

Critical Essay #1

Mono discusses the problems he found with Chronicle of a Death Foretold.

[Chronicle of a Death Foretold] is, at one level, a simile for the fiction-making process. Here we are given events that, in some genuine sense, exist lie formed by history before they occur And a townful of people through their action, thought, custom, laziness, pride, willful negligence, through their unconscious art create this plot-which-was-real. The irony is: that having created it, they cannot avert it. No second draft is possible: even in art, where free will would seem to be most free, a determinism, a manifest destiny, still presides....

A nameless narrator has come back. (Some 27 years, mind you, after Santiago Nasar was turned to human piecework.) Neither he nor the town can stop riding this hobbyhorse.

For years we couldn't talk about anything else Our daily conduct, dominated then by so many linear habits, had suddenly begun to spin around a single common anxiety. The cocks of dawn would catch us trying to give order to the chain of many chance events that had made absurdity possible, and it was obvious that we weren't doing it from an urge to clear up mysteries but because none of us could go on living without an exact knowledge of the place and the mission assigned to us by fate.

Now that formulation, with all respect to Garcia Marquez, is somewhat self-propelled. I don't believe it. No matter what the event, populations don't he awake for a quarter-century grave-robbing their moral reminiscence. The linear habit will reassert itself. Garcia Marquez's narrator who previously has employed splendid sparse, aromatic, and elliptical prose is indulging himself here. For one moment at least Garcia Marquez doesn't trust the event, its portentousness or imagic value.

Otherwise his attack is stark and, given Garcia Marquez's purpose, proper enough. Because the narrator is examining an essentially novelistic occurrence, he has been sequestered as a juror might be. He cannot comment, or probe: and this rather kiln-dries the novel. Angela, Bayardo, Santiago are left without development or chiaroscuro. They seem cryptic and surfacehard: film characters really And there must be no surprise art here lies in the event itself. That, to start with, is Garcia Marquez's conceit. Angela, we don't know, might have taken her own virginity. Nor will we ever understand why rich Bayardo came to this unmarked burial of a town. Chronicle has become myth: as you don't ask for the psychohistory of Parsifal or Gawain, you must accept Angela, Bayardo, Santiago But beyond Garcia Marquez's glass-brick-hard style (redone brilliantly, as usual, by Greg Rabassa in English), beyond a Warren Report-meticulous detective reconstruction, it is hard to care much for these people. Emotion, you see, might skew our clarity. No character even when he or she is presumed real should elude an author's control.

The trial record will be introduced An investigating judge "never thought it legitimate that life should make use of so many coincidences forbidden literature, so that there should be the untrammelled fulfillment of a death so clearly foretold."

Garcia Marquez, I think, is over-indicating here. The events, though pretty sensational, aren't full of unbelievable coincidence. Life often has taken greater poetic license. What will distinguish this happening is the intensity of examination both by his townspeople and by his narrator. Intensity that seems somewhat forced. At one point the narrator, obsessive, will claim that he must put a "broken mirror of memory back together again from so many shards." But memory doesn't just reflect. In general, I wish Garcia Marquez hadn't surrendered so many of the devices and perquisites that belong to fiction: subjectivity, shifting POV, omniscience, judgment, plot surprise. Form is, of course, an artistic choice. Garcia Marquez has given his choice excellent service. But more might have been essayed. After all every death is, to some degree, foretold.

Source: D. Keith Mano, "A Death Foretold," in National Review, Vol. XXXV, No. 11, June 10, 1983, pp 699-700.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Rabassa looks at the structure of Chronicle of a Death Foretold.

When Gabriel Garcia Marquez announced that he was abandoning literature for journalism until the Pinochet dictatorship disappeared from Chile, people expected him to keep his word, and many were surprised when he published *Cronica de una muerte anunciada* (Chronicle of a Death Foretold). He was not really breaking his pledge, however, as can be seen from what he said in an interview with Rosa E. Pelaez and Cino Colina published in *Granma* (Havana) and reprinted in *Excelsior* of Mexico City (31 December 1977). In the interview he is asked what aspect of journalism he likes best, and his answer is reporting. He is subsequently asked about the *cronica* genre and answers that it is all a matter of definition, that he can see little difference between reporting and the writing of chronicles. He goes on to say that one of his ultimate aims is to combine journalism and fiction in such a way that when the news item becomes boring he will embellish it and improve upon it with inventions of his own. So when he wrote this latest book of his, a short, tight novella, by his lights he was not returning to fiction but carrying on journalism as usual, even though his uncramped definitions could well apply to everything that he had written previously and supposedly had put in abeyance.

