

The Hunt for Panamanian Literature

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I. Heart of Panama

Often one of the most defining aspects of a nation or region's culture is its literature, the words it puts out for the rest of the world to see. By looking at literature, one can examine the nation as a whole and comparing the literature of neighboring countries their cultures can be compared. For such a young, global country as Panama, a set culture can be difficult to identify. There are cultural niches in Panama from all areas of the world in food, art, and all aspects of life. This raises the question of whether Panamanian literature reflects this variety. However, upon examination Panamanian literature is less diverse. When compared to other Latin American literature—in this case Colombian—Panamanian literature fits neatly into the regional identity. A comparison of Gabriel García Márquez's *The General in His Labyrinth*, a Colombian work, and Juan David Morgan's *The Golden Horse*, from Panama, yields very few stylistic and cultural differences. By looking at these two works, the conclusion can be reached that Panamanian literature is in fact remarkably similar to the other writings of Latin America.

An examination of Márquez and Morgan's works will have to begin with an examination of the two authors and their works separately. After gaining a basic understanding of the works, they can be compared and contrasted to examine any differences—if any—between the styles that can be attributed to cultural influences. These comparisons will factor in the topics and themes of the works, the structures, magical realism, the shared histories of Colombia and Panama, and the analysis of Juan David Morgan. Counter-arguments to the conclusions drawn will then be presented and countered in turn. These counter-arguments will include the small sample size for both number of authors and number of works. From these arguments final conclusions will be drawn on the relationship between Panamanian and Colombian—and through Colombian literature, Latin American literature in general—literature.

II. A Tale of Two Novels

Within Panama, one of the best known authors is Juan David Morgan, who is one of the eponymous Morgans of Panama's Morgan and Morgan law firm. *El Caballo de Oro*, or *The Golden Horse*, is Morgan's first novel to be translated into English. It was published in Spanish in 2005 and is soon to be released in English. The book follows the construction of the cross-isthmus railroad by the Panama Railroad Company in the late 1840's and early 1850's. The focal characters of the book are primarily American, both engineers and businessmen. Most of the book is based on the actual history of Panama, but Morgan added some incidents to create a better story, including most of the romance. This puts the book firmly into the historical fiction genre. Morgan creates a fluid structure, not depending on any one narrator or format to tell his story. He switches among about a half dozen narrators throughout the novel and between first person journal entries and third person point of view. Aside from the main story of the railroad, Morgan also explores the California gold rush, which was closely related; lawlessness in Panama; and immigration into Panama.

From the Colombian perspective, one of the greatest Latin American writers is Gabriel García Márquez, who is one of the very few Latin American recipients of the Nobel Prize in literature. *The General in His Labyrinth* is a historical fiction novel that follows the final journey of General Simón Bolívar in 1830 and presents the rest of his life through flashbacks. The book shows his flaws as well as his talents, but focuses on the last few sickly weeks of his life after he left the presidency and tried to leave the country. It is written from a third person point of view, with the focus primarily being on the General—as Bolívar is called—and his servant, José Palacios. Through the General's memories, Márquez explores a formative period of Latin American history and various themes associated with it. The Spanish version originally

published in 1989, and it was translated into English the next year.

III.A Portrait of the Stories of Two Lands

Up until 1903 and the construction of the canal, Panama and Columbia were one country and so they share a large part of their history. This shared history encompasses many of the defining periods of the countries as well as the periods explored in *The General in His Labyrinth* and *The Golden Horse*. Because of this shared history, there are naturally going to be many similarities between Colombian and Panamanian novels—particularly with historical fiction novels. The events of the first half of the nineteenth century are frequently explored in Latin American literature, both fantastically, as in *House of the Spirits*, and realistically, as in *Labyrinth* and *Golden Horse*. The events of this period was defining for the regions, full of drastic politically, social, and economic changes. The revolution of Simón Bolívar and the Panamanian Railroad were just two of many massive changes that occurred during this period. It is only natural for such a turbulent period to be written about, and so it is by countless authors. This means that even before stylistic similarities are analyzed, there are likely to be many topical similarities amongst Latin American novels, and Colombian and Panamanian novels in particular. The fact that the two novels in question are both historical fiction only increases these topical similarities. It also leads to many thematic similarities. Uneasy politics, national identity, and nature and man are just some of the general themes explored in these two books. The characters deal with immigrants from across the region and the world, and in both books foreigners are major characters. This is especially true in *Golden Horse*, where almost all of the major characters are Americans. Both books have people fighting and appreciating nature and facing the political turmoil of their countries.

