

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Márquez



Review by: Lauren Evans

I read this book for the first time when I was a senior in high school taking an AP Spanish Literature class. We read it in Spanish, but I had bought it in English as well to help me learn the words that I didn't know. It was really great to pick it up again 16 years later, especially because I have read a few more of "Gabo's" work since then – *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. The writing style of this Nobel Prize winner is so captivating and carries so much deep symbolism, I really feel you have to read his works a few times to really pick up their true meaning.

To fully understand Gabo's work and symbolism in it, especially this book, you have to know about his unusual upbringing in Colombia and the state of his country before and during his life – so I'll share a little bit with you in hopes that it will inspire you to pick up some of his great work! Born in 1928 in the northern town of Aracataca, Gabo was brought into this world not too long after a period of Colombian civil wars. Many of his relatives were involved and lost their lives, and veterans of these wars have manifested themselves as fictional characters in many of Gabo's works. Another event that affected his works (especially *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) was the Banana Strike Massacre of 1928, an uprising of banana workers of the American company United Fruit because of their exploitation and denial of basic human rights and working conditions. When the workers got together to organize a demonstration, the Colombian government sent in their troops who fired on the unarmed banana workers and killed hundreds. For the workers who survived – many of them disappeared and were never heard from again. This event (which is denied as ever having happened in Colombian history books) sparked the start of La Violencia, a period of unrest, fighting and destruction of property that would claim the lives of more than 150,000 Colombians by the mid-1950s.

Gabo's family also played a significant role in his writing, especially his grandparents who were responsible for raising him. His grandfather fought in the Colombian civil wars including the Banana Massacre, and he would tell his grandsons real, gruesome stories of his experiences. On the other hand, his grandmother would spout fictional tales to her grandchildren – ones full of folklore, ghost stories and premonitions. Even though his grandfather would tell him not to believe these stories, Gabo always bought in to what his grandmother told him, and it was her

style of storytelling, of getting Gabo to believe everything she said even though it was far from reality, that heavily influenced his style of storytelling and his themes of magic realism. After the death of his grandparents, Gabo went to school for law but found little interest in it. Instead, he chose to spend his time catching up on literature and reading everything he could get his hands on. After marrying and having children, Gabo and his family lived in New York City and Mexico City. There, he authored his first works that each sold only a few hundred copies each, but in 1965, while in Acapulco, he would get the inspiration to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. He locked himself in a room with cigarettes and alcohol and wrote daily for 18 months until sending the book to be published in 1967. Since then, it has sold millions of copies and has been translated into many languages.

One Hundred Years of Solitude is the history of the town of Macondo and its founding family, the Buendías. Because the story takes place over the course of more than a century, most of the events in the book are about the births, deaths, marriages and love affairs of the Buendía family. At the beginning of the book, Macondo is extremely isolated and goes for many years without contact from the outside world. But, that soon changes, and with those changes, comes unrest and war.

With a very diverse and ambitious family under her wings, the matriarch of the book Ursula José Iguarán devotes herself to keep the Buendía family together despite its differences. Some of the men in the family are wild and have many lovers, while others are quiet and solitary, and the women in the family vary from shy, prim and proper to wild, assertive and outgoing. We meet Jose Arcadio Buendía, the founder of Macondo and a solitary leader who possesses great strength and intellect, but who often chooses to alienate himself from his men – one of the many representations of solitude in the book. After his children are born and mature, they inherit his traits: José Arcadio takes on his immense strength, while Aureliano takes on his intense focus and strategic mindset.

As the Buendia children grow up, Macondo begins to connect with the outside world, and as a result, civil wars begin as do many changes to the government structure, bringing violence and death to the once peaceful town. Aureliano Buendía emerges as the notorious Colonel Aureliano Buendía and leader of the liberal rebels. Dictator Arcadio Buendía, the cruelest member of the family, is eventually shot by a firing squad. After Arcadio's passing, a mayor of Macondo is elected, and his reign is peaceful until another civil uprising has him killed.

For Macondo, the forces modernization and capitalism are crushing. A banana plantation moves in and exploits the land and the workers, and the Americans who own the plantation settle in their own segregated area of town. As what happened in Banana Massacre of 1928, the workers go on strike, and thousands of them are killed, their bodies dumped carelessly into the ocean. A five-year period of heavy rain and flooding follows that completely decimates Macondo, and the Buendía family mirrors that decline of their once Eden-like town by turning on each other. The book ends just as it had started: the town of Macondo returns to its isolated state, and the Buendías die off. The book ends when the last surviving Buendía, Aureliano, discovers that all has been predicted in ancient parchments: that the Macondo and its inhabitants have been

living out a preordained cycle, “because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth.”

While not directly connected to the work we do, the theme of poverty was used to demonstrate a real issue compared to the elements of magic realism like gypsies, myths and legends that were woven into the story. Much like the circumstances of Gabo’s upbringing with his grandparents, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* wants readers to harness the powers of interpretation to discover what is real and what is not.