

Colombian writer María Cristina Restrepo qualifies this debut work of yours, *Eye of the Moon* now translated into Latin American Spanish as *El ojo de la luna*, as “an extraordinary novel”.

It is a very valuable and fair qualifier, I think, after reading it and rereading it. It is a truly admirable translation from English into Spanish that allows us to appreciate a writing of great elegance, rhythm, knowledge and literary craft. To start, tell us how and why the idea of writing this novel arose and what the initial process was like.

When I started the novel, I was writing nonfiction articles about complex topics. I had also taken a writing course and started writing short stories about Johnny and Percy, the main characters of *Eye of the Moon*. Growing up, I had many adventures and was in trouble of one kind or another almost every day, starting at age six, and that trend continued throughout my teenage years. I had a great deal of material for stories. In fact, a tremendous amount.

I was brought up in a world that few had ever experienced. It was beautiful—really, it was part of another century, but there was a tension there that few knew or understood. One could be cast out of that world at any time. Believe me when I say that the higher one lives, the farther one can fall, and for me, the bottom was a long way down.

My stepfather was a tyrant, but an extremely intelligent and cultured one. He knew which buttons to push to make us cringe and being cast out was an option that was never rescinded. Survival required being invisible while living in plain sight, and that is a skillset few have, let alone hone to a fine art from an early age.

One also had to be able to read people with a degree of precision that few of my peers, could comprehend, let alone believe. One had to understand the dynamics of a room full of people at a glance, and that can't be comprehended in the current milieu of texts and social media postings.

In the end I think those early skills, however painfully acquired, helped me write the way I write. I think they are still relevant. It was that feeling of tension and hyperawareness that I wanted to convey in a complex story, one that readers would respond to and enjoy. It had to be intelligent, skillful, and take the reader to a different place, a place where manners, conversations, and beauty prevailed but where dark matters (and that subtle tension) lay just below the surface. To do that I needed a story.

I grew up in several worlds. The world of my father was highly intellectual, with odd bits of the supernatural thrown in. My grandmother, Alice Astor, had died reading an Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. She was an Egyptologist among other things. The occult and the mystical were never far away, and my father had one of the largest libraries on the occult in the US, possibly the world.

The episode with the demon that Percy and Johnny describe was the result of a late-night foray of mine to read one of these locked up tomes. The book I took back to my room that particular night was about summoning demons. Of course, I had to experience for myself whether the occult was real. I was a teenager, after all, and so I started in.

I freely admit that I never completed that summoning. It scared me like nothing else. That didn't mean I was a believer, just a person who was aware that there is more to the world than meets the eye.

The ghost story that Sir Henry tells in a letter to Stanley is based on a story told to me by my father over lunch at the St. Regis Hotel in New York. Such tales were customary.

What precipitated the idea for the novel was an article in *W* magazine about my grandmother that posed the idea that she might have been murdered. What if she was? What if she wasn't? What really happened? That question is how the story started.

I grew up with a scientific education. Physics was my forte, not because I liked the subject, it just happened to be a subject I could do. I rarely studied with a great deal of enthusiasm so most of the concepts had to be worked out in the exam room. Math I liked, but I was horrible at it until years later.

I also studied Latin for many years. At the high school I went to, you had to take a foreign language. I chose Latin and so with that casual decision I entered the world of Ovid, Catullus, Livy, Caesar, Cicero and the mystery religions.

Of course, I wondered if there was a scientific explanation for the mystical that the Russian side of my heritage embraced. Much of the occult parts of *Eye of the Moon* seem plausible because they are plausible. A great deal of mathematics, physics, and economics finds its way into the book including how to solve complex problems in negotiations using game theory. The good news is that it isn't obvious.

This work greatly respects and vindicates a well-known tradition of the intrigue, suspense and mystery novel that, despite the great narrative revolutions of the 20th century up to our time, from Joyce to Italo Calvino and the “boom” of Latin American novelists, continues to be very current among all kinds of readers in the world. Why this choice, specifically stylistically so formal? Or is there also an aesthetic position in this novel, a specific vision that goes beyond the narrative itself?

A key factor that enters into the novel is the subject of ecstasy, whose roots within Western culture start with the Greeks, and the tragedies they invented. Greek dramas were religious festivals to Dionysius and to really understand them, at least from my perspective, you must understand the influence of Dionysius as well as the Elysium Mysteries on Greek Thought. Pharmacopoeia and religion were often interconnected. Festivals were ecstatic experiences.