The chronicle has long been the primitive method of recording events and people and passing them on into history. Most of what we know about medieval Europe has come from chronicles, and in Africa history has been kept through the oral chronicles of the riots. In Latin America, Brazil in particular, the "chronicle" is a recognized and broadly practiced form, offspring of the more ancient variety, that lies somewhere between journalism and "literature." In the United States certain newspaper columns of a more subjective and personal nature correspond to the Latin American chronicle, which almost inevitably makes its first appearance in the press before going into book form. Therefore Garcia Marquez is correct when he says that it is all a matter of definition in the question of whether or not he has abandoned literature and whether or not he has returned

This new book shows many aspects of life and literature and how one is essentially the same as the other; life imitates art. It starts off in good journalistic style with the "when" and the "what."

On the day they were going to kill him, Santiago Nasar got up at 5:30 in the morning to wait for the boat the bishop was coming on....

This use of the temporal to begin the narration reminds one immediately of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which begins in a similar if not identical vein and sets the stage for the necessary retrospect... . The difference is that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* begins in *medias res*, in good epic fashion, while this "chronicle" opens almost at the end of the action, not quite so far as the end of life as in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, but close to it. This might well show the influence of journalism in the direction that Garcia Marquez's style has been taking through these last three longer works. The first is more legendary and historical as it develops toward its inevitable and fated climax, while the last two depend on journalistic investigation for their development.

Julio Cortazar has spoken about that nightmare for authors (and typesetters) in Spanish: *casualidad/causalidad* (chance/causality). There is no need to worry about such a slip in the interpretation of this story, as the two elements coincide quite neatly. It is known from the beginning of the tale that the Vicario twins are planning to kill Santiago Nasar for having deflowered their sister Angela, thus ruining her marriage to the strange but wealthy newcomer Bayardo San Roman. Many people in the town are aware of the Vicarios' intentions, but through a concatenation of quite normal, even banal, bits of happenstance, nothing is ultimately done to stop them. Indeed, one gathers that even they have little heart for the dirty job that honor is forcing them to do and are only waiting for the authorities or someone to prevent them from bringing it off, since they are prevented by the code from backing down themselves. The title is quite fitting, therefore, in that the death in question has been announced and is foretold Garcia Marquez has managed to keep the shock and horror of surprise, however, by seeing to it also that the one person who is blithely unaware of what has been ordained, almost until the moment of the act itself, is Santiago Nasar. In the end chance has become the cause of the inexorable deed: *casualidad/causalidad*.

The format used for the narration of the tale is quite journalistic. The narrator, Garcia Marquez himself, perhaps genuine, perhaps embellished, as he mentioned in the interview cited above, is investigating the murder some twenty years later in order to ascertain how such a thing could have happened, how in the end no one was in a position to stop what nobody, including the perpetrators, wanted to happen. The matter of imperfect memory (there are great discrepancies as to the weather) helps lend uncertainty to a tale or event that had become certain because of uncertainty itself. The narrator also relies upon his own memory; he was home from school at the time of the killing and was a friend and contemporary of Santiago Nasar, having caroused with him the night before the murder. In addition, he interviews the participants and several observers, tracking some of them down to more remote places. The narration is a kind of complicated act of turning something inside-out and right-side-out again in that it resembles the application of fictive techniques to the narration of true events in the manner of Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, but here fiction is treated like fact treated like fiction. This swallowing of his own tale by the snake gives a very strong feeling of authenticity to the story....

