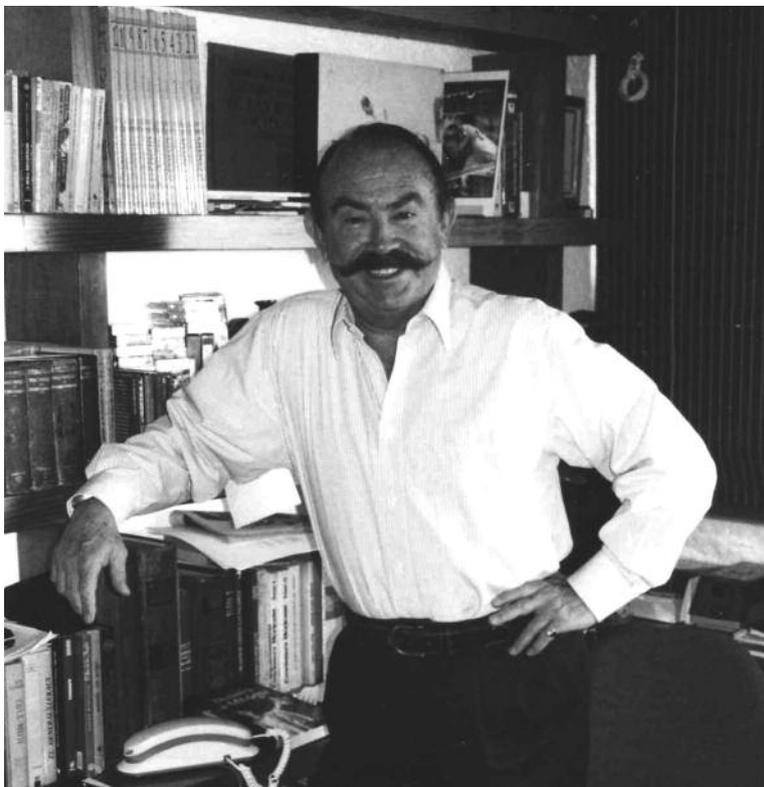


Rafael Ramírez Heredia

Exceptionally Seductive

Gilda Salinas*



God never pays the bill.

RRH

Rafael Ramírez Heredia (1942-2006) drew portraits of sociological phenomena, convinced that literature was a constant search. "Literature is the magic of words: architecture and music," he said, despite the brutal take he always had when portraying the society of his time, which is ours as well. Ramírez Heredia, the author of over

50 books and innumerable articles published in newspapers and magazines in Mexico and abroad over a period of 40 years as a journalist, wrote with his guts and re-wrote with his head. He was an implacable critic of his own work, inquisitive, obsessive and perfectionistic. He was a 24-hour-a-day writer because even if he was not in front of his computer, the novel, story or article he was doing was going through his head, where he was tying up loose ends, gestating until he

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could stumble over to the desk with it to put it down in black and white.

“Writers are like Mexican peasants: condemned to die working,” he would say more than once with his unfailing black humor. And he preached with his example: despite cancer, one month before his death he was in Mexico City’s Zócalo to launch *La esquina de los ojos rojos* (The Corner of Red Eyes), and three weeks before he died, just like every Tuesday since the 1980s, he went to give his workshop at the Jesús Reyes Heróles Cultural Center in Coyoacán, willing to teach his students the resolutions, accents, hooks that make up the literary bag of tricks. There was no room for writers without talent in the workshops he gave all over Mexico and in Spain, Chile, Colombia, Honduras and Cuba. “You can learn the bag of tricks, but you can’t learn talent.” He was an early riser, like people from the coast (he was born in Tampico). But he also had a good dose of Yucatán genes. So, by 6:30 in the morning, he was already “crucified on his ass in front of the keyboard.” Five, ten, twelve hours, whatever the piece required because writing was the only thing, the most important thing in his life. “When I’m writing, I feel absolutely protected, in a very special womb.” And, like most passionate creators, he began to experience parallel realities: the real one and the literary one; the day-to-day one and the reality of the work in progress.

