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INTERVIEW

An Interview With

Gloria Montero

Interviewed by Pedro Fernández Dorado

This is the transcription of an interview with Gloria Montero, recorded on May the 20th, 2008, at Gloria's home in Barcelona.

I would like to thank Gloria Montero for her invaluable help and for the magic in her books, and Sue Ballyn for giving me the opportunity to meet Gloria in person.

The Ramblas in Barcelona are as lively and crowded as always on this warm Tuesday, and as I arrive at Gloria Montero's door, very close to the wonderful Romea theatre, I wonder what her apartment will look like. All my expectations are accomplished when I enter Gloria's flat, where she receives me with a huge smile and invites me to enter. During the interview she will explain that the building dates from almost three hundred years ago, and it seems to me an ideal home for a writer. After following her through a long wide corridor we arrive at a beautiful room with light streaming through two high windows looking out toward the Mediterranean Sea. A few minutes later, after some jasmine tea, we are both ready to begin the interview.

Pedro: Gloria, I would like to start this interview with a quote from your novel *The Villa Marini*, in which you depict the encounter of Marini, the main character, with the spectacular Australian landscape. The quote says the following:

"*Her eyes glitter over the familiar landscape. The mountains in the background, purple against the bruised colour of the tall sticks that rise straight from the red soil. She knows the smell of that earth, the texture of its dampness below the hot crust, the roots that grapple down into its dark, the creatures that live and forage there. She's aware suddenly how much she belongs here. How much a part of it she has become. Like the heat, the rain, the cane itself*" (*The Villa Marini*, 103)

Gloria, I believe you were born in Queensland and stayed there until the age of nineteen. How much has that land become a part of you?

Gloria: That's a difficult question to answer because I think that where you are born, the land, the place, everything abouit it, is a bit like your family. You don't question it. It's just there and becomes part of you.

I've lived outside of Australia longer than I ever lived there. But I suppose that particular landscape in Australia had its importance. Perhaps if it had been an urban landscape it might not have had the same impact, but the tropics are very special. And the landscape, right there on the coast of the Great Barrier Reef with sugar plantations all around, is especially beautiful. Local history accounts tell how many of the original European settlers in the area were Irish. The Catholic Church had bought up large tracts of land to attract Irish immigrants.

Pedro: Yes, that comes through in *The Villa Marini*, there's a catholic priest who plays an important role in the novel. But I guess that was not the only community living there when you were a child. Can you recall what kind of community were you brought in?

Gloria: When I was growing up in Innisfail, there was that tremendous mixture of people there. As well as the Irish and the English and a few Scots, there were a lot of Italians, some Yugoslavs, Chinese, people from the Pacific Islands, Lebanese, Greeks, a few Spaniards – you name an ethnic group and they were there! I think it comes out in *The Villa Marini* that it was the only place in Australia at least at that time, perhaps even now, where the Chinese had their own temple.

Pedro: But was it an important community?

Gloria: No, not especially important as a community, but they were there. The grocery stores at the town were usually either owned by the Chinese or by the Greeks. Now when I think back, I'm aware how different ethnics groups each had their own business specialties, but when I was growing up there I never thought about it at all. It was just what was there. The landscape, as I have said, is very beautiful there: the Pacific Ocean, wild and rough, with spectacular beaches and sugarcane fields all around. Even after all these years, it is still very vivid to me.

The town where we lived survived on sugar cane. There was a sugar mill in the town and two or three other sugar mills in the small towns around. My godmother's family, who were Catalan, had a large sugar plantation. I spent a lot of time on the farm there as a child and drew a great deal on those memories for the novel.

Pedro: I gather that Paronella Park was quite close to where you lived as a child. Do you think that comparisons may be drawn between the house and grounds of The Villa Marini and the architecture of Paronella Park?

