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# Super Mario

Mario Vargas Llosa: A Life
*By Gerald Martin*
Bloomsbury 1,056pp £35

Every time I hear the words ‘magical realism’ I want to reach for my revolver. Back in the 1970s, paperback editions of *One Hundred Years of Solitud*e by Gabriel García Márquez appeared in student bedsits more predictably than lava lamps and posters of Che Guevara (often with the back cover torn for marijuana spliff filters). Published in 1967, the Colombian saga spawned countless ‘magical’ imitations, not all of them good. Mario Vargas Llosa, the distinguished Peruvian novelist, is associated with the *realismo mágico* school but, wary of the example set by García Márquez and other Latin American peers (Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar), he wrote novels that were sometimes closer to fictionalised journalism.

Vargas Llosa died in 2025, at the age of eighty-nine. His matinee-idol good looks had long gone. He resembled a ‘waxen dummy’, writes Gerald Martin, and was on the rebound from a high-profile relationship with the Spanish-Filipina socialite (and *Hello!* magazine regular) Isabel Preysler. By any standards, Vargas Llosa is a difficult quarry for biographers. He was noted for his determination to keep aspects of his life secret; his love life was marked by scandal. He had a violent streak, moreover, that erupted in 1976 when, in a shameful episode, he punched García Márquez in the face at a film premiere in Mexico City.

Half a century on, the most famous right hook in the history of Latin America remains the subject of feverish speculation. Martin, an emeritus professor of modern languages at the University of Pittsburgh, devotes ten pages to the punch in his exhaustive biography of Vargas Llosa, but even then is unable to fathom quite why it happened. At over one thousand pages, *Mario Vargas Llosa: A Life* is thick as a brick. Martin’s 2008 life of García Márquez weighed in at more than six hundred pages. Fortunately his life of Vargas Llosa is also rather good. In immaculately sourced pages, Martin chronicles the life and times of one of the Hispanic world’s most industrious and successful intellectuals.

In his trademark suit and tie, Vargas Llosa was often maligned by his enemies as a reactionary. He was no sentimental Castroist, and in later years lost no opportunity to decry the Cuban Government’s imprisonment of the poet Heberto Padilla as an abuse of human liberties. He and García Márquez were part of the so-called ‘Boom’ of the Latin

American novel (which reached its height with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) but their personalities were different. While García Márquez went about in proletarian bush jackets and Cuban-heeled cowboy boots, Vargas Llosa had a more senatorial air. He consorted with Margaret Thatcher, espoused her neoliberal individualism and in 1990 ran on a free-market ticket in Peru's presidential elections; but he was no unthinking conservative. Unlike Thatcher, Vargas Llosa reviled the Chilean dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet. Political utopias and autocracies of any sort were anathema to him. His true allegiance was to himself, argues Martin – to his own individuality, to his writing, to his success. 'He is totally and completely selfish and self-centred,' remembered the Peruvian poet Antonio Cisneros. (He was a 'slimeball', said a woman friend.) Others found him a model of courtesy and old-world charm. His prominent front teeth showed a dazzling white when he grinned.

Vargas Llosa was born in 1936 in the southern Peruvian city of Arequipa. As a toddler he was taken by his mother to live in neighbouring Bolivia after her husband abandoned her. Mario grew up believing him dead. He was a ten-year-old 'spoilt brat' (his own description) when his mother presented him to a complete stranger: Ernesto Vargas, his father. Mario had been deceived from the moment he learned to speak and understandably he felt aggrieved. A violent, tyrannical individual, Ernesto routinely beat and terrorised Mario, and sent him to a military academy in Peru to make him less of a 'sissy' (Martin is fond of this outdated word). The teenage Vargas Llosa hated the barracks discipline but the experience fed into his gleefully subversive first novel, *The Time of the Hero* (1963), which included scenes of masturbation and bestiality among the cadets.

