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Love in the Time of Cholera

by

Gabriel Garcíá Márquez

1985



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The time of the novel is roughly between 1840 and 1910. The main setting of the action is a colonial port city in the Caribbean, presumably Columbia, named only the city of the Viceroy throughout the novel. At one point, Fermina Daza travels with her father to her mother's family in Valledupar, where they stay for three.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Dr. Juvenal Urbino del Calle - the son of an aristocratic family who studies medicine in Europe and brings back all the newest science to his home in the Caribbean. Although devoted to his wife, he has a four-month affair, and then repents heartily. He likes to be served with precision in his home. He is a demanding man who likes to be served with precision, a passionate chess player, and a friend who enjoys music.

Fermina Daza - a sensible woman from a peasant family whose mother dies before she is ten and whose father decides to make a lady out of her. She runs an elegant and graceful house, enters her husband's social circle with great command and self-possession, and becomes the most prominent socialite in her city. She likes to smoke secretly, collect objects of beauty and interest, and raise animals, reptiles, and birds of all sorts (though the last is thwarted by her husband's aversion to animals.)

Florentino Ariza - a non-sensible romantic. He falls in love with a girl at first glance and spends three years sending her sentimental letters and being a martyr to love. When he is jilted by her, he waits over fifty years for her husband to die so he can court her again. While he is waiting, he has innumerable sexual affairs.

Minor Characters

Jeremiah de Saint-Amour - a disabled war veteran who becomes a photographer, mainly of children. He and Juvenal Urbino play chess together. His death by suicide marks the first page of the novel.

The Inspector - the man who examines Jeremiah de Saint-Amour's body after his.....

Many additional characters are identified and discussed in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Florentino Ariza is the protagonist of the novel. He is a man who bases his whole personality and all his life decisions on the model of romantic love found in sentimental romance novels and.....

Antagonist - The obstructions to Florentino Ariza's love serve as his antagonist. These obstructions are many and long-standing. First, Fermina Daza's father forbids her to see him; then she jilts

Climax - Florentino Ariza comes back to Fermina Daza after more than fifty years of waiting for her.....

Outcome - The story ends in comedy, for Florentino Ariza wins Fermina Daza's heart by using.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

In chapter one, Dr. Juvenal Urbino, an elderly doctor from an aristocratic family and a leader in the city, examines the body of his good friend, Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, who has committed suicide to avoid old age. He had greatly admired Jeremiah, who was a chess master and children's photographer. When he finds a long suicide note, Dr. Urbino is greatly disturbed at its contents. His wife, Fermina Daza, thinks nothing of what the note says. Her husband, however, feels compelled to follow the directions in the note. He visits a secret lover of Jeremiah de Saint-Amour and is shocked to find she is a black woman. He is also shocked that she aided her lover in his plan to kill himself. Still shaken by the news, he returns home to dress for a gala luncheon in honor of one of his most distinguished medical students. When he and Fermina Daza attend the event, a downpour almost spoils everything, but the hostess manages to salvage the party.

Arriving home, Juvenal and Fermina find the house in an uproar because his parrot has escaped into the trees. After his siesta, Juvenal goes out and finds the bird. When he tries to reach for it, the bird goes higher and higher in the tree. He stumbles on the ladder, falls, and soon dies. Fermina Daza is distraught over his death. There is an elaborate funeral, which Florentino Ariza attends. At the end of the day, when everyone has left, Fermina Daza finds Florentino Ariza in her parlor. He tells her he has waited for more than fifty years to repeat his pledge of undying love and eternal fidelity to her. She orders him to leave and finds herself sobbing in grief over her husband's death and rage over Florentino Ariza's gall.

Chapter two tells the story of Florentino Ariza, who is the illegitimate son of Transito Ariza and Don Pius V Loayza. His father died when Florentino was only ten; before his death, he never recognized him legally. As an uneducated adult, Florentino goes to work in a telegraph office with Lotario Thugut. He teaches Florentino all about his job and how to play the violin. Despite his pitiful appearance, Florentino is popular with girls his age, but he is not attracted to any of them. One day, however, when he is delivering a telegram to the father of Fermina Daza, he catches sight of her and falls in love. He learns all he can about Fermina Daza and her father. She goes to an Academy for girls of the aristocracy. While he is trying to decide how to approach her, she and her aunt Escolastica have noticed his interest and have been discussing him. He has been sitting in the park by her house for several weeks pretending to read so he can watch her pass by on her way to school. In the meantime, Florentino Ariza has written seventy pages of compliments in a letter to her. His mother advises him to give her a shorter letter.

