

# Giving up the ghost

A new generation of apolitical, cosmopolitan Latin American writers is determined to banish the spirit of García Márquez and magical realism. By Ángel Gurría-Quintana

The enduring fame of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has been a blessing and a curse for Latin American writers. A blessing, because it brought the region literary prominence, easing the way for other authors. A curse, because Gabriel García Márquez's intoxicating brew of epic storytelling, tropical flourishes and touches of magical realism made readers and publishers expect all Latin American fiction to conform to his template.

Tales abound of dejected authors whose work was considered unpublishable in translation because it lacked the requisite dash of local colour, exoticism or underdevelopment. When one Chilean writer, Alberto Fuguet, submitted a short story to a literary journal in the US, the editor famously rejected it because it was "not Latin American enough". For years, it appeared that only novels peopled with ghosts, set amid some crumbling family homestead or in a destitute Latin American backwater, would attract foreign publishers and booksellers.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. García Márquez, the Colombian Nobel laureate, remains the most conspicuous figure to emerge from the Latin American fiction "boom" of the 1960s and 1970s that also brought international fame to authors such as Mexico's Carlos Fuentes, Peru's Mario Vargas Llosa and Argentina's Julio Cortázar.

By the 1980s, however, a new generation of writers was emerging, most of whom had grown up in Latin America's crowded megacities. Its members produced fiction that accurately reflected the demographic shift from rural to urban environments. Fuguet, the Chilean writer whose story was rejected, compiled short works of fiction by 17 writers – all male. The 1996 anthology of new Latin American fiction was titled *McOndo*, a sly reference to Macondo, the setting for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The world these young authors depicted was one of McDonald's, shopping malls and high-rise condos. It was a place filled with the detritus of modern popular culture instead of the flying maidens and melancholy generals of García Márquez's books. Modern writers were encouraged to jettison tradition and abhor the folksy regionalism foreign readers had come to expect. There was a definite generational shift as authors took new and surprising directions. A conspicuous trend was the refusal to root

books in the region: Mexican Jorge Volpi's *In Search of Klingsor* (1999) occurs in post-war Germany, while Argentine *McOndo* contributor Rodrigo Fresán's *Kensington Gardens* (2003) is set in London. A more flexible idea of what it meant to be a Latin American writer now seemed possible.

Latin America's literature has always been as diverse as its landscape – it could not be otherwise in such a vast region. Yet this diversity has not always been evident in translation. Three recently translated works of fiction illustrate some of the ways in which contemporary writers have moved away from the magical realist paradigm that has long encumbered writing from the continent.

No one was more daunted by the success of Colombia's Nobel winner than younger Colombian writers. Among them was Laura Restrepo, whose latest novel, *Delirium*, appeared in English earlier this year. Like García Márquez, Restrepo settled in Mexico to flee Colombia's troubles. That, however, is where the similarities end.

García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) is about an honour killing in a small Colombian town. *Delirium* dissects a new type of violence emerging from Colombia's cities: societal, all-encompassing, fuelled by drug traffic. The novel is a devastating chronicle of disenchantment with a country rent by brutality and tainted to its core by dirty money. And while García Márquez's storytelling is classically omniscient and forcefully linear, Restrepo's writing is fragmented and her narrators are disconcertingly unreliable.

One of the narrators, an unemployed university lecturer called Aguilar, explains his

discomfort "with the phenomenon calling itself magic realism, so fashionable at the time". It is a sharp dig at Restrepo's illustrious forerunner, and a necessary act of literary patricide.

Aguilar returns to Bogotá and finds that his wife, Agustina, has descended into madness. As he pieces together events that occurred in his absence, we get glimpses of Agustina's pampered childhood with an abusive father, and a mother who would rather endure betrayals and lies than suffer social shame. Meanwhile, we are given details of Agustina's breakdown by an unsavoury ex-boyfriend known as Midas McAlister.

Violence – state-sponsored, or practised by terrorists or cartels – is certainly not a new theme in Latin American fiction. Yet few contemporary Latin American novelists have managed to depict it with such urgency as Restrepo.

Agustina's malady is that of someone coping with Colombia's ubiquitous hypocrisy and bloodshed. It is not unlike the lunacy consuming the country as it descends into a vortex of paramilitary attacks, guerrilla strikes, kidnappings and bombs. "Maybe the hardest part," Aguilar acknowledges, "is accepting the stretch of middle ground between sanity and madness and learning to straddle it."

