



## Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the greatest of the amnesia writers

*Garcia Marquez's descriptions of memory loss came largely from his observations of several family members suffering with Alzheimer's dementia. His account of 'the loss of the name and notion of things' in One Hundred Years of Solitude preceded the notion of semantic dementia, while his descriptions of amnesia in The Autumn of the Patriarch and The General in his Labyrinth can now be looked upon as literary prodromes. Marcel Proust in In Search of Lost Time explores the way particular events are re-ignited in our memories, whereas Marquez teaches us more about the benefits and disadvantages of forgetting.*

Gabriel Garcia Marquez died at home in Mexico City at the age of 87 after living with dementia for over 10 years. In his memoir he wrote, 'Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it',<sup>1</sup> but in his final years he could no longer recall anything and became as elusive and spectral as his fictional General in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. Forgetting had been his leitmotif; the irony of his own amnesia was not lost on his adoring public.

Marquez was born in Aracataca, Colombia, a hick town that had grown up on the bank of a river whose transparent water raced over a bed of shining stones. A vast plantation once owned by the United Fruit Company, which had led to an outbreak of 'banana fever', stretched out on the far bank, and in the near distance were the white peaks of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. It was a torrid place of hurricanes, punishing droughts, sudden downpours and locust plagues, home for the children of fortune seekers. Miracles and mysteries happened in Aracataca every day.

The 22-year-old Marquez was working part time as a journalist in Barranquilla when his mother sought him out and asked him if he would come with her on the 130-km journey from the Colombian Caribbean coast to Aracataca to sell the family home. It was during this sentimental voyage first by ship and then by train that he finally decided to be a writer. On arriving with his mother at his birthplace he wrote<sup>1</sup>:

'The first thing that struck me was the silence. A material silence I could have identified blindfolded among all the silences in the world. The reverberation of the heat was so intense that you seemed to be looking at everything through undulating glass. As far as the eye could see there was no recollection of human life, nothing that was not covered by a faint sprinkling of burning dust.'

In his memoirs, Marquez describes the powerful effect that re-entering the family home had on him. It was there that

Tranquilina Iguarán, his grandmother, had sought reassurance for her ghostly visions and where his maternal aunts had listened to his litany of tall stories. His grandfather, Colonel Nicolás Marquez, the only male adult in the extended family, had encouraged him to read the dictionary and had the walls of his workshop painted white so that his grandson might have an inviting drawing surface on which to create works of art. Marquez recalled the rocking chair that his grandmother believed rocked back and forth of its own accord and he smelt again the intoxicating scent of the jasmines in the garden. These memories later became his 'madeleine cakes'.

In his memoir, he also writes about the origin of the name he used for the fictional town in his most acclaimed work *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

'the train stopped at a station that had no town, and a short while later it passed the only banana plantation along the route that had its name written over the gate: *Macondo*. This word had attracted my attention ever since the first trips I had made with my grandfather, but I discovered only as an adult that I liked its poetic resonance. I never heard anyone say it and never asked myself what it meant.'

Marquez was claustrophobic, afraid of the dark and suffered from terrifying nightmares that made him sleepwalk and cry out in his sleep. At night when dreams appeared like lustrous moths, he trapped them in his entorhinal cortex and transformed them into cinematic streams of consciousness. He wrote from nine in the morning till two in the afternoon in a fugue, lost in a labyrinth of suffocating memories. The flashbacks of childhood that he unearthed during this process took on a new life through his writing, and the horror and forlorn hopes of his family history became a subversive force. Marquez elevated his innate blarney into aesthetic distinction. 'At bottom, I have written only one book, the same one that circles round and round, and continues on', he explained.

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*One Hundred Years of Solitude* arose out of two separate souvenirs, the first when he was impressed by a camel at the circus, and the other when he saw ice for the first time at the banana plantation. Over time these fused into a single false memory in which he recalled seeing ice at the circus. The frozen water's transparency and deliquescence became a metaphor for the lives of those who lived in the town of mirrors.

'Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.'

