

# The historical novel in Mexico

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Over the past decade, Mexico has experienced an unprecedented “boom” in historical novels, as many talented writers have found their calling in this genre. This trend reflects a certain maturation of Mexican society allowing for reflection on the nation’s history and a more reasoned approach to events of the past—events whose influence continues to be felt today.

As with other countries, the history of Mexico can be read in a variety of ways, depending greatly on the sources one uses. For some, history is but the chronology of dates, facts and figures.

For others it is a byzantine epic in which acts of war and military heroes determine affiliations and enmities, while some view history as a scientific challenge or intellectual project. For the overwhelming majority it boils down to the empty, intangible and incontinent verbiage spewed out in the fervid delirium of officialdom.

Nevertheless, the historiographic approach to the reality of the past has evolved, through the incorporation of new resources and techniques that make history more accessible to researchers. Microhistory, regional history, the history of mentalities, as well as historical analysis of economics, demography, food, etc., have provided a new dimension and a more agreeable, interesting and—hopefully—more objective path to the truth.

Literature, which is hypersensitive to historical events and the evolution of historical research, has been nourished by these new approaches, using these new tools to refashion its voice in accordance with new trends. This allows the writer to construct his or her work in complete freedom, unbound by schematic rules and regulations—the violation of which used to mean being cast out of the genre—and with a structure well-fitted to the anecdotes the writer seeks to convey.

One example is Fernando del Paso’s *Noticias del imperio* (News from the Empire). This work reflects the contributions made by the history of mentalities (Lévi-Strauss, Foucault) and microhistory (Luis González, José María Muriá); this is especially evident in the letters exchanged between the French brothers in the novel, as well as in the microscopic detail in which the author conveys the daily life of that era.

In literary terms, in Mexico the process of “rationalizing” the events of the past—a prerequisite to these events being used as material for novels—began to develop in the second half of the 19th century, perhaps because of the popularity of writers such as Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas and Angel Saavedra (the Duke of Rivas).

It is thanks to Walter Scott’s prolific work that, at the beginning of the 19th century, English speakers (and, later, speakers of other languages) were able to familiarize

themselves with an important part of the history of England and the writer’s native Scotland.

Scott initiated a genre with unsuspected possibilities, through works such as *Ivanhoe*, *The Lady of the Lake*, *Rob Roy* and the saga of Arthur and the knights of the Round Table.

In a similar fashion, Alexandre Dumas the elder recreated part of the history of France in world-renowned historical novels such as *The Three Musketeers*, *Twenty Years After* and *The Count of Montecristo*, in which the fictional narrative was based in large part on accounts of events considered to be historically accurate.

In Spain, the Duke of Rivas produced the *Romances históricos* (Historical Ballads), *El moro expósito* (The Foundling Moor) and *Historia de la sublevación de Nápoles* (History of the Naples Uprising), which were widely read by Spanish-speaking writers in the 19th century.

Years later, Mexican writers—such as Vicente Riva Palacios, with *Martín Garatuza* and the monumental *México a través de los siglos* (Mexico Through the Centuries), Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, with *El zarco* (Blue Eyes), and Manuel Payno, with *Los bandidos de Río Frío* (The Bandits of Río Frío)—joined in the task of producing works that melded the essences of narrative, history and tradition, a technique that would slowly take root as literature came to be used as a means for describing historical events.

Nevertheless, the works of this period were imbued with the romantic spirit of the era; fiction was influenced by a moral code which exalted the values sanctioned by the medieval epic, in which a Manichean view of the world constantly made itself felt.

The production of these works, whether epics, historical dramas or novels, required a collective maturity allowing for serene reflection on a community or nation’s past.

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Historians are assigned the task of collecting and recording the key moments of past reality, while writers of fiction give priority to the context of history, above and beyond dates and official heroes, in order to produce literature.

The revolutionary events that began in Mexico in 1910 captured the imagination of writers who had devoted their talents to writing traditional historical novels inspired by events of the distant past. The Revolution obliged them to focus their attentions on events of the immediate past as well as those they were living through themselves.

Thus there arose the “novel of the Mexican Revolution,” whose most important practitioners (Martín Luis Guzmán and Mariano Azuela) left us the dazzling testimony, in fictionalized form, of a history they had participated in directly.

drama. Their works *Los de abajo* (The Underdogs) and *La sombra del caudillo* (Shadow of a Leader), like those of Rafael F. Muñoz, Mauricio Magdaleno and others, did not confine themselves to fictionalized narration of the events but put forward judgements corresponding to each author’s ethical-political viewpoint.

