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The Sound of Things Falling

by Juan Gabriel Vásquez (translated by Anne McLean)

Perspective by Rohan Clifford

Edited by Marion White

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The Sound of Things Falling

Perspective by Rohan Clifford

Introduction

As befits the protagonist of a novel in the noir detective genre, Juan Gabriel Vásquez's narrator is more a self-destructive victim than a detective, and an outsider to a crime which nevertheless deeply affects him in his personal life. Vásquez's *The Sound of Things Falling* is also historical fiction, showing readers why the Colombian people's complex and horrific recent history is still an open wound, and how their powerful northern neighbour, the United States of America, can influence life in Latin American countries. As realist fiction, Vásquez's novel has the *bogotano* Antonio Yammara narrate unflinchingly the story about himself and the people, places and events connected with his attempt to establish facts behind the crime, including his adulterous relationship with Maya Fritts which is based on the shared wounds of their shared history. The novel's settings are the streets and neighbourhoods of Bogotá, the old Spanish-colonial capital high in the Andes, and the humid equatorial landscapes of the coastal regions to its west.

Vásquez said of the Colombian 'masterpiece' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, written by Gabriel García Márquez, that it influenced his becoming a writer; he also described it as 'a distorted view of Colombian history' and said that he wished to 'forget this absurd rhetoric of Latin America as a magical or marvelous continent.' Vásquez is a Latin American realist writer, along with the likes of Peruvian writers Mario Vargas Llosa and more recently, Santiago Roncagliolo. Although the latter writers have fast claims within the post-modernist genre, we are made aware of Vásquez's insistence upon his own status as a Colombian realist writer. What Vásquez shares with both Llosa and Roncagliolo is a compelling drive to tell the stories of Latin America. Comparisons of Vásquez's literary prose have also been made to the much more noir palette of Uruguayan author Juan Carlos Onetti, and there is a case to be made for Vásquez among the modern noir writers of the twenty-first century.

Vásquez has noted that he wanted to 'show how the drug trade affects somebody not involved in it' (Jaggi, 2012). His protagonist and narrator, Yammara, is a lecturer in law at Colombia University, Bogotá, an academic who seems to share his life only with associates in the seedy pool hall and cafes, and who occasionally shares his bed with students seeking to 'gain an extra mark or two'. Yammara's reflections orbit the mysterious Ricardo Laverde. Laverde's past is murky, rumours of incarceration adding to the mystery, but a mutual trust develops until Laverde shares news of the imminent

return of his ex-wife, Elaine Fritts. When Laverde listens to a cassette recording in a café, he is inconsolable, and as he leaves to be joined by Yammara, a passenger on a speeding motorcycle guns down the pair. Laverde is dead and Yammara is badly wounded and permanently scarred. His relationship with an ex-student, Aura, mother of his new baby daughter Leticia, begins to suffer as Yammara, now suffering from what we would call post traumatic stress disorder, spirals into obsession—with Laverde, and with discovering why he and Laverde were attacked.

Yammara's recollections, and the stories he collects as he searches, take us back through the years as far as 1938. As he circles back over his own story, seeks out Consuelo Sandoval and Maya Fritts, and reads letters and articles about Elaine/Elena and Ricardo Laverde and their families, we retrospectively span the years from present day Colombia (2009), back through the havoc caused by drug cartels in the nineties, to the seventies when Laverde is arrested for drug trafficking, the sixties when young American Peace Corps volunteers line up to be assigned to work in Latin American rural areas, and the thirties when Colombia was at war with Peru.

Antonio Yammara's search is very personal—in a sense, it is about regaining his masculinity—but his reflections are wide-ranging. A doctor recommends he keep a diary, as it will help to distinguish 'the pertinent questions from the ones that are not' (p. 67) but Yammara thinks diaries represent 'the fiction that our life matters'. 'I can't figure it out' (p. 75) he says of his 'accident' with Laverde, as he wrestles with questions about the nature of memory, truth and justice. Yet with clarity he shares details of historical and cultural events in both Colombia and the wider world. Despite Maya offering him 'proof', certainty seems to elude Yammara; what he does tell us is that:

this story in which my name did not appear spoke of me in each and every one of its lines ... all my feelings were reduced to a tremendous solitude ... [t]he solitude of a child (p. 152).

The blossoming and destruction of Ricardo Laverde and Elaine Fritts' precarious relationship forms a tragic backdrop to Yammara's story and is in part Vásquez's reaction as a *bogotano* coming of age under the growing shadow of the