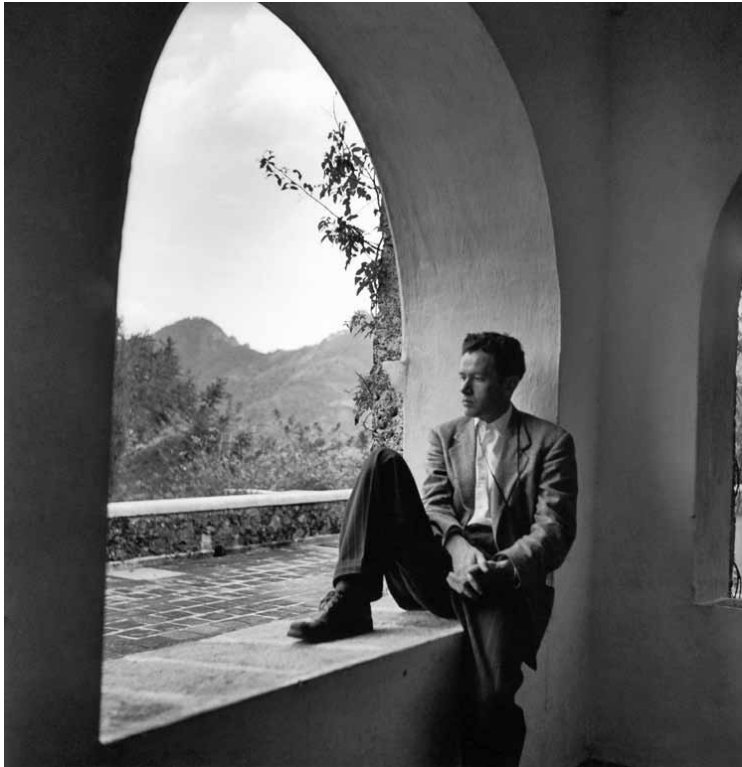


Juan Rulfo

Elena Poniatowska*



Rulfo goes through daily life like a sleepwalker, waiting for the precise message that will set him writing again.

“**M**y father died when I was six years old, and my mother when I was eight. When my parents died, I was still scribbling little zeros, nothing but little balls, in my school notebook. I was born May 16, 1918, in Sayula, but they took me later to San Gabriel. I am the son of Juan Nepomuceno Pérez and María Vizcaíno. I have many names: Juan Nepomuceno Carlos Pérez Rulfo Vizcaíno. My mother was named Vizcaíno and in Spain there is a province called Vizcaya, but no one, no Spaniard is named Vizcaíno. That name doesn't exist, which means that it was invented in Mexico.

“My parents were *hacendados*. One had a hacienda, San Pedro Toxin, and the other, a place called Apulco, which was where we spent vacations. Apulco is on a cliff and San Pedro

on the shores of the Armería River. In the story, “The Burning Plain,”¹ that river of my youth reappears. That's where the highwaymen holed up. A gang of highway thieves that hung around there killed my father when he was thirty-three. It was filled with bandits, pockets of men who had joined the Revolution² and who later felt like keeping up the fighting and the looting. Our hacienda San Pedro was burned four times while my father was still alive. They murdered my uncle, and they hung my grandfather by his thumbs, which he lost; there was much violence and everyone died at the age of thirty-three. Like Christ. Thus I am the son of moneyed people who lost everything in the Revolution...

“When he went to fight in the Cristero Revolt,³ the priest of my town left his library in our house because we lived across the street from the rectory converted into a barracks, and, before leaving, the priest moved everything. He had a lot of books because he passed himself off as an ecclesiastical censor

* Mexican writer.

Photos in this section, courtesy of DGCS, UNAM.

and he gathered volumes from people's houses. He had the Papal Index and with that he would officially ban the books, but what he really did was keep them because in his library there were many more profane books than religious ones, all of which I sat myself down to read: the novels of Dumas, Victor Hugo, Dick Turpin, books about Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull. All of that I read when I was ten years old. I spent all the time reading because you couldn't go out for fear of getting shot. I heard a lot of shooting, and after some confrontation between Cristeros and Federales, there were men hung on all the posts. That's for sure, the Federales looted as much as the Cristeros. It was rare that we didn't see one of our own people hung by the feet on some post on some road. They stayed there until they got old and they hung them very high; there they would sway in the breeze for many days, sometimes months, sometimes only the tatters of their pants billowing out with the wind as if someone has put them out to dry there. And you felt that things were really serious when you saw that."

* * *

Rulfo always seems possessed, and at times one discovers in him the lethargy characteristic of mediums: he goes through daily life like a sleepwalker, reluctantly fulfilling the vulgar tasks of waking existence. With his ear tuned, he lets the worldly noises go by, waiting for the precise message that will set him writing again, like a telegrapher waiting for a code. In his stories, many individual souls have spoken, but in his

novel *Pedro Páramo*, he made a whole people talk. The voices mix with one another, and you can't tell who is who, but it doesn't matter. The connected souls form one: alive or dead, Rulfo's men come in and out of our own souls as if they were in their own houses.

It would not be rash to say that the literature of Juan Rulfo is based on rancor. Or rancors. The land surrenders only its leathery surface; the sun bakes bald plains and hallucinating heads, the women burning pestles, their flesh quickly warmed by the heat of the earth. Rulfo's men, or rather, his souls in limbo travel across the burning plains looking for a father who disinherited them at the moment of conception. They are the just sons of a mother who left them with the onus of avenging her and who died on time, because otherwise they would have been the butt of jokes for the others, for those who drink beer that is as warm as burro piss in the cantinas. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ Juan Rulfo's "The Burning Plain" was included in his 1953 collection *El llano en llamas* (The Burning Plain and Other Stories).
- ² The Mexican Revolution, which began after President Porfirio Díaz fixed the 1910 election results, was led by Francisco Madero, and sparked several subsequent revolts, including those led by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata.
- ³ The Cristero Revolt, in which a rebel army made up largely of peasants fought in defense of their faith and the power of the Catholic Church in Mexico, erupted in 1926, after the archbishop of Mexico declared that the clergy would not recognize certain anti-clerical articles of the 1917 Constitution.



Elena Poniatowska Wins Cervantes Prize

Voices of Mexico congratulates Elena Poniatowska, a distinguished member of our Editorial Board, whose work has been translated into many languages, and who is the recipient of many awards. The most recent are the prestigious 2013 Cervantes Prize, considered the Nobel for Spanish-language letters, and the Fine Arts Medal 2014, one of Mexico's highest distinctions for artistic creation. In 2007, the Mexico City government created the Ibero-American Prize for the Novel and named it after her.