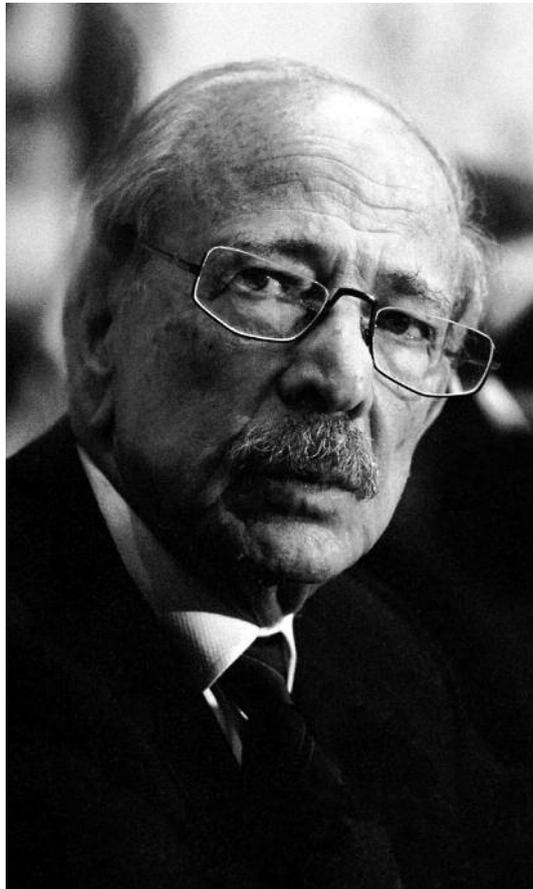


# Fernando Benítez

## Journalist and Man of Letters

They say he carried the word in his hand and his friends in his heart and that on his long odyssey on the byways of culture in Mexico, he managed to eliminate the gap between journalism and literature. Fernando Benítez was born in 1910, the same year that the Mexican Revolution broke out. Above all a writer and journalist, he was the pioneer of cultural journalism in our country, a discoverer and champion of talents, editor, teacher to several generations of journalists, a novelist, and a self-taught historian and anthropologist.

He began his career in 1934 as a contributor to *Revista de revistas* (The Magazine of Magazines). Two years later he joined *El Nacional* (The National), a daily founded by then-president Lázaro Cárdenas. His interest in cultural supplements was born when he discovered among the publications that the paper received the Sunday supplements of the Argentine dailies *La Nación* (The Nation) and *La Prensa* (The Press) that regularly printed articles by important figures of Latin American literature. Ten years later, when he became director of *El Nacional*, he launched its supplement, *La revista mexicana de cultura* (The Mexican Magazine of Culture). The venture was not very fortunate, however: it stopped coming out because he was fired for political reasons only a short time later. But Benítez did not give up. In 1949, *México en la cultura* (Mexico in Culture), a supplement of the national daily *Novedades* (News), was



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born, the country's only cultural supplement, realizing his dream of seeing culture on the streets. His great achievement was surrounding himself with experienced collaborators like Vicente Rojo and José Emilio Pacheco; he would keep up this tradition in all the supplements he later edited.

For more than 10 years, Mexico's great talents and the promising young pens of literature and art paraded through the pages of *México en la cultura*, an interminable list headed up by Alfonso Reyes, Paul Westhein, Alí Chumacero, Octavio Paz, José Luis Cuevas, Luis Cardoza y Aragón and Carlos Fuentes, to mention only a few, as well as several Spanish refugees exiled in Mexico.

His byword was a commitment to excellence and truth. Benítez and the supplement survived two clashes over censorship, the first when he published an Octavio Paz translation of a poem called *Going to Bed*, and the second when he printed Rubens' painting *The Three Graces*. But neither Benítez nor the supplement could survive their defense of the Cuban revolution: in 1961 he was fired. Thirty of his collaborators resigned in solidarity.

