The forty-second meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Online Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 20 November 2023.

We discussed our fifth modern classic of the year, the great Mexican writer Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* in a new translation by Douglas J Weatherford, published in paperback and eBook by Serpent’s Tail, 2023.

**About the Book**

‘Pedro Páramo is not only one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century world literature but one of the most influential of the century’s books’ **Susan Sontag**

In this stunning masterpiece of the surreal, Juan Preciado sets out on a strange quest, bound by a promise to his dying mother, to seek his father, Pedro Páramo, from whom they fled many years ago. The ruined town of Comala is alive with whispers and shadows. Time shifts from one consciousness to another in a hypnotic flow of desires and memories, a world of ghosts dominated by the tyranny of the Páramo family. Womaniser, overlord and murderer, Juan’s notorious father retains an eternal grip over Comala.

‘A simplicity and profundity worthy of Greek tragedy, though another way of conveying [the novel’s] unique effect might be to say that it is Wuthering Heights located in Mexico and written by Kafka’ **Guardian**
About the Author

Juan Rulfo (1917–1986) is the author of what is probably the most important novel in Mexican literature. *Pedro Páramo* was published in 1955 and went on to be translated into more than forty languages, sell over a million copies in English alone and initiate an entire literary movement. Rulfo’s other literary works are *The Burning Plain* and *The Golden Cockerel*. He also worked as an anthropologist and photographer.

About the Translator

Douglas J. Weatherford, Professor of Hispanic Literature and Film at Brigham Young University, has published extensively on Juan Rulfo, with particular emphasis on the author’s connection to film. In 2017, Weatherford released the first English-language translation of Rulfo’s second novel, *El gallo de oro*, as *The Golden Cockerel and Other Writings*.

Litfest was delighted that Gerald Martin, biographer of Gabriel García Márquez (Bloomsbury, 2007) and Mario Vargas Llosa (forthcoming, Bloomsbury) and a great admirer of the novel that helped to inspire *100 Years of Solitude*, could join our discussion on 20 November 2024. The following is an edited transcript.
Bill Swainson  I’m going to dive straight in start by asking you to tell us why *Pedro Páramo* is one of your favourite books, and why it’s so important in Latin American literature?

Gerald Martin  Two things to start with. It’s probably the most beautiful novel that I’ve ever read. And that’s a big statement but I’m making it. I’ve spoken to two Nobel Prize winners who both told me the same thing: it’s the novel they would most like to have written. They were Miguel Ángel Asturias, the Guatemalan writer, and Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian. So for them this was the Latin American book. Latin Americans consider it a novel that applies to every Latin American country — long before García Márquez’s *100 Years of Solitude* — and within its extraordinary space — it’s such a short book, it’s got so many dimensions — it sums up the whole history of colonial, and the first part of post-colonial Latin America. It deals with Mexican peasants and yet at the same time, it uses all the techniques of the modernist novels of the 1920s and ’30s in Britain and Europe. That’s what I’d say at the start.

Bill  I’m now going to hand over to my colleague Sam O’Donoghue to prompt the questions.

Sam O’Donoghue  Thank you very much, Gerald. That was a really interesting introduction. We have a few questions prepared for you. Our first question comes from Roger and is about García Márquez.

Roger  Márquez’s introduction to *Pedro Páramo*, says that the book got him out of a writer’s block and then he went on to write his masterpiece, *100 Years of Solitude*. I’m wondering how you would compare the two books, not only in terms of the content, and the degree of magic realism or surrealism, but also in terms of the grammar and the structure of the book. Perhaps you could draw some similarities or differences between the two books?

GM  Well, I’d repeat what I just said about them, both using really very sophisticated techniques that were born in Europe and the US in the 1930s, but finding ways to apply them to developing societies that were not the kind of societies that those modern techniques had come from. So both works are in one sense magical realist. And magical realism is the literary approach that juxtaposes the European aspect of Latin America with what we can call the indigenous aspect of Latin America, that of the First Nations. You’re constantly juxtaposing, using sophisticated techniques, the European worldview which has dominated Latin America for the last 500 years, and the various kinds of indigenous perspective, which in Mexico would be Indian peasants and in Brazil would be jungle Indians but mainly Africans coming from the slave past, and so the writer sees from those perspectives.