Instead of giving us a linear narration of the episodes leading up to the final tragedy, Garcia Marquez divides the novella into chapters, each of which follows the trajectory from a slightly different angle and involves a different combination of characters. The fictive structure is therefore a web of crisscrossed story lines, and in the center (or on the bias) is the hole of solitude and impotence where the killing takes place, uncrossed by any of the lines that would have plugged it and prevented the tragedy. This reminds one of the suicide attempt by Colonel Aureliano Buendia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when, in emulation of the poet Jose Asuncion Silva, he asks his doctor friend to make a dot on his shirt where his heart is. We later find that the wily physician, on to the colonel's intentions, has designated the one spot in the area of the heart where a bullet can pass without being fatal. As in so many other aspects of this book when compared to the others, and as Garcia Marquez does so many times with a technique that links all of his tales but at the same time differentiates among them, we have mirror images, reverse and obverse.

There is a richness of characters, as one would expect from this author. While he borrows some from his other books, as is his wont, he invents new ones that have great possibilities for expansion into tales of their own, the same as innocent Erendira and her heartless grandmother, conceived in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and developed at length in their own novella. As it is, Garcia Marquez is adept at weaving different and seemingly unconnected stories together in order to make the webbing of his complete tale, and any of the tangents that he uses to devise the whole chronicle could be followed off into a separate narrative. There are also intriguing characters on the fringes that we hope to see more of. The wedding and the murder coincide with the bishop's passage up the river (there are always rivers in Garcia Marquez). This episcopal worthy was passing through early in the morning on the day after the abortive wedding and on the day of the killing. The atmosphere, rather than being tetric in advance of the slaughter (the brothers were butchers and killed him with their pig-sticking knives), is ludicrous, for it seems that the bishop's favorite dish is cockscomb soup, and the townspeople have gathered together hundreds of caged roosters as an offering to his grace. At dawn a cacophony ensues as the captive creatures begin to crow and are answered by all the cocks in town. As it so happened, and as predicted by Santiago Nasar's mother, the bishop did not even deign to stop, and his paddlewheeler passed by as he stood on the bridge and dispensed mechanical blessings to the sound of the congregated roosters. This was the comic atmosphere that would surround the death foretold.

What unites so much of Garcia Marquez's writing is the sense of inexorability, of fatefulness.

Things often come to an end that has been there all the while, in spite of what might have been done to avoid it, and often mysteriously and inexplicably, as with the death of Jose Arcadio, the son, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Here the hand of doom is unavoidable, but the path is tortuous, as it would logically appear that there were ever so many chances to halt the assassination. There is a touch of mystery too, however, in the fact that the narrator-investigator was never able to find out if Angela Vicario and Santiago Nasar had been lovers. All evidence and logic said that the dashing young rancher, already betrothed to the daughter of one of his Arab father's compatriots, could not possibly have been interested in a brown bird like Angela Vicario. She had her own mystery, however, because in the end, years later, she and Bayardo San Roman come back together again

as strangely as they had been joined the first time. He appears one day at her new home in "exile" beyond Riohacha with a suitcase full of the letters she had been writing him, all unopened.

From the beginning we know that Santiago Nasar will be and has been killed, depending on the time of the narrative thread that we happen to be following, but Garcia Marquez does manage, in spite of the repeated retelling of the event by the murderers and others, to maintain the suspense at a high level by never describing the actual murder until the very end. Until then we have been following the chronicler as he puts the bits and pieces together *ex post facto*, but he has constructed things in such a way that we are still hoping for a reprieve even though we know better. It is a feeling that makes us understand why King Lear was altered in the nineteenth century in order to spare those sentimental audiences the ultimate agony of Cordelia's execution. Garcia Marquez has put the tale together in the down-to-earth manner of Euripides, but in the final pathos he comes close to the effects of Aeschylus.

