

The Elements of Style

The charm of novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez extends to Princeton.

HOLDING two first editions of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novels, I took my place behind a gaggle of Eminent Princeton Writers who were talking to the Extremely Famous Colombian Writer. After Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates and Russell Banks had stepped away, I worked myself over to him and introduced myself.

Everyone had said that he was reclusive and hard to reach. But at that moment, it didn't seem possible. The handsome Colombian superstar graciously shook my hand and smiled at me. I told him that I had written an article about the Princeton University's Atelier Program, which had brought him here, and he immediately asked to see it. Actually, he wanted me to deliver it to his hotel the next morning before he left for his home in Mexico City, which I promised to do, and then forgot!

Still clutching my books, I asked in my pathetic Spanish if he would autograph them for me.

"For whom are they?" he asked, in a serious voice.

"For my children."

"How many children?" This sounded like a challenge.

"Two," I said, thinking that he was asking because he didn't want to sign very many books.

"Only two? Why only two from a woman like you?" A smile was creeping across his face.

"Well, I didn't meet the right man until very late" I began.

"And now you've met me!" he said

triumphantly. "Let's get out of here, go out on the patio together."

So out we went, the allegedly reclusive Famous Writer and I, to the patio to take a seat together at a table under an umbrella. It was a beautiful New Jersey spring evening, and the smell of freshly cut grass lingered, just the kind of thing that a man who wrote the famously romantic *Love in the Time of Cholera* might notice. Well, anyway, I noticed.

He asked me what I do, all the while paying strict attention to my words and smiling at me playfully. He is a man who is comfortable with women! I told him that I wrote for a newspaper and write features pieces, but that I also write fiction. He then told me that I had great promise of becoming a famous fiction writer, because he had learned everything he knew about writing by working for a newspaper. "In the end," he said, "nothing is more interesting than writing about people."

Buoyed by the promise that I, too, could become an Eminent Writer and join his crowd, I whipped out the two books I wanted him to sign.

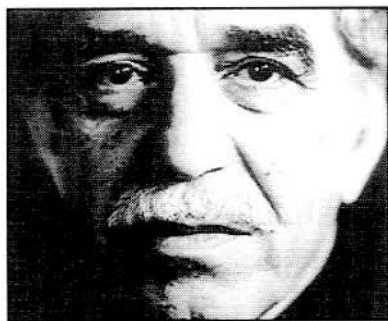
Pen poised, he looked at me, his eyes smiling. "And whom is this for?"

"My daughter, Maya," I said.

"Ah, Maya. Beautiful, beautiful." Taking the book from me, he creased it open carefully, and began to draw a large flower. "A girl. That is good," he said softly. His handiwork done, he handed me the book and winked ever so slightly.

It said: "Para Maya, Una Flor — Gabriel." ●

— Deborah A. Kaple



Gabriel Garcia Marquez.