

# ENCUENTROS



*True Lies*  
*on the Subject of Literary Creation*

---

Lecture by

**Sergio Ramírez**

## IDB CULTURAL CENTER

Director: Ana María Coronel de Rodríguez  
Visual Arts: Félix Angel  
Concerts and Lectures: Anne Vena  
Cultural Promotion in the Field Program: Elba Agusti  
IDB Art Collection: Gabriela Moragas



The Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank, an international financial organization, was created in May 1992 at the Bank's headquarters in Washington, D.C., as a gallery for exhibitions and a permanent forum from which to showcase outstanding expressions of the artistic and intellectual life of the Bank's member countries in North, Central and South America, the Caribbean region, Western Europe, Israel and Japan. Through the IDB Cultural Center, the Bank contributes to the understanding of cultural expression as an integral element of the economic and social development of its member countries.

The IDB Cultural Center *Exhibitions* and the *Concerts and Lectures Series* stimulate dialogue and a greater knowledge of the culture of the Americas. The *Cultural Promotion in the Field* funds projects in the fields of youth cultural development, institutional support, restoration and conservation of cultural patrimony, and the preservation of cultural traditions. The *IDB Art Collection*, gathered over several decades, is managed by the Cultural Center and reflects the relevance and importance the Bank has achieved after four decades as the leading financial institution concerned with the development of Latin America and the Caribbean.

## TRUE LIES ON THE SUBJECT OF LITERARY CREATION

---

*Sergio Ramírez*

Someone has said that being a writer is the best trade in the world, although there are older professions. Or perhaps not. The need to tell, and to hear tell, begins in that magic moment when it isn't enough to experience reality through one's own direct perceptions. One needs to wander in one's mind beyond the real limits of one's world, where the visible ends and darkness begins, calling up an intense curiosity about the unknown, about the shadows we can barely make out.

Imagination begins with the act of seeing what we cannot touch. Someone first imagined the origin of the stars, but millennia had to pass before someone else could measure the distances. The expansion of the mind toward a gaseous state is imagination, the first state of rational thought.

Reason and representation are therefore one and the same. That act has no antecedents, no substitutes. And someone who in the process of imagining—that is to say, thinking—must then rep-

resent not only that which he is imagining, but also his surrounding reality; and this representation will inevitably be tinted by the colors of his imagination.

And then in turn, someone listens, and imagines the representation made by the words he is hearing. This double necessity—telling and hearing tell, writing and reading, offering and receiving—still has an ancestral essence rooted in the individual, as well as in the relations among individuals. Imagine, discover, explore, challenge, change, expose, represent, create. Disobey, recount, write.

Let us imagine the first storyteller and the first listener, sitting by the fire in the primitive night. One wanting to conquer the attention of the other, trying to lead the listener into his or her private universe, to enchant, persuade, induce the listener to believe in the teller's own visions and inventions. And the other, predisposed to participating in this ritual—like one agreeing to pay for a seat in the theatre—prepared to believe, to be enchanted, seduced. And why not say it, to

---

*True Lies On the Subject of Literary Creation* was presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C., on May 10, 1999 as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program.

let him- or herself be fooled.

Fear, danger, need, desire, and anxiety before the unknown create myth, the most ancient and subtle knot of invention, its sacred origin. The word *believe* is fatal for myth, says Robert Calasso (*The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, 1998). Only risk brings us into the realm of myth; we are surrounded, not by belief, but by magic, by a spell the soul casts on itself, according to Plato in *The Phaedrus*. In myth is created the hero, our own reflection, without which life would be miserable. The hero who through the centuries sets off, is purified, accomplishes his feats, returns, and is sacrificed in an eternal, never-ending cycle, as Joseph Campbell explains (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1973).

Like a delicately woven fabric, or like skin, this accumulation of sensations clothes our gods and heroes—envelopes them, lends them presence, creates their image, gives them form. The imagination fabricates images, that is its job.

As our knowledge of the world has expanded to satiety and we have acquired images of all and everything, the presence of original myth has become extinguished. The pale light of the television, in pushing back the frontiers of darkness, undoes its own children. Now we have representations of everything, or almost everything, on the screen. Wars, famines, collective tragedies, and crimes take place in our own houses. They are domestic happenings, part of an epic unfolding at home. The contemporary is instantaneous, not like before, when events were always recounted in the past tense, looking back on a distant time, on a past so far away as to be unreal. In the Colonial centuries, the coronation of Spanish

kings was celebrated with street festivals in the provinces of Central America, far away from the news, well after those kings had gone mad, or died.