It is the orphan Rebeca, adopted by the Buendía family, who first brings the plague to the sleepy backwater of Macondo. The first symptom is severe insomnia, which is followed by complete erasure of childhood recollection and an inability to remember the names or purpose of everyday objects. As a result, its victims slip into an existence that has no past. Marquez's detailed description of the townsfolk's sickness fits a constellation of signs that would some years after the publication of his novel be characterized as a distinct syndrome, and renamed semantic dementia<sup>2</sup>:

'One day he was looking for the small anvil that he used for laminating metals and he could not remember its name. His father told him: 'Stake'. Aureliano wrote the name on a piece of paper that he pasted to the small anvil: stake. In that way he was sure of not forgetting it in the future. It did not occur to him that this was the first manifestation of a loss of memory, because the object had a difficult name to remember. But a few days later he discovered that he had trouble remembering almost every object in the laboratory. Then he marked them with their respective names so that all he had to do was read the inscription in order to identify them. When his father told him about his alarm at having forgotten even the most impressive happenings of his childhood, Aureliano explained his method to him and José Arcadio Buendía put it into practice all through the house and later on imposed it on the whole village. With an inked brush he marked everything with its name: table, chair, clock, door, wall, bed, pan. He went to the corral and marked the animals and plants: cow, goat, pig, hen, cassava, caladium, banana. Little by little, studying the infinite possibilities of a loss of memory, he realized that the day might come when things would be recognized by their inscriptions but that no one would remember their use.'

José Arcadio Buendía, the founding father of Macondo, lives the life of a man who has no memory or past. He discovers a way to create perpetual motion but then becomes convinced that every day is repeating itself over and over again. Tied to a chestnut tree in his backyard for his own safety he descends into oblivion, babbling in medieval Latin with the local priest. Marquez tells us that José Arcadio's delirium was triggered by the re-emergence of a hidden memory of the ghost of the murdered Prudencio Aguilar (Fig. 1).

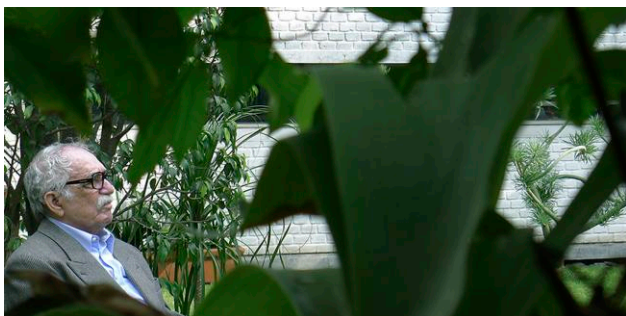


Figure 1 Gabo in his labyrinth. ©Guillermo Angulo.

In 1990, Francisco Lopera, a neurologist working at the University of Antioquia in Medellín, began research into a disease characterized by progressive amnesia that began before the age of 50 years and which led to dementia and death within a decade of its onset. During his field work in the Andean municipalities of Angostura, Belmira, Santa Rosa de Osos and Yarumal, he was told by the locals that in the olden days the victims of the scourge had been tied to trees as an act of mercy and left to die. Pathological examination of donated brains revealed the characteristic histological hallmarks seen in Alzheimer's disease. Lopera and his team collected tissue samples from 26 families which would eventually lead to the finding of a missense point mutation on the presenilin-1 gene on chromosome 14, caused by a glutamic acid to alanine mutation in codon 280 (the Paisa mutation). The pedigree has an estimated 1000 carriers and spans seven generations originating with a Basque couple who had settled in Antioquia at the beginning of the 18th century.

Lopera drew attention to the similarity between the plague of Macondo and fatal familial insomnia, an autosomal dominant genetic disease caused by a mutation in PRNP D178N of the prion protein gene, but to the disappointment of the Colombian press, poured cold water on any similarities they tried to draw between the leaf storm of forgetfulness in Macondo and the dreadful reality faced by the carriers of the Paisa mutation in Yarumal and Angostura.<sup>3,4</sup> As a young man, Lopera had wanted to study astronomy, but after reading a newspaper article which concluded that flying saucers were a figment of human imagination he had set his heart on becoming a neuropsychiatrist (personal communication).

