

# LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA

## Gabriel Garcia Marquez

### Overview

Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014) was a Colombian novelist, short story writer, and journalist who established brilliant new literary potentials, 'magic realism' in particular, which spearheaded the vivid energy of 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American literature. Beginning his career in law, he shifted to journalism, then gradually moved into the writing of fiction. He won the Nobel Prize in 1982, for *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), and used his reputation to enforce his political influence inside Colombia—where he was a beacon of liberalism, and a close friend of Fidel Castro.

### Story

The tale opens on a semi-comic note, a certain doctor of note having fallen from a tree while seeking to recapture his pet parrot, and a certain Florentino Ariza, once, fifty one years ago, the suitor of the doctor's wife, expressing his still vivid love for the lady. This long, episodic novel is basically a story of an unending love affair.

The love affair had begun when Florentino, still a teen ager, had delivered a telegram to Fermina's father, a man known for his shady dealings. Knowing the beautiful girl's house, Florentino watches her every day as she returns from school, closely supervised by her aunt Escolastica. Getting up his courage, at last, Florentino asks Fermina if he can send her a letter. She at first refuses, saying she will have to get permission from her father, which she gets. Florentino writes her what he calls a 'subdued note,' instead of the sixty-page letter he initially drafted; in this subdued note he tells her he is deeply in love with her. She responds that she is pleased, and thus begins the lengthy relationship described above.

During the next two years the lovers only occasionally see one another, though they write love letters to each other daily. At school, unfortunately, Fermina is caught writing a love letter to Florentino, and is expelled by the Mother Superior. Concurrently, Fermina's dad finds a love letter to Florentino from his daughter, hidden in her bedroom; he fires Escolastica, and forces his daughter to take a long trip alone with him, so she can 'forget her boyfriend.' Unfortunately for him the lovers find a way, even in exile from one another, to communicate by telegram.

Upon seeing one another again, after this enforced separation, the two lovers have different reactions. Fermina no longer sees anything in Florentino, is in fact disgusted with him, and cannot imagine that she ever felt for him. Florentino, however, feels more strongly than ever for Fermina, and, though he will not again speak with her in private, for the next 'fifty-one years, nine months, and four days,' that is until the tree-disaster described at the beginning of the story, Florentino will all that time remain deeply in love with Fermina. He will during this period have many affairs, but none that affect his undying affection for Fermina.

In the course of his active sexual-social life, Florentino makes contacts which eventuate in his becoming a significant man of business and influence; his fidelity of heart is entirely with Fermina, who has meantime become pregnant, and then, sadly, become conscious of her Doctor husband's serious love affair. Fermina is in fact just recovering from this disappointment, and beginning to care for the Doctor again, when the Doctor falls and kills himself. Florentino rushes into the breach, swearing to Fermina his 'eternal fidelity and everlasting love,' and though at first, once again, she rebuffs him sharply, he gradually wins her back again. He Invites Fermina on a river cruise—he is now president of a boat line—and she accepts, opening them to love-making

for the first time. To keep onlookers away from their ship, and thus to stifle rumor and scandal, the Captain raises the yellow flag of cholera, and no port will allow the ship to dock, a true holiday for Fermina and Florentino.

## Themes

**Fidelity.** The novel is about fidelity. Florentino is undyingly faithful to his love for Fermina, and she for him. She of course marries another man, but after that doctor's death she is totally there for Florentino, as though the two had simply been separated by brackets. As for Fermino, the more affairs he has with other women, the more lastingly faithful he is to Fermina.

**Time.** The novel as a whole illustrates the fact that time is an illusion: the love initially joining the two lovers is unchangingly the same after fifty some years.

## Characters

**Florentino** is a precocious and obsessed type. Both in his powerful fidelity to Fermina, and in the sequence of one-night stands that fills his middle-years, he is driven and preoccupied. He is also self-disciplined; sufficiently so that he can create a responsible business career for himself, and maintain a respectability appropriate to his love for Fermina.

**Fermina** is a daringly loving person—witness all her youthful scheming together with Florentino--and at the same time a high-toned society woman, whom destiny enables to Indulge a taste for fine living. Faithful to her husband, she was at the same time, throughout her marriage, preserving her inner fire for Florentino.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

### **Florentino Ariza** (Emotional)

**Character** Florentino is a kind of romantic hero, in this book concerning the man's fifty years plus love affair with his childhood sweetheart, Fermina Daza. His adolescent love for this lady--who marries another--blossoms fifty years later into a passionate marriage, at seventy plus years of age. In order to grasp this profile, we have to imagine Florentino as a lover who is at first totally shy with women, while he is at the same time undyingly true to his first love, and whose bio is punctuated by a series of almost endless sexual encounters. We have here the classic romantic lover, who is also a reckless womanizer.

### **Parallels**

The Spanish writer, Tirso de Molina, in *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest* (1630), launched an early modern fascination with the literary skirt-chaster, a handsome charmer—the types of charm vary greatly—who is often after the ladies, and often wins them. (Don Juan is the classical form of the type, and the main figure in Tirso's work.) These sensuous gentlemen, who range from the systematic seducer—Valmont in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), to the handsome value free soldier, Vronsky in *Anna Karenina* (1875), to the romantic and mysterious Rochester, who is so fascinating to Jane Eyre, in the novel of her name (1897).

### **Illustrative moments**

**Romantic** As a young man Florentino—who was working as a telegraph operator in his town—was known as the romantic par excellence. His romantic temper appeared in his forlorn demeanor—'very thin, with Indian hair plastered down with scented pomade, and eyeglasses for myopia.' He had one suit, which he had inherited from his father, but which he cared for so well it looked brand new 'every Sunday.' Despite his marginal romantic look he was the fascination of the girls in his circle, who held 'secret lotteries to determine who would spend time with him...'