But even when the original myth is altered, its history, essence, and narrative substance remain; and this manifestation is not extinguished by the close of the narration. If we think about it, there are no new stories to tell, no new plots to be invented. The tragedies, novels, romances, tales, tangos, and boleros we tell ourselves are always the same. The plot always advances along a well-worn road. The themes have been there from the beginning: they are poisoned seeds passed down through the generations so that passion will bloom. They are opiates that feed on blood, semen, and saliva, and are used for the decoration of tombs. As Voltaire wrote, nothing ever changes, no matter the kingdom, the era, or the ideology. Or perhaps there are only three themes, as Horacio Quiroga suggested in the title of one of his books of stories: love, madness, and death. Or only two, love and death, as García Márquez believes. But it will always be necessary to tell, to recount. The reader doesn't care if the plots are old; all he wants is a storyteller who knows how to do his trade.

There is an essential difference between fantasy and imagination. The terms are often used interchangeably; but their difference has much to do with the verisimilitude of the tale, that is to say, its credibility.

The hybrid composition of animals and human beings, or between different species of animals, or the existence of animals with traits or features foreign to their own type, has always awakened a fascination for the fantastic, and this has

given us splendid literary works, from Ovid's *Metamorphose* to *The Thousand and One Nights*, to the seductive mythologies of our aboriginal cultures. Borges did an excellent, though very incomplete, and imaginative compilation of these varied species in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1957), some of which (we don't know how many) are his own invention.

The resulting images are perhaps fantastic because they subvert the conventions, or forms, of what we generally accept as established reality: winged horses, two-headed dogs, women with snakes for hair, men with the heads of bulls. But the process of arriving at these compositions is nothing if not imaginary. And all of the richness of the symbol is found here, in the very process of conception. Here is where we find the story.

The new figure, conceived and rendered by the imagination, always has its beginnings in the real and takes its component parts from reality. The breath that fills the creature with life arises from the complexity of subjective reality where desire and necessity cohabit in intimate darkness. With this dirty breath of desire and necessity, the creature is filled with life and contaminated with imagination, with an emanation of reality that can pull him out of the static void of fantasy. This is not merely a symbolic act; if it were, we could well remain in the insubstantial realm of the fantastic. In the act of metamorphosis, or hybridization, there is always an infectious breath of necessity and desire that gives life to the myth and to its character.

All life begins with breath. Or with an act of spitting, as in the story of the tree of heads in the *Popul Vuh*. In this story, the Princess Ixquic draws close to the tree

where she sees, by the light of a pale moon, hanging between hard, shining calabash, the head of Hun-Hunahpú, the prince assassinated by the lords of Xibalbá, masters of the underground kingdom of darkness. The head asks her to hold out her hand, so that it might spit into her palm. The saliva penetrates into the entrails of Princess Ixquic. In the saliva of the dead head is the seed of life. The sons born of this prodigious event, Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué, will avenge the crime [of their father's murder].

This is the difference. Passion is the difference. The Minotaur—part bull, part man—lives hidden in the labyrinth because his family is ashamed of him. They hide him not merely because of his monstrous deformity, but because he is the fruit of rape and adultery, more monstrous still. The children of adultery, the mad ones, the consumptives, all those who bear the seal of crime, are always hidden from view. And the Minotaur is condemned not only to his own monstrosity, forced to expiate the sins of others, of his mother, but condemned as well to the contempt of his family and to the betrayal of his sister. It is his fate to drown in despair. Following contempt and betrayal, all that awaits him is death.

Liberation from the monster that is neither bull nor man never ceases to be a relief for everyone, as in the other *Metamorphosis*, of course Kafka's (*Die Verwandlung*, 1915): the death of the son, the brother turned into an insect, prisoner of his own disgrace, frees the Samsa family from its hindrance, from shame and, most of all, from being guilty of contempt. This death, this relief, merits a tranquil outing by streetcar one sunny afternoon through the streets of Prague.

One needs to get free of the monster. The Minotaur is doomed even before the hunt begins. Theseus, the stranger, will kill him at close range; the sword, the key, the thread are all given him by Ariadne, the Minotaur's own sister, guilty of treachery and parricide. A blood crime, a crime committed for love. And because treachery never pays, Theseus abandons Ariadne as soon as he has possessed her. Ovid tells this story in *The Metamorphoses* (Book VIII, chap.ii) as a moral tale. He doesn't want to portray a fantastic character, even though the Minotaur has the bull's head and was fathered by the celestial seed of a bull. Supernatural or monstrous, the story doesn't say. The Minotaur is an established figure. But his story is tragic. And it is only through the story—that is to say, through imagination, rather than his form—that the Minotaur is possible. His aspect is impossible; it is but the consequence of his tragedy, or the consequence of imagination, like the brothers Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué, who are instruments of vengeance. They are born prodigiously, in order to avenge.