These novels of “steel and bridle,”<sup>1</sup> of intuitive heroes who became part of the military hierarchy through the whims of fate, and bourgeois gentlemen alarmed at changes in the status quo, absorbed the energies of Mexico’s most important writers during the first half of this century, as works of high quality continued to be produced, such as *La virgen de los cristeros* (The Virgin of the Cristeros<sup>2</sup>) by J. Guadalupe de Anda, and *Pensativa* by Goytortúa Santos.

Outstanding among his works are the stories and *estampas* (images) of Mexico’s Colonial era and Independence period (*Del tiempo pasado* [Of Times Past]). While focused on tasty and piquant anecdotes about famous personages such as “La Güera Rodríguez,” his works reflect the imagery of the common people as expressed in myths and legends based on the syncretism of Mexican culture.

Another figure is José Fuentes Mares, who was principally concerned with clarifying the development of the Liberal and Reform movements in Mexico, in essays such as *Juárez y la intervención* (Juárez and the Intervention) and *Juárez: el imperio y la república* (Juárez: The Empire and the Republic), novels such as *Servidumbre* (Servitude), and theatrical works like *Su alteza serenísima* (Your Most Serene Highness), in which he puts forward his implacable critique of Santa Anna, previously expressed in the historical essay *Santa Anna: aurora y ocaso de un comediante* (Santa Anna: Rise and Fall of a Comedian).

Victoriano Salado Alvarez is another of the authors who cultivated this genre; in his works *De Santa Anna a la reforma* (From Santa Anna to the Reform Movement) and *La intervención* (The Intervention) he related, in novelistic form, the episodes of the great reformist movement which changed the face of the Mexican republic.

The Mexican *costumbrista* novel reached its apogee with Agustín Yáñez in his works *Al filo del agua* (At Water’s Edge), *La tierra pródiga* (The Bountiful Land) and *Las tierras flacas* (The Lean Lands), recreating the way of life of agrarian communities and their principal characters, as well as the aftermath of the Revolution and the changes it brought about.

The 1950s saw the rise of several of our greatest writers: Juan Rulfo, Juan José Arreola, José Revueltas,

## “In Mexico the process of ‘rationalizing’ the events of the past began to develop in the second half of the 19th century”

The works of these writers added valuable elements to the genre, contributing to its evolution. The fact that the narrators were eyewitnesses to the events they described made living testimony of the anecdotes and characters described in their works, rather than a dry and bookish chronology. Their sources were no longer other books, documents, or stories from oral history, but the experiences of their own lives as warriors on the run.

In addition—and this is of particular importance—they expressed their own sharp criticisms of the events they had lived through and the personages who played key roles on the stage of the revolutionary

A parallel process was the rise of the 20th-century Mexican novel of the *costumbrista* school (relating local customs and manners)—a forerunner of present-day microhistory and regional history.

During this brief period, only a few isolated figures continued to concern themselves with historical stories and novels. Artemio del Valle Arizpe was one of these few.

<sup>1</sup> “Mexicans, hark the battle cry, grasp the steel and bridle” is a phrase from the Mexican national anthem. (Editor’s note.)

<sup>2</sup> The Cristeros were participants in a rural religious revolt against the post-Revolutionary government’s policy of secularization in the 1920s and ’30s. (Editor’s note.)

Elena Garro, Carlos Fuentes and Rosario Castellanos, among others. The historical novel—a genre in which these authors did not work—was practically forgotten, without having reached the level of importance it did in some other countries.

Nevertheless, in the preceding period, between 1935 and 1945, the government's *indigenista* policy<sup>3</sup> led historians, sociologists, ethnologists, philosophers and archaeologists to give new emphasis to explaining the importance of the Indian world, as Mexicans incorporated this world as a basic part of their self-image and a cornerstone of their nationality.

Such profound thinkers as Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán analyzed the ethnic composition of our people, and even added an ingredient which had previously remained hidden: the black component of some regions' populations. This would make itself felt in literature in general and, subsequently, provided an important contribution to the historical novels produced in the 1980s.

Going by the historical period they cover, the novels of this genre which have been produced in the recent past may be grouped as follows:

*The pre-Hispanic period and the Spanish Conquest.* Putting modesty aside, we are obliged to mention the novel *Gonzalo Guerrero*, by the author of this article, which relates the history of the personage the book is named after. The novel seeks to recreate the Maya world before the Conquest, and stresses the process of acculturation of the main character and the creation of the first Spanish-American *mestizaje* (the mixture of Indians and Spaniards).

*The Conquest and the Colonial era.* One work which must be listed here is the novel *Fuego* (Fire), by Paco Ignacio Taibo I, in which the

author presents the story of an uprising by nuns in the city of Puebla in the 17th century. Also deserving of mention is the recent novel *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* (The Accursed Diary of Nuño de Guzmán), by Herminio Martínez, which recounts the adventures of this rebel conquistador, describing his ambitions and betrayals, as well as his characteristic cruelty. Also relating to this period are the novels *Memorias del nuevo mundo* (Memoirs from the New World) and *Vida y tiempo de Juan Cabezón de Castilla* (The Life and Times of Juan Cabezón de Castilla), by Homero Aridjis, in which the author recreates Colonial life and describes the shadow play produced by the "meeting of two worlds."