**Longing** Florentino soon became fixated on a 'beautiful adolescent with almond shaped eyes,' who went to a private school in his neighborhood, and 'who walked to school in groups or accompanied by an older servant...' (It is the same woman he will propose to at book's end, when they are both in their seventies; proof of his lasting intensity.) Florentino would sit in the park across the street from Fermina's house, half hidden on a leaf enclosed bench, and compose love letters to this sweetheart who did not know him. Unfortunately the young lady was tightly patrolled by her aunt, who never left her unaccompanied!

**Romantic** Florentino is a writer and has a writer's temperament. During his prolonged romantic fascination with his Fermina, while he watches her from the park, he writes voluminous love letters to her, and long seeks for a way to communicate them to her. In the end he decides to give her 'a sober and explicit half-page is which he promised...his perfect fidelity and his everlasting love.' His reaction to having finally outed his feelings is extreme; in addition to his usual bowel problems, he 'became disoriented and suffered from sudden fainting spells...' His mother, unsure of the meaning of these symptoms, suspected the 'devastation of cholera,' more than the ravages of love.

**Lover** After Florentino first proposes to Fermina, he is accepted, and plans are slowly being made, but thanks to some bad luck—for Florentino—her dad discovers the vast packets of love letters she has received from her wooer. Florentino thereupon becomes the clandestine bad guy, whom the father-in-law-to-be condemns. Florentino finds himself without the object of his neurotic passion, and begins the complex life of love affairs and visions which essentially crowds his life until the death of Fermina's real husband—by which time Florentino and Fermina are in their seventies.

### Discussion questions

On the whole, is Florentino a crazy phlanderer or an undyingly faithful lover, who remains true to his initial infatuation?

Why is Florentino so attractive to the ladies, from the earliest days?

Is Florentino shy? If so, how do the ladies know he is fascinated by them?

**Fermina Daza** (Conscientious)

**Character** Fermina Daza is the lifetime counterpart to the male lover/protagonist, Florentino Ariza. Their connection dates to their teen years in the same city, and lasts until they finally rediscover one another in their seventies, after she has been married for fifty years to another man, and he has worked his way through hundreds of affairs. Fermina is from the start sensitive, properly flirtatious—in the Latin American cultural sense—and for a while even a mainstream high fashion *madre de familia*—but in the end she is faithful to the eccentric and semi-inspired *imaginativo*, with whom she first found passion. She cares profoundly for her childhood sweet heart, and is unable to forget him.

**Parallels** Penelope, in Homer's *Odyssey*, acquaints us with a model of ancient Greek womanly patience, a patience full of strategies for warding off the suitors who are trying to replace her husband. (At the other end of the Trojan struggle we can add Hecuba or Andromache, two wives, of Trojan leaders, who are battered by destiny.) Portia, in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (1596), excels in such womanly virtues as patience and good judgment. For a woman tried by difficult marriage, and patient in the course of its painful ups and downs, cf. Dorothea, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871).

### Illustrative moments

**Sexual** It took some time before Fermina grew into her sexuality. 'In Valledupar,' when her father first sent her away from Florentino, she 'began to realize at last why the roosters chase the hens...she was initiated into solitary love...sprawling on the bathroom floor, her hair loose, smoking her first mule drivers' cigarette...' At the same time, though, she still dreaded the sacrifice of her virginity, which 'she knew was about to seal her separation from her family, and her entrance into marriage.' During her wedding ceremony she wore a smile 'that seemed painted on with white lead...a poor attempt at disguising the-- terror of a virgin bride.'

**Modish** In Paris, on her marital voyage there with Dr. Urbino, Fermina exercised her unique taste on purchases of hats, shoes, clothes artfully chosen from second hand shops—she at once hated *haute couture*—and brought home extravaganzas of private taste which startled her fellow bourgeoisie in Colombia. 'She brought back everything that had been used in the past twenty years to change the appearance of hats'—birds, cherries, crests of peacocks, tailfeathers of Asiatic roosters, entire pheasants. It was seeing her in her finery that determined Florentino that 'Dr. Urbino had to die,' so that he could inherit this gorgeous fleshly prize.

**Frustration** Fermina came increasingly to feel trapped in the perfect happiness Dr. Urbino had designed for her. 'If anything vexed her, it was the perpetual chain of daily meals. For they not only had to be served on time; they had to be perfect, and they had to be just what he wanted to eat, without his having to be asked...At the mere hint of a doubt, he would push aside his plate and say: 'this meal has been prepared without love.' In the course of years spent in this kind of caring but monotonous marital routine, Fermina rediscovered that taste for drama and surprise which were at the root of her lasting fascination with Florentino.

**Faithful** At many stages in her developing existence, Fermina encountered Florentino, in fact so frequently, and with so little alertness, that 'more than once, in sheer distraction, she forgot to greet him.' He was growing in business respectability, and off and on Fermina would not even connect him to 'the languid adolescent who would sit and sigh for her under the gusts of yellow leaves in the Park of the Evangels...' Their old flame, however, remained bright in the realm of writing letters, where once again they exchanged their innermost thoughts with one another. On the page, she cared for him just as she always had.

### **Discussion questions**

What was the nature of Fermina's love for Urbino? Did it develop in stages? Did she ever forget Florentino, in the course of her marriage to Urbino?

Is Fermina the kind of person who would naturally be attracted to a brilliant marginal like Florentino? Was theirs, after all, a marriage made in heaven?

What was the lifegiving source of peace for Fermina? Where did she go for strength and self-control?