One day Florentino crosses over to her house, where Fermina is sitting with her aunt. They arrange to meet the next week so he can give her his letter. After the first letter, they become devoted to one another. She knows her father would be opposed to Florentino since he wants her to marry into aristocracy; as a result, she and her aunt keep the love affair a secret. In the meantime, Lotario Thugut tries to introduce Florentino Ariza to illicit sex. Florentino refuses and spends his time writing love letters to Fermina. The rapid exchange of letters between the two continues until she.....

THEME

Main Theme

The main theme of the novel is the power of romantic love. The protagonist, Florentino Ariza, devotes his entire life to the pursuit of a woman he has only spoken to briefly and has never been alone with. He waits for.....

Minor Theme

The minor theme of the novel explores the reality of married life. Fermina Daza and Dr. Juvenal Urbino are married for almost fifty years, characterized by petty power struggles, mundane acts of kindness, practical.....

MOOD

The mood of the novel is generally comic. The narrator treats the epic passions of Florentino Ariza with a wry humor that undercuts the seriousness of his emotions. The struggles of marriage are also treated in a farcical manner. In spite.....

AUTHOR INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Gabriel Garcia Marquez was born in 1928 in Aracataca, a small town on the coast of Columbia. He lived with his mother's parents for the first eight years of his life. He learned a great deal from them, for his grandfather had been a soldier in Columbia's civil war of the 1890's and his grandmother was a natural storyteller. The author writes of having received many inspirations from both of them.

Garcia Marquez went to law school for three years and then worked as a journalist for fifteen years, spending time in Columbia, Europe, and Cuba. During his time as a journalist, he began to write fiction on the side. His first novels include *Leaf Storm* (1955), *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1961), and *In Evil Hour* (1962). He also wrote a book of short stories, *Big Mama's Funeral* (1962). After these first successes, he went for five years without writing any fiction.

Marquez began writing again after having a vision of the first chapter of what was to become his best novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. He had been driving in Mexico when the idea for the book came to him, so he stopped working as a journalist and devoted one and a half years to completing the novel, which he published in

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Garcia Marquez is usually considered part of the second generation of Latin American writers. The authors of the first generation were writing in the late 1960's and included Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, Miguel Angel Asturias of Guatemala, Alejo Carpentier of Cuba, and Pablo Neruda of Chile. The second generation is led by Garcia Marquez and includes Julio Cortazar of Argentina, Guillermo Cabrera Infante of Cuba, Carlos Fuentes of Mexico, Isabel Allende of Chile, and Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru. The writing of the second generation, though very varied, is characterized by a combination of the political and the personal and the realistic and the magical. It also uses the innovations introduced by modernism.

Each of the second-generation writers has his or her own version of magical realism, the literary.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Dr. Juvenal Urbino is always reminded of "the fate of unrequited love" when he smells bitter almonds. He has been called on an urgent case to see the Antillean refugee Jeremiah de Saint-Amour. Amour is a disabled war veteran who became a photographer of children. He and Urbino play chess together. Amour has killed himself by taking cyanide. Dr. Urbino finds the body and beside it, the body of Amour's dog and Amour's crutches. The dawn is visible through the window of his room. The room had been his friend's photography laboratory as well as his room. All the light is shut out except for the one open window. Even though the air from the open window had purified the air in the room, "there still remained for the one who could identify it the dying embers of hapless love in the bitter almonds." Dr. Urbino had often thought the room with its heavy disorder would be a bad place to die in a state of grace. Later, however, he decided that the disorder was part of Divine Providence (the divine ordering of the world).

A police inspector comes in along with a young medical student. They are the ones who had opened the window and covered the body. They greet Dr. Urbino with words of condolence because everyone knows he was friends with Jeremiah de Saint-Amour. Dr. Urbino is an eminent teacher. He shakes hands with both men, just as he has always shaken hands with every one of his students before class every day. He teaches general clinical medicine. Urbino next pulls the blanket back slowly "with sacramental circumspection." The body is naked, "stiff and twisted." His friend looks very old. His eyes are open. Because he had used crutches, the muscles of his upper body are over-developed, but his legs look pitifully thin. Dr. Juvenal Urbino studies with body with an aching heart. He says, "Damn fool. The worst was over." Then he covers the body again.

