

# Author Profile

## Mercè Rodoreda

BORN in 1908 in Barcelona, Spain, author Mercè Rodoreda grew up immersed in the proud, autonomous cultural milieu of Catalonia. Prior to the Spanish civil war, Catalunya (as it is known in the Catalan language) was independent of its cultural and geographic sister, Spain, and had a proud literary tradition that dated back to the Middle Ages. Rodoreda wrote five novels between 1932 and 1937, only one of which, *Aloma*, she considered of lasting worth. When the civil war began, Franco's Spain subsumed Catalonia, banning the public use of the Catalan language and prohibiting the publication of Catalan literature. Driven from her native land in 1937, Rodoreda

fled to France and, later, Geneva to avoid the Franco regime's repression. During this time, her literary voice fell silent, as she produced nothing of note for two decades.

Without a home, without a language, Rodoreda painted. Her watercolors depicted asymmetric, curvilinear women, free from space and time and with frozen tribal African visages, in a deliberate reference to Picasso. To recapture her voice, she began writing short stories, published collectively as *Vint-i-dos contes* (Twenty-two stories), which won the Víctor Català Award in 1957. As a novelist, she picked up where she left off, rewriting *Aloma* in a more accomplished style.

Rodoreda's protagonists are often strong female characters struggling with the existential dilemmas of identity. *La Plaça del Diamant* (1962; Eng. *The Time of the Doves*, 1980) remains her most acclaimed work. It tells the story of Natàlia, a young woman trying to escape desperate poverty in the midst of civil war, in a stream-of-consciousness narrative. For her complete body of work, Rodoreda received the Catalan Literature Award of Honor. She returned to Barcelona in the mid-1970s, shortly before Franco's death, as the ban on Catalan began to lift. She died of cancer in 1983. The Mercè Rodoreda Prize for short stories and narratives was established in her honor in 1998.

### An excerpt from *The Time of the Doves*

JULIETA came by the pastry shop just to tell me that, before they raffled off the basket of fruit and candy, they'd raffle some coffeepots. She's already seen them: lovely white ones with oranges painted on them. The oranges were cut in half so you could see the seeds. I didn't feel like dancing or even going out because I'd spent the day selling pastries and my fingertips hurt from tying so many gold ribbons and making so many bows and handles. And because I knew Julieta. She felt fine after three hours' sleep and didn't care if she slept at all. But she made me come even though I didn't want to, because that's how I was. It was hard for me to say no if someone asked me to do something. I was dressed all in white, my dress and petticoats starched, my shoes like two drops of milk, my earrings white enamel, three hoop bracelets that matched the earrings, and a white purse Julieta said was made of vinyl with a snap shaped like a gold shellfish.

When we got to the square, the musicians were already playing. The roof was covered with colored flowers and paper chains: a chain of paper, a chain of flowers. There were flowers with lights inside them and the whole roof was like an umbrella turned inside out, because the ends of the chains were tied much higher up in the middle where they all came together. My petticoat had a rubber waistband I'd had a lot of trouble putting on with a crochet hook that could barely squeeze through. It was fastened with a little button and a loop of string and it dug into my skin. I probably already had a red mark around my waist, but as soon as I started breathing harder I began to feel like I was being martyred. There were asparagus plants around the bandstand to keep the crowd away, and the plants were decorated with flowers tied together with tiny wires. And the musicians with their jackets off, sweating. My mother had been dead for years and couldn't give me advice and my father had remarried. My father remarried and me without my mother whose only joy in life had been to fuss over me. And my father remarried and me a young woman all alone in the Plaça del Diamant waiting for the coffeepot raffle and Julieta shouting to be heard above the music. "Stop! You'll get your clothes all wrinkled!" and before my eyes the flower-covered lights and the chains pasted on them and everybody happy and while I was gazing a voice said right by my ear, "Would you like to dance?"

*Editorial note:* From *La Plaça del Diamant* (1962; Eng. *The Time of the Doves*, 1980), tr. David H. Rosenthal, reprinted by permission of Graywolf Press. To order a copy of the novella, visit their website at [www.graywolfpress.org](http://www.graywolfpress.org).

