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A Writer Whose Posthumous Novel Crowns an Illustrious Career

By [LARRY ROHTER](#)

SANTIAGO, Chile - Even before his death two years ago at 50, Roberto Bolano was emerging as his generation's premier Latin American writer. But with the posthumous success of "2666," an extravagantly encyclopedic 1,119-page novel that traverses two continents and eight decades, Bolano's reputation and legend are in meteoric ascent.

To younger readers and writers, Bolano, a Chilean who died in a Barcelona hospital while awaiting a liver transplant, is a cult hero cut down, like some rock star or movie idol, as he was reaching his prime. In little more than a decade, he produced a torrent of novels, short stories and essays that chart a path distinct from the "Boom generation" of Latin American writers before him.

"Bolano's genius is not just the extraordinary quality of his writing, but also that he does not conform to the paradigm of the Latin American writer," said Ignacio Echeverria, former literary editor of *El País*, Spain's leading daily. "His writing is neither magical realism, nor baroque nor localist, but an imaginary, extraterritorial mirror of Latin America, more as a kind of state of mind than a specific place."

Since its publication late last year, "2666" has won nearly every literary award for which it is eligible, most recently the municipal prize here in Bolano's native land. It would be the favorite for the Rómulo Gallego prize, the most prestigious in Latin America, except that Mr. Bolano won it for his last novel, "The Savage Detectives," and is not eligible.

Divided into five sections that Bolano first envisioned as separate novels, to be published one a year, "2666" begins with the hunt for a writer who has disappeared. But the search for the writer converges with the efforts of police confronting a serial killer who preys on female factory workers in a Mexican border town.

"Roberto emerged as a writer at a time when Latin America no longer believed in utopias, when paradise had become hell, and that sense of monstrousness and waking nightmares and constant flight from something horrid permeates '2666' and all his work," said the Argentine novelist Rodrigo Fresana. "His books are political, but in a way that is more personal than militant or demagogic, that is closer to the mystique of the beatniks" than the "Boom."

Bolano also differs from the generation of writers preceding him in that his national identity is fluid. Whereas Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia, Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru and Carlos Fuentes of Mexico all identify closely with their native lands in their important works, Bolano makes his protagonists vagabonds who move from country to country, usually on some quest doomed to disappointment.

"He's not really from any one place, but is a sort of international, post-nationalist writer with strong emotional ties to Chile, Mexico and Spain," said Natasha Wimmer, who is translating "The Savage Detectives" into English. "He's not just steeped in his own national literature and drama, but is more wide-ranging and global, especially in his later books, and language-wise he definitely draws on the colloquialisms and slang of all three countries." In his last interview, published by the Mexican edition of Playboy magazine, Bolano said he regarded himself as "a Latin American," adding that "my only country is my two children and perhaps, though in second place, some moments, streets, faces or books that are in me."

His early years were spent in southern and coastal Chile, by his own account a skinny, nearsighted and bookish but dyslexic child. As a teenager, though, he moved with his family to Mexico, dropped out of school, worked as a journalist and became active in left-wing political causes. He returned here just before the 1973 coup that installed Gen. Augusto Pinochet in power, and, like many others of his age and background, was jailed but, as he told it, was saved when two former classmates serving in the national police recognized him and authorized his release following a week in prison.

After an interlude in El Salvador, spent in the company of the poet Roque Dalton and the guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, he returned to Mexico living as a bohemian poet and literary enfant terrible - "a professional provocateur feared at all the publishing houses even though he was a nobody, bursting into literary presentations and readings," his editor, Jorge Herralde, recalled.

He finally made his way to Spain, where he married and settled in a small town on the Mediterranean coast near Barcelona working as a dishwasher, a campground custodian, bellhop and garbage collector, while he wrote.

Mr. Bolano thought of himself primarily as a poet, and a 20-year collection of his verse was published in 2000 under the title "The Romantic Dogs." He turned to narrative fiction "and abandoned his parsimonious beatnik existence," Mr. Herralde said, because the birth of his son in 1990 made him "decide that he was responsible for his family's future and that it would be easier to earn a living by writing fiction."

As regards his native country, which he visited just once after going into exile, Bolano had conflicted feelings. It was surely not by accident that the main garbage dump where many of the murdered women in "2666" are found is called "El Chile," or that he named his son Lautaro, after a leader of the Indian resistance to the Spanish conquest here.

Bolano is also notorious in Chile for his fierce attacks on Isabel Allende and other members of the literary establishment. "He didn't fit into Chile, and the rejection that he experienced left him free to say whatever he wanted, which can be a good thing for a writer," said the Chilean novelist and playwright Ariel Dorfman.

Of Latin America's writers, Bolano most admired Borges. The first of his novels, "Nazi Literature in the Americas," published in 1996 and soon to be available in English, can be read as a homage to Borges.

A voracious reader, Bolano was also familiar with Anglo-American literature, and was fascinated by such genre writers as James Ellroy, Philip K. Dick and Cormac McCarthy. "Everything he writes seems to have some riddle in it that is a reference to something else," said Deborah Treisman, fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, which plans to publish a Bolano short story later this year. "You get a definite sense of the wide reading he had done and feel this sort of allusive quality."

In "2666" Bolano works some of the same geographic territory as Mr. McCarthy - the arid frontier between Mexico and the United States - but in the more hallucinatory fashion of Mr. Ellroy. Though the novel starts and ends in contemporary Germany, the focus is on the murders of scores of female factory workers in the imaginary border city of Santa Teresa, a plot line modeled on similar killings that have occurred in recent years in Ciudad Juárez.

The reasons for the book's unusual title remain a mystery even to Bolano's closest friends. But there are oblique references in his writing indicating that Bolano thought of that year as a sort of apocalypse. Thus far, Bolano is little known in the English-speaking world and most of his work is not readily available. But the critics and editors familiar with the two small, early novels that *New Directions* has published in translation, "Distant Star" and "By Night in Chile," or who have read him in French, German or Italian translations have been unusually enthusiastic about his work. [Susan Sontag](#) called him "the most influential and admired novelist of his generation in the Spanish-speaking world."

Over the next few years, more Bolano will be translated into English. In addition to the 622-page "The Savage Detectives" and "2666," the rights to both of which were recently acquired by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, all his other novels are to be translated, and a collection of short stories called "Last Evenings on Earth" is to be published early in 2006. "We want to do everything, because he is just a mesmerizing writer," said Barbara Epler, editor in chief of *New Directions*.

Bolano was extraordinarily prolific, but Mr. Herralde, his Spanish editor, said that not much remains unpublished: a volume of poetry tentatively called "The Unknown University" and one more collection of short stories. Bolano joked about the "posthumous," saying the word "sounds like the name of a Roman gladiator, one who is undefeated," and would no doubt be amused to see how his stock has risen now that he is dead. Still, Mr. Fresan said that "Roberto was one of a kind, a writer who worked without a net, who went all out, with no brakes, and in doing so, created a new way to be a great Latin American writer."

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