Dr. Urbino just celebrated his eightieth birthday last year. They had given him a three-day jubilee. He still refuses to retire even though he is losing his hearing in his right ear and has to use a cane when he walks. He dresses in very fine clothes: a linen suit, a gold watch chain across his vest, a Pasteur beard, and his white hair combed into a neat part. His immaculate clothing reflects his character. He compensates for his loss of short-term memory by writing notes to himself, but they are stuffed into the disorder of his pockets. He is the city's oldest and most illustrious doctor and its most fastidious man. "Still, his too obvious display of learning and the disingenuous manner in which he used the power of his name had won him less affection than he deserved."

He gives precise instructions to the inspector and intern. The body does not need autopsy since it's obvious that it was a suicide. The intern is disappointed because he had wanted to study the effects of gold cyanide on the body. Dr. Juvenal Urbino realizes this intern is from the country, new to the city. He consoles the intern by telling him there will be another person driven mad by love who will give him a chance to study. It occurs to the doctor that of all the suicides he has seen, this is the first that used cyanide when the suicide hadn't been caused by love. He tells the intern that when he does find one, he should notice that the corpses almost always have crystals in their heart.

He tells the inspector to get around all the rules and arrange it so his friend could be buried that afternoon. He tells him he will speak to the mayor. He is sure that the inspector will find plenty of money in Jeremiah de Saint-Amour's room to cover the expenses of the funeral. If he doesn't, the doctor assures him that he will pay for the funeral. He then instructs the inspector to report to the press that his friend had died of natural causes. He adds that he will speak to the governor if necessary. The inspector is amazed at Dr. Urbino's willingness to skip over the rules when, usually, his sense of civic duty

exasperates those around him. The inspector says, "I understand the man was a saint." Dr. Urbino says, "Something even rarer. An ascetic saint. But those are matters for God to decide."

Dr. Urbino hears the bells of the Cathedral ringing for High Mass. He looks at his watch and realizes he will miss Pentecost Mass. Dr. Urbino looks at the parlor of his friend's house. It is his photography studio, set up with a huge camera on wheels and a backdrop of deep blue. The walls of the room are full of pictures of children in all their costumes, first communion outfits, and birthday clothes. Over the years as he had paused in his chess games with Jeremiah, he had looked at the pictures and shuddered at the thought that these children would be the leaders of the city "where not even the ashes of his glory would remain."

He notices a half-finished game of chess on the table. He studies it despite the fact that he's in a hurry. It was the previous night's game. Jeremiah uses the white pieces and it is clear he would have been defeated in three moves. Urbino thinks to himself that if there had been a crime, this chessboard would be a good clue because he only knows one man who is capable of devising such a masterful trap. He realizes he must find out why Jeremiah had not finished this game, when always before, he finished all his chess games.

That morning as Dr. Urbino was making his rounds, the night watchman had found a note saying "Come in without knocking and inform the police." The inspector and intern arrived shortly and searched the house for evidence. They found a note addressed to the doctor. Urbino opened the window and looked at eleven pages of paper written front and back. When he had read the first paragraph, he knew he would miss the Pentecost Mass. He had read the note with great urgency and when he finished, he came back into the present time as if from a great distance. He felt despondent. His fingers trembled uncontrollably. He told the inspector and intern the note only contained his friend's final instructions.

He had told them to loosen a plank on the floor where they found an account book. In it they found the combination to the strongbox. They found enough money for the funeral expenses. Dr. Urbino says it is the third time he has missed Sunday Mass since he was a child. He stays around to finish the last details. However, he can't wait to share the contents of the letter with his wife. He promises the others that he will notify the Caribbean refugees in the city of Jeremiah's death. Jeremiah had acted as though he were the most respectable of them all, the most radical and the most active, even after he became severely disillusioned. He will also tell Jeremiah's chess partners and others who might want to come to the funeral. Before he had read the letter, he had wanted to be the first of the mourners. Now, he's not sure. He tells the others that he will be at the country house of Dr. Lacides Olivella, his favorite disciple, who is celebrating his silver anniversary that day.