So, in this novel, what we’re really looking at is a Mexican — we don’t know what Juan Preciado, the main character, is in any detail but he’s clearly a Mexican peasant of some kind, who perhaps grew up in the city. He comes back to the place where his parents are from and through his eyes, we come to see the Mexican conception of life and death, the Mexican conception of the Catholic religion, which is really very little to do with the Catholic religion as Europeans know it, and so on. So it’s the extraordinary task of finding a technique of communicating the worldview of somebody who’s completely different, or very different, from us, and of course both Rulfo and García Márquez are really extraordinary writers.

One of the things that is difficult — I’ve been looking at the translation, which is very good — is that their complex levels of language, with all its ambivalence and ambiguity, are very difficult to
communicate. (I won’t go on much longer!) There’s also the feeling of the books. Both of the books are about something very Latin American, which is a nostalgia for something which they feel is a world and a set of human rights related to it, which have been lost — lost is a euphemism — that they feel is been suppressed. And a dominant culture thereby overtook and destroyed a previously existing culture. And so both these writers are obsessed with their childhood experiences. I’m sure you know or perhaps you don’t know — that Rulfo’s childhood was horrendous, as you can imagine from the worldview expressed in his writing. His father was murdered when he was four. His mother died when he was ten. He therefore lived with a series of different relatives. And he was only educated really to the age of fourteen. And yet he’s written in perhaps the most universally acknowledged, novel in Latin American history. So I repeat that childhood is very important as a source for both these books.

**Margaret** I think that my question also touched on the way he was an inspiration to García Márquez. I’m not really very familiar with Latin American literature in general and I’d really like to know what came before? Does he represent a complete break from previous Latin American literary traditions and also, was he the first to deal with some of the major themes which carried through for a lot of other authors as well. So it seems like he’s been very influential. Perhaps you could talk to us a little bit about that.

**GM** Let me say that being a Latin American specialist is quite a demanding occupation. Most of my colleagues in Spanish departments deal with a country of 30 – now 40 million people – with quite an extraordinary history and culture. But Latin America’s got twenty countries and Mexico, for example, is at least as complex as Spain. It had both the Aztecs and the Mayans several thousand years ago, and many other cultures as well. Mexican literature in the twentieth century is at least as distinguished as Spanish literature, though much less well known. So to draw a conclusion about these texts in the light of all the different literatures in the sub-continent is very difficult.

But what you can say is that, before the generation of Rulfo and García Márquez, people who started writing during or just after the Second World War, there was more of a tendency to do two quite different things. The one would derive from a European perspective about what took place, above all in urban situations. And the other was to take up, from a very distanced perspective, the worldview of the Indians, the gauchos, the inhabitants of the jungle, all those different people in the Latin American outback.

I’m one of the people who thinks that Latin America should be one country, one federal country, and I’m also one of the people who thinks there is a Latin American literature which is more than the sum of its national constituent parts; and that the Latin American writers of the post-Second World War period were writing as much from a Latin American perspective, as from the perspective of their own particular country. What they weren’t doing any longer was writing like European or North American writers. They’d found their own identity, their own way to go. And this reached its height in the 1960s, with the generation of so-called Boom. I think I’ve lost myself again, but I hope that’s some kind of answer.

**Charlotte** I’m really interested in the differences between the translations. I think you’ve touched on this already, but I don’t speak Spanish and I would be really interested to hear your perspective on the differences between them.
GM I can’t really easily do that but I’ll try to give an answer it anyway. There have been three translations that I remember. Each one has been better than the last. So all of them have their difficulties. I can only talk tonight about this one, which I’ve read really rather quickly. But let’s say that the first translation, to which we’re not going to add a name, just wasn’t good enough. This one is very good. Rulfo has written a prose poem. It’s one of the most beautiful novels I’ve ever read in any language. It’s a superb communication of the Mexican landscape, and of the atmosphere of being in Mexico. It’s also a wonderful communication of the way in which Mexican country people speak.