Desire and necessity. This is the breath that incubates the creatures that spring forth from the primeval mud. Their debris nourishes the monsters in their caves. And the monsters of this bestiary will always be configured of an infinite variety of elements, multiple combinations that leave open the possibility of adding a new symbol, beyond the monstrous, the human, or the monstrous-as-human.

The absolute freedom of myth is the freedom of the imagination to engender passion, to breath necessity and desire into its progeny, to inspire them with true life and strip them of fantasy. Myth may incarnate a congealed monstrous image

recalling sin, or an image that acts as an instrument for vindication or passion. Such images are born of the night without rest. The representation, the figure, becomes an emblem of passions and vendettas, of terrible hatreds, and of the terror that will always pursue the criminal.

The Gorgon and her head of snakes, hands of bronze and wings of gold, capable of turning to stone anyone who looks into her icy eyes, is a complex instrument of vengeance in Theseus's hands, and also a weapon of war. Daughter of passion. And the harpies, those winged divinities with the faces of maidens and hooked talons, who screechingly devour everything, turn everything into excrement, are instruments of punishment, daughters of power. King Phineas never lets them eat; with sarcastic rage, he snatches food out of their mouths.

I cite this last example, perhaps, because in the mythical bestiary of Nicaragua, the most emblematic figure is the Bird of Sweet Enchantment. Not only is it a representation of the popular imagination that creates myths but it is, more importantly, a symbol for the meaning of life, necessity, and desire. Here the myth penetrates most profoundly, has no substitute. This bird, which has brilliantly colored plumage, astounds those who see it when it appears, flying out of the void. It embodies the sweet enchantment of ethereal illusion, because it cannot be captured. If someone does capture the bird, it immediately turns into excrement. The bird has the same power as the harpies. All that remains of its marvellous appearance turns to dung in the hands of one who desired, or needed it. It unsettles me to think of this representation as the reading a country might continually make of

its own history, its own destiny.

On the other hand, Midas, King of Phrygia (*The Metamorphoses*, Book XI, chapter iii), had received from Dionysus the gift we're all familiar with, that everything he touches would turn to gold. It is an ironic gift, because bread, meat, wine, all turn to gold upon merely coming into contact with his fingers, and so become inedible. Whereupon Midas then has to beg Dionysus to unburden him of this divine gift, which threatens to kill him from hunger and thirst. As we see, human anxiety always vacillates between gold and excrement, between passion and its detritus.

I would like to pause over an image that, for me, calls up my vocation as a writer: a piece of furniture. This may seem arbitrary to you, but my maternal grandfather was a cabinetmaker, in addition to being an evangelical pastor who could divine underground sources of water. I still have one of his exquisitely crafted, handmade oak tables, which has a large surface and turned legs like graceful, faceless caryatides supporting the sensitive, but strong architecture. On this table rests the computer with which I write, the volumes I consult, my notebooks.

With this example—this table—I want to unite construction, manufacturing, and artifice with the writing of fiction, that “machine of varied invention,” as they said in the times of the medieval romances about valiant knights. In order to make a table, one begins with the idea of a tree, the tree that rises up against the winds in the motley darkness of the forest. One needs to select one tree from among many trees, consider its trunk, the texture of its bark, the range of its roots, the solemnity of its stature, the luxuriance

of its branches, and then one must cut it down. After chopping it down, one must saw this tree into pieces, put these pieces together, give them form, taking care that no light escapes through the joinings and, finally, trim, sand, polish, and varnish.

Of the original form of the tree nothing survives, yet the tree is there. Between the tree and the table, between the tree's matter and the transformation of that matter into a table, there is an appropriation of material, which is to say, a process of turning reality into imagination and imagination into language. This process requires various tools, like those my grandfather used for carpentry: plumb line, chisel. Rigor, discipline, a sense of proportion, of aesthetics, a love of perfection even though perfection will always be unattainable. Sanding repeatedly, polishing over and over. Staining, changing one's mind, applying a different stain. Making sure that no light comes through the joinings.

We could also use the example of a piece of clothing, which will allow me to talk about hidden operations and procedures, those which never reach the reader's gaze because they would conspire to undermine the work's credibility, like examining stitches or scrutinizing the reverse side of an embroidery. Turning the fabric inside out is the vice of a reader who reads like a writer, wanting to see the quality of the needlework, the weaving on the wrong side of the cloth, all the places where the secret procedures are hidden. But that deforms the act of reading which, particularly in the case of a work of imagination, should be done for pleasure and delight—precisely the reason that books exist.

