

Doña Bárbara — An Introduction by Rómulo Gallegos (1954)

This is a brief introduction written by Rómulo Gallegos for the 25-year anniversary commemorative edition of *Doña Bárbara* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1954). It offers one of the rarest and most interesting statements by the novelist about his own work. [[The original Spanish text](#) was translated to English by T. Rindfleisch (tcr@stanford.edu).]

It may not please everyone who reads this book when I tell them that the characters existed in the real world, since after all one of the useful functions a novel serves is to be an escape hatch from that world where human beings and events move on and are brought about in a manner so arbitrary and without sense that there is no account of them that may satisfy the need for logical order that a person experiences when they have nothing to do, that is when the machinery of folly stops, even if not that of horrors, while even the worst novels reveal some sense of orderliness. However, they have asked me to explain how and when it crossed my mind to write my novel, and so now I will write that history.

Once again, in the limbo of writing something that was still without form, there were characters in search of an author. For Pirandello, his characters found their author on a theater stage, the curtain raised, no audience in the auditorium; mine came to me in a place on the right-hand bank of the Apure, one afternoon in April.

I had been writing a novel whose protagonist had to spend some days at a cattle ranch on the savanna and, in order to gather impressions of the landscape and environment, it was I who had to go to the plains of Apure, for the first time, in the aforementioned April of 1927.

Blazing sun and copious rain, with all the thunderous machinery of a savanna storm, where between clouds and savanna a single clap of thunder has no set time to come to an end, accompanied me throughout the journey – only one of the thousand paths the plains have to offer – to show me from the start the partitioning of the day just as it was accustomed to dividing up equitably the whole year, half dry savanna with mirages of illusory water tormenting the thirst of the hiker, and half inundation from woodland to woodland in the rivers, from sky to sky in the marshlands. I arrived, found some friends, and by dusk I was together with them on the outskirts of San Fernando. These were cordial people, among them Mr. Rodríguez, smartly dressed in white, whom I will never forget, as you will see, for the things I owe him.

The wide river, the hot environment of the savanna, with human manners and cordiality. A wisp of a palm grove there on the horizon, perhaps a whinny of wild horses in the distance, responding for all one knows to the bellow of a more or less untamed bull, and why not also, near to us, the mournful song of a red-footed partridge. The plains are all that: immenseness, ferocity, and melancholy.

The sun set luxuriously over the wide and useless river – because it doesn't bring water to arable land, nor does a pirogue ever ply its waters – and over the immense savanna, deserted fields, nourishing the arrogance of man already captured in the plains verse:

Sobre la tierra la palma, sobre la palma los cielos; sobre mi caballo yo y sobre yo mi sombrero.

But this spectacle was not about pessimistic reflections, and my Venezuelan desire that all the parts of my homeland at some time boast of prosperity and guarantee happiness took literary form in the following phrase:

Tierra ancha y tendida, toda horizontes como la esperanza, toda caminos como la voluntad.

I am sure that I formulated that line mentally and did not have then nor have now a basis to believe that Mr. Rodríguez might have the ability to read thoughts; but what is certain is that I saw him smile as if about something well known, as if he had just discovered that I had found the principal character for my novel destined to have such good fortune.

And in effect, I did find it: the scenery of the plains, the ferocity of nature that forges hardy men. Are not all the human players that figure in this book nature's beings?

And then Mr. Rodríguez proceeded to introduce me to them, through interrogation:

— *¿Ha oído usted hablar de...?*

He would then name an individual from real life, whom I won't mention although I am in the midst of writing this history.

Mr. Rodríguez told me the background – a sad case from real life. A doctor of laws who gets involved in a cattle ranch on his property and, administering it well, came to develop it into one of the richest in the region; but, because he took to the bottle one bad day – perhaps one of those days with continuous rain, which the plainsmen describe as "de cachimba, tapara y chinchorro", that is a time of leisure to enjoy the smoke of a pipe and a swig of booze, this from a rustic vessel made from the fruit of the tapara tree, under the hammock – and in that way he became addicted, so that no man was left there worth his salt.