Let me just mention, by the way, since we’re talking about this, that there is DH Lawrence and his *Plumed Serpent*; Lawrence’s depictions of the Mexican landscape were also really remarkable in the 1920s. It’s a book that not many people read, but it really is worth it. It’s got some silly ideas, but nevertheless, it’s a really interesting novel.)

The problem, then, with a novel as poetic as *Pedro Páramo* is that some things just can’t be translated. For example, I don’t know if you will remember the evocative scene with the two children (Pedro and Susana) early in the book – I noticed this particularly because it’s one of my favourite moments – and Rulfo says the two children used to go out – and this is the Spanish – *en la época del aire*, which is a beautiful phrase. But if you translate it literally into English, it is in the *period of air* or the *epoch of air* or the *time of air*. When in Spanish *aire* can be a breeze. So on the one hand, you’ve got the idea of the children up in the hills, out in the air, two friends entirely free to develop their relationship. But at the same time, Rulfo’s talking about the moment when the wind comes at the time of the change of the seasons. Of course, you can’t say *the time of air* in English, because it doesn’t make any sense. But any Latin American would understand *la época del aire*, so you just have to choose between two different meanings: we don’t have a word which covers both things. So the translator chooses, and he says “the windy season”, which is fine: that’s what it’s saying. But you’ve lost the double meaning of the Spanish, so it’s a very difficult decision, something is lost.

Look, I’m really sorry, Charlotte. I can’t actually compare the three translations except to repeat what I said (which I’m convinced of) that they go 1, 2, 3: and one was the worst, two was the second – this is like *The Antiques Roadshow* – and three was the best, is the best. And I would say that this is definitely a good translation, which I don’t always say.

Lisa I think there were a number of us in the group who were struggling a little bit with who was alive who was dead, and what was maybe memory, what was reality. And there’s punctuation, which is used in this version that we’ve been reading, I guess, to help try and place and help us understand what is and isn’t a conversation and what is narrative? What is recall, memory? And I’m just wondering how punctuation might have been used in the original language? Is it just for us who have been reading in English or was punctuation used in the original, in a similar sort of way to help place us and to help us be less confused?

GM Yes, it’s very good question: the punctuation seems to complicate things. You are, as many people have said, expected to read a book like this twice. So the first time you learn how to read it, and you have the experience of being a detective and trying to make sense of it, or being an archaeologist, trying to find your way through, and then the second time, you’re able to understand it much more clearly. Of course, most people don’t like reading a book a second time when they
struggled with it the first time… But anyway, let me just say something that would simplify the book for you in any case, before we get on to that question of which involves who is dead, and how we know, and so on.

The book’s in three parts. It’s very important to understand that. The first part of the book is about Juan Preciado, the guy who’s going to look for his father — sent by his mother — and arrives in Comala, and he has the same trouble as we do: he can’t work out what’s going on. So he leads us in to this strange world and we share his perplexity. And that part of the book goes on to page 56 [in this edition]. And then there are eight or nine pages until page 65. And the conversation between pages 56 and 65 — between two dead people — is absolutely crucial because it helps explain the Mexican peasant conception of the world. And it’s structurally like — I can’t remember what it is in *Wuthering Heights* but there’s something just like it. So Rulfo imitated the structure of that book, although these are very different worlds. So the conceit in those eight pages in the middle is that Juan is dead and he’s having a conversation with someone else who’s dead.

And of course, Mexico is known as the land of the dead, no other country I know compares with it. And no country — our Halloween is a pale imitation of the Mexican sense of and celebration of death, and it really is true that for many, many Mexicans, the dead still live. So there are ghosts, there are wandering spirits, there’s a certain adaptation of the concepts of purgatory, limbo, etc. All these concepts are in the book. And the Catholic conceptions are mixed in with pre-Hispanic pre-Columbian conceptions. So it does actually help if you spent twenty or thirty years studying Mexican archaeology in order to get deep inside it!

