The Perfect Novel You've Never Heard Of

Rediscovering Juan Rulfo's Pedro Paramo

By Jim Lewis

It's a very strange book; let me admit that at the outset. It's as primitive and uncanny as a folk tale, plain-spoken but infinitely complex, a neat little metaphysical machine—one of those small, perfect books that remake the world out of paradox, like Waiting for Godot, or Nadja.

When it was first published in Mexico City in 1955, it received a few tepid notices and sold poorly. Its author was 37 at the time, or 38. (No one seems to know for sure when he was born.) He was from Jalisco, near Guadalajara, and he'd published one mildly interesting collection of short stories a few years earlier. I suspect no one knew what to make of the new book, since it was entirely unlike—well—anything else. Perhaps the critics were astounded into silence; more likely, they were puzzled and a little bit blind. As for the author, he went silent and never wrote another book, though he lived on for more than 30 years, long enough to see himself credited with the invention of an entire movement, to see his only novel sell millions of copies, to receive mash notes from Nobel Prize winners.

In Latin America, he eventually came to be considered canonical, a master of modernism, but here in the United States, his reputation remains curiously split between those few who adore him and the many who have never heard of him. When I mention to people that I'm reading his book again (I've read it five or six times in the past few years), I invariably get one of two responses. A few will announce that it's one of their favorite books, but the majority will say, "Pedro ...what? By Juan ... who?" And to these latter I'll explain: Pedro Paramo by Juan Rulfo. A very great novel.

It begins, "I came to Comala because I had been told that my father, a man named Pedro Paramo, lived there. It was my mother who told me. And I had promised her that after she died I would go see him." First person, past tense, a perfectly lucid and concise setup. It doesn't last long. As the narrator—his name is Juan Preciado—approaches the outskirts of town, he's joined by a burro driver who mentions that Pedro Paramo is his father, too; together they enter town, and everything changes.

To begin with, Comala seems half disintegrated, like a newspaper that's been left out in the rain; and the people who live there are melancholy and diffident. A woman, a man, a priest: They're given names but left otherwise undescribed. They bring Preciado into their homes, but their homes are empty, and all the time they talk and talk, telling stories about the town, its history, its sorrows and scandals, and most of all about Paramo. They all have stories about Paramo, a bad man, a cacique, a rapist, a thief.

Peculiar things start to happen on the page, things I've never seen in a book. The tenses switch back and forth, past to present and back again, sometime in the space of a single paragraph, until time itself becomes senseless. The stories begin to refract, shatter, and rebuild; pronouns multiply—I, he, she, you, stumbling over each other. Dialogue and thoughts are left unattributed. The perspectives shift from internal to external and back again, from Preciado to Paramo to Paramo's childhood love, Susana San Juan. "This town is full of echoes," one character says. "It's like they were trapped behind the walls or beneath the cobblestones. When you walk, you feel like someone's behind you, stepping in your footsteps. You hear rustlings. And people laughing. Laughter that sounds used up. And voices worn away by the years." And why? Because—the reader realizes this about the same time Preciado does—all these people are dead.

Soon enough Preciado is dead as well—from grief, it seems, or fright—but the book just keeps going, sustained by the babble of ghosts. They speak in unattributed dialogue, interrupting one another, overlapping, addressing one another; and every so often the fog of voices lifts, and a third-person narrator, clear as a 19th-century novelist, steps in—though in context his voice is every bit as disorienting as the others. Out of this babble emerge tales of love, of cruelty, of poverty and misfortune, of the revolution and the succeeding Cristeto Revolt; and then Pedro Paramo is killed by one of his many bastard sons—Abundio, the burro driver from the beginning—and, just like that, the book is done.

Very strange, as I say; and yet one never suspects that Rulfo is being willfully elusive, or mannered, or gratuitously obscure. His work is built on an intricate lattice of time and space, but it doesn't seem planned so much as grown, something natural, inevitable, efficient, and effortless. All its paradoxes are innate. For example: It's the most morbid...
book I've ever read, since all of the living are dead; but it's also one of the most vivifying, since all of the dead are still living.

Rulfo himself died of lung cancer in 1986. We know a little about him—not very much. He was famous enough in his own lifetime to attract scholars and biographers, but private and mischievous enough to enjoy vexing and misleading them. We know this: that he was born to a well-to-do family in a small town southwest of Guadalajara and raised in the wake of the revolution. When he was 6, his father was killed by bandits; two years later, his mother died of heart failure. He was educated in an orphanage, a bookish child—"I spent all my time reading," he said, "because you couldn't go out for fear of getting shot"—who became a somewhat reclusive adult, at once retiring and proud. Something like Wallace Stevens, it seems: the peculiar genius with a day job. Rulfo worked for the Mexican government, then as a tire salesman for Goodrich, then, after his two slim volumes were published, as a bureaucrat again. He wrote a few scripts for television and films, and he was a dedicated amateur photographer; but his career as a novelist was done.

His reputation, though, was just beginning. In Mexico, as elsewhere, social realism was the inevitable companion of political upheaval. It was what you got until someone figured out how to make art again. Rulfo was that someone, and what he began was an entirely new style: a kind of rural modernism, eclectic in its influences (Knut Hamsun was one of Rulfo's heroes, and he once expressed an affinity with Faulkner) but specific enough to its time and place that it transfigured generations of Latin American literature.

Here's what Carlos Fuentes said: "The work of Juan Rulfo is not only the highest expression which the Mexican novel has attained until now: through Pedro Paramo we can find the thread that leads us to the new Latin American novel." And when Gabriel Garcia Marquez first arrived in Mexico City in 1961, a friend pressed a copy of Pedro Paramo on him; he read it twice that night and so often thereafter that, he has said, "I could recite the whole book, forwards and backwards." Moreover, he acknowledges, "The examination in depth of Juan Rulfo's work gave me at last the way that I sought to continue my books." And thus was Magic Realism born, although, in truth, Rulfo's own book is more diabolical than magical and more phenomenal than real; and, more importantly, none of his descendants are like him at all.

The '60s passed, then the '70s. There was supposed to be another book on the way, but that may have been a ruse on Rulfo's part. "I am not a professional writer," he once said. "I write when I feel like it." Apparently, he felt like it less and less, for when he died, little of the rumored second novel was found.

I was steered to Pedro Paramo by writer Ruben Martinez. (Thank you, Ruben.) I read it and then read it again almost immediately, and then again, and then again; I was trying to reverse-engineer it, but I never did figure out quite how it works. At the same time, I couldn't understand how Rulfo had escaped my attention for so long; it was like happening on a new primary color, entirely unlike any I'd seen before. But then I read something else Marquez had to say. He, too, didn't know Rulfo's name until he was given the book; he, too, was surprised. How could a book be at once so admired and so obscure? "Juan Rulfo," he said, "to the contrary of what happens with the great classic writers, is a writer whom one reads a lot, but of whom one speaks little."

Well, yes: So I have spoken about him a little and about his book a little more. He would have been 90 this year (or 91), and where are the celebrations in his honor? You'd think the author of Pedro Paramo had become one of its characters: a melancholy and slightly mysterious man, long since passed away, a voice from the grave with a story to tell, which he speaks with an insistence that only madmen, masters, and the dead can maintain.

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