The novel as an art form comes from those same roots and a writer should pay attention to them. It's the reason my novel takes place over only a five-day period; dialogue takes center stage; the gods are honored; forms of etiquette adhered to, and the spirits of the underworld exert a profound influence over the living. Attending those festivals of dramatic plays in ancient Athens was not like going to the movies today—although movies have their roots in drama—but deep and significant ecstatic experiences that were shared by the audience, and whose purpose was to emphasize the connections between gods and mortals and between members of the audience with each other. I wanted the novel to be like that.

I wanted to go back to the roots from which the novel and most of what we consider entertainment came from. I think it is true that the purpose of entertainment, given its Greek roots, is to connect.

The characters in the story are very interesting, especially because of the lifestyle that distinguishes them, people of a high social level, sophisticated, highly cultured and characteristic of a time that was not as informal and irreverent as the one we live in today. There is a detailed description, a deep and convincing knowledge of the environment in which these actants live and develop. It can be said that the novel describes a type of society that at the time was quite prestigious, brilliant, and let's say exemplary. Could your gaze on these characters you describe be, from a contemporary perspective, already somewhat ironic, very critical, or do you still really believe that important humanistic values can occur in this type of society you describe? What values or ideals do you consider that the novel stands out beyond intrigue, luxury, money, elegance, style, and the good life?

Business and finance are a part of the novel because the USA has that element at its roots.

The New World, the means to get there and the potential profits to be made describe the “.com companies” of the Age of Exploration.

New York was a Dutch trading post before the British took it.

Business transactions involve a great deal of trust. One trusts that the goods purchased are of the quality and quantity expected. If future deliveries are involved, one trusts the goods to be delivered by the time agreed.

Even a marriage is a contract.

Every relationship and exchange in the novel is contractual in nature. Partly this was done to develop the business aspects of the novel, which set it apart from the typical gothic novel, and also because contracts extend into the spiritual realm. In Roman times, the gods were expected to reciprocate. There was a *quid pro quo*. You made an offering to the gods and the gods were expected to fulfill their end. It did not always work out that way but even in the area of magic there are contracts.

On an informal level we call them promises, but a promise is often contractual, particularly if what was promised demands reciprocation from the other party.

“I promise to be at the restaurant at noon” is a promise.

“I promise to be at the restaurant at noon and pay for the lunch if, and only if, you make the reservation.” Here we are moving into contracts.

Demons, based on the history we have of them, real or imagined, have always been portrayed as pretty sharp at knowing a bargain.

Contracts beget trust: the keeping of one's word. Real trust is trusting in spite of all indications that one shouldn't. Anything less isn't trust. Does that extend to love? Is not real love to love in spite of all reasons not to? In this novel there is nowhere for the characters to hide. Meals rule their days and nights. Promises are made and broken. When they are broken, there are consequences. Break a promise to a god, and what happens? Nothing? I don't think so.

The characters in the story are greater than real life. They are godlike in some ways. Livy in his Histories of Rome had the characters give speeches, often eloquently. Today we answer back and forth and often say the first thing that comes into our minds or text it. How many times have we thought, "I wish I had said that *differently*." Often it is our "considered" thoughts, our second thoughts, that are the wiser but there is no time, and the moment is lost.

What would happen to the world if all of us really said what we should have said, had we really thought about it? In the novel I, the author, control time. I get to think about what the characters say, often rather extensively, before they say it. In this way, the characters of the novel are greater and larger than they would appear in real life. They are eloquent and often so profound. Percy says that to be invited to Rhinebeck, the person has to be pretty good at what they do. What is rarely noticed is that the reader is also sitting at that table, and is being included in that select group, and by doing so, he or she is changed.

Circling back to the Greek Drama, the audience is uplifted and included in great deeds. Primarily the drama is about the polis, the city. What it's like to be at the table of life as a citizen, and what it means to the city. In *Eye of the Moon*, it is the family rather than the city. Each of the families could be thought of as independent city states vying for control and the fulfilment of their plans.

Meals form a great part of the novel. These may seem superfluous and unnecessary, but breaking bread with another has ancient significance. To not break bread is to announce that there are issues between parties that cannot be resolved without force of arms. To eat together is to place one on an equal footing with the server of the food, the host, and with that come the ideas of protection, sanctuary, and succor, thus dialogue is possible and issues possible to be solved.

The novel is like a Russian Doll. There are levels of issues and stories within stories. Not all of the problems raised have a single solution because no answer fits all questions. No solution is universal. Problems must often be solved in sequences one after the other. This is true in real life.