Gloria: I used to go there with my family. The Paronellas were friends of ours. But many people used to go there to picnic. There was a little waterfall and pools where you could swim. The park grounds were extensive. What I remember of it from when I was a child was half in ruins. An interesting thing is that way back then José Paronella had built a hydroelectric plant on the property, and a friend sent me a clipping recently from an Australian newspaper that talked of this hydro plant now being rebuilt. However, you must remember that what happens to Marini in the novel has nothing whatever to do with Paronella Park. The novel is entirely fictional. And most of the story takes place before I ever lived in the area.
Besides, in those days, what marked the area more than anything else was the cane season. Gangs of cane cutters were employed. They came for the season and lived in barracks on the farms. At nights during the season there would be spectacular fires. Just imagine a cane field, and more than one, on fire all around the town - it was extraordinary! That doesn't happen anymore because they no longer burn off the fields, and there are no gangs of cane cutters who come for the season either. Now everything is mechanised.

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Pedro: In your novel we learn how Mariano Grau is very much concerned about the political situation in Cuba. While being raised by Spanish parents in Australia, I suppose that you can remember how you and your family experienced Franco's dictatorship.

You are very well known for your constant struggle in support of democracy in Spain during Franco's dictatorship. How much did your family's experience of the civil war influence you in taking up this struggle? Also, I wonder how you felt when you returned to Spain while Franco was still alive.

Gloria: You know, I believe that each one of us inherits not just physical characteristics from our families, but that we also absorb a lot of dreams, a lot of ideas as well.

Pedro: Political ideas also?

Gloria: Also. For me, Spain has always been present, although I was in my teens before I ever came to Spain. And Spain then wasn't quite what Spain is today. One particular detail sticks in my mind that perhaps makes this clear. When I first visited my family in Asturias, they lived in Turón, a coal mining town. We would go in a little train to Mieras on the weekend where there was a market on Sundays. We'd leave early in the morning when it was still dark, and I can remember clearly the profile of the mountains all around and also the profile of the *tricornios*[1] of the Guardia Civil patrolling the area. It seemed strange to me there should be so many of them in such a small town. But I learned then about the *maquis*[2] in the mountains. There was a great deal I had to learn. I've often thought that the reason I feel so completely at home in Spain is because we

[1] The *tricornio* was a three-cornered hat worn as a part of the uniform of the paramilitary Civil Guard during the Franco's dictatorship in Spain.

[2] The *Maquis* were the members of the Spanish guerrillas exiled in the mountains between France and Spain, who fought against Franco's regime.

were so much part of it not only during the Transition back to democracy but also during the years of the dictatorship.

Pedro: When you were living in Australia, you didn't live through the kind of political problems such as we had here, did you?

Gloria: When I was growing up, politics were part of my life, too. My grandfather had decided very early in Asturias that he was not going to work in the mines, the only work available there then, where miners very often lost their lives. So for a time as a young man he worked as a shepherd. Then when he and my grandmother, the village school teacher, married, he followed a brother of hers to Argentina. After a few months my grandmother and their first daughter joined him there and another daughter was born in Argentina. After a couple of years they heard of two Welsh brothers who were filling a ship with workers to go build a railroad in Australia between Alice Springs and Darwin. That was how the family got to Australia. Later on, when the Spanish war started, my grandfather came back to fight in the war. He was already forty years old. I was very young then, but I can remember everybody at home sitting around the radio listening to the news from Spain. When he was wounded in the war, my grandfather eventually got back home. However, he was indignant about what was happening in Spain and would speak about the situation there whenever he could. I remember him being carried home covered in blood after being attacked by an Italian fascist group in the area. Another day we came home to find the house had been ransacked. Papers and documents were spread all over the place, many of them destroyed.
Pedro: By the Italian Gang?

Gloria: This "Black Hand" gang, as they were known, had close ties to Mussolini's Italy. Geographically, we were a long way away and yet, Europe and the Spanish war were always present and affected us. That comes out, I think, in *All These Wars*, which is set in the same area as *The Villa Marini. A*lthough *All These Wars* is my story, whereas Marini's story is fictional.

