

## Poor Mexico!"

In recent articles, I have frequently quoted or referred to opinions of Carlos Fuentes, Mexico's leading novelist, author of *The Old Gringo*, *Aura*, *Christopher Unborn*, among other novels, and recently the author and narrator of the brilliant BBC Television series, "The Buried Mirror". Probably Mexico's most vocal critic, with his searing political commentaries appearing internationally (monthly columns in the *New York* and *Los Angeles Times*), and yet undeniably an ardent supporter of his own country's culture and people.

However, the domestic perception of Carlos Fuentes is as enigmatic as the country itself. Mexicans, often fiercely nationalistic, have never really excelled at critical self evaluation, and public sentiment towards the writer and his works is often mixed. Such remarks as "He's an elitist", "He doesn't really understand our problems", "Its easy to criticize Mexico when you don't live here", are often voiced amongst Mexican academia; and amongst the general public, with illiteracy rates among the highest in the world, and a good portion of the population reading little more than comic books, it's not surprising to draw a blank when asking people about their literary star. Fuentes admits that he spends little time in Mexico, and in an interview with Bill Moyers a few years ago, he joked that his home was the Clipper Business Class of the now defunct Pan Am Airlines. However, he has pleaded with his detractors, "don't classify me, just read me!"

Fuentes's genius is undeniable. He has brought to us the myths and ideas of Mexico's past and present, with a beauty, passion and brilliance, that can be understood by even those who have not so much as glimpsed at a postcard from Mexico. He has written political satire and historical interpretation, created worlds of abstract narrative, and discussed present economic and political developments in a clear and honest manner.

I was first introduced to Carlos Fuentes' work ten years ago by German radio

correspondent Joerg Hafkemeyer, who was stationed in Mexico City at the time. Over many late nights of discussion and tequilas in the tiny fishing/tourist community of Puerto Angel, Joerg explained how Fuentes' work had given him unique insights into the Mexican mentality, and its peculiarities and contradictions. In particular, he recommended reading "The Hydra Head", which, on the surface, is probably the first Third World spy thriller, an action packed, quick-paced novel of intrigue, but with a subtle backdrop of current cultural and political reality. Fuentes makes his observations subtly, giving us a glimpse into the Mexican psyche, while taking us on a dazzling labyrinthine ride. In this present Mexican political climate of assassination, conspiracy theories, and publicly accepted deception, this work is even more electric. In particular, its description of an government orchestrated attempt on the President's life, rings with an eerie suggestion of reality.

Much of Fuentes' writing discusses the differences in philosophy and history between Mexico (and the rest of Latin America, for that matter) and its northern neighbours. Fuentes has described the border which runs between the U.S. and Mexico as a "scar", one which divides two memories: one of victory and one of loss, best expressed by Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz's famous remark: "Poor Mexico! So far from God and so near to the United States!" This border is not just geographical, but also psychological and emotional, and Fuentes has advocated trying to bridge these differences without denying them. In his 1984 Massey Hall Lecture series, Fuentes poetically described:

We [Mexicans] are worried about redeeming the past; they [the United States] are accustomed to acclaiming the future. Their past is assimilated, and, too often, it is simply forgotten; ours is still battling for our souls. We represent the abundance of poverty; they, the poverty of abundance. They want to live better; we want to die better. They are accustomed to success; we, to failure.

Fuentes summarizes these comparisons by stating that every Mexican has a personal frontier with the United States, and before this century is over, every North American will have a personal frontier with Mexico; particularly prophetic remarks in light of recent Free Trade Developments and immigration/border controversies.

Carlos Fuentes' plea to read his works is well-founded, and a wise choice if one's aim is to better understand a rich and often perplexing culture.

In another segment of what is soon becoming my "American Ambassador - Moron Watch", it was hilarious to listen to U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, James Jones' succinct analysis of Mexico's political and economic climate at his April 16th address to the Trilateral Industrial Environmental Conference in Mexico City. Ambassador Jones observed that the recent rebel uprisings in the state of Chiapas in no way reflected political or economic instability nationwide and that: "I think that everybody has recognized that Chiapas is a social and economic development problem that is unique to that region." Possibly Ambassador Jones has been out of town for the almost-daily protests and the daily news stories of worker unrest and growing economic dichotomy throughout the country!

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