

Juan Toledo

Somebody has to
do it

As with sport, or even journalism, the arts take place in a world with a fair amount of jingoism. As a result, our artistic appreciations, our literary ones, are full of one-sided misconceptions and omissions. One of these misconceptions is that all Latin American literature is synonymous with magic realism, when in fact its main exponent, Gabriel García Márquez, wrote more historical novels than magic realist ones. One could even argue that Latin American readers have an advantage over those of the English-speaking world, in having no problem whatsoever understanding the psychological and socially charged dramas of Jane Austen, Dickens or Martin Amis, or even those fantasy sagas full of the kind of magic which aspires to save the world – including Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings* or, more recently, *Harry Potter*. The same cannot be said of the average English reader, who tends to think of literature produced in Spanish across the Atlantic as all detached from reality, failing to understand that magic realism is, in reality, a social and

historical critique. This is a misunderstanding which manifests itself in a lack of translations, an absence of literary discussion in the British press or even obituaries for some of our most important writers. Even specialised publications, like *The London Review of Books*, offer very little when it comes to the diffusion of the ideas and themes appearing in contemporary Latin American fiction. The exception tends to be either a writer who fits the pre-existing model of how a 'successful' English novel should read, or a novelist already translated and acclaimed in the United States.

The other major contrast between Latin American and UK English literature is one of format. Whereas in Britain, for historical and commercial reasons, the novel as a literary form is king, in Latin America some of our most admired and innovative writers never wrote a novel, preferring instead the innovation, irony and refined humour of the short story. This is something which remains marginalised on these shores of ours in Britain.

My own transition from a student of sciences in Latin America to an undergraduate reading English literature and philosophy at the University of London's Birkbeck College, followed by a Masters in Hispanic studies, created in me a personal comparative study between the two great fictional traditions of British and Latin American literature. As a result, I felt the urgency of trying to generate – together with a small group of friends – a commentary, critique and dissemination of books and ideas produced across the pond in Spanish, something which still at present remains

virtually non-existent in Britain. The do-it-yourself approach to filling that void has always required nothing less than steadfastness. Before the globalised democratisation of the internet, my efforts consisted of editing the first Spanish speaking newspaper in London, *Crónica Latina*, turning what was a community sheet for businesses advertising their trade into a monthly newspaper with opinions, interviews, an extended cultural section and even a crossword. Subsequently, I had the opportunity to edit a magazine, *Pulso*, that similarly was transformed into a quasi-cultural monthly and which, fortunately, I was paid to do.

Together, *Crónica Latina* and *Pulso* was a labour of seven years – reviewing books and films, and interviewing such luminaries as Alberto Manguel, Roger Bartra, Javier Cercas, Sylvia Libedinsky, Juan Manuel Roca, William Ospina and Homero Aridjis (the first poet ever to address the ecological dilemma in any Western language). With the help of some British Latin Americanists such as William Rowe, Jason Wilson and John Kraniauskas – contacts made possible through my postgraduate studies at Birkbeck College in London – we were able to venture into British institutional spaces and present a slightly different perspective of Latin American literature and culture. Personal highlights, at the time, were conferences at the Institute of Latin American Studies about two philosophers Estanislao Zuleta (whose entire oeuvre has been recently re-edited) and Nicolás Gómez Davila, as well as a fortnightly slot to talk on Nicky Campbell's BBC Radio 5 Live show.

Now that the ubiquitousness of the web has translated into wider access to global cultural production, my efforts are focused on putting and keeping together a community of writers, critics, academics and independent publishers – such as Friends of Alice, Victoria Press and Equidistancias – to share their knowledge and enthusiasm for Latin American literature. Two outcomes have been ZTR-Radio- London, a bilingual podcast (www.ztradio.podomatic.com), and Revista Perro Negro (www.revistaperronegro.com), the only cultural magazine that, as far as we are aware, is also bilingual. The magazine's editorial credo is to have a free to access, online publication written in language that is at once intelligent, original, accessible and even irreverent. Articles are published in either English or Spanish. We commission our own translations and help to present and disseminate work by lesser-known authors, both contemporary and non-contemporary. We have just started to publish our own books and translations in Ediciones Perro Negro. And after eight years we have been able to create what we call 'an immense minority' of loyal worldwide readers and listeners keen to learn about the literary traditions of Latin America, and to a lesser extent the English-speaking world, albeit from a different perspective.

What we have witnessed, after almost four decades of commenting and promoting Latin America literature in the UK, is a significant shift from the perception by British readers of a narrative until recently equated with exoticism and "*lo real maravilloso*" to a more recent body of work encompassing outstanding and imaginative, hard hitting texts. These

include *Hurricane Season* by Fernanda Melchor, *Optic Nerve* by Maria Gainza, the disquieting short stories of Samanta Schweblin and historical reflections about cultural purity and identity as explored by UK-based writers like Enrique Zattara and Carlos Fonseca, the latter in his extraordinary novel *Austral*. The afro-Latin American novel is also starting to emerge, along with the narratives of native cultures of the continent, with authors such as the Mayan author Marisol Ceh Moo who writes in Yucatec and Spanish as well as Ruben Hilari Quispe, who writes in Aymara. The canvas through which Latinx writers weave their threads is definitively much larger, more textured and colourful than ever. It seems that finally our globalised cosmic world is starting to exert its gravitational pull on us, not the other way around.

Juan Toledo is a translator, podcaster, editor and teacher. Born in Colombia, he studied chemistry at the National University and then literature and philosophy at Birkbeck College and University College London, where he also completed a master's degree in translation and Hispanic studies. He worked as a Touring Officer in the Drama and Dance department and later as a Cultural Manager in the Arts Division of the British Council. He edited one of the first Spanish-language newspapers in Britain, *Crónica Latina*, and later became director of an independent radio station in Brixton. He is currently editor and co-host of two ZTR Radio podcasts, *Artefacto* and *The Programme*, and edits the bilingual digital cultural magazine *Perro Negro*. He published his first collection of poetry *Ocurrencias y recurrencias* in 2022.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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