Marquez's books are peppered with descriptions of senility, solitude and memory loss. The General of the Universe, the puppet dictator in *The Autumn of the Patriarch* wears a baggy linen suit that looks as if there is no-one inside it. He tricks his people to believe that he has already died six times, he has a double who is hired to be his official impostor who he orders to have his feet flattened out with a mallet and his testicles pierced with a shoemaker's awl and then to swallow turpentine to make him forget how to read and write. Such is the General's power that he can change the clocks, alter the seasons and even sell the sea of his Caribbean coastline to the Americans. Alone in his mansion he tries to cling desperately to his last remaining memories.

'only then did he confront the devastating winds of his excessive years when he wandered at dusk through the deserted building, hid in the darkened offices, tore the margins off ledgers and in his florid hand wrote on them the remaining residue of the last memories that preserved him from death.'

'for there were periods when he wrote down everything he thought, everything he knew, on a piece of cardboard and tacked it to the door of a toilet ... he wrote down the few things he remembered to make sure that he would never forget them.'

'he would go all over the building looking for the jars of honey whose hiding places he would forget after a few hours and he would find by mistake the rolls from the margins of ledgers where he had written in other times so as not to forget anything when he could no longer remember anything, he read on one that tomorrow is Tuesday, he read that there was an initial on your white handkerchief a red initial of a name that was not yours my master.'

Marquez's final work of fiction, the novella, *Memory of my Melancholy Whores* (2004) received a mixed reception in the Anglo-Saxon world. Michiko Kakutani, the chief book critic at the



*New York Times* who had written glowing reviews of his earlier works wrote:

‘The fertile inventiveness that animated his masterpiece “One Hundred Years of Solitude” is decidedly muted in these pages, and the reverence for the mundane realities of ordinary life, showcased in more recent works, seems attenuated as well. As a result, “Memories of My Melancholy Whores” feels like a brittle little fable composed on automatic pilot. The trajectory of this narrative turns out to be highly predictable, leading to a banal ending to a banal story that’s quite unworthy of the great Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s prodigious talents.’

In 2009 at the International Book Fair in Guadalajara, Mexico, Marquez announced that he had written nothing for the last 5 years but was working on a second volume of memoirs:

‘You wake up one day and you are old, just like that with no warning. It’s stunning’, he added. ‘I heard years ago that there comes a time in the life of a writer when you are no longer able to write a long work of fiction. The head can no longer hold the vast architecture or navigate the perilous crossing of a long novel. It’s true I can feel it now. So it will be shorter pieces from now on.’

Sitting in the auditorium next to the poet Álvaro Mutis, Marquez confided to his old friend, ‘All those faces are familiar to me, but I can’t put a little name tag under their faces’. In the months that followed, it became clear to his friends that Gabo’s memory was failing. ‘I work with my memory. Memory is my tool and raw material. I cannot work without it. Help me’, he pleaded. Nobody could. One day his secretary noticed him looking lost in his garden and asked him, ‘What are you doing out here, Don Gabriel?’ ‘Crying’, came the answer, ‘Crying? You are not crying’, ‘Yes, I am’, he replied, ‘But without tears. Don’t you realise that my head is now shit?’

His family protected him from the public and blamed his frailty and forgetfulness on his age and on the chemotherapy he had received for a lymphatic cancer some years earlier. In his touching memoir to his parents *A farewell to Gabo and Mercedes*, Rodrigo Garcia wrote about his father, ‘Our faces ring a distant bell. He is astonished when the housekeeper tells him that those two men are his sons’. He also tells us that there were times when his father had misidentified his wife Mercedes and accused her of being an impostor. Rodrigo explains to a female friend that his father now lives in the present, unburdened with the past and with no expectations for the future to which she replies, ‘So your father doesn’t know he’s mortal, lucky him’.<sup>5</sup> There are still preserved brief moments of insight and flickers of his old sense of humour, ‘I’m losing my memory, but fortunately I forget that I’m losing it’. Or: ‘Everyone treats me like I’m a child. It’s good that I like it’ (Fig. 2).

