

Political Novels Fascinate Mexican Readers

Many of the recent best-sellers point to the next presidential succession.

It's impressive how many titles related in one way or another to political themes you find these days on new book tables in Mexico City bookstores. A number of them are particularly noteworthy because of the publicity they've received and because they were so quickly sold out. Among these are *México negro* (*Black Mexico*), by Francisco Martín Moreno, on oil in Mexico since the beginning of the century and *Los Presidentes* (*The Presidents*), by Julio Scherer García, about the country's last four presidents. And not to be left behind are *Memorias*

proposed Adolfo López Mateos as his successor. Flores was killed together with his wife. Asunción Izquierdo de Flores, better known by her last pen name, Ana Mairena, used for her novel *Los Extraordinarios* (*The Extraordinary Ones*).

Héctor Aguilar Camín's *Morir en el golfo* (*To Die on the Gulf*) is based on the murder of Manuel Buendía, a highly-respected commentator whose column, "Private Network," was widely read and discussed. The story's narrator (also a journalist) makes contact with the leader of the oilworkers' union and other figures who hold important government positions. This allows him to get to know the intricacies of the government apparatus and the ways it exercises power.

Finally, *Arráncame la vida* (*Tear Out My Life*), by Angeles Mastretta, is set in the 1940s, during the Avila Camacho administration. It also deals with the use of power. Catalina Guzmán, the narrator and main character, tells the story of her life alongside Andrés Ascencio, a character modeled after Maximino Avila Camacho, a general in the revolution and brother of the President, who was quite enthused about the idea of one day being his successor. It reveals the intrigues and maneuvers of those in high government places.

All of these books have something to do with politics, either because the author is or has been involved in Mexican politics, because the events and people portrayed have been closely tied to the country's political life or because the characters and



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Leading novelist Angeles Mastretta

(*Memoirs*), by Gonzalo N. Santos (in its third edition by January 1987, despite a hefty price tag), *Desde la trinchera* (*From the Trenches*), by Heberto Castillo and *Personajes* (*Personalities*), by Francisco Martínez de la Vega.

There were also three novels published in 1985 that were particularly noteworthy because of the ways in which they dealt with politics or because real events were used to set the context. Vicente Leñero's *Asesinato* (*Assassination*; now in its fifth edition), rigorously woven from archives and press clippings, is more than simple reporting or testimony; it is a search for truth. The book is about the murder of Gilberto Flores Muñoz, ex-governor of Nayarit and a presidential contender in 1958, until in an unexpected move, then President Adolfo Ruiz Corti-

events are based on real life political figures or real incidents. For example, Gonzalo N. Santos was once Mexico's ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg, a member of the Senate and governor of San Luis Potosí, his native state. After a run-in with then President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952-1958), however, he turned down an offer to become ambassador to Guatemala and retired to "El Gargaleote," his ranch that he refers to as "my provostship."

Julio Scherer García's *Los presidentes* deserves special comment. From his own vantage point, he tells of his relationships with Presidents Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976) and José López Portillo (1976-1982), Scherer also tells why it has been impossible to date for

life and culture

him or any of the other journalists at *Proceso*, the news weekly that he directs, to get an interview with President Miguel de la Madrid.

Scherer recalls significant moments in the López Mateos presidency (1958-1964), dwelling on events leading to the designation of Díaz Ordaz as his successor. He also provides glimpses of former Presidents Lázaro Cárdenas and Ruiz Cortines, as well as of Latin American heads of state he has interviewed, among them Papa Doc Duvalier of Haiti and General Stroessner of Paraguay. In addition, Scherer gives new details on his ouster as editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Excelsior* in 1976, during the Echeverría administration. While that story has already been masterfully told by Vicente Leñero in *Los periodistas* (*The Newspapermen*), published in 1978, and by others involved in the case, no one can question Scherer's right to tell the facts as he lived them. When Scherer talks about former presidents, he provides fascinating insights into Mexico's high-powered political circles.

One of the stories Scherer tells is of a dinner party at the home of Daniel Cosío Villégas, a prominent Mexican intellectual. President Echeverría and several close aides were invited, as were two other intellectuals, Octavio Paz and Víctor Urquidí. The main topic of conversation was the relationship of intellectuals to power and criticism. The president and all those present openly expressed their points of view. Scherer wanted to reproduce the discussion as completely as possible and asked

Publishing works of this type when the time for presidential succession comes around is practically a tradition in Mexico. The "political season" usually begins about a year before the so-called *destape* (revelation or unveiling), when the presidential candidate for the Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI, is announced. It's then that the real political campaigning takes place, between different contenders and factions within the ruling party. The season comes to a close when the new president elect takes office.

The last book in this genre during the previous "political season" was published by Elena Poniatowska in 1983, shortly after De la Madrid took office (December 1, 1982). *Domingo siete* (*Sunday Seven*) quickly sold out three editions. The author's fame for her courageous honesty and outspoken way of calling things by their rightful name helped make the book so popular. In addition, the book reproduces interviews with the seven presidential contenders in the 1982 race, including Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, candidate for the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT) and the first woman to ever run for president in Mexico. The title, *Domingo siete*, is taken from a children's book and has a two-fold meaning: the elections were held on a Sunday, and there were seven contenders that year.

There seem to be even more "political season" books now than ever before. This, combined with the great variety of topics and analysis, points to the difficulties underlying the upcoming presidential succession. It will probably be the most



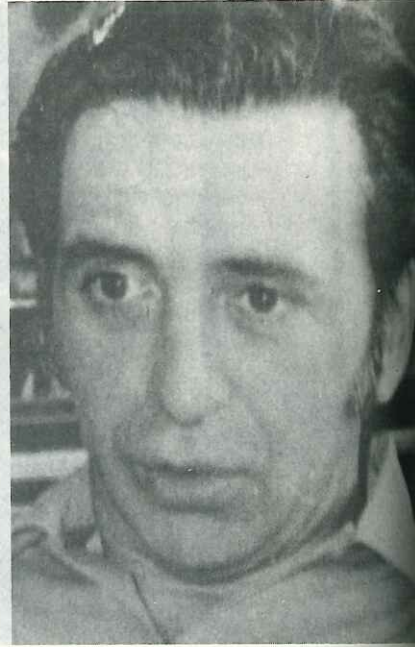
Photo by Rogelio Cuéllar

Julio Scherer heads *Proceso*, Mexico's leading weekly news magazine



Photo by Rogelio Cuéllar

Elena Poniatowska is Mexico's principal writer



Author Vicente Leñero

Octavio Paz to write up the points he had made that Saturday evening. Scherer includes Paz' reply, in which he explained that the conversation concerned the role of intellectuals in modern society and that the freedom with which everyone expressed their opinions was "admirable." Paz also wrote:

"...the intellectual plays a critical role in today's world. He may not be the conscience of society, but he is its eyes and tongue. The intellectual says what he sees and what he hears; he is the witness and the spokesperson of his time. Thus, the simultaneously intimate and contradictory character of his relationship with government power" (page 82).

It's no coincidence that these books are appearing just now.

delicate and complex since Manuel Avila Camacho replaced Lázaro Cárdenas in 1940, over the rebellious opposition of General Andreu Bello.

Intellectuals in Latin America have traditionally played the contradictory role of being critical of institutions, while at the same time maintaining close ties with government power. One of the peculiarities of this relationship in our country is the periodic flood of political literature, a phenomenon that is no doubt associated with the *sui generis* nature of Mexican presidential succession. ★

María Rosa Fiscal