To begin reading a book is like ap-

proaching something new which shouldn't be sullied or blemished. Custom and familiarity end up killing the sensation, or the illusion of newness, when one reads like a writer intent on uncovering the mechanics, stitching, and patterns on the wrong side of the embroidery. It is this same familiarity which, after repeated visits to someone's long-admired house, allows us to discover the faint water stains on the walls and the tear in the carpet, to find deficiencies in objects whose insistent presence at first impressed us, to discover a lack of order and maintenance that hadn't been apparent before. This disappointment brought on by too much intimacy can overwhelm the spirit, which now seems full of unwelcome sounds, voices, and odors.

In the introduction to *Tom Jones* (1749), we find the *bill of fare to the feast*. Fielding warns that the author should not see himself as a gentleman offering a private banquet, but rather as the patron of an establishment where clients are welcome because they pay. If the meal were free, then the guests could never complain about what they were being served. On the contrary [Fielding says], the client has the right to examine the menu beforehand, so he can know what to expect. But only one dish is available: *the human condition*, or *human nature*. The guest shouldn't be offended at having only one selection: it is easier for a cook to take from all the species of animals and vegetables and make a multitude of dishes than for the novelist to exhaust all the variants and varieties of the human condition. Anything else is a matter for the kitchen.

No one should enter the kitchen. Only the author, who must make sure that his

noise, dirty pots, and waste don't intrude on his reader's experience. There is nothing more disappointing for someone who sits at Fielding's establishment than to see, even involuntarily, the inside of the kitchen when the servers come flying through the doors, letting us see the bustle and disorder that reign within, the flashes of annoyance over dishes left unfinished or imperfect. Or the outright failures.

A narrative's effectiveness, its congruity, depend on the verisimilitude of the events. No one—since Cervantes himself forgot—has ever failed to remember that Sancho had his mule stolen in the Sierra Morena by the famous thief, Ginés de Pasamonte, whom Don Quixote himself had freed from prison; yet in the next paragraph of that same chapter, Sancho appears, riding side-saddle on the very same mule (*Don Quixote*, 1: xxiii).

In Part Two of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes tries to get past his mistake, and so the bachelor Sansón Carrasco asks Sancho to explain the oversight (2:ii-iv). But Cervantes errs again when Sancho speaks of his having been robbed of his mule as though it were fresh news.

In his novel *Homer's Daughter* (1955), Robert Graves enumerates the incongruities found in *The Odyssey*: when Ulysses is fleeing the island of the Cyclops, Homer forgets that the rudder is in the bow, and not the stern, as he says later; that it requires more than three men to hang a dozen women all at once with a single rope, as happens with the servants after the killing of the suitors who accost Penelope; that with the twelve axes Ulysses shot through his bow, and which he never recovered, the suitors could have re-armed themselves; that one never

cuts down a live tree in order to build a boat; and finally, that hawks do not devour their prey mid-flight.

*Pecata minuta.* Drops of oblivion in an disproportionate sea of memory. But these oversights that become incongruities perturb the reader's desire to participate, they cause unease, arouse impatience. They are a reminder of the artifice, let us see the effort in the kitchen. A fly in the soup at Fielding's inn. The combination of oversights, incongruities, disarrangement of time and place, absences, errors—even on the level of syntax and spelling—demonstrate a lack of discipline and skill in the handling of tools and materials. They show a lack of know-how.

There is nothing more difficult than putting a hat in the hand of a character, as Gabriel García Márquez has told me. And it's true. It requires a great deal of application not to forget, later on, what this gentleman is supposed to do with his hat. If he hung it on a hook, he mustn't appear wearing it later walking down the street, like Sancho riding the mule stolen by Ginés de Pasamonte. The most practical solution is found in the old film serials of the 1940s, where gangsters and detectives tore around without their hats ever flying off, no matter how intense the fighting, no matter how hard the kick to the head.

The table that lets light seep through the joinings, that doesn't rest squarely on the floor, whose surface is rough, whose drawers stick—such imperfections make for disposable books, annoying to the reader, and liable to be forgotten. They are the ultimate punishment for bad lies, and not even God loves bad liars.

So let's say that in the mechanics of reading, there is play among the visible

and the invisible, between the writer and reader, and this dynamic must not be thrown off by defects; perhaps a very small number of defects can be allowed. It is a delicate operation, dependent on perceptions, a process that goes from one mind to another, a chain of images passing continually through the filter of words. In this process there must be a harmonious correspondence of images, although not necessarily a visual identity. Awkwardness in the events, or defects in the language can frustrate the whole operation, making it tedious, or unintelligible. Such problems can block, or confound the image.