# Do You Know Who Mercè Rodoreda Was?

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

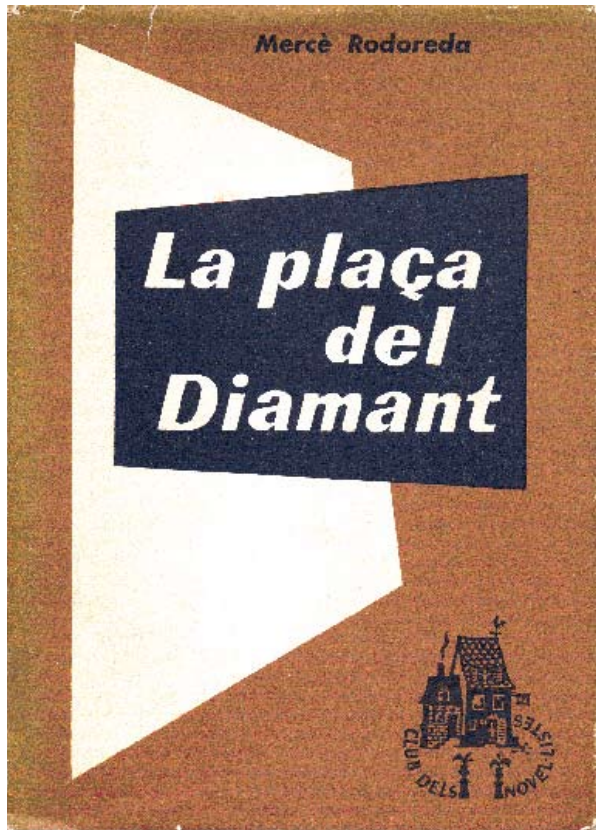


Mercè Rodoreda was, perhaps, one of Spain's best post-Spanish civil war authors. Her works were critically acclaimed, but she remained largely unknown in her own country. Gabriel García Márquez recounts his experience with the "invisible woman."

**W**HILE IN A BARCELONA BOOKSTORE LAST WEEK, I inquired about Mercè Rodoreda, and they told me that she had died the previous month. The news caused me great sadness: first, for the much-deserved admiration I have for her books and, second, for the unwarranted fact that the news of her death had not been publicized outside Spain with due coverage and honors. Apparently, few people outside Catalonia know just who this invisible woman was who wrote some wonderful and enduring novels in a splendid Catalan rarely found in contemporary literature. One such work, *La Plaça del Diamant* (1963; Eng. *The Time of the Doves*, 1980), is, in my opinion, the most beautiful to have been published in Spain following the Spanish civil war.

The reason Rodoreda is so little known, even within Spain, cannot be attributed to the fact that she wrote in a language of limited range nor to the fact that her human dramas take place in a secret corner of the very secretive city of Barcelona, for her books have been translated into more than ten languages, and all of them have been met with much more enthusiastic critical acclaim than she rightly deserves in her own country. "It is among the books of universal scope written, perhaps, by love itself," commented the French critic Michel Cournot in referring to *La Plaça del Diamant*. Elsewhere, Diana Athill, commenting on the English translation of the book, claimed, "It is the best novel to be published in Spain in many years." And, in the United States, a critic with *Publishers Weekly* described the work as strange and marvelous. Nevertheless, some years ago—on the occasion of one of many anniversaries—a survey was taken

\* Editorial note: Rodoreda died in April 1983.



among contemporary Spanish writers to try to establish, according to their own criteria, the ten best books written in Spain after the civil war, and I don't recall that anyone had mentioned *La Plaça del Diamant*. Instead, many cited, with complete justification, *La forja de un rebelde* (The making of a rebel), by Arturo Barea. The interesting thing is that this book, whose four thin volumes had been published at the end of the fourth decade of the twentieth century in Buenos Aires, had not and still has not been published in Spain, whereas *La Plaça del Diamant* had already gone into its twenty-sixth edition in Catalan. I read the book in Spanish at that time, and, in so doing, my amazement was somewhat comparable to what I had felt upon reading Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* for the first time, although the two books have nothing in common except for their sheer beauty. From then on, I don't know how many times I have reread the book, including several times in Catalan, with such effort that speaks volumes to my devotion to the novel.

Mercè Rodoreda's private life is one of the best-kept secrets of the very mysterious city of Barcelona. I don't know anyone who could have known her well and who could say with complete certainty what she was like. Moreover, Rodoreda's books allow only a glimpse of her almost excessive sensitivity to and love for her people

and the life of her neighborhood, which is perhaps what gives her novels universal appeal. We know that throughout the civil war, she stayed in her family home in Sant Gervasio, and her state of being at that time is evident in her books. We know that later she went to live in Geneva, where she wrote from the vestiges of her nostalgia. "When I began to write the novel, I hardly remembered what the Plaça del Diamant was like," she commented in one of her prologues, which provide perfect examples of her consciousness as a novelist. Anyone other than another writer would be surprised that the author had succeeded in re-creating in such detail and so lucidly the places and people from such a remote existence, one almost lost in the haze of childhood. "I only remember," she wrote in the prologue to a Catalan edition of her work, "that once, during the festival of La Gràcia neighborhood, when I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I went on a walk through the streets with my father. In the Plaça del Diamant they had erected a tent, as in other plazas, of course, but the one I always remembered was that one. Upon passing in front of that veritable music box, I had a desperate desire to dance, which my parents forbade me to do, and I walked around like a tortured soul through the decorated streets." Rodoreda assumed that it was because of this frustration that many years later, in Geneva, she began her novel with that popular holiday. In general, Rodoreda's eagerness to dance, which her parents always repressed because it was deemed impermissible for a decent girl, has been identified by the author herself as the fundamental taboo that motivated her to write.

