Carlos Fuentes, Mexican Man of Letters, Dies at 83

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Carlos Fuentes, Mexico's elegant public intellectual and grand man of letters, whose panoramic novels captured the complicated essence of his country's history for readers around the world, died on Tuesday in Mexico City. He was 83.

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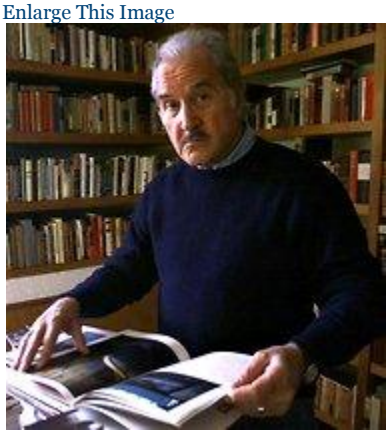

Henry Romero/Reuters

Carlos Fuentes at home in Mexico City in 2001.

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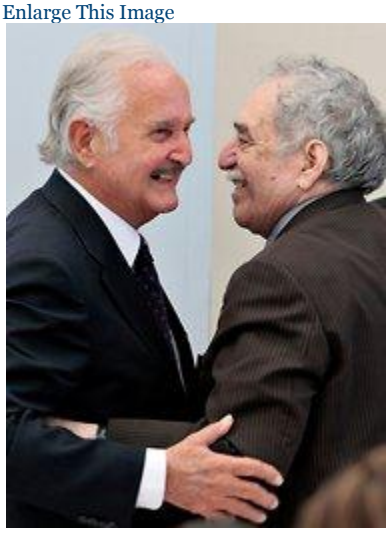

Henry Romero/Reuters

Mr. Fuentes, left, and the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez in 2008.

His death was confirmed by Julio Ortega, his biographer and a professor of Hispanic studies at Brown University, where Mr. Fuentes taught for several years. He died at the Angeles del Pedregal hospital after his doctor, Arturo Ballesteros, found him in shock in his Mexico City home, The Associated Press reported. The doctor told reporters that Mr. Fuentes had had an internal hemorrhage.

Mr. Fuentes was one of the most admired writers in the Spanish-speaking world, a catalyst, along with Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar, of the explosion of Latin American literature in the 1960s and ’70s, known as El Boom. He wrote plays, short stories, political nonfiction and novels, many of them chronicles of tangled love.

Mr. Fuentes received wide recognition in the United States in 1985 with his novel “The Old Gringo,” a convoluted tale about the American writer Ambrose Bierce, who disappeared during the Mexican Revolution. It was the first book by a Mexican novelist to become a best seller north of the border, and it was made into a 1989 film starring Gregory Peck and Jane Fonda.

In the tradition of Latin American writers, Mr. Fuentes was politically engaged, writing magazine, newspaper and journal articles that criticized the Mexican government during the long period of sometimes repressive single-party rule that ended in 2000 with the election of an opposition candidate, Vicente Fox Quesada.

Mr. Fuentes was more ideological than political. He tended to embrace justice and basic human rights regardless of political labels. He supported Fidel Castro’s revolution in Cuba, but turned against it as Mr. Castro became increasingly authoritarian. He sympathized with Indian rebels in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas and skewered the administration of George W. Bush over its antiterrorism tactics and immigration policies, calling them unduly harsh.

He was also critical of Venezuela’s leftist leader, Hugo Chávez, however, calling him a “tropical Mussolini,” and of his own country’s failure to stem its rampant drug violence. On the day he died the newspaper Reforma published a hopeful essay by him on the change of power in France.

Mr. Fuentes was appointed the Mexican ambassador to France in 1975, but he resigned two years later to protest the appointment of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz as ambassador to Spain. Mr. Díaz Ordaz had been president of Mexico in 1968 when Mexican troops opened fire on student protesters in Mexico City.

But it was mainly through his literature, Mr. Fuentes believed, that he could make his voice heard, and he did so prolifically and inventively, tracing the history of modern Mexico in layered stories that also explored universal themes of love, memory and death. In “The Death of Artemio Cruz,” a 1962 novel that many call his masterpiece, his title character, an ailing newspaper baron confined to his bed, looks back at his climb out of poverty and his

heroic exploits in the Mexican Revolution, concluding that it had failed in its promise of a more egalitarian society.

His novels remained ambitious and topical. His last, “Destiny and Desire” (2011), is a sprawling work that Michael Wood, writing in The New York Times Book Review, described as “not exactly a parody of ‘War and Peace,’ but certainly a spectral, playful revision of the idea of a novel that competes with history.”

He added, “It offers lavish quantities of comedy, satire, allegory, fantasy and brilliant political commentary; makes coded allusions to recognizable celebrities like the communications magnate Carlos Slim; evokes the work of Spinoza and Machiavelli; includes ghosts, graves, murders, a voluble flying prophet and a talking severed head.”

The severed head had fallen victim to Mexico’s drug-gang wars, which Mr. Fuentes believed pose an ever-graver threat to Mexican society. The head speaks in darkly comic tones.