The writer imagines, and so too does the reader in the act of reading. In a sense, a future dependence is being forged. There might be something that the reader doesn't like, something that doesn't seduce him, and this idea of resistance, of censorship creates a modification in the writing. These moments are critical to the process. If the writer lets himself be pulled along by an anxious 'what will they read'—like one who lets himself be driven by 'what will they say'—then he'll be waging his battle in alien territory, that of passing tastes and preferences of the moment. In contemporary terms, we can say with certainty that a reader is reading at every moment; but it's even more certain that he will never disparage that chain of moments which form true pleasure, and deep-seated [literary] preference.

Between writer and reader there is a correspondence of images; however, there is no confusion of identity, since there are as many [imagined] scenes and faces [of characters] as there are readers. In the mind of an author, there is but one

model, though it may be complex, for the composition of the scenes and characters he is imagining. The filter of words must be sufficiently effective to allow the passage of most of his imaginative ideas. Between the mind that imagines and the word that is the copy [of these imaginings] there is a whole process, a whole dynamic of fidelities. But for readers, there is no single model: the writer's imaginings are received and reflected in a host of dissimilar—but connected—copies.

Universal models, based on homogeneous properties, can only be obtained directly from the image, not through words. We have a universally understood the image of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza because there is a visual archetype, thanks to the engravings made by Gustave Doré; and today there is a whole panoply of prints, sculptures, and drawings that refer us to these characters, who are more recognizable in this way than through reading. Someone reading *Don Quixote* for the first time only confirms and recognizes these figures.

How many Madame Bovarys exist in the minds of readers? Without the movies, the number would be infinite, as in the nineteenth century. It is the cinema that “captures,” even “congeals” the image [of a character, a place, a time.] Before the invention of cinema, any provincial young woman could imagine freedom by lending her own body, her own face to the character [of Madame Bovary]. But in the cinema, one's fantasy is restricted to the model; and the number of models is reduced. So how many Madame Bovarys? The face of Jennifer Jones in Vincent Minnelli's black-and-white film? Or that of Isabelle Huppert

in Claude Chabrol's movie? But is that truly her face? Or do all those imagined faces survive, in spite of everything?

One must imagine the image. That is the reader's most splendid task: to imagine the world *as though he were a blind man dreaming*, to quote from the poem “Canto de guerra de las cosas,” (1946) by the Nicaraguan poet Joaquín Pasos. Only literature can spawn such diversity, can prodigiously create a face, a scene, a setting in the mind of each and every reader. Balzac's minutest description of a house, D.H. Lawrence's most detailed description of a face, or a nude body, will always provoke a sizzling multitude of images each time they are read. Fielding's menu may have only one dish, but its variations are infinite.

The beauty held out by literature is always hypothetical. That is why we are so often disappointed in movies based on literary works. We are made to confront the images of a particular reader—the film's director—and these intrude on our own imaginings. Congruency is never possible. The image exposed in the film collides with, and destroys, our own.

Does anyone recall the old radio dramas? I always remember *El derecho de nacer* (*The Right to be Born*), by Félix B. Caignet. The clear, sensual, sonorous voices *were* the elegant sweethearts and heroines whose traits and actions we heard described by the narrator. Those voices didn't correspond to the actors who were hidden, like fabulous monsters, in the recording booth. The voices, by themselves, *were* the characters. Revealing the hidden image, seeing the body that went with that voice, would have broken the spell.

Radio hides; the cinema reveals;

there's no escaping this. We might each have a mental picture of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, but in a movie she must be beautiful, tragically beautiful, like Greta Garbo. The woman who dies crushed beneath the wheels of a train must be beautiful and abandoned. In opera, on the other hand, we don't demand congruence between the voice and the image, a beautiful voice that corresponds to a beautiful image. Because in opera the voice incarnates everything, there is license for the most atrocious excess and incongruence; and unlike in radio, these incongruities are visible on stage. The dying Violetta Valery, whom we read about in Alexandre Dumas *fil's La Dame aux camélias* (1852, *Camille*), is but skin and bones; yet a soprano playing her in *La Traviata* can weigh over two hundred pounds, as long as her expanded thorax can sustain the highest tremolos. And in opera, the diva can sing an aria of intense drama while collapsed in her final agonies, as we look on through our tears—a situation which, in the pages of a book, would be totally ridiculous.

In the theatre there is also another type of verisimilitude. When we sit in the orchestra, we are never offended by the smell of fresh paint on the sets, or by the reality of the cloth, wood, and cardboard before our eyes. The illusion of reality created by the theatre depends on the understanding that the viewer will accept the artifice. In Act I of *Henry V*, Shakespeare asks the audience, through the Prologue, to undertake for itself an act of the imagination:

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;  
Into a thousand parts divide one man,

And make imaginary puissance;  
Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs in  
th'receiving earth;  
For 'tis your thoughts that now must  
deck our kings,  
Carry them here and there, jumping  
o'er times,  
Turning th'accomplishment of many  
years  
Into an hour-glass....