This, it seems, is the accommodation that many citizens of Latin America are forced to endure. If the region's literature once hinted that magic was part of daily reality, it now suggests that normality requires an uneasy compromise between chaos, carnage and wilful oblivion.

Restrepo's *Delirium* confronts the unpleasantness of Colombian current affairs head-on, and in this her writing is closer to the traditional mould of politically militant Latin American writers. However, another newly translated novel by an Argentinian illustrates how far young Latin American authors have strayed from expectations. Alan Pauls' astonishing *The Past* – masterfully translated by Nick Caistor – is unabashedly about love. It is also about addictions. To drugs, certainly, and to the voluptuousness of language and art, but mostly to love itself: its tremors, its aftershocks, its subterranean wells of jealousy, disgust and elation.

Though Pauls is not officially part of the *McOndo* movement, he shares with that group one of its defining characteristics: a professed disinterest in the region's politics.

## DELIRIUM

by Laura Restrepo

translated by Natasha Wimmer

Harvill Secker £16.99, 320 pages

FT bookshop price: £13.59

## THE PAST

by Alan Pauls

translated by Nick Caistor

Harvill Secker £17.99, 474 pages

FT bookshop price: £14.39

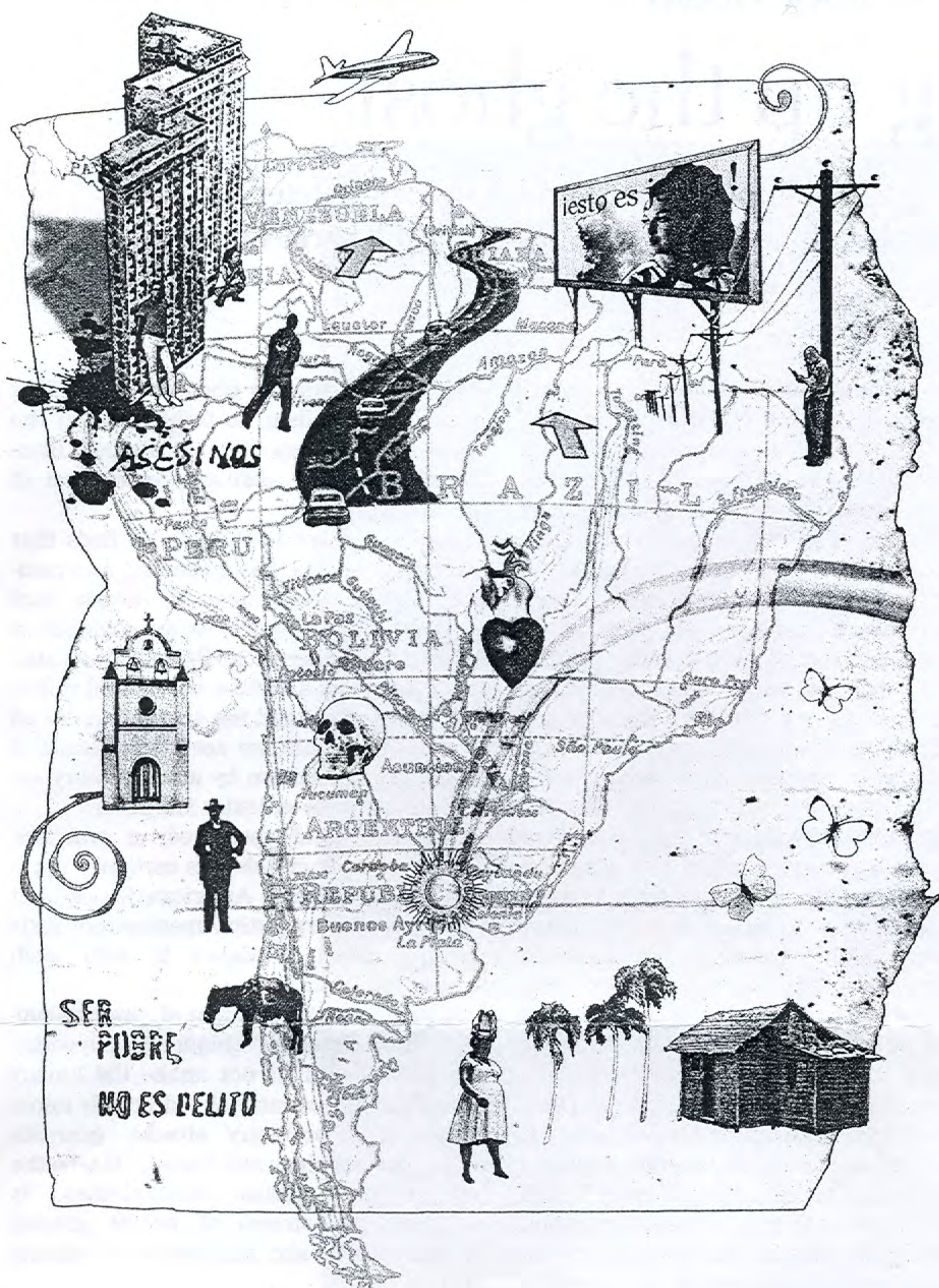
## LAST EVENINGS ON EARTH

by Roberto Bolaño

translated by Chris Andrews

Harvill Secker £15.99, 277 pages

FT bookshop price: £12.79



The *Past* glosses over more than two decades of recent Argentine history with only the barest mention of the country's military dictatorship or its recent financial crises. Momentous events such as the fall of the Berlin wall serve only as markers in Rimini and Sofia's relationship.

The novel is mostly set in Buenos Aires. Its spirited protagonists, Rimini and Sofia, are the most extraordinary lovers in Latin American fiction since the ageing couple in García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (which this year was voted the best Spanish-language novel of the past 25 years by Spanish-speaking writers). While García Márquez's delightful characters appear to be caught in their own world of sepia-tinted conventions, Sofia and Rimini are utterly modern and shockingly recognisable.

They have been together since their adolescence, basking in the smug knowledge of their relationship's uniqueness. Then, quite abruptly, "only 72 days... away from their twelfth anniversary", they split up. Yet to Rimini and Sofia, this is a beginning, not an

end: "Separation was not the opposite of love: it was its frontier, its culmination, the interior wall of their confinement."

Here we see another point of convergence with Pauls' contemporaries: he resists exploring themes of Latin American (or even national) identity – a favourite subject of earlier generations. Now, personal identity is all that matters. In the narcissistic, self-centred quest to satisfy their emotional needs and establish a sense of self, Sofia and Rimini – globetrotting, art-loving, love-addled – epitomise the new notion of what it means to be Latin American.

