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Gabo y Fidel: Paisaje de una amistad. Ángel Esteban and Stéphanie Panichelli. (Espasa Calpe 2004).

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A Penchant for Power

Gabo y Fidel: Paisaje de una amistad takes on the intriguing topic of the close friendship between Gabriel García Márquez and Fidel Castro. Not concerned about stirring controversy, the authors explore the ulterior motives that sustain the enduring bond between the Nobel Prize winning Colombian writer and the Cuban leader.

Ángel Esteban, professor of literature at the University of Granada, co-authored the book with Belgian philologist Stéphanie Panichelli. Although the book's subjects declined invitations to be interviewed, Esteban and Panichelli spoke with friends, acquaintances, and associates of the men, as well as journalists, writers, and politicians; they also include statements from Castro's and García Márquez's interviews, books and articles. The result is an engaging, highly readable, and exhaustively researched account of the relationship between two major figures of literature and politics of the Hispanic world.

As of January 2005, the book sold over 20,000 copies. The English language version, due to be released by Planeta in September 2005, promises to be even more popular. Translations into Polish, French, Italian, and German are in the works.

The authors begin by establishing García Márquez's affinity for Castro and his position toward the Cuban Revolution before the 1977 meeting that launched their friendship. They explain that García Márquez, coming from humble origins, was always fascinated with power and the powerful. Many of his works tell stories of dictators, generals, and colonels, they point out, observing that "Fidel se parece a sus más constantes criaturas literarias" (86). Although García Márquez was never a member of the Communist Party, he strongly supported socialism, believing that it held the future for Latin America.

The authors discuss at length "El caso Padilla," and the uncertainty as to whether or not García Márquez actually signed the first open letter of protest to Castro. (In an interview given after the book's publication, Esteban said that Vargas Llosa, who he considers a credible source, has since told him that García Márquez did not, in fact, sign the letter.) In the early years of the Revolution, García Márquez was not among the committed writers who were invited to Casa de las Américas, such as Vargas Llosa and Cortázar, because the revolutionary leaders felt that his articles did not come out clearly in defense of Castro and the Revolution.

But García Márquez wanted to be in the inner circle. In 1975, he spent six weeks traveling in Cuba, and the result was his article that would pave the way to the famous friendship: "Cuba de cabo a rabo." Highly favorable to the Revolution, García Márquez's article depicted it, according to Esteban and Panichelli, as "demasiado perfecto para ser verdad...[casi un] paraíso terrenal" (136).

The historic meeting of the two men shortly after García Márquez's return from a trip to Angola in 1977 is related in García Márquez's own words, with a long passage from an interview published in *Playboy*. García Márquez explains that Castro began by asking his impressions of Angola, but soon the conversation was diverted to the topic of food, and the men ended up talking for hours about their common love of seafood.

A central issue in the book is the nature of their friendship—is it literary or political? The authors discuss the literary aspects of their relationship—for instance Castro reads all of García Márquez's manuscripts before they are published and corrects errors regarding minor technical details like the speed of a boat, the description of a firearm. However, Esteban and Panichelli insist that García Márquez is simply not telling the truth when he denies or downplays the political aspects of their relationship, and the book provides abundant evidence to back this assertion. García Márquez relishes being an intimate of the charismatic Cuban leader, working behind the scenes to influence his decisions and serving as his emissary in high level diplomatic mediation. They suspect that Castro guided García Márquez's authorship of his article "Operación Carlota: Cuba en Angola" because it reiterates

Castro's version: that Cuba's role in Angola was a defense of international proletarianism and not a defense of Soviet interests. Another example of García Márquez's partisanship is his article about the Elián González matter, which the authors consider to be one-sided, painting the issues in black and white with good guys and bad guys. The authors also discuss García Márquez's repeated refusal to join other intellectuals in denouncing Cuban human rights violations, such as torture of prisoners. The authors note that García Márquez is well aware of the flaws of the Revolution, but will not risk his friendship by defying Castro with public statements.

Castro, for his part, they say, is delighted to have a Nobel Prize winner as unofficial ambassador of the Cuban revolution. The friendship intensified once García Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1982; Castro gave García Márquez a mansion in the best neighborhood of Havana and a Mercedes for his exclusive use, at a time when housing and cars were scarce commodities. "Cuba ya tenía su Nobel," say Esteban and Panichelli (204).

On the positive side of the balance, the authors acknowledge that García Márquez has influenced Castro to free political prisoners—as many as 3,200 according to some accounts—and intervened in behalf of dissident writers such as Armando Valladares and Norberto Fuentes. But in an appendix the authors cite Vargas Llosa's disparagement of his activities in defense of human rights: "Para nadie es un secreto que Fidel Castro les regala a sus cortesanos y amigos algunos presos políticos de vez en cuando. A él [García Márquez] eso le lava la consciencia" (324).

A chapter in the final part of the book is devoted to the Ochoa Case (1989), which casts García Márquez in a critical light. When García Márquez heard about the accusations against four high-level Cuban officials, including the decorated general Arnaldo Ochoa and García Márquez's good friend Tony de la Guarda, he flew to Cuba to try to intervene on their behalf, soon discovering that Castro had made up his mind to execute the four men. Nevertheless, when Ileana and Jorge, Tony's daughter and son-in-law, came to talk to García Márquez, he reassured them that everything would be all right, telling them not to contact human rights organizations. Ileana and Jorge remain highly critical of García Márquez's cynical behavior that night and skeptical of his gestures on behalf of another imprisoned family member. " 'Gabo siempre se cubre para la historia,' " said Jorge. " 'No se trata de ayuda humanitaria. Él ayuda porque conviene al gobierno fidelista' " (289).

Ultimately, the book exposes the contradiction between the novelist's professed defense of human rights and opposition to capital punishment, and his silence in regard to the regime's political executions and repression of intellectuals. The authors, while never questioning the literary merit of García Márquez's opus, have dared to expose the questionable political ethics of one of the most beloved writers of the Spanish language.

(A shorter version of this review was published in the Polyglot, June 2005).