

Jaime Sabines

(1926-1999)

Notes for a Biography

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In the last four decades of the twentieth century, Jaime Sabines became Mexico's most widely read poet. Unlike many Spanish-language writers, his verses have been read by thousands upon thousands of people, many of whom know them by heart.

Jaime Sabines Gutiérrez was born on March 25, 1926, in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. His Lebanese father, Julio Sabines, came to Chiapas in 1914 as a captain in Carranza's army, and later became a major in the Mexican army. His mother was Luz Gutiérrez, a member of the Chiapas aristocracy. He had two older brothers, Juan and Jorge.

His childhood and adolescence were spent in typical Chiapas sobriety. Almost every evening, his father would tell his "three musketeers" stories that his memory called up out of that Arabic dream that lasted *A Thousand and One Nights*. Years later, Jaime Sabines would recognize his family's oral tradition as his first contact with literature.

His interest in poetry was born early; when he was a child, his mother made him recite poems. He knew *El declamador sin maestro* (Teach Yourself to Recite Poetry), an anthology of 114 clas-

sic verses, by heart. He also read the novels by Jorge Isaacs, Victor Hugo, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Honoré de Balzac and Alexandre Dumas. In high school, his brother Jorge, "the writer in the family," and his mother forced him to participate in a student poetry contest. The verses were Jorge's, not Jaime's. He was surprised when he received news that he had won first place. Jaime was 16, and his involvement in this "fraud" made him feel obligated to write. His first poems were printed in the school student newspaper. As the editor of his school newspaper's poetry page, Jaime reveled in the poets who excited him then: Federico García Lorca, Antonio Machado, Miguel Hernández, León Felipe, Walt Whitman, Vicente Huidobro...

Sabines developed into a taciturn young man. In 1945, he had to leave Tuxtla for the hostile environment of Mexico City. He entered medical school, but 3 years of anguish convinced him that medicine was not his vocation. Those were also years of solitude during which he read and wrote madly. *La Biblia* (The Bible, a literary anthology) became his constant companion; he read Neruda, Joyce, Huxley, Nietzsche, Vallejo, Baudelaire, Khayyam and Tagore. He visited Tuxtla for a few months.

In 1949, Sabines returned to Mexico City to study Spanish literature at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. He rented a room at 43 Cuba Street, where cabarets and night clubs lit up every night. His companions were a coffee tin, a hot plate, his *Delicados* cigarettes without filters, a radio and the mute company of books. After communing with the volumes surrounding him, the poet would throw himself on the bed and write and write. One of those mornings *Los amorousos* (The Lovers) was born, a poem that showed many of the themes of his future work: love, death, time, joy and the body. In this room, his first book, *Horas*, was born.

It was at this time, during visits to the house of his teacher Efrén Hernández, that Sabines met writers Juan José Arreola and Juan Rulfo. He attended literary gatherings with friends such as Emilio Carballido, Rosario Castellanos and Fernando Salmerón. His second book, *La señal* (The Signal), was published in 1951. While visiting his mother's house over Christmas vacation, he wrote *Adán y Eva* (Adam and Eve), his first long poem which would be published 11 years later.

In 1952, during a visit to his family in Tuxtla, Major Sabines had an accident

* Mexican writer.

and Jaime had to stay longer. Months later, he married his high school sweetheart Josefa Rodríguez, "Chepita," and he did not return to the university. He took on the running of his brother Juan's fabric store, El Modelo. Behind the counter, while awaiting the birth of his first child, Sabines wrote another long poem: *Tarumba* (1956), "a song of survival." He was visited in his store by other young poets, such as Oscar Oliva, Eraclio Zepeda and Juan Bañuelos, who came to talk about poetry and share a bottle of Castillo rum. In 1959, Jaime Sabines was awarded the literary prize given by the state government of Chiapas. Over a dozen awards soon followed, including the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize, the Elías Sourasky Prize in 1982 and the National Arts and Sciences Award for Linguistics and Literature in 1983.

The poet returned to Mexico City and worked with his brother Juan in a live-stock feed factory for 17 long years. In this period, Jaime and Josefa bore and raised their four children: Julio, Judith, Julieta and Jazmín. The writing continued.

In 1961, Sabines published two books: *Diario semanario y otros poemas en prosa* (Weekly Diary and Poems in Prose) and *Poemas sueltos* (Loose Poems). A year later, the UNAM decided to collect his work into the book *Recuento de poemas* (Collected Poems).

At this point, Sabines' father developed cancer and the poet, in response to the pain of his father's oncoming death, began to write the verses that would become one of his most important poems: *Algo sobre la muerte del Mayor Sabines* (Something about the Death of Major Sabines). On September 30, his father died, and Sabines left the poem unfinished. In 1964,

however, he returned to the subject of death and wrote the second part of the poem, which was finally published in 1973, after the publication of *Yuria* (1967) and *Mal tiempo* (Badtime) (1972).

Between 1976 and 1979, Jaime Sabines was an Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) deputy in the Chiapas state legislature. His brother Juan had been elected governor there. In 1977, *Nuevo recuento de poemas* (New Collected Poems) was released by Joaquín Mortiz. Almost 10 years before, the second edition of *Recuento de poemas*, published by the Ministry of Education (SEP), had sold out with a printing of 40,000 copies. Posters printed with his poems were put up in the Mexico City subway.

In 1983, Sabines left politics but decided to continue living in Chiapas, this time in the country. He bought a ranch near the Monte Bello Lakes and called it "Yuria."

In 1986, the UNAM and the INBA organized a tribute to celebrate Sabines' sixtieth birthday. Lectures were given on his work, and the festivities concluded with a poetry reading in which hundreds of his readers gathered. The poet began to divide his time between "Yuria" and Mexico City.

In 1987, Vervuert, a German publishing house, published a Sabines anthology, titled *Dein Körper neben mir* (Your Body Is Beside Me). Other anthologies were published later in Bulgaria, Cuba, the United States, Canada, Chile, France and Spain. Sabines' poems were also included in anthologies of Latin American literature assembled in over 20 countries. Also in 1987, Sabines' brother Jorge died. Months later the poet was reelected as deputy, this time in Mexico City,

and he decided to live in the capital permanently.

In November of 1989, during a visit to Chiapas, Sabines slipped and broke the femur of his left leg. He never recovered completely from the injury and had to go through almost 40 operations because of it.

During the last decade, Sabines spent most of his time convalescing at home. Nevertheless, the poet agreed in the last five years of his life to give various poetry readings attended by thousands of people. Another testament to his popularity is the fact that two years ago the largest telephone company in Mexico published a Sabines anthology with a print run of 500,000 copies.

In his last years, Sabines also traveled extensively in Mexico and around the world, promoting new editions and translations of his work with poetry readings. He is fondly remembered despite his comment, "The highest honor for a poet is to become anonymous. When someone says a poem, a fragment, or a line of Jaime Sabines without knowing who wrote it, that will be Jaime's supreme moment."

On March 19, 1999, Jaime Sabines died, a victim of the "Prince Cancer." He wanted to die at home, under the care of his family. They say that in the days before he died, his blue-green eyes stared out the window in his bedroom at a bougainvillea that was just starting to bloom with the coming of spring.

In the last 10 years, Sabines gave us only one new poem, *Me encanta Dios* (I Just Love God), which illustrates to some degree the struggle (his struggle) with life, though he always knew that "dawn must come." ■■■