The little slips of fate that seem so unimportant until they end in tragedy are the blocks that he builds with. Coincidence or lack of it is not so patently contrived as in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Green House*, where we have the same characters wearing different masks on different stages. Instead, the epiphanies mount up and reveal the characters and the circumstances (never completely; there is always something unknown) by a succession of banal delights and *contretemps*....*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* might well be the book that Garcia Marquez was projecting in his Havana interview when he said that he wanted to write the false memoirs of his own life. He is not the protagonist of the story, but he is not only the author; he is the narrator. He even tells how he first proposed marriage to his wife and mentions her by name. In this way he is following the tradition of Cervantes, who mingled the real and the fictional to the degree that all levels came together in a time that only Proust could understand, and he is also very close to what Borges is up to in his story "The Other Borges." When Gabriel Garcia Marquez said that he was abandoning literature for journalism, he probably did not realize the ambiguity of his statement, and since then, as he has done in his reportage, he has come to the conclusion that in technique at least and possibly in many other ways as well they are the same.

Source: Gregory Rabassa, "Garcia Marquez's New Book. Literature of Journalism," in *World Literature Today*, 1982, Vol., 1982, No. 1, Winter, pp. 48-51.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Buford focuses on Garcia Marquez's "demythologizing of romantic love" related to the murder and murderer as well as on the "unabsolved guilt" of the community that allowed the murder.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez has repeatedly expressed his surprise at being so insistently regarded as a writer of fantastic fiction. That exotic or "magical" element so characteristic of his work is, by his account, not really his own achievement. It is merely the reality of Latin America, which he has faithfully transcribed in more or less the same way that he might write about it in, say, an ordinary article written for a daily newspaper. On a number of occasions, in fact, Marquez has said that for him there is no real difference between the writing of journalism and the writing of fiction both are committed to the rigours of realistic representation and his own ideal of the novel involves as much reportage as imagination. Viewed in this way, Marquez can be seen as an inspired tropical reporter for whom the strange Columbian world with its prescient prostitutes, benevolent ghosts, and an eccentric magician who refuses to die is just his everyday journalist's "beat". The image is not entirely fanciful. In an interview published in last winter's *Pans Review*, for example, he says that the non-fiction account of contemporary Cuba that he is currently writing will prove to his critics "with historical facts that the real world in the Caribbean is just as fantastic as the stories in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*." What he is really writing, he says, is good old-fashioned "socialist realism".

Chronicle of a Death Foretold is very close to Marquez's ideal fiction. Written in the manner of investigative journalism and in a conspicuously flattened, unadorned prose, the novel sets out to reconstruct a murder that occurred twenty-seven years before.

From the outset of Marquez's chronicle, everybody--including the reader--knows that the Vicario brothers intend to kill Santiago Nasar. Everybody knows how they mean to do it with a pair of butcher's knives and why. And they know so much because the brothers are dedicated to telling their plans to everyone they meet. The original Spanish title, lost in English translation, is important here. In *Una cronica de una mueine anunci-ada, anunaada* signifies not so much "foretold" as "announced" or "advertised" or "broadcast" none of which, admittedly, makes for a very poetic title. The idea of an announced or broadcast death, however, is crucial. The brothers are committed to a course of action that has been determined for them; honour can only be redeemed publicly by their killing of Santiago and they can only be relieved of their duty by the people around them. Once they have broadcast their intentions to the whole community, everyone, to some extent, by failing to stop them, participates in the crime....

It is ... obvious that this murder, for all the simplicity with which it is narrated, is no simple crime. Part of its significance is evident in the way it is understood by those of Santiago Nasar's generation, for whom the murder seems to mark the end of their youth and render illusory so much that was once meaningful. Flora Miguel, Santiago Nasar's fiancée, for example, runs away immediately after the crime with a lieutenant from the border patrol who then prostitutes her among the rubber workers in a nearby town. Divina Flor the servant meant for Santiago's furtive bed is now fat, faded, and surrounded by the children of other loves. And, finally, after more than twenty years, Angela Vicario is reunited with the husband whose affronted masculine pride was the cause of the crime. Overweight, perspiring and bald, he arrives still carrying the same silver saddlebags that now serve merely as pathetic reminders of his ostentatious youth. Marquez's chronicle moves backwards and forwards in time, and views the participants in a senseless murder long after the passion that contributed to it has died. In many ways, then, the novel offers itself as an icy demythologizing of both romantic love and the romantic folly it inspires; it is a debunking of dream and sentiment hinted at by the book's epigraph, "the hunt for love is haughty falconry".

