

CARLOS FUENTES

Bookmarks: *Adam in Eden* (2009), *Destiny and Desire* (2008), *Happy Families* (2006), *The Eagle's Throne* (2002), *The Crystal Frontier* (1995), *The Campaign* (1991), *Christopher Unborn* (1986), *The Old Gringo* (1985), *Distant Relations* (1980), *Terra Nostra* (1975), *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), *Aura* (1962), *The Good Conscience* (1959), *Where the Air is Clear* (1958).

Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012) often said he was from four or five worlds. He was born in Panama City; raised in Washington, DC, where his father worked in Mexico's diplomatic corps; and educated in Chile and Mexico. He taught in Argentina, France, England, and in the United States, the latter as the Kennedy Professor of Latin American Studies at Harvard. But he's "a Mexican by will and imagination," and highly politicized.

In an interview from his home in Mexico City, he said most Latin writers are political creatures by nature. Because they're "very interested in the makings of their cities and culture," they often exert a greater influence on their countrymen than writers do in the United States.

"We have to be strong. Our institutions — the congresses, the unions, the press and political parties — traditionally have been very weak. So we're forced to speak up about real issues and be strong."

In the US, he said, few people "have had to face hard facts about very much since the 1930s. Now, you're going to have to face some hard economic facts about the debt and deficits, though they've not become evident to you yet. An economic problem is coming (to the US) and it will demand that Americans lower their level of consumption, and you'll have to change. Hard times may provoke another way of living in North America, another kind of discipline, and probably another type of writing

then is being done now. Perhaps, as happened in the 1930s, a John Steinbeck will come forward.”

Fuentes was Mexico’s ambassador to France from 1975 to 1977. He traveled the globe before and after that. Milan Kundera, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Octavio Paz were among his friends; and, before they died, Jorge Borges and Luis Buñuel.

His life among different cultures helped him evolve as “a varied, thinking, citizen of the world.” His upbringing taught him that cultures “aren’t isolated and perish when deprived of contact with what’s different and challenging.”

“Reading, writing, teaching, learning are all activities aimed at introducing civilizations to each other. No culture retains its identity in isolation; identity is attained in contact, in contrast, in breakthrough.”

Fuentes is glad to be done with diplomatic work. “It was educational and instructive, but it was like having the clap.”

He’s busy enough now with writing, teaching and speaking — “not only to explicate my own work, but to help put into focus what critics call the Boom in Latin American literature.”

“The Boom isn’t just one act, not just a passing moment,” he said. “It didn’t come out of nothing. You have to remember it has a great continuity, especially in poetical productions. Then a new generation of novelists came along and the Boom coincided with the discovery (in the United States) of Latin American writing. It didn’t happen all at once. Good writers were working for years. It was like 30 years of Latin writing was telescoped into a few years. The Boom helped internationalize fiction. It destroyed a lot of preconceived, narrow ideas about genres of the novel, and made literature more personal in its responses to life, history and myth.”

Fuentes’ books include *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, *The Good Conscience* and *Distant Relations*. His *The Old Gringo* is about Ambrose Bierce, the 20th-century American journalist who disappeared, presumably among Pancho Villa’s soldiers in Mexico. In his non-fiction book *Myself With Others*, Fuentes writes about his adolescence, politics, and love for Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*.

All of his own books are in some way about myths, memories, and desire, he said.

“They’re part of an on-going, single book. Myths are about the present. Memory is about the past. Desire is about the future. Because we’re always thinking, in the present, about the past and about desire, in a way everything ever written or lived is present now.”

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