A crude case of self-addiction perhaps; but I was in the presence of a dramatic stage – the desert providing sustenance to its ferocity, shelter to its barbarism, almost dehumanizing – and it was as if, taking the words from Mr. Rodríguez, someone had placed me before it, telling me with a stammering voice:

— *Esta tierra no perdona. Mire lo que ha hecho de mí la llanura bárbara, devoradora de hombres.*

I continued watching. This man was not bad as a dramatic character and I gave him the name Lorenzo Barquero

But already Mr. Rodríguez was introducing me to another character:

— *¿Ha oído hablar de doña...? Una mujer que era todo un hombre para jinetear caballos y enlazar cimarrones. Codiciosa, supersticiosa, sin grimas para quitarse de por delante a quien le estorbase y...*

— *¿Y devoradora de hombres, no es cierto?* — I asked with the thrill of making a discovery, and so having a woman to symbolize the cruelty of nature meant I had a novel. But from another point of view, it seems this could not be without the other side of the coin – Beautiful then, also, like the savanna? Well... -- replied Mr. Rodríguez, smiling, and letting me do what seemed to be most natural and logical for me, since they had already told him I was a novelist.

Twenty-seven years have passed. I will never forget that it was he who introduced me to doña Bárbara. I stopped working on the novel I was writing, for sure still not published. The matriarch had taken control of me, as it would be perfectly logical that she should take power over Lorenzo Barquero. Besides, this was a symbol of what was happening in Venezuela in the area of political history.

There I learned about María Nieves, "cabrestero" of the Apure, across whose turbid waters, teeming with carnivorous caimans, he used to swim with an oak branch in his left hand and a song on his lips, guiding the front of a group of cattle that had to cross from one bank to the other. I wrote about all this and included his name in my book, and various people have told me that when someone would pick a quarrel with him, making fun of him, he used to respond:

— *Respéteme, amigo. Que yo estoy en Doña Bárbara.*

María Nieves no longer fords the Apure with his song on his lips because death has sealed them forever, but I include his boastful image in these lines as the best tribute my work is able to give him. He was an unpolished man, with the soul of a plainsman.

In the cattle ranch, La Candelaria de Arauca, I also met Antonio Torrealba, savanna foreman of that ranch – he is the Antonio Sandoval in my book – and from his words I gathered precious information that I used in *Doña Bárbara* as well as in *Cantaclaro*. He also is no longer alive and in his memory I pay homage to him for the invaluable collaboration that his knowledge of the rough and violent life of the Venezuelan plainsman gave me.

Deeper into the savanna, farther than the Arauca, I met Pajarote – as he was named – a fiercely loyal man ready to shake hands with anyone who offered him theirs, and I met Carmelito, the suspicious man for whom you have to demonstrate with real deeds that you have the heart of a good man beating in your chest – good with a horse and good with integrity. Frankness and suspicion are two aspects of the same core characteristics of a plainsman. I heard them tell stories of the hard work of a cattleman, toiling from dawn to dusk to capture ferocious wild bulls or to stop the stampedes of large herds of animals in the days of roundups. And the stories of ghostly spirits who appear in the dense thickets on nights with the full moon and bewitching light.

To all of these characters – those still alive and struggling on or those now only names in nostalgic gatherings under the roofs of rustic dwellings – I hold them in my predilection for affection for my nicest characters.

I came to know Juan Primito, slow-witted but good at heart, with his “rebullones”, in a town in the Valles del Tuy. And I met those characters of an opposite sort, Mujiquita, Pernaleta, Balbino Paiba, and El Brujeador, in various places in my country, where I was making up personifications of the Venezuelan tragedy. To meet the demands of my temperament, I could not limit myself to a depiction of pure characters composed of individual traits, but rather I needed to choose my characters from among real persons who were causes of or shaped by the misfortunes of my country, because I have always had inside me something more than a simple man of letters.

Nevertheless, in this depiction of an unfortunate period in my country, we cannot forget Santos Luzardo and Marisela in my novel, both of whom are pure inventions of the author, but with outlines defined by the palpitations of the Venezuelan heart. They are, respectively and complementarily, the cause that we have to strive toward, time and time again, and the hope we must cling to with untiring resolve; today’s duty for the peaceful contemplation of tomorrow.

This edition conforms to the goal of the Fondo de Cultura Económica to focus on the commemoration of twenty-five years of *Doña Bárbara*; and because they wanted me to tell their readers the history of this auspicious novel, I have included in this prologue the story of how I found its key characters, one day in April, along the shores of a river in the savanna. But if I said that I probably heard at that time the wild bellowing of a bull, I well could add that in the still air there fluttered the softness of a white flight of herons.

RÓMULO GALLEGOS