*The Independence period.* Few novels have been published on the Independence movement or the figures involved in it. Halfway between the

*The Reform movement and the second Empire.* Fernando del Paso wrote his celebrated novel *Noticias del imperio* to describe the Mexican schizophrenia of the mid-19th century, which spawned Maximilian's empire and the reconstruction of the Republic. Paco Ignacio Taibo II's novel *La lejanía del tesoro* (Distant Treasure), which was recently awarded the International Planeta-Joaquín Mortiz Prize, is based on the same period, describing the deeds and adventures of President Benito Juárez and his minister Guillermo Prieto, when the Republic was installed in the area previously called Paso del Norte. In the final years of the Porfirio Díaz period, the bitter "caste war" laid waste to the Yucatan Peninsula; this is the central theme of Silvia Molina's novel *Ascención Tún*.

*The Revolution.* Although they have to do with the revolutionary

“The revolutionary events that began in Mexico in 1910 captured writers' imagination”

historical and comic genres is Jorge Ibarguengoitia's charming novel *Los pasos de López* (López' Steps), in which the main character relates the odyssey of Generalissimo José María Morales during the struggle for Independence. Although a work for the theater, Vicente Leñero's *El martirio de Morelos* (The Martyrdom of Morelos) is an important work that deserves to be mentioned here and which is related to the narrative genre. Among short novels aimed at describing historical events are *Valentín Gómez Farías, un hombre de dos mundos* (Valentín Gómez Farías, a Man of Two Worlds) and *Leona Vicario, la insurgente* (The Insurgent Leona Vicario), also by this (none too modest) author.

movement of 1910 and deal with figures involved in the Revolution, Ignacio Solares' novels *Madero, el otro* (Madero, the Other) and *La noche de Angeles* (The Night of Angeles) cannot be classed as novels of the Revolution, since their purpose is not to describe the events or political acts in which the characters are immersed, but rather the intimate phenomenology of these characters and their reflection in the events. Of a similar type, Brianda Domecq's novel *La insólita historia de la Santa de Cabora* (The Astonishing History of the Saint of Cabora) puts forward an interesting feminine viewpoint on the revolutionary events in the northern part of Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> *Indigenismo* was a policy in favor of Mexico's Indian (indigenous) population, its history and culture. (Editor's note.)

*Post-Revolutionary Mexico.*

Angeles Mastretta has provided a delicious parody of the era of Manuel Avila Camacho and the outrageous behavior of this president's brother Maximino, in his novel *Arráncame la vida* (Tear Out My Life). In *Alas de angel* (Angel Wings), David Martín del Campo describes events that occurred under the state governments of Tomás Garrido Canabal, in Tabasco, and Felipe Carrillo Puerto, in Yucatan, as well as the socialist movements of that period. More recent events provide the backdrop to Hernán Lara Zavala's novel *Charras*,<sup>4</sup> which relates the persecution and assassination of a union leader in Yucatan during the 1970s, and Carlos Montemayor's

<sup>4</sup> This is derived from the word *charros* (literally cowboys), used to describe corrupt union officials. (Editor's note.)

*Guerra en el paraíso* (War in Paradise), a well-documented and courageous novel which describes the guerrilla war headed by local teachers' union leader Lucio Cabañas in the mountains of Guerrero.

"Overall" novels. Among this type of novels are Carlos Fuentes' *Terra nostra*, which provides a long-range historical reflection on Mexico and presents a new viewpoint on the Spanish monarchs who ruled New Spain.<sup>5</sup> Gerardo Cornejo's novel *Al norte del milenio* (To the North of the Millennium) is a project of similar scope.

These works bear witness to several concerns: objectivity in the description of the events; a complete freedom of structure; the demystification of "heroes" consecrated by the political

<sup>5</sup> New Spain was the Colonial name for Mexico. (Editor's note.)

system established after the 1910 Revolution; a sharp critique of government systems during each historical period; the denunciation of repressive methods, from Colonial times to the present day; and the possibility of subliminally educating potential readers, who are increasingly demanding this kind of work.

At the end of the 20th century, the historical novel has finally succeeded in sinking roots in Mexican literature. More and more, authors are using historical sources to document the anecdotes of their narratives and to situate their characters in context. They recount our history anew, reevaluating it with the aid of the natural freedoms of the literary art, so as to produce a body of work which may well come to be recognized as the Mexican novelistic genre par excellence of the end of our century ❧

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