Rodrigo goes on to relate how shortly before his father’s death a bird crashed into the glass wall of the back porch and fell stone dead on the sofa. Later, one of his father’s close friends explains it as an example of life imitating literature and draws his attention to a passage in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*:

‘They buried her in a coffin that was not much larger than the basket in which Aureliano had arrived, and very few people were at the funeral, partly because there were not many left who remembered her, and partly because it was so hot that noon that the birds in their confusion were flying into walls like day buckshot and breaking through screens to die in the bedrooms.’

Úrsula Iguarán, the indomitable matriarch comes to see her very long life as a curse once she realises that time was turning in a circle

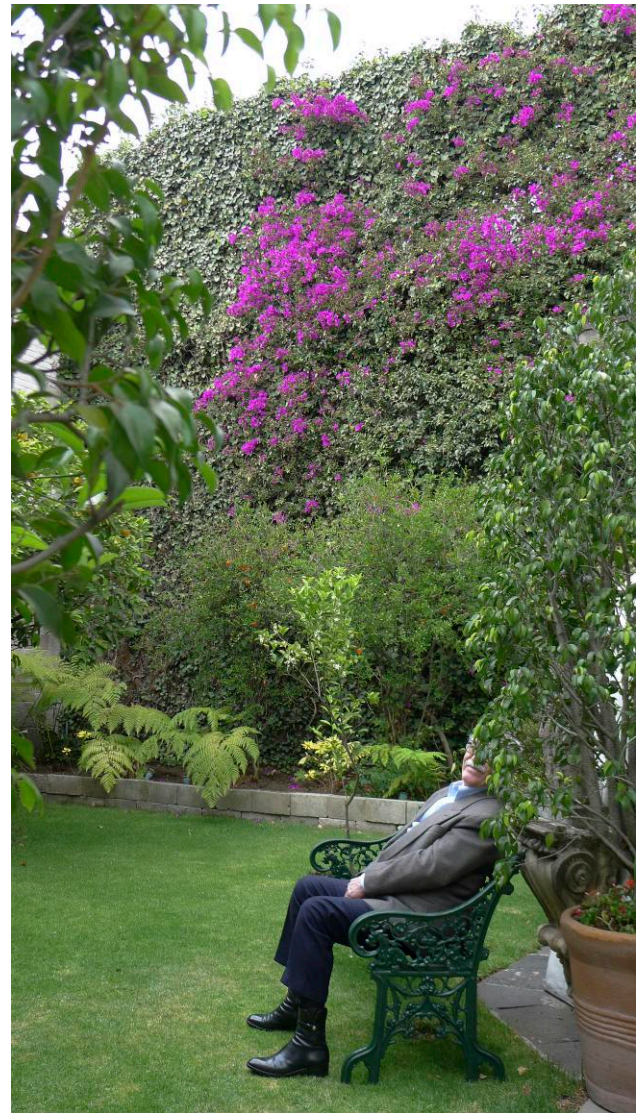



Figure 2 Garcia Marquez deliberately hiding from the camera in his garden in Mexico City. ©Guillermo Angulo.

and that the sins of the fathers are repeating themselves over and over. By the time of her death she has shrunk into a ‘cherry raisin lost in her nightgown’, diminished and negligible.

Reading literature can provide insights into how memory works and its complex connections to time. Proust’s long sentences and detailed recollection seem to make time slow down, whereas Marquez makes time disappear. He deliberately blurs characters together, confuses timelines to encourage forgetting. His novels remind us that everyday objects are aide-memoires, which give us a chance to recapture that innocence of our very first exposures. He shows us that forgetting the past gives us a second chance and helps to free us from loss.

Marquez was obliged to leave his son to describe his final days and his death, but he had foreseen it through his observations of Alzheimer’s dementia within his own family, first Tranquilina, then his mother and finally in several of his brothers and sisters. His writings liberate us from linear time constructs, connect narrative to molecular discovery and demonstrate that even when collective amnesia prevails, other utopias are possible. He is a writer

who through his own life helps us understand the implication of cognitive deficit.

 A. J. Lees

Institute of Neurology, UCL, London, UK

E-mail: andrew.lees@ucl.ac.uk

A. J. Lees is Professor of Neurology at the National Hospital, Queen Square and author of *Mentored by a madman: The William Burroughs experiment* (Notting Hill Editions and New York Review of Books) and *Brainspotting: Adventures in neurology*.

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