From a structural perspective, *Labyrinth* and *Golden Horse* also bear many similarities to

each other and other Latin American works. Both books have a very fluid structure, treating narrators and time as vague suggestions of conduct rather than set facts. *Labyrinth* is told through third person, but the person whose view is being shown switches—generally between the General and José Palacios. Thus, sometimes the reader is privy to Palacios’s thoughts and views and sometimes the reader is lost in the General’s memories. Throughout the book though there is an overarching intelligence that provides personal histories of the characters with regards to their relations to the general. *Golden Horse* has an even more fluid perspective, flitting between first and third points of view and rotating through a collection of narrators. Occasionally the same event will even be discussed by multiple narrators. Looking at events from multiple narrators also creates a fluidity of time. Clear dates are very rarely given in *Golden Horse* unless the chapter is taking the form of a dated journal entry. This makes it difficult to gauge the passage of time or determine which events are happening concurrently. *Labyrinth* also has a fluid chronology as it darts between flashbacks and the present. The flashbacks themselves are not arranged chronologically either, making it difficult to establish any type of timeline. Both novels begin at the end, be it the end of the General’s life or the end of the railroad. The shifting structure seen here is a hallmark of Latin American literature and magical realism, one of the primary literary styles of the region. It is far less common in more European influenced literary styles, which traditionally have a more straightforward structure.

In Latin America, the major literary style is magical realism. While this style generally includes works without a historical basis, its influences can still be seen in both *Labyrinth* and *Golden Horse*. Woven within the clearly factual basis of both these works are subtle elements of magic which are treated as perfectly ordinary. In *Golden Horse* the clearest example of this is with Randolph Runnels and his slaughter of the mountainous bandits. Runnels was a retired

ranger who believed that he had a destiny when the Panama Railroad Company came and asked him to deal with a bandit problem. Runnels tells the representative of the Company that, ““You will tell me of a great river beset by monsters, pestilence, and grief. You will speak also of a long road that will join two worlds, and of criminals, attacks, and deaths. You will ask me to help you reestablish the laws of God and man there”” (Morgan 294), part of a prophecy that a reverend had told him years ago. As Runnels’ story plays out his prophecy proves true, and while other character think him rather odd and vicious, his destiny is not truly questioned. A similarly mystical event is seen in *Labyrinth* with the General and a witch doctor. The General has an undiagnosed illness which appears to be temporarily cured by a native witch doctor using the General’s shirt (Márquez, 59-60). While the General does not remain cured, the possibility of the witch doctor’s success is raised and accepted by the General’s associates. This everyday sort of magic being fully integrated with reality is the major hallmark of magical realism. The fact that it can be seen even in what should be factually based novels suggests that non-historical novels would bear even more similarities.

In the view of the Panamanian people themselves, Panamanian literature is not distinct from Latin American literature as a whole. In a conversation with Juan David Morgan, he stated that he saw the literature of Panama as very much a part of the greater whole that makes up Latin American literature. He was unable to describe any substantial distinctions that made Panamanian works stylistically unique, despite the global nature of Panamanian culture. In his opinion it would be difficult to compare novels from different genres—a historical novel and a non-historical novel—but aside from that difficulty there would be no major differences between Panamanian literature and that of any other Latin American culture. In this his analysis fits into the conclusions presented here, that Panamanian literature is simply a part of the greater Latin

American literature.

IV. Things Fall Apart

While both *Labyrinth* and *Golden Horse* indicate many similarities between Panamanian and Colombian literature, they are only two books by two authors, and so not a comprehensive study of Latin American literature. Thus, it could be argued that they are simply two authors who happen to write in similar styles or even just two books which happen to be similar rather than an accurate representation of regional literature. However, the prominence of the two authors in question serves to counteract this argument. Gabriel García Márquez is the best known Colombian author and widely regarded as a good representative of the magical realism literary style. His other novels such as *Love in the Time of Cholera* or *100 Years of Solitude* both are excellent representations of magical realism and bear many similarities to *The General in His Labyrinth* and *The Golden Horse*. While not a Nobel laureate, Morgan is equally representative of his own country. He is one of Panama's best known and bestselling novelists, and has been for many decades. On top of this, similarities can be seen between *labyrinth* and *Golden Horse* and works by other well-known Latin American authors, such as Isabel Allende. Such wider similarities suggest that the commonalities between *Golden Horse* and *Labyrinth* are part of a larger trend rather than a freak occurrence.

Another possible counter is the predominance of American characters found in *Golden Horse* over native ones. All of the narrators are American, and almost all of the characters with any sort of power. This is rather different from *Labyrinth*, where most of the characters are native to the area and foreigners in positions of power are the minority. However, this discrepancy can be attributed to the subject of *Golden Horse*—an American made railroad. It would be nearly impossible to analyze this period without a plethora of American characters as they

were the ones in charge of the railroad. In order to maintain historical accuracy and discuss the power behind the railroad Morgan had no choice but to make most of his characters foreign rather than native to Panama.

V. 100 Years of Stories

Thus, any examination of Panamanian literature must be examined in the context of Latin American literature as a whole: there is no real distinct between the two. A direct contrast to the rest of Panama's global culture, the literature in Panama is simply a part of the regional style and not a blend of global styles. This is an interesting contrast, and the cause of such a difference would be intriguing to study further, as would whether this trend continues as Panama continues to globalize. Panama is still a fairly young country, so it is entirely possible that true differences simply have not had time to form. However, for the time being, it seems that a book from Panama would fit in well anywhere in Latin America.