In the cinema, such a call to the imagination is impossible. The obvious décor and the manifest presence of the set intrude on our will to believe. The use of the travelling shot—the camera rolling continually from room to room, following the characters, revealing a sliced-up wall, always creates an uneasiness in the viewer, the knowledge that it is all fake. That wall is part of the set, it isn't real.

What then is the point of departure in literature? Is it the image? The story itself? A character? In all cases, the point of departure is a minuscule point of light, a bud which already contains everything, a cosmic larva, a gaseous conflagration that constitutes the origin of the universe all over again. It is settling into a solid state, then expands into a complex configuration; it is pressured, but methodical, and returns to the realm of reality, once again taking on a solid state, which later will revert to the gaseous, changing state of the imagination.

For a long time I was obsessed by an image which contained the seed of a story. It is a nocturnal image of two men, one dressed in dark cashmere, the other wearing a surgeon's gown covered with blood: they are fighting in the middle of

a street half a block away from a crystal urn which eventually falls, smashing on the pavement, spilling its contents. It is February 1916 in the city of León, Nicaragua. The brain of Rubén Darío, who had died a few hours before, has fallen to the ground like that of a defeated Medusa. The man in the surgeon's gown has extracted this brain because he wants to know if it weighs more than that of Victor Hugo. The savant is Louis Henry Debayle, a descendant of Stendhal, according to himself, and a student of Charcot and Péan at the Sorbonne. The other, an obscure, money-minded brother-in-law of Darío, wants only to sell the brain, as he had promised, to a museum in Buenos Aires. My obsession has ended. But the scene remained in my novel *Margarita, está linda la mar* (*Margarita, the Sea is Beautiful*).

The initial image, which appears at the climax of a dream, or in a bolt of lightning without thunder, also contains the characters and plot—like Zeus's head contains Athena's whole adult body, armed with her shield and lance; even before she was born, she was already pregnant with the seeds of the stories and adventures she will later live through; or like the warrior's head hanging among the calabash, whose saliva holds the power of creation.

But for a writer of these inclement tropics, his or her country contains the seeds of a whole body of writing, all the plots, all the images. Rubén Darío, my character and compatriot, never forgot that across the distant sea, in the brilliant glare, *under the fiery gold of the Nicaraguan sun*, lay the small country that would receive him, triumphantly, like an Indian or Chinese prince upon his return. His

carriage rolled through the streets of León, carpeted with wheat and sawdust, passed beneath triumphal arches decked with flowers and fruits and weavings full of stuffed birds mutely singing his praises. The unlettered artisans, who loved his verses even though they'd never read them—the sonorities were in the very air—seized the reins and pulled the poet from his carriage into the street so that he too could join the festivities, along with the little girls dressed as nymphs and naiads, in allegorical representation of his poems.

This was also, and Darío knew, the Nicaragua of corrupt politicians, complicit intellectuals and illiterate generals; this was the country that would bury him with all the honors of a Prince of the Church, after they had extracted his brain in the solitude of a dark, oven-hot night while, all through the city, the church bells rang out the sounds of mourning. The reality of his country—my country—was oppressive. He died under the occupation of a foreign military; by the time I was born, we had already suffered three military regimes. In the 1850s, an adventurer from Tennessee [William Walker], invaded Nicaragua, declared himself president, and decreed the legitimacy of slavery. But afterward came Sandino, an artisan like those who seized the reins and pushed Darío into the street, humble even in stature, yet willing to take up arms against the intervention in the mountains of Las Segovias.

I was born under one Somoza; I was exiled under another Somoza; I entered the maelstrom to unseat the last Somoza. I have known the unforgettable headiness of a triumphant revolution, and the desolate wasteland of a lost revolution. It is all

in my itinerary, for better or worse, and the chronicle of that itinerary is found in my memoir *Adiós Muchachos* where I recount the revolution as I lived it.

But in all these events of my life there is also material for novels. An inescapable reality for even the least fervent of writers. Even the highest ivory towers are flecked with the blood of what we continue to call literary reality, whose obscure corners inspire the aura of the imagination.

After many years spent between literature and politics, I have given to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and I have stayed with literature. And after many years, I believe, with Susan Sontag, that while the perfect society is utopic, justice, compassion, and honesty are not.

As Rilke says, "what you truly love will endure." What you truly imagine will endure as well.