Almost immediately, the entire team found a home at the magazine *Siempre!* (Always!), edited by José Pagés Llergo, where they gave birth to the magazine *La cultura en México* (Culture in Mexico). An entire new generation would enrich its pages, including Carlos Monsiváis, Gabriel Zaid, Leopold-

do Zea, Emilio García Riera, Elena Poniatowska, and many more. Benítez would remain there for almost 10 years, despite the confrontation with the federal government over the 1962 coverage by Benítez, Carlos Fuentes, Víctor Flores Olea and León Roberto García of the assassination of peasant leader Rubén Jaramillo and his pregnant wife.

By that time, Benítez had not only given many writers access to the general public, but he had also vindicated the value of journalism in literature. As he said, “I don’t set up those arbitrary borders that exist between journalism and literature in Mexico. I believe that journalism is literature, literature under pressure, the pressure of time and being up to date.”<sup>1</sup>

After leaving *Siempre!* and taking a few years off from journalism, he again accepted the job as editor of the supplement *Sábado* (Saturday), at the recently founded *Unomásuno* (Oneplusone), where he worked from 1977 to 1986. Then he moved on to the *La Jornada Semanal* (The Weekly *La Jornada*), put out by the paper of the same name, where he worked two years and then retired in the hopes of founding a new daily, a dream he never saw realized.

Benítez was a professor of journalism at the UNAM, coming punctually to class for 30 years. Clarity, simplicity and brevity are the key to any piece of journalism, he would repeat untiringly. He never gave exams because, he said, “That, I leave to their city editors,” but he allowed no one in his class who had brought nothing in writing because he thought that a journalist had to write something every day without fail. At the end of the semester, he would remind his students, “You will write literature for future historians, so don’t forget the most important rule of writing, the one that the Red Queen told Alice, ‘Start at the beginning, continue until the end and stop there.’”<sup>2</sup>

Benítez wrote extensively: a book of stories *Caballo y Dios* (Horse and God) (1945) and a play *Cristóbal Colón* (Christopher Columbus) (1953), both of which he considered undistinguished; two novels, *El rey viejo* (The Old King) (1959) and *El agua envenenada* (Poisoned Water) (1961) and innumerable journalistic books and biographies that ventured into history and anthropology, like *La ruta de Hernán Cortés* (The Route of Hernán Cortés), *Viaje a la tarahumara* (Voyage to the Tarahumara), *En la tierra mágica del peyote* (In the Magic Land of Peyote), *Lázaro Cárdenas y la revolución mexicana* (Lázaro Cárdenas and the Mexican Revolution) and the

three-volume *La ciudad de México* (The City of Mexico), among others. The four volumes of *Los indios de México* (The Indians of Mexico) deserve special mention. Written after traveling extensively through Mexico by burro and on foot, this work would change the public’s perception nationwide of Mexico’s indigenous peoples. From his experience with the Indians, Benítez learned a lesson of humility. “I thought I was pretty snazzy stuff, a wise and elegant man....The Indians taught me an unforgettable lesson; they taught me not to think myself important.”<sup>3</sup> And he was a faithful defender of the indigenous cause until the end.

Fernando Benítez was also an advisor to the UNESCO on matters of journalism from 1947 to 1967; he was president of the Pen Club (1969) and Mexican ambassador to the Dominican Republic (1991). He received many honors and awards, such as the Mazatlán Prize, the National Award for Literature and Philology, the Manuel Gamio Medal for Indigenist Merit and the National Anthropology and National Journalism Awards.

His human side was never hidden away from those he worked with. He was intense; he placed great value on friendship, sartorial elegance and a sense of humor, and above all, on women. “I owe my education to women because up until I was 30 or 35, I lived in their bedrooms....[They] are men’s irreplaceable teachers.”<sup>4</sup>

Fernando Benítez died last February at the age of 90. His legacy will be vital for understanding much of twentieth-century Mexican culture. Faithful to his principles to the end, he left nothing undone. He started at the beginning, continued to the end and stopped there. ■■

**Elsie Montiel**

*Editor*

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Raquel Peguero and Patricia Vega, “Fernando Benítez: un torrente de alegría,” *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 22 February 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Mónica Mateos, “En el aula puntual,” *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 22 February 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Peguero and Vega, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Peguero and Vega, op. cit.