After the years of his early struggles, Dr. Juvenal Urbino has always followed the same routine. He has the most prestige of anyone in the province. He always gets up at dawn and takes his secret medicines of all sorts. He takes something every hour and always in secret. He does this because as a young man he had always opposed giving old people medicines of aches and pains. "It was easier for him to bear other people's pains than his own." He also carries a pad of camphor in his pocket and when no one is looking, he breathes it deeply to calm his fear of mixing so many drugs.

After taking his morning medicine, he spends an hour in his study preparing for his lecture. He teaches Monday through Saturday and does so until the day before his death. After studying, he does fifteen minutes of respiratory exercise in the bathroom in front of the open window "always breathing toward the side where the roosters were crowing, which was where the air was new." Then he bathes and waxes his mustache and dresses in white linen. He is eighty-one years old and he still keeps the same festive spirit he had when he returned from Paris after the great cholera epidemic. He has breakfast and then uses an infusion of wormwood blossoms for his stomach and a head of garlic to prevent heart failure. After class, he usually has some kind of appointment that relates to civic or religious duties. He has lunch at home and then has a ten-minute nap on the veranda listening to the street sounds. After his nap, he reads new books for an hour, especially novels and history books. He next gives lessons in French and singing to his parrot. He drinks a glass of lemonade and goes to call on his patients. He refuses to see patients in his office. He sees them in their homes.

When he had first returned from Europe, he had visited his patients in the family carriage pulled by two horses. Then he changed it for another kind of carriage and one horse. He continues to use it even though it is now far out of fashion. He is aware that he is only called in for hopeless cases these days. However, he thinks of this as a form of specialization and prides himself on being able to diagnose a patient just by looking at her or him. He hates the fact that so much surgery is

being done now, calling the scalpel the greatest proof of the failure of medicine. He is distrustful of patent medicines and thinks of all medication as poison. He tells his students that everyone is the master of her or his own death and that the only thing doctors can do for them is to help them die without fear of pain. Even with these extreme ideas, his former students still consult with him because of his "clinical eye." He is an expensive and exclusive doctor. All his patients live in the ancestral homes of the District of the Viceroys.

Because his schedule is so strict, his wife always knows where to send a message to him if needed. When he was a young man, he had always stopped at the Parish Cafe for a game of chess with his father-in-law's friends and some Caribbean refugees, but he hasn't been there since the turn of the century. It was then that he had met Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, who arrived in the country with his legs still intact and not yet a photographer of children, but a great chess player. No one could beat him. For Dr. Juvenal Urbino, it was a miraculous meeting and he never gave up his passion for chess after it. Dr. Urbino became Jeremiah's "unconditional protector, his guarantor in everything" without learning anything about his past. He later lent Jeremiah the money to set up his photography studio and Jeremiah paid every cent back.

The whole friendship was based on chess. At first they played with a handicap for Jeremiah since he was so good, but eventually they played as equals. Later, when Jeremiah developed a passion for movies, they played only on nights when a film wasn't showing. When they became closer friends, the doctor went to the movie with Jeremiah, but he never took his wife. She didn't like following the complicated plot lines and she also didn't think Jeremiah was a good companion for anyone.

Dr. Urbino always spends Sundays by attending High Mass, returning home to rest and read on the terrace. He doesn't see patients or visit friends on Sundays. On this day of Pentecost, two things had happened: Jeremiah's death and the silver anniversary of his student. Instead of going straight home from Jeremiah's house, he gets into his carriage and looks at the letter again. Then he tells the driver to take him to an address in the old slave quarters. He looks again at the letter. It contains a "flood of unsavory revelations that might have changed his life, even at his age, if he could have convinced himself that they were not the ravings of a dying man."

The streets are crowded with people who have just gotten out of mass. Dr. Urbino's is the only horse-drawn carriage. It is distinguishable from the other few that are still used in the city by its immaculate patent leather roof, its brass fittings, and its fancifully dressed coachman, who wears velvet livery and a top hat despite the heat of the Caribbean summer. Dr. Urbino knows the city very well, but not the former slave quarters. They pass the marshes whose smells Dr. Urbino recognizes from having smelled them on sleepless nights. "But that pestilence so frequently idealized by nostalgia became an unbearable reality when the carriage" lurches through the muddy streets where buzzards fight over the.....