But the real significance of the murder is much greater, and is felt by the entire community whose uncritical faith in its own codes of justice and spectacle is responsible for the crime. The weight of this responsibility is felt most, though, by the unnamed narrator, he returns because he is bothered not by an unsolved mystery but an unabsolved guilt, and the chronicle he produces is a document charting the psychology of mass complicity. It is interesting that Marquez, in developing a simple tale fraught with obvious political implications, chose not to

fictionalize an actual political event Latin America provides more than enough material but to treat instead a fictional episode with the methods of a journalist. In so doing he has written an unusual and original work: a simple narrative so charged with irony that it has the authority of political fable. If not an example of the socialist realism Marquez may claim it to be elsewhere, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is in any case a mesmerizing work that clearly establishes Marquez as one of the most accomplished, and the most "magical" of political novelists writing today.

Source: Bill Buford, "Haughty Falconry and Collective Guilt," in *Times Literary Supplement*, No 4145, September 10, 1982, p. 965.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Hughes praises the accuracy of Garcia Marquez's description of details as well as his originality for implicating the whole community in the murder through their foreknowledge of the murder plan.

One hundred pages of quality make [Chronicle of a Death Foretold] a fiction that reverberates far beyond its modest length. The story is a mere incident. In a waterfront town on the Caribbean a self-contained youth called Santiago Nasar will be, was, and indeed is being, stabbed to death with meat knives. This event takes place in gory detail on the last few pages. It is the sole preoccupation of the pages in between. And on the first we more or less know that it has already happened. So the suspense is not acute....

Not so much marching forward as marking time, the narrative continuum continually drifts more back than forth, rescuing the story piece by piece from the memory of policemen, gossips, officials, shopkeepers, whores, whose 'numerous marginal experiences' are humanly unreliable. They can't even agree about the weather when the blows were struck. And that is the element that melts this strictly factual document (as it pretends to be) into delicious fiction: everyone in town regards his or her personal evidence as fact, whatever the contradictions. By exploiting the fallibility of his characters Marquez arrives at nothing but the truth.

The book's original touch is that these townspeople, deftly sketched without a word or image wasted, know before Santiago does, but without warning him, that he is on the point of being murdered. All have ostensibly cast-iron excuses, loss of nerve, forgetfulness, failing to take the threat seriously, not wishing to become involved. In their variety of selfish responses to foreknowledge, they bring on Santiago's death, as if secretly savouring it in prospect and relishing its aftermath. We are all to blame, mutters Marquez with good humour, because we all brainlessly share the eccentricity of common human feeling.

The book vindicates its brevity by an exactitude of detail that snaps a character to life without recourse to long or even direct description To visualise a visiting bishop, all we need to be told is that his favourite dish he discards the rest of the fowl is coxcomb soup. The mayor's character is purely and simply conveyed when we are casually informed that a policeman is collecting from the shop the pound of liver he eats for breakfast. In these two images all authority, religious and civil, is nicely confounded, just because no heavy weather is made of confounding them. The reader is paid the compliment of being asked to respond imaginatively to the most delicate of hints and indeed to make his own moral structure from the ins and outs of the lack of narrative: to decide for instance, who is lying for good reasons, who being honest for bad.

One of the book's great virtues is self-containment. It presents a large world in parvo, without being selfconsciously a microcosm, framed in noble if miniature proportions, viewed by an aristocrat of letters whose attitude to the human lot mingles contempt and compassion in a witty blend Nobody shows up either well or badly under the microscope. People are seen as wayward but pitiable cells in the body politic, preventing it from functioning properly but at the same time breathing an outrageous life into it.

Some days after reading this novella I am still in several minds as to what it is about. Just a faithful picture of a community living off shopsoiled machismo? An author's obsession with the dramatics of sudden death? The last drop of blood squeezed out of material better suited to a thriller? A neurotic treatise on the erotic corollaries of murder? Any or all of these perhaps and more. And that's a healthy feeling of perplexity. If good books do furnish the imagination, they also echo on and on in its rooms.

Source: David Hughes, "Murder," in Spectator, Vol 249, No 8044, September 11, 1982, p. 24.