

Narrative and Memoir

By Sarah Fay

Book Reviews:

From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey, by Pascal Khoo Thwe. HarperCollins, 2002.

Living to Tell the Tale, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, trans. Edith Grossman. Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

A memoir should give us the sense that if we could write about our lives from a distance, a compelling narrative would emerge. V.S. Pritchett has said of the memoir, "It's all in the art. You get no credit for living." The assumption here is that, if told well enough, any experience can become an engaging story. These two memoirs, however, show that the life lived counts for as much as how it is relayed. Perhaps what matters is the attitude toward that life and whether or not the writer can go beyond the narrow concerns of the self.

Both Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Living to Tell the Tale* and Pascal Khoo Thwe's memoir, *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey*, account the extraordinary beginnings of two men. *Living to Tell the Tale* documents the first 28 years of Marquez's life. Marquez, or Gabo, as he's frequently called, is the Nobel Prize-winning author of more than 20 books, including the magical realism cornerstones *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*. This autobiography (the first in a series of three) focuses on his family's esoteric history and the years he spent in apprenticeship as a writer.

In reading *Living to Tell the Tale*, one never gets the sense that what is being documented is necessarily "real." Marquez was once quoted as having said, "If you say there are elephants flying in the sky, people are not going to believe you. But if you say that there are four hundred and twenty-five elephants in the sky, people

will believe you." In Nabokovian style, Marquez admits to and embraces the fallibility of memory. The story jumps in and out of time. Even the epigraph reads, "Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it."

One of the texts that Marquez says influenced him most is *One Thousand and One Nights*, with its blend of the earthly and the extraordinary. The story he liked best is that of a fisherman who promises a neighbor that he will give her the first fish he catches if she will lend him a lead weight for his casting net. When the woman opens the fish to fry it, she finds a diamond.

Marquez spends the rest of the book stringing legend, history, experience and mythology together. Aracataca, the town where Marquez is raised, is a wild place of "infallible wizards and biblical misfortunes." It is here that he watches the exorcism of his Aunt Wenefrida, Nana:

All of a sudden Nana writhed in deep convulsion and a bird the size of a chicken and with iridescent feathers escaped from between the sheets. The woman caught it in midair with a masterful blow of her hand and wrapped it in a black cloth she had prepared. She ordered a fire lit in the backyard and without any ceremony tossed the bird into the flames. But Nana did not recover from her ailments.

Even as a young adult, Marquez's life is touched by magic. After a hapless three months of trying to write for a newspaper, he asks one of his teachers to tell him the secret to writing feature articles. Maestro Zabala declines; instead, he troubles Marquez with "the enigma of a twelve-year-old girl, buried in the Convent of Santa Clara, whose hair grew after her death, more than 20 meters in 2 centuries."

From the Land of Green Ghosts, which won the Kiriyama prize for nonfiction, centers on Thwe's origins in the remote Paduang tribe in Burma—a country ruled and virtually ruined by the dictatorship of Ne Win and the successive implementation

of one futile government after another. The book follows Thwe's experiences as a student and rebel in Mandalay up through his eventual escape to Caius College at Cambridge University in England.

Thwe shares Marquez's esoteric but auspicious beginnings. In Phekkon, Thwe's ancestral village, rice wine is a staple, even in infancy. They use a homemade shampoo of soap fruits, slimy barks and roasted herbal beans before reentering the home, and entice ancestral spirits with aromatic flowers and food. His Paduang tribe is known for the famed metal rings worn by its women to elongate their necks. "They looked to us like mythical creatures," Thwe writes, "half-human and half-bird—and yet it never occurred to us that the Paduang were different from other people. That we were descended from a 'zawgyi'— a male creature, half-human and half angel—and a beautiful female dragon did not seem odd, merely a source of pride."

These stories give Thwe a sense that the Paduang are more than just a freak show. "They may even have made up some of the stories," he says, "or parts of them—but in being told in this way the stories entered the world of myths." Each night after dinner, Thwe's family basks in moonlight and the children are told about their ancestors: "The young night was pollinated with stars, and the full moon looked like a huge lollipop as it rose in the east over the purple hills and shed light on our unlit town It even seemed to heal sorrows and spiritual wounds."

Thwe and Marquez struggled to achieve their dreams—one to become a writer, the other an academic. "Even when I had not eaten," writes Marquez, "I never missed school"; he loved writers such as Faulkner, Joyce, Borges, Hemingway, Woolf, and Steinbeck. Though he reminisces about lying in the arms of prostitutes and married women, Marquez prides himself on the fact he was too poor to buy books of his own and was forced to borrow them from friends and stay up all night in order to finish and return them. Thwe's love of literature and reading takes him from his village to study in Mandalay. There he is disoriented and robbed, driven to

insomnia and left to pray that he will not wake with the barrel of a gun in his face.

In both stories, the political backdrop drives the narrative. For Marquez, it is “La Violencia,” the political unrest that plagued Columbia during the 1940s and 1950s and resulted in the deaths of more than 200,000 people. Despite the grotesque violence, Marquez describes Columbia as “a nation obsessed with poetry.” For Thwe, it is the rebel student movement, inspired by the democratic leader Aung San Suu Kui. During the 1988 uprising, Thwe flees to the Burmese Thai border. In each section of Marquez’s story, something befalls the protagonist. In Thwe’s tale, he escapes and manages to make it to England with the help of Dr. John Casey, a Cambridge don. His flight from military oppression reads like an action movie.

The most compelling moments of Thwe’s book come when he finally reaches England. He describes himself as “lost” in the modern world. To relax, he takes up gardening. Because he does not recognize English flowers and plants, he chops down a noble old clematis thinking it’s a weed. When a cat eats the eggs out of a bird’s nest, Thwe vows to kill it and eat it. When asked by Casey how he would do that, Thwe replies that he would bang its head against a wall or tree. The last hundred pages are so beautiful one wishes we could see more of the West through Thwe’s eyes.

Living to Tell the Tale and *From the Land of Green Ghosts* have what good autobiographies and memoirs should have, that delicate mixture of indulgence and humility. By the end of *Living to Tell the Tale*, Marquez is a journalist and a published short story writer. He has fallen in love and departed for Europe. Despite the fact that the major novels have not yet been written, and Marquez is virtually unknown, he is surprised and delighted by his good fortune.

From the Land of Green Ghosts ends with Thwe’s graduation from Cambridge, an event for which he feels blessed, despite his exile.

Perhaps we are seeing that V.S. Pritchett was, in some ways, wrong: How you tell your story matters, but it is what you say that ultimately makes the difference.