Today there is conflict in the world. No one solution will answer. Real life requires many solutions, and often the decisions and solutions must be sequential in order to be effective. It is a process, not an event, and at the heart of human conflict there must be trust to resolve it, and one party at the least must make the attempt, or nothing will happen. Greek drama made that clear. That, and that there are often greater plans at work from higher powers.

Literarily I believe that your work has affinities with writers who also explored a socially refined and cultured world at the time, such as Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Truman Capote, among many others. Do you feel that affinity? What writers do you recognize close to your writing, in your way of doing it?

I have read a lot and have been influenced by all I have read, even the bad. Having read since my early youth I know what I like and what I don't. I know what I wish to say in my own way. We all have a voice that is uniquely our own, but my unique written voice is only as effective as the words spoken and their ability to engage and enthrall the reader. I think each of the writers mentioned were able to communicate something in a way that the reader responds to. It is like sharing a universe: this is what I

see—do you see it too? To the degree that commonality is able to be expressed, one has affinity for what is written, even if it should be troubling and disturbing. We readers experience it too, and thus we know we are not alone.

Am I in that class of writers that you mentioned? I would like to be. Because my unique voice is so very different, I have a chance. Why? If I want to be the best at something, I can't do or copy what everybody else does. If I did, I would never be the best, by definition, no matter how hard I tried. The logic is irrefutable and daunting in its way. The very best is a minority of one, and that is a lonely place to be, and so I write what I write in the way I write for no other reason than it is mine and belongs to no other.

Whether it is recognized as such is not within my power, other than by my desire to reach a reader in a profound way. Luckily for the reader, I am aware of that. I think all artists hope that through, and by, their work the world might be changed for the better. I have similar aspirations. I admire all the writers you mentioned because they helped me understand what is possible, and what is not.

In order to arrive at the pinnacle of a craft, takes a great gift. It is to all of our sorrow as individuals that our great gifts are rarely recognized by ourselves. Others see us far more clearly. They always do, and so it is that the audience has the last word.

The artist must struggle with the doubts, the mores, and the thinking of the times in which the artist lives and step outside the normal. I understand that, and so I have great affinity for all writers and all artists, particularly the great ones.

Your knowledge and life experience largely feed the content of this novel. One feels that there is much of this that is not part of the plot but rather of the environments you describe: tastes, art, gastronomy, and even the world of finances, legal matters, etc. Is this novel a reflection of your life, your way of seeing the world, of understanding the society of our time?

The articles I wrote offer more about my worldview. The novel is, in its essence, a story that uses the elements I grew up with.

A fantastic, ritualistic token, an ancient fetish, a kind of sacred Grail that can open dimensions, and portals in time is the sacred object that gives the book its title. Why did you choose it and what special meaning may it have for the reader? Specifically, what does the Eye of the Moon symbolize?

“Eye of the Moon” refers to Wadjet of Egyptian Mythology. She was the all-seeing Eye, the protector. It is a theme that runs through the novel. I wrote several blogs on this.

The subtle handling you achieve with the dramatic threads is very remarkable and you keep the reader always attentive and tied to the development of the story. The dialogues are always very entertaining and also loaded with irony, good humor and, when required, conceptual depth. How do you achieve that effect, maintain that rhythm, that narrative tension?

The Greek playwrights used rhythm changes for effect. The novel does as well and sticks to an organic succession of events. In nonfiction it is necessary to hold the readers' attention, and that is not often

easy. With fiction it is easier. Mystery and curiosity are the author's friends, and I capitalize on that. Each scene leads to the next scene. Each conversation leads to the next one, and the reader is pulled along by wanting to find out what happens.

Faced with the changes and innovations of mode, formats, and new technologies that affect writing, and especially, in what concerns the genre of the novel today, how do you position yourself, how do you adapt to these demands, and do you think that the book as it exists today will continue to last, and that long novels like *Eye of the Moon* will continue to be possible?

I write what I enjoy. I happen to like long novels because one can add in so many good things. A good story should be long, but only if it's a good one!

As a writer of our time, do you also have a commitment, a moral, political, and philosophical stance that you still believe in? Or do you think that it is enough to write without taking into account any opinion, any ideology, or any particular ideal?

I am apolitical but that doesn't mean I am disinterested. What I do believe in is the human spirit. Humans were born to cooperate. It's in our DNA. I wrote about this in my articles in several places. We just need to sort it out and that takes time. Time in the end sorts it out.

In conclusion, what "message" or underlying idea do you think *Eye of the Moon* can deliver to the reader of this time, this country, this world?

Only one: The importance of talking to each other.