an aging Trotskyist who can shed light on Peru's radical politics of the 1950s. A novel within a novel.

1950s Novel: **WHO KILLED PALOMENO MOLERO?** (1986)

In 1950s Peru, a young airman is murdered. In this politically corrupt society, two detectives may never find the killer.

1963: Peru returns to civilian rule with centrist president.

1968: Military general leads junta, nationalizes many industries, and suspends constitution; Peru ruled by military until 1980.

1980: Civilian (democratic) rule returns. The Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) guerrillas begin armed struggle.

1980s Novel: **DEATH IN THE ANDES** (1993)

In this panoramic historical novel and murder mystery set in the politically volatile Andes, Civil Guard Lituma investigates the disappearance of three men—victims, perhaps, of the Shining Path guerrillas. Yet the Civil Guard isn't innocent, either.

1982: Army cracks down on left-wing guerrillas and drug traffickers, leading to person "disappearances."

1985: APRA candidate wins presidential election and tries to remove military and police old guard.

1987: Vargas Llosa leads New Libertad movement and blocks plans to nationalize banks as Peru falls into bankruptcy.

1988: Shining Path guerrilla campaign intensifies.

1990: Independent center-right Alberto Fujimori defeats Vargas Llosa for president on anti-corruption platform; more than 3,000 political murders reported.

1990s Memoir: **A FISH IN THE WATER** (1993)

A memoir written in the aftermath of Vargas Llosa's failed bid for the presidency of Peru in 1990. The author flashes back to his youth in Peru, discusses his political mistakes, and spares no one.

1992: Shining Path leader arrested

1994: More than 6,000 Shining Path guerrillas surrender.

2000: Fujimori resigns after political and financial scandals.

2001: Center-left Alejandro Toledo wins election.

2002: Truth and Reconciliation Commission begins public hearings about atrocities committed during civil war of 1980s and 1990s against Shining Path rebels.

wor with some “boom” authors, including García Márquez, for his political beliefs. Vargas Llosa supported and then denounced Fidel Castro’s Cuba in the early 1970s. The next decade, he became a political conservative whom critics denounced for his “Andean Thatcherism.” Many Peruvians see two Vargas Llosas—the politician, and then the novelist out of step with his own messages. Vargas Llosa, however, claims to distinguish between fact and fiction. “When I want to write about political matters, I write essays or articles or give lectures,” he noted in *A Writer’s Reality*. “When I write literature, I concentrate on what is truly literature, something larger than politics.” Although he addresses highly political themes in his literature, he doesn’t fall into polemical ideology. He portrayed *Feast of the Goat*’s infamous dictator Trujillo, for example, not as a monster, but as a man who lost his humanity as he gained power. By narrating the story from the points of view of those involved in the Trujillo regime, Vargas Llosa created a convincing reality. And it’s this truth—the ability to offer multiple perspectives on life—that “burns a protest” in his fiction and gives it relentless power (*New York Times Book Review*, 10/7/84).

MAJOR WORKS

The Time of the Hero (1962, English 1966)

♦ THE BIBLIOTECA BREVE PRIZE



Vargas Llosa’s debut novel—a groundbreaking look back at his days as a student at the Leoncio Prado Military Academy in Lima as a microcosm of Peruvian society—was an instant bestseller. It won the highest award for a work of Spanish language fiction and placed him at the forefront of the Latin American boom, along with Mexican Carlos Fuentes and Colombian Gabriel García Márquez. But his portrait of Peruvian life was so realistic and controversial that Peruvian authorities publicly burned 1,000 copies.

THE STORY: The Circle, a gang of adolescent army cadets, silences a squealing fellow student by killing him during field exercises. To protect the academy’s reputation, authorities withdraw their charges of murder and cite the death as an accident. But in a country ruled by unwritten military codes, the murder forces the perpetrators to examine their lives with new perspective.

“Vargas is concerned less with society than with growth and change in the individual and the mystery of how these are accomplished. ... [A]s with other fine writers, [he] functions on more than a single level of meaning, while the epigraph from Sartre would seem to imply that the values of some of the book’s events are those of existentialism.” HARRY SYLVESTER, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 9/11/66.

