

## PREFACE

Ignacio Solares is a major figure in contemporary Mexican literature: the author of a dozen novels and several plays (some based on his novels), editor of the cultural supplement to the weekly magazine *Siempre*, and director of the Department of Literature at the National University of Mexico (UNAM). His awards and honors include two fellowships at the Centro Mexicano de Escritores (1975, 1977), the Magda Donato Prize (1988), the Diana/Novedades International Prize (1991), the National Prize for Cultural Journalism (1993), membership on the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CNCA, since 1994), and a Guggenheim fellowship (1996).

Life in Mexico City—you might even say the life of Mexico City—is basic material in Solares' novels. They are stories of personal relationships sensitively detailed, with natural dialogue and the use of special effects that may be called "supernatural" (not the "magical realism" so often noted in Latin American fiction). In more recent novels, Solares adds a historical dimension by focusing on the experiences of some of Mexico's revolutionary leaders, the great figures that defined the political beginnings of modern Mexico. Intensely human, credible characters inhabit all of these narratives.

Solares was born in Ciudad Juárez in 1945, but he has never been a regional novelist. Rather, both his life and his interpretation of Mexico seem to extend outward from the capital city, always recognizing the centrality of that sprawling mass of humanity. His first novel, *Puerta del cielo* (1976), focuses on a young man of modest background who works as a bellboy in a Mexico City hotel. Outward relationships are interwoven with the protagonist's inward realities and, surprisingly, with visits from the Holy Virgin. This kind of supernatural effect became a hallmark of Solares' novels. He followed the first novel with a documentary narrative about alcohol-

induced visions (*Delirium tremens*, 1979). His next novel, *Anónimo* (1980), opens with the startling statement "It seems laughable, but that night I woke up being somebody else." This novel proceeds to test the limits of reality in ways that may remind readers of the play and film *Heaven Can Wait*.

During the 1980s, Solares produced three notable novellas: *El árbol del deseo* (*Tree of Desire*), *Serafín*, and *La fórmula de la inmortalidad*. Each of the three stories features a juvenile protagonist who is quite real, and some kind of supernatural effect (such as telepathy). Late in the decade, Solares published a major novel about twentieth-century Mexico City, *Casas de encantamiento* (1987), that folds three time periods into each other, thereby projecting certain essential qualities of the place.

Near the end of the decade, Solares published his first historical/political novel, *Madero, el otro* (1989). This story deals with the conflict between idealism and political expediency in the leadership of President Madero. (Solares discovered that Madero communicated supernaturally with a deceased younger brother.) The success of this novel led to others featuring historical figures: one about Felipe Angeles (1991), another about an archetypal post-revolution president (*El gran elector*, 1993; presented on stage in 1991), and a third about the invasion of the United States by the forces of Pancho Villa (*Columbus*, 1996). Another well-known figure, Plutarco Elías Calles, is the protagonist of one of Solares' plays (*El jefe máximo*, 1991).

Published in 1994, Solares' *Nen, la inútil* returns to the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Nen, an Aztec girl, is raped by a young *conquistador* who could have had her as a willing lover. This incident is a metaphor for the convergence of the two cultures as perceived by Solares. Here, as in all his work, he seeks an understanding of the society in which he is an important actor.



In the two novellas translated here, *Tree of Desire* and *Serafín*, Solares demonstrates his particular adeptness at portraying the complex lives of young people—an unusual subject in contemporary Latin American fiction. Cristina, the ten-year-old protagonist of *Tree*

of *Desire*, runs away from a home that is outwardly normal but inwardly dysfunctional. She takes her four-year-old brother with her, and confronts some of the humbler and more troubling aspects of life in Mexico City. Or is it all a dream? If it is a dream, Cristina also dreams within that dream. Solares' narrative, deceptively simple on its surface, suggests that the terrifying city may be a metaphor of Cristina's life within the family, a nightmare that may not come to an end with the end of the story.

Serafin, in the novel that bears his name, is a boy (eleven or twelve years old) who lives in rural Mexico. His father has left the family for Mexico City, taking the village beauty with him. Serafin's mother sends the boy, by himself, to look for his father. Woven into this story of cruelty and compassion, of connections maintained and broken, is an account of a failed protest march against the injustices suffered by rural Mexicans. In portraying the homespun intellectual leader of this movement, Solares explores the social and economic background that has led to Serafin's plight.

Serafin's world intersects Cristina's, but does not parallel it. Her story moves from middle-class to lower-class within Mexico City; Serafin's story instead moves from a rural to an urban environment. The two novels, read together, offer a multidimensional view of contemporary life in Mexico.

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