

Mystery Novels Prosper in Mexico

Mystery novels are increasingly popular in Mexico. New authors and new titles, seminars and special literary awards signal the new trend. This article offers an overview of the genre's development in Mexico.

Critics today when dealing with mystery stories recognize two principal sub-genres: the thriller or detective story which describes the society where the plot takes place and the 'roman noir' in which solving the mystery is less important than the handling of suspense and the description of characters. In the first category there is a crime to be solved, a culprit, a lady in distress, some vital clues and a detective whose sharp and clever mind rivals the criminal's. Famous writers such as Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle belong here. Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler are important within the second category which often includes violent characters.

Crime story writers in Mexico usually belong to the first sub-genre. But they have certain peculiarities such as the presence

of open spaces and sociopolitical concerns which should not be overlooked. There are also a number of stories which have characteristics of both. To mention three: Ana Mairena's *Los extraordinarios* (The Extraordinary People) (1961), Jorge Ibar-güengoitia's *Dos crímenes* (Two Crimes) (1979) and Vicente Leñero's *Asesinato* (Murder) (1985).

Crime as Reality

In *Los extraordinarios* there is a good handling of suspense which is meted out in adequate doses. It works as a *leitmotif* that gives the story unity and helps in the unfolding of the plot. A young man from the country arrives in a big city where he carefully plans the murder of a rich lady who amassed a fortune in a devious manner. He kills her with a stiletto and without turning a hair. Oddly enough what happens in the story was also a sort of premonition. The author, whose real name was Asunción Izquierdo de Flores Muñoz and her husband Gilberto Flores Muñoz were savagely hewn to death. These two murders provided Vicente Leñero with the subject-matter to write *Asesinato*, which is a report cum story and not a crime story as such. It is based on a detailed analysis of trial documents and newspaper accounts of the case. According to Leñero this

Mystery Writers' International Meeting

Various cultural organizations including the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the National Art Institute, the government's

Department of Education and the International Association of Crime Story Writers organized a Mystery Writers' International Meeting last February. The first part took place in the House of Arts and Culture in San Juan del Río, Querétaro, and was sponsored by the state authorities. The second part and the Mystery Novel Book Fair were held in the Palacio de Minería in Mexico City.

Renowned writers such as Germany's Manfred Drew, Czechoslovakia's Jiri Prochazka, Argentina's Juan Sasturain, U.S.S.R.'s Julian Semionov, U.S.' Roger Simon and Spain's Manuel Vázquez Montalbán were there. Mexican crime story writers were also present: Edmundo Domínguez Aragonés, for example, whose book *La fiera de piel pintada* got first prize in the Crime Story Award organized in Mexico by the publishing house Plaza y Janés.

According to Vicente Leñero, author of *Asesinato*, which he considers a report cum novel, an academic tone and a desire to better define this literary genre prevailed at the meeting.