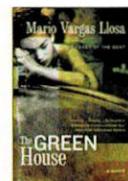
“[This] novel is a remarkably mature (and, one imagines, highly autobiographical) account. ... [D]espite its prolixity, it is still a harsh and honest piece of fiction.” BERNARD BERGONZI, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 10/6/66.

“He can be favorably compared with Carlos Fuentes in his mastery of psychological complexity; with Julio Cortázar in structural sophistication; with the ... Spaniard Luis Martín-Santos, in command of style; with the Cuban, Alejo Carpentier, in political and social insightfulness.” CHOICE, 12/66.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A penetrating look at youth striving for manhood amid Peru’s secretive and rank-and-file culture.

The Green House (1966, Eng. 1968)

♦ RÓMULO GALLEGOS AWARD



The Green House draws on Vargas Llosa’s experiences growing up near a brothel in the northwestern Peruvian town of Piura. The novel, which juggles multiple plots, locations, shifting points of view, and more than 30 characters, reflects Peruvian society’s vast inequalities. Critics considered it a classic “total” novel—a fusion of style, subject, and form that convinces readers that an illusory reality may be even “truer” than reality.

THE STORY: Specific events and tensions in Piura, Santa María de Nieva, and the Upper Marañón rainforest reveal broader Peruvian societal clashes. A brothel (the Green House) on the outskirts of Piura affects the city and a mission deep inside the jungle. It also brings to light the conflict between indigenous culture and modern Christianity, gender inequalities, and the landscapes that encourage exploitation across all aspects of Peruvian society.

“Mario Vargas Llosa’s message seems to be that man, like the jungle, has a mysterious energy which cannot in the end be explained or subdued. His characters may be saints, villains, victims, or nothing in particular, but they break out of the pages of this magnificent novel with the stubborn uncontainability of life itself.” V.S. PRITCHETT, NEW STATESMAN, 11/21/69.

“... the novel, for all its grandeur and the continuously dazzling quality of its style and language, would seem to be the late work of a brilliant older man who has stopped caring much about life, and whose sense of humor has been eroded over the years—an aged Faulkner, say, but without the wit. ... [He] seems much more interested in constructing and decorating his ghastly and remarkable landscape than in caring about—or making us care about—who inhabits it ...”

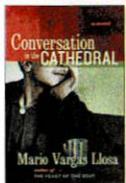
SARA BLACKBURN, NATION, 3/3/69.

“Time is telescoped, distant places become as contiguous as film cuts, character dissolves into the landscape, resolution surprises climax, and the book, even while seeming to say more about Peru than any other book ever written, closes in on itself, shutting out everything not within its own pages.”

ROBERT COOVER, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 2/2/86.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Beware—the first dozen pages consist of one long paragraph. Once you get past that, *Green House* offers a first-rate look at the myriad forms exploitation takes.

Conversation in the Cathedral (1969, Eng. 1975)



The novel offers a frightening portrait of political greed in the 1950s, when Manual Odría's corrupt dictatorship terrorized all aspects of Peruvian society. With his omniscient narrator, heavy dialogue, and chronological juxtapositions, Vargas Llosa exposes Peru's social history, the tensions inherent in political activism, and the points at which Peruvian society took the wrong path.

THE STORY: Two men, one an upper-class journalist and the other his father's former chauffeur, meet by chance in the Cathedral (a cheap bar) and reminisce about the past. Through their conversation, they reveal how the terrible workings of Peru's military dictatorship have affected—and corrupted—their lives.

"Placed against the background of social tableaux re-created with an almost Dickensian eye for detail and variety, Vargas Llosa's protagonists are gradually shown to have been involved, in one way or another, in a single act of violence; this shared experience ... gives suspense, energy, and continuity to a work that might otherwise, despite all its excellent qualities, have been in danger of bogging down."

J.L.C., SATURDAY REVIEW, 1/11/75.

"Sometimes, three conversations mingle, weaving an intricate, three-dimensional network of Peruvian society in the early 1950s. This massive novel oscillates between tedium and brilliance." THOMAS KRETZ, AMERICA, 4/11/75.

THE BOTTOM LINE: An excellent examination of how a military dictatorship affects the individual psyche.

Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter (1977, Eng. 1982)

♦ A NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW BEST BOOK OF 1982



In this bestselling semi-autobiographical, tragicomic novel, Vargas Llosa pays homage to two figures who helped shape his youth: a Bolivian radio newsman with whom he worked in Lima in the 1950s, and the famous Aunt Julia (not, incidentally, a blood relative). The tyrannical father comes from Vargas Llosa's childhood.

THE STORY: The delectable Aunt Julia, now divorced from her Bolivian husband, returns to Peru to find a man willing to support her high style. Instead, she marries her lustful nephew Mario Varguitas (a diminutive of the author's name), a poor law student. The story of their scandalous love merges with that of a racy scriptwriter who captures Peru's attention. But as the writer's serials grow confused, reality and fantasy start to merge.

"[Vargas Llosa] has managed to create a work that is both challenging and absolutely captivating, a multilayered, high-spirited, and in the end terribly affecting text about the interplay of fiction and reality, the transformation of life into art, and life seen and sometimes even lived as fiction ... clever, complex, and enjoyable ..." RONALD DE FEO, NEW REPUBLIC, 8/16/82.

"The book's principal achievement is the rendering of a vast comic landscape, with its heroes, victims and villains—all populating a world that grows increasingly complex as the novel progresses but that never ceases to entertain. ... and what's more, it made me laugh out loud." WILLIAM KENNEDY, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 8/1/82.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Once you acknowledge life's a soap opera, why not enjoy it? Among Vargas Llosa's best.

The War of the End of the World (1981, Eng. 1982)

♦ HEMINGWAY AWARD



In this sweeping historical novel set in 19th-century Brazil, Vargas Llosa interprets the rebellion of followers of Antonio Conselheiro in Canudos against the newly formed Brazilian Republic. He distinguishes between fact and fiction, history and narrative to show the conflict between Brazil's Northern backlands and the modernizing South.

THE STORY: A religious fanatic, Conselheiro (The Counselor) wanders through Brazil preaching a socialist form of Christianity and gathering a huge band of followers from all aspects of Brazilian society—cripples, murderers, prostitutes, beggars, and likeminded fanatics. The Counselor leads them to Canudos, a revolutionary Jerusalem. But with the new conservative government bent on destroying this libertarian paradise, The Counselor may never be free.

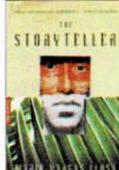
"The greatest qualities of this excellent novel are ... its refusal ever to abandon the human dimension in a story that could so easily have become grandiose ... and finally, a profound awareness of the tragic irony that makes tens of thousands of ordinary women and men die fighting against the Republic that was created, in theory, precisely to serve them, and to protect them against the rapacity of their former feudal overlords." SALMAN RUSHDIE, NEW REPUBLIC, 10/8/84.

"This work represents his most ambitious novel to date in terms of the vastness of the world it portrays and the intensity of its epic action." J.J. HASSETT, CHOICE, 12/84.

"[T]he clarity of vision and faith in reason implied in Mr. Vargas Llosa's marvelous summoning of the past may represent our surest hope of an awakening." ROBERT STONE, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 8/12/84.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A brilliant historical novel about religion, passion, ideology, and freedom.

The Storyteller (1987, Eng. 1989)



Vargas Llosa blends memoir and folklore in this short novel about the meaning of life—and our origins. Through the storyteller, he also unsparingly examines the environmental and cultural devastation of his homeland.

THE STORY: When a Peruvian writer chances upon a photograph of a tribal storyteller living in the Ama-

zonian jungle, he recognizes the man not as an Indian, but as an old school friend and Jew, Saul Zuratas. The writer begins to imagine Zuratas's transformation from a modern man obsessed with the primitive Machiguenga tribe's survival against encroaching rubber barons to a member and storyteller of the tribe.

"*The Storyteller* is science fiction at its best. ... To me this is Mr. Vargas Llosa's most engaging and accessible book, for the urgency of its subject purifies and illuminates the writing. I was spellbound, as if by the voice of that storyteller in the circle of listeners; his voice is many voices, his voice is the tribal voice." URSULA K. LE GUIN, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 10/29/89.