Few authors have expressed with such accurate and useful clarity the subconscious process of literary creation as has Rodoreda in the prologues to her books. "A novel is a magic act," she wrote. In speaking about *Mirall trencat* (1974; Broken mirror), her longest novel, she provided another almost alchemistic revelation: "Eladi Farriols, dead and lying in the library of a stately manor, provided me with the first chapter in a most unexpected way." Elsewhere, she observed, "Small things play a great role in narrative, as they always have, long before Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote *Le voyeur*" (1952; Eng. *The Voyeur*, 1958). I came to know the meaning of this statement long after Rodoreda had bedazzled me by the sensuality with which she reveals things within the atmosphere of her novels, long after she had astounded me with the new light she sheds with her words. A writer who still knows how to name things has already won half the

battle, and Rodoreda knew how to do that as well as anyone who wrote in her mother tongue. On the other hand, not all of us authors who write in Spanish know how to do so; and for some, such ability is more evident than we ourselves think.

I believe—if I am not mistaken—that Mercè Rodoreda is the only author (male or female) whom I have visited without knowing beforehand, having been compelled to meet her by an irresistible admiration. Some twelve years ago, I found out through our editor in common that Rodoreda was in Barcelona for a few days, and she received me in a temporary, very modestly furnished apartment with only one window that faced the twilight garden of Monterolas. I was surprised by her casual demeanor, which later I found described in one of her prologues: “Perhaps the most notable of my multiple personalities is a kind of innocence that makes me feel good in the world in which I was destined to live.” Therefore, I knew that, together with her literary vocation, she had a parallel vocation, one just as dominant as the other—that of growing flowers. We spoke about the subject, which I consider another form of writing, and between our discussion of roses and other florid exchanges, I tried to talk to her about her books and she tried to talk to me about mine. I was struck by the fact that of everything I had written, she was most interested in the rooster from *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* (1961; Eng., *No One Writes to the Colonel*, 1968), and she was struck by how much I enjoyed the raffle of the coffeepot in *La Plaça del Diamant*. Today I have a cloudy memory of that unusual encounter, which, no doubt, was not one she took to her grave but that for me was the only time I conversed with a creator of fiction who was a living replica of her characters. I never knew why, upon our

bidding farewell at the elevator, that she said to me, “You have quite a sense of humor.” I never heard news of her again until this week, when I learned quite by chance—and at such an inopportune moment—that the only misfortune that could prevent her from continuing to write had, indeed, occurred.

*First publication in English*

*Translation from the Spanish  
By David Draper Clark*

*Editorial note:* This essay first appeared as “¿Sabe usted quién era Mercè Rodoreda?” in the “Opinión” section of *El País* (May 18, 1983, p. 11), one of Spain’s leading newspapers, and was subsequently reprinted in *Notas de prensa: Obra periodística 5, 1961–1984* (Mondadori, 1999).

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ was born on March 6, 1928 in Aracataca, Colombia. He has distinguished himself as a journalist, publisher, scriptwriter, and, primarily, as an author of fiction and nonfiction. His works include *Cien años de soledad* (1967; Eng. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1970), *El otoño del patriarca* (1975; Eng. *Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1979), *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981; Eng. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 1983), *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (1985; Eng. *Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1988), *El general en su laberinto* (1989; Eng. *The General in His Labyrinth*, 1990), *Noticia de un secuestro* (1996; Eng. *News of a Kidnapping*, 1997), *Vivir para contarla* (2001; Eng. *Living to Tell the Tale*, 2003), and *Memoria de mis putas tristes* (2004; Eng. *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, 2005). Among his many awards are the 1972 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, conferred by the University of Oklahoma and *World Literature Today*, and the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature. This year marks García Márquez’s eightieth birthday and the fortieth anniversary of the first publication of *Cien años de soledad*, both of which are being celebrated throughout Latin America and beyond with much fanfare.

### Fifty years ago in the pages of *Books Abroad*, the forerunner of *World Literature Today*

“Brief and informative, Aldous Huxley’s *Heaven and Hell* deals with ‘visions’ and hallucinations induced by drugs, hypnotism, and mechanical devices. To validate his study, Huxley points out that there is in every mind a *terra incognita* populated with visionary materials which are similar, which retain a static identity as they recur in remarkably different individual minds. This phenomenon occurs, he implies, by a principle similar to that of the Jungian archetype. The ‘visions,’ then, are part of the structure of Mind; a greater or lesser degree of awareness of reality makes them available. What this book may contribute to the study of psychology, philosophy, or art is at the moment impossible to say; nevertheless, it will make interesting and provocative reading.”—Melvin W. Askew, *BA* 31:1 (Winter 1957), 35