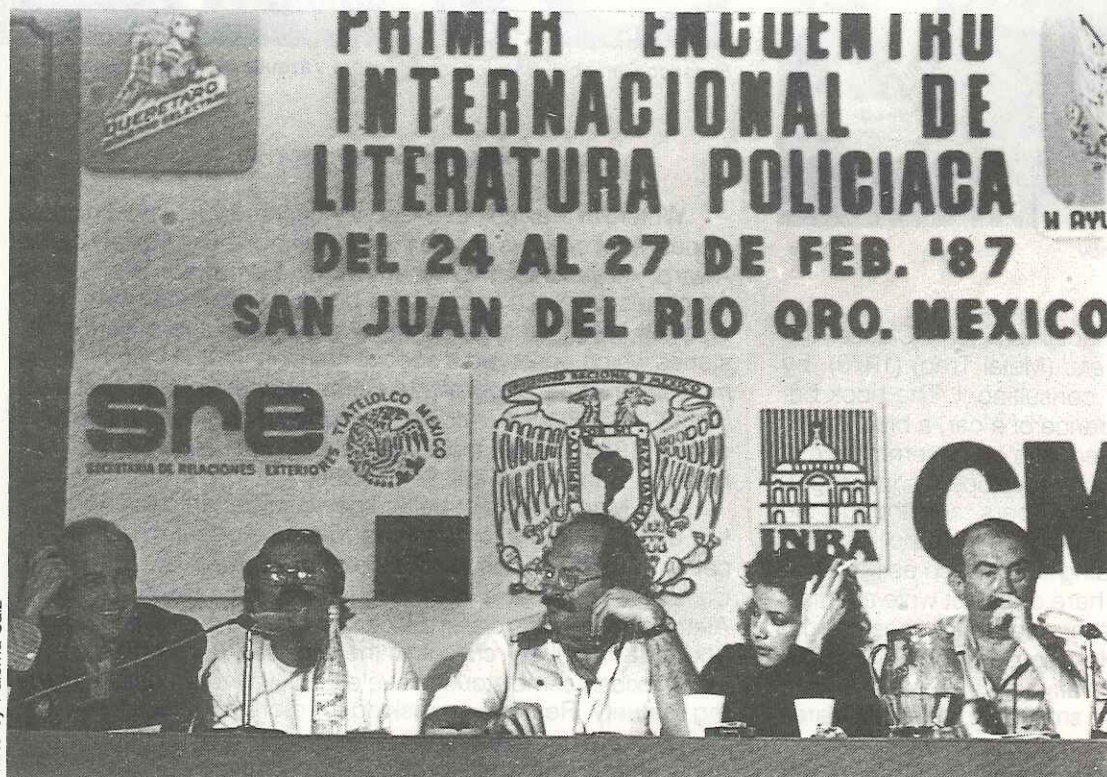


Photo by Paloma Saiz

From left to right: Roger Simon (US), Paco Ignacio Taibo II (Mexico), Juan Madrid (Spain), Malú Huacuja (Mexico) and Rafael Ramírez Heredia (Mexico).

life and culture

type of book is more open because "it sees crime as part of reality and not only as fiction."

Dos crímenes is nearer to being a detective story: there is suspense, a first crime which leads to a second, some clues, one or two culprits and two people who investigate—a professional and an amateur who is really a chemist—Together with this we get a deep concern for political issues and a fine sense of humor, which is typical of Ibarra's prose.

Rafael Bernal's *El complot mongol* (The Mongol Plot) (1969) is undoubtedly the best detective story written in Mexico and marks a turning-point in the development of crime stories in this country. The protagonist is a professional killer who must investigate a possible attempt against the U.S. president. His way of thinking corresponds to a certain type of Mexican policeman commonly called "guarura" (bodyguard); that is why he is described as being solitary, ruthless, good with his fists, violent, tough and a woman-hater. Through this character Bernal criticises both these bodyguards and Mexican politics. The story

Rafael Bernal's *The Mongol Plot* is a landmark in the evolution of Mexican mystery novels.

takes place in Mexico City, mostly on Dolores Street, located in the heart of the city and inhabited by Chinese immigrants.

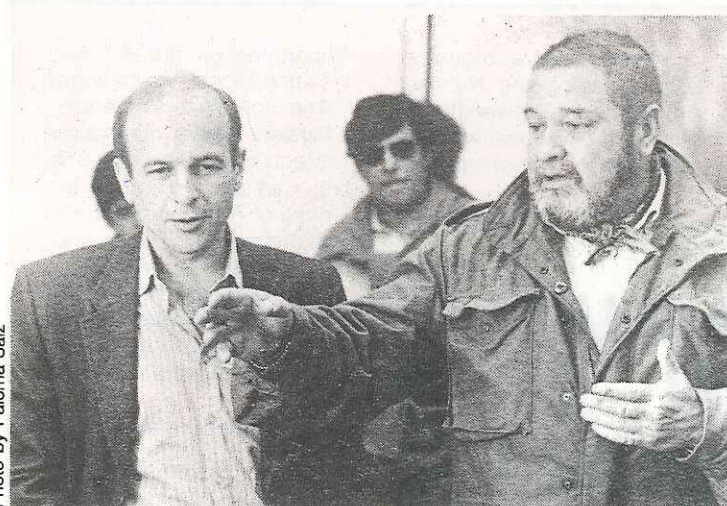


Photo by Paloma Saiz

Writers Roger Simon and Julian Semionov.

