

Nobel Prize in Literature 2010 goes to Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa

Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian novelist, poet, essayist and journalist, was awarded the 2010 Nobel Prize in Literature, the Swedish Academy announced recently. The academy honored him “for his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual’s resistance, revolt and defeat.” He is the first Latin American writer to win the prize since the Mexican poet/philosopher Octavio Paz won it in 1990.

The Nobel tends to be given as a lifetime achievement award – it goes to a living writer, not to a particular work – and Vargas Llosa, 74, earned it with decades of critically acclaimed writing across literary genres. Born in the small southern Peruvian city of Arequipa in 1936, he was brought up in Bolivia by his maternal grandparents after his parents divorced. He returned to Lima for military school, then studied law, and afterward he lived abroad for nearly two decades, spending time in Spain, France and England. It was during that time that he began writing novels. His 1963 novel, *The Time of the Hero*, which drew on his military school experiences and exposed the corruption he encountered there, catapulted him onto the literary scene. Among his other well-known novels are *The Green House*, *Conversation in the Cathedral*, and the epic saga *The War at the End of the World*, a fable of Latin American revolution set in the Brazilian town of Canudos, which the influential American literary critic Harold Blom cites in his list of essential works of the Western canon.

Interviewed by *The Paris Review* in 1990, Vargas Llosa ascribed his “obsessive desire to write” to his time at military school. “It was an extremely traumatic experience which in many ways marked the end of my childhood,” he said, “the rediscovery of my country as a violent society, filled with bitterness, made up of social, cultural, and racial factions in complete opposition and caught up in sometimes ferocious battle. I suppose the experience had an influence on me; one thing I’m sure of is that it gave rise to the great need in me to create, to invent.”

Like many other prominent Latin American writers, Vargas Llosa coupled his urge to invent with an urge to record and comment. He has had a prolific career as a journalist, essayist and critic; among his notable critical works is a study of Gabriel García Márquez. And like many writers in the Latin American tradition, and like Octavio Paz in particular, he has been politically active, moving over the decades from the left (he once supported Fidel Castro) to a more conservative position (he opposed the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua). His autobiographical *A Fish in the Water* chronicles his unsuccessful run for president of Peru in 1990, a race he lost to the autocratic Alberto Fujimori.

In his fiction, Vargas Llosa is a storyteller in the 19th-century mode, one who seeks to “abolish the distance between the story and the reader.” He told *The Paris Review*: “I think it’s very important that the intellectual element, whose presence is inevitable in a novel, dissolves into the action, into the stories that must seduce the reader not by their ideas but by their color, by the emotions they inspire, by their element of surprise, and by all the suspense and mystery they’re capable of generating.”

Vargas Llosa has a high international profile; he is widely read in translation, has served as president of the PEN international association of writers, and in 1995 was awarded the Cervantes Prize, the highest literary honor in the Spanish-speaking world. In winning the Nobel, he joins an elite group of Latin American writers: Paz, García Márquez, Neruda, Asturias and Mistral. He has taught and lectured around the world; this fall he is in residence at Princeton University, where he was notified of his win. “I am very grateful to have received this privilege,” Vargas Llosa told *CNN en Español*. “The truth is I did not expect it. It was a surprise ... but a pleasant surprise.”

Based on an article by Radhika Jones in *Time/CNN*, 10/7/10

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