Even before Pauls became a poster boy for modern Latin American novelists – cosmopolitan, apolitical, unconcerned with national boundaries – Chilean expatriate Roberto Bolaño was already tracing this path. A poet, novelist and short-story writer, Bolaño had an anarchic streak that made him a guiding spirit behind movements such as the *McOndo* anthology. Since he died from liver disease in 2003, his followers have declared him nothing short of

a genius who reinvented the novel, though such claims are exaggerated.

Bolaño is a writer's writer. He extracts much mileage from the pettiness of poets, and from ridiculing the vanity of self-appointed prophets of the literary vanguard. In his gem of a novella, *By Night in Chile*, he makes a lapidary criticism of bad-poets-turned-literary-critics: in a military regime, he suggests, they are the most likely to become torturers. It is in the short form that Bolaño excels – rather than long self-indulgent novels such as *The Savage Detectives* (published earlier this year) or his as-yet-untranslated behemoth, *2666*. With the recent publication of *Last Evenings on Earth*, a collection of short stories, English-speaking readers will better understand what made him so distinctive.

Most of the stories in this collection are about unsuccessful authors. All the narrators resemble versions of Bolaño himself. "Sensini", the opening tale, is about an old man obsessed with entering provincial literary competitions. In another story, "Henri Simon Leprince", we are told: "The protagonist... (middle class, well educated, respectable friends, but downwardly mobile and short of money) – is a writer. Naturally he is a failed writer." Yet another introduces a bad poet whose uncritical tenacity gave him "a kind of literary sanctity that only young poets and old whores can appreciate".

The lesson gleaned from Bolaño's work is, as one character puts it, that "the little word of letters is terrible as well as ridiculous." But there is a darker vein to his tales of pathetic scribblers. As another character observes, "violence, real violence, is unavoidable, at least for those of us who were born in Latin America during the fifties and were about 20 years old at the time of [former Chilean president] Salvador Allende's death."

It is with such "unavoidable violence" that these new works of fiction contend. Whether they explore the tyranny of past loves, the casual villainy of inconsequential writers, or the rule of blood money, they remain – amid the region's poverty and promise – the most effective way of presenting unpalatable truths. They also introduce English-speaking readers to fresh narratives from a continent as rich in storytellers as in calamities. Amid this variety of voices, one thing is clear: we are not in García Márquez's Macondo any more.