This detective story is so important that Ifigenio Clausel, the private detective in *Trampa de metal* (Metal Trap) (1979), by Rafael Ramírez Heredia is forever consulting it. The book begins with the mysterious disappearance of a car, a blue Volvo, which conceals the shady maneuvers of high government officials. These come to light as Clausel develops his investigating. The crime does not take place indoors, and though the Volvo disappears from a car-park it then goes on to include most of Mexico City and some surrounding areas such as Metepec and the Toluca highway. Ramírez here does not write a typical crime story; he goes further than that and denounces corruption in high government circles. He also describes the typical difficulties of living in a large city: traffic jams, lack of parking space, eating in "taquerías", life in a small apartment in the area of Coyoacán.

María Elvira Bermúdez is another interesting detective story writer. She is both a lawyer and an expert on crime stories—she has even written a book on this subject—. Her books *Diferentes razones tiene la muerte* (Death Has Different Rea-

sons) (1953), *Muerte a la zaga* (Death Lags behind) (1985) and *Encono de hormigas* (Ant Resentment) (1987) are influenced by British and American detective story writers. Bermúdez' books are full of detail and they have a logical, almost mathematical narrative sequence. She has created a character called Armando H. Zozaga, a professional journalist and amateur detective who is in charge of solving the crimes. It is interesting to note that sometimes a woman solves the mystery.

Rosa Margot Ochoa, better known for her books on ancient Greece, is the author of *Corrientes secretas* (Secret Currents) (1978) which takes place in an hacienda in Yucatán. At the International Meeting of Mystery Writers she read a paper called "In Defense of Crime Stories" in which she insisted these stories "are close to Greek tragedy."

Paco Ignacio Taibo II, should also be mentioned here. He is the author of *Días de combate* (Battle Days) (1976) which was made into a not too successful film and of many other stories centered round crime; for example *Pálidas Banderas* (Pale Flags) (1986) which is about a plot to overthrow a Latin-American dictator. *Días de combate* reminds one of *El complot mongol* especially in the way suspense is handled, the detective's personality, how the criminal is discovered and the prevailing violence.



Photo by Paloma Saiz

Federico Campbell (Mexico) and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (Spain).

Recent Crime Stories

Writers in Mexico have recently become interested in crime stories. A lot of this is due to the publishing house Plaza y Janés Award, organized two years ago. Edmundo Domínguez Aragonés' book *La fiera de piel pintada* (The Beast with Painted Skin) (1986) was the winner. Nonetheless there were other stories which deserved a special mention: Malu Huacuja's *Crímen sin faltas de ortografía* (A Crime without Spelling Mistakes) (1986), José Huerta's *Accidente premeditado* (Premeditated Accident) (1986) and Eugenio Aguirre's *El rumor llegó del mar* (The Rumour Came from the Sea) (1986).

Ana María Maqueo, better known for her articles on linguistics and her books for teaching foreign students Spanish, recently published *Crímen del color oscuro* (A Dark Colored Crime) (1987). What is interesting is that the protagonist, Roberto Alatorre, a middle class policeman, can actually be trusted, and that he is very critical of the Mexican upper class.

Mexican crime stories have a long way to go before attaining maturity. Readers are asking for more of these stories and there still are not very many on the market. But the new authors show enthusiasm and it probably won't be long before a writer of international dimensions appears.

María Rosa Fiscal