**Sergio Ramírez** (b. Masatepe, Nicaragua, 1942). In 1960, at the University of León, he founded the magazine *Ventana*, and with Fernando Gordillo headed a literary movement of the same name. In 1963, he published his first book, *Cuentos*. He received his law degree in 1964.

In 1968, Ramírez was elected Secretary General of the Confederation of Central American Universities (CSUCA) and, in that post, founded the Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana [EDUCA], or University Press of Central America. From 1973 until 1975, he lived in Berlin as a Visiting Writer.

In 1977, he headed the Group of Twelve in opposition to the regime of Anastasio Somoza. When the revolution triumphed in 1979, Ramírez became a member of the governing Junta. He was elected Vice President of the Republic in 1984. He founded the publishing house Editorial Nueva Nicaragua in 1981. He was the leader of the Sandinista Group in the Parliament from 1990 to 1994, and in 1995 founded the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista [MRS].

He has published over twenty-five books, which have been translated into various languages, including: *El pensamiento vivo de Sandino* (1975), *Charles Atlas también muere* (stories, 1976), *Castigo divino* (novel, 1988) which won the Dashiell Hammett Prize and was adapted for television by RTI in Colombia; *Clave de sol* (stories, 1993), *Un baile de máscaras* (novel, 1995) which won France's Laure Betaglione Prize for the best foreign book of 1998. His novel *Margarita, está linda la mar* won the Alfaguara International Prize for the Novel in 1998, whose jury was led by Carlos Fuentes.

In Nicaragua, he is president of the Foundation for War Victims, the XXI Century Foundation, and the Editorial Board of *El Semanario*. He is a member of the Central American Commission on Education, Equality, and Economic Competitiveness, organized by PREAL, under the auspices of Inter-American Dialogue. In 1999, he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Maryland.

The following works by Sergio Ramírez are available in English:

1. *Stories* (London: Readers International, 1981).
2. *To Bury Our Fathers: A Novel of Nicaragua* (London: Readers International, 1984)
3. *Sandino, The Testimony of a Nicaraguan Patriot, 1921-1934* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)
4. *Hatful of Tigers – Reflections on Art, Culture and Politics* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1995).

The themes covered in this talk derive from the book *Mentiras verdaderas*, published in April 2000 by Alfaguara, in the *Palabra del escritor* collection, and were developed in a series of lectures delivered at the Cátedra Julio Cortázar of the Universidad de Guadalajara in May 1997. They were also treated in a presentation by the author at the Seminario Geografía de la Novela [Seminar on the Geography of the Novel] organized by the Colegio Nacional de México in March 1998.

Translated by Marguerite Feitlowitz

Other publications available in the *Encuentros* series:

- *Houses, Voices and Language in Latin America*  
Dialogue with José Donoso, Chilean novelist.  
No. 1, March 1993.
- *How the History of America Began*  
Lecture by Germán Arciniegas, Colombian historian.  
No. 2, April 1993.
- *The International Year of Indigenous Peoples*  
Lecture by Rigoberta Menchú, Guatemalan indigenous leader  
and 1992 Nobel Peace Prize laureate.  
No. 3, October 1993.
- *Contemporary Paraguayan Narrative: Two Currents*  
Lecture by Renée Ferrer, Paraguayan novelist and poet.  
No. 4, March 1994.
- *Paraguay and Its Plastic Arts*  
Lecture by Annick Sanjurjo Casciero, Paraguayan historian.  
No. 5, March 1994.
- *The Future of Drama*  
Lecture by Alfonso Sastre, Spanish playwright.  
No. 6, April 1994.
- *Dance: from Folk to Classical*  
Lecture by Edward Villella, North American dancer and Artistic  
Director of the Miami City Ballet.  
No. 7, August 1994.
- *Belize: A Literary Perspective*  
Lecture by Zee Edgell, Belizean novelist and author of *Beka Lamb*.  
No. 8, September 1994.
- *The Development of Sculpture in the Quito School*  
Lecture by Magdalena Gallegos de Donoso, Ecuadorian anthropologist.  
No. 9, October 1994.