At the age of sixteen, Vargas Llosa got a job as a crime reporter on a daily in Lima, Peru's capital, and three years later he eloped with a much older woman, Julia Urquidi Illanes. Julia was not his biological aunt – she was only his uncle's sister-in-law – but the affair led to rumours of incest. He and Julia were married in 1955. Vargas Llosa's funniest novel, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, drew inspiration from the scandal-ridden marriage. By the time it appeared in 1977, however, Vargas Llosa had long since abandoned Julia for his first cousin, Patricia Urquidi. His marriage to Patricia in 1965 was no less symbolically 'incestuous' and shocking to the wider family. With Patricia he lived in Paris for a while, and afterwards in the London suburb of Cricklewood.

Vargas Llosa's fiction from this time is scabrous and innovative. *The Green House* (1966) and *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969) display the modernist influence of William Faulkner. Beneath the sensuous prose is a rich polyphony of different voices and narratives. Vargas Llosa was now a name: he grew a Latin-lover moustache and might have been mistaken for a polo player. He was careful never to boast about his literary success; he let others boast for him, says Martin.

As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, Vargas Llosa's defence of conservatism became ever more combative. He berated the left-leaning García Márquez as Fidel Castro's 'courtesan' (the writers had not spoken since the punch) and in later years he supported such Trump-admiring politicians as Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Argentina's Javier Milei. Given his declared aversion to dictatorship, it is striking, says Martin, that he never once criticised General Franco, but then Vargas Llosa lived in Spain during the late 1950s, the early 1970s and for much of the 1990s, and was even made a Spanish citizen.

Martin provides a riveting account of Vargas Llosa's doomed attempt to become president of Peru. After he lost he disparaged the 'putrefaction' of his populist rival Alberto Fujimori's presidency and described Fujimori's supporters as 'human filth'. Vargas Llosa's 2016 novel *The Neighbourhood* was, a quarter of a century later, a thinly veiled criticism of Fujimori's Peru. Set in 1990s Lima, the pulpy thriller is full of blackmail, corruption and startlingly graphic sex. Critics were unsure what to make of it.

One could argue that Vargas Llosa's finest novel is *The Feast of the Goat* (2000), a magnificent addition to the Latin American 'dictator novel' genre. President Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic is exposed in it as a sexual predator and despot in the megalomaniac mould of Tamburlaine. The novel was the 'first great literary event in the Hispanic world in the new millennium'. It helped win Vargas Llosa the Nobel Prize a decade later and put him in the company of García Márquez as a Latin American with a civic conscience. Oddly, the more right-wing Vargas Llosa became in person, the more his books seemed to 'shift leftwards', Martin argues. His semi-fictionalised account of Roger Casement's life, *The Dream of the Celt* (2010), illustrates the point. As the freedom-fighting champion of enslaved Congolese peoples and a martyr to Irish independence, Casement embodied the utopian ideals that Vargas Llosa had spent the previous forty years 'explicitly opposing'.

In old age, Vargas Llosa was stricken by multiple myeloma and would sit watching bullfighting on television while in a state of mental disarray. His final novel, *I Give You my Silence* (2023), published in translation (by Adrian Nathan West) this month by Faber, is the 'blandest' he wrote, in Martin's view. It is dedicated to his long-suffering second wife, Patricia (still alive). In it, a 'second-rate' author goes off in search of Andean folk rhythms and, along the way, exalts the beauty of the Peruvian *vals* (waltz). The novel is a bagatelle, but it has its own charm.

Gerald Martin's biography is not without blemish. I was unsure about the proliferation of exclamation marks ('Astonishing times!', 'so much for social rebellion!') and the prose can be breathy ('Mario had a damsel and he wanted her in distress'). For all that, *Mario Vargas Llosa: A Life* remains a considerable achievement: gossipy, erudite and deeply researched, it will be the last word on the man who wanted to be the most famous writer in the Hispanic world since Cervantes.