“I speak of my body because I’ve lost it,” the character says, then adds: “I am a 27-year-old man, one meter seventy-eight centimeters tall. Every morning I look at myself naked in my bathroom mirror and caress my cheeks in anticipation of the daily ceremony: Shave my beard and upper lip, provoke a strong response with Jean-Marie Farina cologne on my face, resign myself to combing black, thick, untamable hair. Close my eyes. Deny to my face and head the central role my death will be certain to give them. Concentrate instead on my body. The trunk that is going to be separated from my head. The body that occupies me from my neck to my extremities, covered in skin the color of pale cinnamon and tipped with nails that will continue to grow for hours and days after death, as if they wanted to scratch at the lid of the coffin and shout I’m here, I’m still alive, you made a mistake when you buried me.”

Though Mr. Fuentes wrote in just about every genre, including opera (a 2008 work inspired by the life of Gen. Antonio López de Santa Anna, the wooden-legged president of Mexico during the Texas Revolution), he declined to write an autobiography.

“One puts off the biography like you put off death,” he once said. “To write an autobiography is to etch the words on your own gravestone.”

Carlos Fuentes was born on Nov. 11, 1928, in Panama, the son of Berta Macías and Rafael Fuentes, a member of Mexico’s diplomatic corps. As his father moved among Mexican embassies, Mr. Fuentes spent his early childhood in several South American countries. Then, in 1936, the family was transferred to Washington, where Mr. Fuentes learned to speak English fluently while enrolled in a public school.

In 1940 the family was transferred again, this time to Santiago, Chile, where he began to experiment with writing. In an interview with The Times in 1985, Mr. Fuentes said he first had to decide "whether to write in the language of my father or the language of my teachers." He chose Spanish, he said, because he believed that it offered more flexibility than English. There was also a practical reason. English, he said, "with a long and uninterrupted literary tradition, did not need one more writer."

He was 16 when his family finally returned to Mexico. He knew his homeland through the stories that his grandmothers had told during the summers he spent with them.

"I think I became a writer because I heard those stories," he said in 2006 in an interview with the Academy of Achievement, a nonprofit organization in Washington. His grandmothers fascinated him with their tales of bandits, revolution and reckless love. "They had the whole storehouse of the past in their heads and hearts," Mr. Fuentes said. "So this was, for me, very fascinating, this relationship with my two grannies — the two authors of my books, really."

When he told his family that he wanted to be a writer, his father was encouraging, but insisted that he also study law, which he did in Mexico and Switzerland.

After completing his degree, Mr. Fuentes entered Mexico's diplomatic service, while also carving out time for his fiction. His first novel, "Where the Air Is Clear," was published in 1958 when he turned 30. It was a literary sensation, mixing biting social commentary with interior monologues and portrayals of the subconscious. His reputation established, Mr. Fuentes left government service to devote all his energies to writing.

As an author, he said, he did not spend much time rewriting and never suffered from writer's block. He liked to write on the right-hand pages of lined notebooks, making changes and corrections on the left-hand pages before sending a manuscript to be typed.

Professor Ortega called Mr. Fuentes "an unleashed cultural force" who avoided some of the trappings of literary celebrity. In a retrospective book that he wrote about Mr. Fuentes's life when the writer turned 80 in 2008, Mr. Ortega wrote, "Fuentes detests the literary life, its obligations and commitments."

"He hasn't created his own group, and he belongs neither to parties nor ideologies," Mr. Ortega added. "He isn't controlled by either the power of the state nor the power of the market."

Mr. Fuentes's independent thought and reputation for supporting leftist causes led to his being denied visas to enter the United States in the early 1960s. When he was refused permission to come to New York in 1963 for a presentation of an English translation of one of his books, he reacted angrily, saying, "The real bombs are my books, not me."

Congress intervened in 1967, and the restrictions against him were lifted. Later he traveled to the United States frequently, teaching at several Ivy League universities.

Mr. Fuentes is survived by his wife, Silvia Lemus, and a daughter, Cecilia, by a previous marriage to the actress Rita Macedo, who died in 1993. Two children from his marriage to Ms. Lemus, Carlos and Natasha, both died of illness before they were 30.

For much of his career Mr. Fuentes competed for recognition and influence in Mexico and abroad with another titan of Mexican letters, the poet Octavio Paz. Mr. Fuentes received the National Order of Merit, France's highest civilian award given to a foreigner; Spain's Prince of Asturias Award for literature in 1994; and, in 1987, the Cervantes Prize, the Spanish-speaking world's highest literary honor. Mr. Paz, however, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990. Mr. Fuentes, a perennial on the shortlist for the honor, never did.

The two became friends in 1950, when Mr. Paz published his landmark work on Mexican identity, "The Labyrinth of Solitude." They worked together on several literary projects. But by the mid-1980s their political opinions had started to differ. Mr. Fuentes supported the Sandinistas, the leftist rebel group in Nicaragua, but Mr. Paz, who had more conservative views, condemned them. Then, in 1988, the literary magazine Vuelta, which Mr. Paz directed, published an article fiercely critical of Mr. Fuentes, accusing him of lacking true Mexican identity. That set off an often public feud that lasted until Mr. Paz died in 1998. Neither man apologized, diminishing the reputations of both.

Still, in his later years, Mr. Fuentes became an elder statesman of international letters. On his 80th birthday hundreds gathered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to celebrate his life and work. He was introduced by Rubén Beltrán, the consul general of Mexico in New York at the time.

"To speak about Carlos Fuentes is to engage inexorably in Mexican history and culture," Mr. Beltrán said. "We cannot fathom a debate on Mexican literary and humanistic traditions in which his name and work are absent."

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