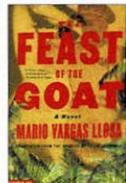
"By a technical tour de force, Vargas Llosa makes us see an affinity between Kafka and native storyteller, between Jew and Machiguangan. ... The Zuratas chapters of *The Storyteller* are arresting because Vargas Llosa has found in them a style that vividly manifests the otherness of primitive culture at the same time that it intimates certain abiding connections with our own culture." ROBERT ALTER, NEW REPUBLIC, 1/8/90.

"The Machiguenga myth ... is sometimes hilarious, sometimes deeply affecting. The tangle of gods and spirits and animals populating its saga, however, become no less confusing, or forgettable, than the crowded casts of most folk epics."

ALAN WADE, NEW LEADER, 2/5/90.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A story about stories—with a strong message about acculturation and environmental devastation.

The Feast of the Goat (2000, Eng. 2001)



This historical novel investigates South America's recent history. Trujillo—the ultimate dictator and the novel's central character—bears resemblance to Peru's former president Fujimori. Vargas Llosa called Fujimori "a more mediocre tyrant," making the novel a loose allegory to Peru's past politics (*The Guardian*, 3/16/02). "When you live in a democratic society—with pluralism, a free press—you lose perspective and don't remember this is the privilege of a very small portion of the world," he said. "For that reason, this novel is not about the past" (*January Magazine*, 1/02).

THE STORY: When middle-aged Urania Cabal returns to the Dominican Republic to visit her ill father, she relives the terrible events of 1961. The aging, power-hungry dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (the Goat) terrorizes the nation and controls a group of elect henchmen, including Urania's disgraced father. "During those thirty-one years," she says, "all the evil we had carried with us since the Conquest became crystallized." But the tide slowly turns against Trujillo, culminating in bloody revolution.

"... the Peruvian novelist, taking on the role more of narrating angel rather than avenging god, has brilliantly re-created one of the darkest periods in the recent history of the Americas."

ALAN CHEUSE, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 11/25/01.

"In Vargas Llosa's rendering, Trujillo emerges as the emblematic generalissimo, a figure to stand beside the dictators in Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* or Roa Bastos's *I the Supreme*. ... Vargas Llosa's fierce analysis reminds us not only of the value of our civil liberties, but of their precariousness; and how dictatorship has a way of beating or leeching the strength out of potential resistance."

LISA APPIGNANESI, INDEPENDENT (UK), 3/30/02.

"The book is a tour de force, possibly Vargas Llosa's best, not only for the profundity of his observations but also because of the craft and skill he brings to writing. ... In his insights and the gravity of his work, Vargas Llosa, to my mind, sometimes makes García Márquez look like a thematic dilettante."

OLGA LORENZO, AGE [AUSTRALIA], 7/15/02.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Though it reads like a thriller, the blood, deception, and portrayal of the banality of evil is true—mostly. ■

The "Dictator" Novels

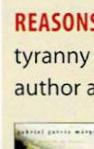
Vargas Llosa's *Feast of the Goat*, a work of political fiction, exposes three decades of dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. So-called dictator novels have a long legacy, with some Nobel Prize winners among them:



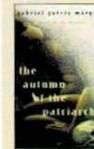
EL SEÑOR PRESIDENTE | MIGUEL ANGEL ASTURIAS (1946): A former Guatemalan diplomat and journalist, Asturias recounts the story of a tyrannical dictator in a country identified as Guatemala, and the police state's nightmarish effect on the individual.



I, THE SUPREME | AUGUSTO ROA BASTOS (1974): This Paraguayan author, exiled for 40 years, reimagines the life of power-hungry Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia, the "supreme dictator" reigning between 1814 and 1840.



REASONS OF STATE | ALEJO CARPENTIER (1974): Another look at tyranny and the frittering away of a nation's wealth by a Cuban author and pioneer of the literary style called magical realism.



AUTUMN OF THE PATRIARCH | GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ (1975): A Caribbean tyrant, both benevolent and cruel, remains caught in his own web of corruption. (See our Book by Book profile of García Márquez in our Jan/Feb 2003 issue)



THE PERÓN NOVEL | TOMÁS ELOY MARTÍNEZ (1985): A fictional portrait of the most loved and hated dictator in Argentina's history—the charismatic but weak Juan Perón.