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I forgot to mention the third part, which takes us even further back into the past to explain the tormented adult lives of Pedro, now a powerful landowner, and the ethereal and mysterious Susana. Juan Preciado, on the other hand, who had led us into the novel and into the land of the dead, never appears again.

Now as to punctuation, most of it is used in order to keep juxtaposing different times and places. The book is constantly moving backwards from the present. We all do that all the time with memory. I’ve been thinking, I’ve actually been thinking, for example, as I’ve talked to you about when I talked to Juan Rulfo fifty-something years ago, I’ve been thinking about numbers of trips that I’ve made to Mexico, we’re all always going backwards and forwards. But when a novelist does it, it can be disconcerting. So the punctuation is designed to show us that we are not just in a single reality.

Western culture believes in beginnings and ends, it believes in being born and dying. Most of us these days don’t believe we’re going anywhere. I can’t speak for all of you, of course, but most of us don’t. But other cultures are much more concerned with dead people, with the relationship with those people, with what we call ghosts, they’re more inclined to call on spirits from different times in the past. So, I mean, it would take me quite a long time to explain how the punctuation produces the effect. But one does need patience. And one does need to be alert, as if we were visiting this town, and as if we were trying to guess what’s going on. The only sure thing about this is that nearly everybody Juan Preciado meets is dead. It takes him a while to understand that, even though he’s a Mexican.

Sam Thank you. Thank you very much. And I don’t know if we have time for a final question, though. But I think you also, you wanted to ask one, didn’t you, Bill?

Bill Thanks, Sam. Yes, a number of films have been made of Pedro Páramo, and I wonder, Gerry, if you could tell us your thoughts on the ones that you’ve seen.

Gerald The only one I’ve seen is tremendously important because it involves García Márquez. When García Márquez was in Mexico he worked with Carlos Fuentes, writing a script for a film of Pedro Páramo, which is quite dramatic visually, but very leaden in terms of acting, it doesn’t manage the dead people at all. Both García Márquez and Fuentes, both great writers, two of the great writers of the Latin American Boom, who were good friends in Mexico at that time, agreed that their work was a failure.

Of course, they blamed the director not themselves and their script. So there’s a very interesting thing happening now, which is that García Márquez’s sons have agreed to film or to allow to be filmed their father’s great 100 Years of Solitude. I’m quite troubled by that because their father said he never wanted it to be filmed. He never allowed anybody to do it. Anthony Quinn offered him a million pounds in 1960s money, which was quite a lot. And García Márquez refused. But then when I took an offer from the BBC to García Márquez of £30,000 to do an interview, he refused that as well. (Laughs) Still, it is his belief that 100 Years of Solitude cannot and should not be filmed. So it’s quite a tricky question and it’s ongoing now. So I predict, although the son Rodrigo is a brilliant film director, that the film will be a disappointment to people who love the book. Though of course it could be that I’m wrong.
In any case, what I was trying to say was that *Pedro Páramo* is a book you can hardly imagine as a good film, I don’t even know who could do it. But it needs a director with ethereal talents; it needs to be beautifully done. It needs to use every technique of cinema to somehow reproduce all these techniques of literature. As you can see, I’m almost eighty years old and I don’t expect to see it in my lifetime!

**Bill** Thank you very much for joining us, Gerry, and for thanks for talking so clearly about this great book, *Pedro Páramo*.

*A reading of the opening of Pedro Páramo in Spanish can be found at: https://bit.ly/3RaPgym*

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**Next Meeting**

The next Litfest International Fiction Online Book Club meeting will be at 6.30pm on Monday 15 January 2024 when we will discuss *Strange Beasts of China* by Yan Ge, translated from the Chinese by Jeremy Tiang

*The atmosphere of “Strange Beasts of China” is delightful. Through the narrator’s futile quest to catalog beasts, Yan captures the fluidness of city life, the way urban space defies definition even for people hellbent on making sense of it*’ [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com)

If you would like to register to join the Litfest International Fiction Book club, please email Bill Swainson at bill@litfest.org