Rafael Ramírez Heredia was a loyal friend, a generous mentor, a charmer, a renowned lover of bullfights and songs by José Alfredo Jiménez (especially about the bullring, of course, as evidenced by the 122 times he was in the ring himself, facing many young bulls and a mature one or two, being gored a couple of times, his work as a bullfight reporter

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and his book *Tauromagias*). But Rafael was also, and above all, an exceptional, prolific writer capable of seducing the reader, creating a partnership between author and reader, of taking the realism of literary truth all the way to pluck the deepest chords of angst or pleasure, of placing his finger on the sore point, like he does in his novels *La jaula de Dios* (God’s Cage) and *La Mara*, or on some erogenous zone of the human geography, like in *Con M de Marilyn* (With M for Marilyn), and of finishing the work in the same way that he recreates a bullfight, all the way until the sword is driven in to the hilt: seeking innovation in doing, in telling, in the saying of it, digging and researching to get the most out of the ideas, interchanging adjectives for images, replacing commonplaces with metaphors, traveling to see *in situ*, smelling, testifying and understanding other realities that surround us, or pulling out memories from adolescence to sprinkle his stories with the flavors of puberty, of the tropics, of loneliness, or nostalgia.

Winner of the Juan Rulfo Prize of Paris, given by France Radio (1984), of the Rafael Bernal Prize for Best Police Novel (1993), of the Dashiell Hammett Prize of Spain (2005), among other important awards, he was the literary father of researcher Ifigenio Clausel —“If” to his buddies— (*Trampa de metal* [Metal Trap], *Muerte en la carretera* [Death on the Highway] and *Al calor de Campeche* [In the Heat of Campeche]), and of Rayo Macoy, a boxer for whom the fortune in his fists laid him the trap called success to which he succumbed. The characters of Ramírez Heredia —“Rafa” to his friends— are sustained, modeled on a personal language that reveals them through the plot, with flashes of humor and pain until they become beloved. “A writer must have a

good time, even if he suffers every time he writes, he must enjoy himself,” and his giving of himself and commitment as a creator explain the joy that superficial literature, like soap operas, always gave him. He would say, “In light-weight literature, everything moves ahead calmly; we don’t smell the sweat, the conflicts, the characters’ desperation. It has no substance...and it is what it seems, as an old bullfighting adage goes.”

Ramírez Heredia’s departure leaves a huge hole in national narrative fiction, in the tutelage of new writers, in the lectures, back covers and book launches, in the incisive promotion of reading (“There is no doubt that there are very few books and lots of television sets.”), in the publication and dissemination of the work of friends and students, and it also leaves a gap that can never be filled at the La Guadalupana cantina. On one workshop afternoon, he said, “A piece of writing has two movements, advancing and the one that takes us to the end. When a newborn is slapped on the butt, it begins its life. But it also begins the road to its death. In a novel, the end and the

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advance meet at a rendezvous of actions.” It is true that Rafa leaves us with his absence, but he also leaves us his written word, the memory of his happiness and black humor, the evocation of his low-brow, imaginative, playful or incisive conversation and his pragmatism; the nostalgia for the afternoon workshops and the shared meals, the image of a writer of great sensitivity and camouflaged sentimentalism, the astute, perspicacious look;

the image of his index finger and thumb caressing his Zapata-style, handlebar mustache with a half smile in the background; the sarcastic opinion and the tenderness. He leaves us the anecdotes of his living life to its fullest and his surprising memory. We are left with a beloved memory, although some of us

feel that he left us too soon.

Authors are like bullfighters, he said, at the center of the ring all alone. I would hazard the opinion that even though death also sends us alone into the ring, in the case of Rafael Ramírez Heredia, like with his writing, his death takes place in two movements: even though he leaves, for many he remains. ■■■



Héctor Ponce de León