- *Art in Context: Aesthetics, Environment, and Function in the Arts of Japan*  
Lecture by Ann Yonemura, North American curator of Japanese Art  
at the Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian Institution.  
No. 10, March 1995.
- *Approaching the End of the Millennium*  
Lecture by Homero Aridjis, Mexican poet and winner of  
the United Nations Global 500 Award.  
No. 11, September 1995.
- *Haiti: A Bi-Cultural Experience*  
Lecture by Edwidge Danticat, Haitian novelist and author of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.  
No. 12, December 1995.
- *The Meanings of the Millennium*  
Lecture by Bernard McGinn, North American theologian from  
the University of Chicago's Divinity School.  
No. 13, January 1996.
- *Andean Millenarian Movements: Their Origins, Originality  
and Achievements (16th-18th centuries)*.  
Lecture by Manuel Burga, Peruvian sociologist from  
the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos.  
No. 14, February 1996.
- *Apocalypse in the Andes: Contact Zones and the Struggle for Interpretive Power*  
Lecture by Mary Louise Pratt, Canadian linguist from Stanford University.  
No. 15, March 1996.
- *When Strangers Come to Town: Millennial Discourse, Comparison,  
and the Return of Quetzalcoatl*.  
Lecture by David Carrasco, North American historian  
from Princeton University.  
No. 16, June 1996.
- *Understanding Messianism in Brazil: Notes from a Social Anthropologist*  
Lecture by Roberto Da Matta, Brazilian anthropologist from  
Notre Dame University.  
No. 17, September 1996.

- *The People's Millennium: The Legacy of Juan and Eva Perón*  
Lecture by Juan E. Corradi, Argentine sociologist from New York University.  
No. 18, November 1996.
- *Brief Notes on Ecuadorian and U.S. Literature*  
Lecture by Raúl Pérez Torres, Ecuadorian Poet.  
No. 19, March 1997.
- *Society and Poetry: Those Who Come Wrapped in a Blanket*  
Lecture by Roberto Sosa, Honduran poet.  
No. 20, May 1997.
- *Architecture as a Living Process*  
Lecture by Douglas Cardinal, Canadian architect whose projects include Washington, D.C.'s National Museum of the American Indian.  
No. 21, July 1997.
- *Composing Opera: A Backstage Visit to the Composer's Workshop*  
Lecture by Daniel Catán, Mexican composer whose operas include *Florencia en el Amazonas*.  
No. 22, August 1997.
- *Welcoming Each Other: Cultural Transformation of the Caribbean in the 21st Century.*  
Lecture by Earl Lovelace, Trinidadian novelist and winner of the 1997 Commonwealth Prize.  
No. 23, January 1998.
- *Out of Silence*  
Lecture by Albalucía Angel, Colombian novelist and pioneer of Latin American postmodernism.  
No. 24, April 1998.
- *How Latino Immigration is Transforming America*  
Lecture by Roberto Suro, North American reporter for *The Washington Post*, and former Bureau Chief of *The New York Times* in Houston, Texas.  
No. 25, May 1998.
- *The Iconography of Painted Ceramics from the Northern Andes.*  
Lecture by Felipe Cárdenas-Arroyo, Colombian archaeologist from the University of Los Andes in Bogota.  
No. 26, July 1998.

- *Celebrating the Extraordinary Life of Elisabeth Samson*  
Lecture by Cynthia McLeod, Surinamese novelist and author of *The High Price of Sugar*.  
No. 27, August 1998.
- *A Country, A Decade*  
Lecture by Salvador Garmendia, Venezuelan novelist, and winner of the Juan Rulfo Short Story Prize and the National Literature Prize.  
No. 28, September 1998.
- *Aspects of Creation in the Central American Novel*  
Lecture by Gloria Guardia, Panamanian fiction writer and essayist, and senior member of the Panamanian Academy of Language.  
No. 29, September 1998.
- *Made in Guyana*  
Lecture by Fred D'Aguiar, Guyanese novelist and winner of the Whitbread First Novel Award, and the Guyana Prize for Fiction, and Poetry.  
No. 30, November 1998.
- *True Lies on the Subject of Literary Creation*  
Sergio Ramírez, Nicaraguan writer and former Vice-president of his country.  
No. 31, May 1999.
- *Myth, History and Fiction in Latin America*  
Tomás Eloy Martínez, Argentinean writer and author of *Santa Evita*.  
No. 32, May 1999.
- *Cultural Foundations of Latin American Integration*  
Leopoldo Castedo, Spanish-Chilean art historian.  
No. 33, September 1999.
- *El Salvador and the Construction of Cultural Identity*  
Miguel Huezo Mixco, Salvadorian poet and journalist.  
No. 34, October 1999.

○ *The Female Memory in Narrative*

Lecture by Nélida Piñon, Brazilian novelist and author of *The Republic of Dreams*.  
No. 35, November 1999.

---

○ Spanish and English versions available

The *Encuentros* series is distributed free of charge to university and municipal libraries throughout the IDB member countries. Interested institutions may obtain the series by contacting the IDB Cultural Center at the address listed on the back cover.

**Inter-American Development Bank**

IDB CULTURAL CENTER

1300 New York Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20577

U.S.A.

Tel: (202) 623-3774

Fax: (202) 623-3192

[IDBCC@iadb.org](mailto:IDBCC@iadb.org)