Notes

Garcia Marquez opens his first chapter in the tone of a eulogy. He is describing an old man who is feeling his age in every moment he is alive. His thoughts are of his accomplishments and of his continued observance of the same customs he has kept for many years. The tone of eulogy is, however, irreverent while still retaining some affection. For instance, the good doctor, who has always refused to give pain medicine to old people, now gives himself so much that he has to calm his fears of an overdose or a dangerous mixture of drugs with the use of camphor. He has to take all his drugs in secret so no one can know he is too proud to admit his mistake.

The reader is kept in suspense throughout the chapter, first upon seeing a dead man, an old friend of the doctor's. Then with the mysterious elements that surround him, the doctor's naming him so reverently an ascetic saint. Then, the eleven-page letter is never read aloud nor are its contents revealed except in the most vague terms. The reader hopes that with the doctor's drive to the old slave quarters, the contents of the letter, why it so disturbs the doctor will be revealed, but instead more mystery is shown in the person of the unnamed lover of the late Jeremiah de Saint-Amour. The doctor thinks several times that this news could change his very regular life, but nowhere in this chapter does the reader hear what the news is. Why is all this suspense here? For one, it makes the reader want to keep reading, setting up a basis for later chapters to fill in the blanks in the reader's knowledge. Second, it demonstrates the doctor's character. He is astonished by it, while his wife scarcely listens to it and thinks it's totally unimportant. As it turns out, only this second element is fulfilled in the novel. After this chapter, the reader hears little more of Jeremiah.

The woman who was Jeremiah de Saint-Amour's lover for all those years is featured as the exotic "other" in this novel.

Garcia Marquez's main characters seem to come mainly from or fit easily within the aristocracy formed by the Spanish conquest of Columbia in the sixteenth century. The people of African descent seem to be here in the novel merely as colorful backdrop, a place to go when a mysterious touch is needed. The woman is herself figured in all the stereotype of the exotic dark woman: she has "cruel golden eyes," hair like a "helmet of steel wool," her parlor has.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Fermina Daza - She's not central to the novel, but merely the object of attraction for the two main protagonists. Garcia Marquez makes her interesting so she seems worthy of all this attention, but does not spend a great deal of time developing her character. Her main character traits are a natural haughtiness, an ability to make a house a home, a habit of rebellion from authority while remaining inside the realm of what's expected of a woman of her class and time, a strong habit of introspection, a love of the communal life of her parents' economic class, and a lack of close familial ties.

Motherless at ten, stuck with a brutish and controlling father who wants nothing more than to transform her into a lady to be married to an aristocratic man, Fermina Daza has to spend most of her life fending for herself emotionally. Her father's manipulation of her as a tool in his goal to enter the aristocracy reveals his lack of ability to connect with her emotionally. She seems to learn well from him. She is horrified when he banishes his sister when he finds out she helped his daughter conduct a love affair. Yet, on some level, she does a similar thing in her relationship with her.....

Florentino Ariza - He is given the most space in the novel. He's one of the most ridiculous figures in literature, on a par with the lovable Don Quixote (Cervantes), the desperate Emma Bovary (Flaubert), the boyish Tom Sawyer (Twain), and the wretched Quentin Compson (Faulkner) in his monomaniacal pursuit of a woman he never really knew to begin with. Like these other fictional characters, he is a voracious consumer of cheap literature. He.....

Juvenal Urbino - He is a figure who stands on the side of realism. The man of science who works valiantly to banish the ignorance that keeps people sick and dying of cholera and other unnecessary illnesses. He is the public figure par excellence. Healed of the disease of nostalgia on his return home from a European education, he.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, as noted earlier, could be described as organic. It begins in the end, when all the action has already taken place and shaped the characters. Then it goes back to the beginning and tells the story of each of the three main characters. The looping back of the plot from end to beginning enables the reader to.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The two main themes of *Love in the Time of Cholera* are romantic or nostalgic love and practical love. Though the novel opens on a long eulogy to the practical lover, Dr. Juvenal Urbino, it is most preoccupied with the quest of the nostalgic lover, Florentino Ariza. One might argue that the ending combines the two forms of love. The couple, Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza sail happily away on a forever river boat cruise, but they do so when they

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT TOPICS

1. Describe the character of Florentino Ariza as having arisen out of romantic fiction and poetry. What is the relationship between Florentino Ariza and his mother? Trace this relationship or look at his sexual affairs as comments on this relation.....

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