

In a 1981 piece for *The New York Times* about his experience meeting or, in reality, spotting Ernest Hemingway on Paris’s Boulevard St. Michel, a 28-year old Gabriel García Márquez reflects on his investment in Hemingway’s body of work. García Márquez admits that he devoured the writing of Faulkner and Hemingway in order to refine his own authorial craft:

> I don't know who said that novelists read the novels of others only to figure out how they are written. I believe it’s true. We aren’t satisfied with the secrets exposed on the surface of the page: we turn the book around to find the seams.

Indeed, it is the ‘seams’ of García Márquez’s own life that have with equal force both fascinated and evaded readers, biographers, and journalists alike. Although the familiar argument persists that in order to get to know an author you simply read his or her work, García Márquez’s complex path to literary greatness is laced with the kind of tantalizing mix of fact and fiction that it practically demands the very attention García Márquez has spurned. Chronicling only the first three decades of his life, García Márquez’s 2002 memoir, *Vivir para contarla* (translated to English in 2003 as *Living to Tell the Tale*), does not attempt the sweeping, intro- / retro-spective narrative his fans thirst after.

As the biography of a living Nobel Prize winning author, screenwriter, journalist, and international hero, it is no wonder that at 664 pages, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life* is the ‘abbreviated version’ of Gerald Martin’s biography (xxi). Martin’s self-proclaimed role as a ‘tolerated’ biographer is undermined by his expansive yet intimate portrait of ‘Gabo.’ Martin plans to publish the longer version of his biography in a few years and although he handles the subject delicately, it is clear that García Márquez’s failing health is the main reason Martin made a push to publish sooner rather than later; García Márquez is now in his early 80s and exhibiting signs of what his younger sibling Jaime euphemistically diagnosed as ‘problems with the noodle’ (559). Alzheimer’s and various forms to dementia seem to plague the family at large as Martin notes García Márquez’s memory is ‘rather steadily’ deteriorating (559).

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With the penumbra of death enveloping a mind like García Márquez’s comes the anxious urge to record and explore its every detail. Minutiae abound in Martin’s biography and one can imagine that his professed 17 years of research and 2,000 pages of text (accompanied by 6,000 footnotes) are in no way exaggerated or superfluous. García Márquez’s left-leaning politics, his friendship with Fidel Castro coupled with his pro-Cuban sentiments, and his own guarded personal affairs have long captured public attention and controversy. Which begs the question, do Martin’s 2,000 pages reveal the subtext beneath a global icon’s recorded history? Readers are often dissatisfied after looking under the public veneer to glimpse the man or woman behind it; salaciousness at times becomes the measuring stick of success, but Martin deftly avoids this trap.

While the contours of García Márquez’s life have been laboriously and lovingly sketched in, so too has a fuller rendering of the type of interiority literary aficionados and scholars appreciate. Made famous in One Hundred Years of Solitude, the fictional town of Macondo lies at the center of García Márquez’s magical realist exploration of love, life, death, family, and so much more. But after reading Martin’s extensive biography, one might wonder when García Márquez allowed fact to bleed into fiction. His own life produces the very strands of his fictional tapestry and some might say it even overshadows his work. Martin’s direct connection between García Márquez’s affair with Tachia in Paris, ‘conditioned by poverty and … threatened by tragedy’ and his novel, No One Writes for the Colonel (1961), indicates the mining Martin does into a rich and complex interiority (206).

At the inception of A Life, we learn of the kind of formational experiences García Márquez underwent, which buttress the argument that given the backdrop of his life his magical realism is just as realistic as it is magical. His grandfather, Colonel Nicolás Márquez Mejía, killed a man over a lover and, although Martin describes the tale as ‘sanitized’, the impact on García Márquez is indisputable and the later fiction that sprang from it is anything but (17). Martin covers the first decade of his life when García Márquez lived with the Colonel and his grandmother in Aracataca. He lost his grandfather at a young age and described it as a tragic and dramatic shift in his life: ‘I was eight when he died. Since then nothing important has happened to me. Everything has just been flat’ (60). Yet what followed is hardly flat: young García Márquez’s memory of first meeting his mother, his disapproval of his distant and womanising father who had 11 legitimate and four known illegitimate children, and following his grandfather’s death his life at large with his ‘less reputable’ side of the family. All of these experiences solidified his journey in the direction of becoming a quiet and keenly observant boy who, according to his father, was a ‘born liar’ (58). But the veracity of the historical unrest and violence in which García Márquez’s life is couched can hardly be challenged. The 1928 massacre of striking banana workers, riots, guerrilla warfare, and continual civil strife all made their way into García Márquez’s fiction. Martin skilfully weaves biographical events and artistic production together in ways that make this biography indispensable to critics and readers looking to some degree to understand García Márquez’s sources of inspiration.

If you achieve global fame and considerable wealth, the inner workings of your private life become more fascinating than the public persona people know; Martin often senses the boundary between biographer and subject, public and private, and he indicates as much while also acknowledging that this hardly led him into the all-too frequent category of ‘burned-out biographers’ (xxiii). To this end, Garcia
Márquez is maddeningly aware of the nature of biography – of arresting the flow of one’s three dimensional life and capturing it on the page. Gerald Martin recalls García Márquez’s telling comment: ‘Just write what you see; whatever you write, that is what I will be’ (xxii). The elusive ‘seams’ of García Márquez’s life will remain just that, but few would argue that the ambiguity of an artist’s soul should, or even could, be fully exposed.

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