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Pedro: You have said on several occasions that you wrote *All These Wars* focusing on the reality from which you came, trying to put together the fragments of your identity.

Gloria: I wrote that book when we first came back to Spain after Franco's death. Although I was living here as a Spaniard, I was writing and publishing in English. I began to wonder who I was writing for. I realized that wherever I had lived I had accepted not only the geography of the place but also its history. I'd never lived anywhere as a foreigner - an ex-patriot. My family in Australia, for instance, were quite definitely Spanish but they were Australians, too; Australians in the sense that they were part of everything that was going on. (It was exactly what we used to talk about in Catalonia, how anyone who lived and worked here should be considered a Catalan.) Writing those stories in *All Those Wars* was really liberating for me because I accepted finally that my history was decidedly multicultural, that who I was encompassed much more than one culture and one language. Many people in the world today have this experience. They emigrate from Latin America, from Africa, from Asia, from other parts of Europe, and that all remains part of them. But they go on to live new

experiences in a new culture, a new language. That's the wonderful thing about immigrants. We have to accept that immigrants need to adapt to their new home when they arrive, but that doesn't mean that they should have to forget where they came from. That's part of them too, and we should always see it as an enriching element for their country of adoption, and for the people living there.

Pedro: It is curious that you came to understand this through writing.

Gloria: Yes, it is curious that this coming to terms with my identity should have come to me in this way, because by then I had been writing for many years. But finally when I did accept that I had not only Spain but Australia and Canada, too, where I lived for many years and where my children were born, it was an enriching experience. All of those countries, those cultures, those experiences are part of me. That background makes me different to other people, more different sometimes than what I might even want to be myself, but it is what I am, who I am.

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Pedro: My vision of Marini in your novel is that of a strong woman tied to the land. It seems to me that the reasons why she stays are economic or personal reasons (I mean caused by her desire to finish what her father started), or even a kind of magic or magnetic force that Australia uses against to prevent her leaving. Were you aware of any of this as Marini's character developed?

Gloria: I don't know or remember that I consciously wanted to show anything other than tell a story. If anything, the idea behind the book is that I believe we inherit a great many intangible things from our families, and what Marini inherited from her father were those dreams of his. By the time he died, he had lost faith in his dreams. Remember that question that someone asked in class about why he, who had always spoken in Spanish to Marini, speaks to her in English before he dies. When I was asked that question I didn't remember that part of the book and had to think about it. It was a very valid question and gradually I realized the reason why. He'd become disenchanted as he grew older after so many problems. He had an affair with Ena, the young girl who worked there. It was as if all the things he had ever been, all the dreams, had gone. And so then, without realizing it, he speaks to Marini in English and she wonders why. And just a moment after that, he dies.

Remember the paragraph of the book that you read at the beginning of this interview when Marini realises that the land has become part of her? When her father dies, she doesn't want to go anywhere else, that land, that plantation is her home. She wants to stay there and finish what they started to build. Her father's dream has become her own.

Pedro: So it is like a mixture of continuing her father's work. I think perhaps that people who work the land are more inclined to be involved with that feeling of belonging to the land.

Gloria: Exactly, and also I imagine that it explains something of the feelings of the person in the family who is not the *hereu*[3]. Catalan law at that time decreed that instead of being divided among all the children, a family property would be inherited by the eldest son. That explains something of the character of Mariano, who feels very bitter about this and determines at all costs to have his own property, his own land.

Pedro: Something similar happens to Dom, but in his case, he had to leave because his family in Ireland had no property. Dom is a very interesting character. I interpreted Dom's final crisis as a direct consequence of his traumatic experience with Aborigines. But I couldn't avoid thinking of another novel we dealt with through the course called *Coonardoo*. In this novel, Susannah Prichard depicts the rough conditions of the Australian land, and shows us how two women fail in trying to live on those lands, having to come back to the commodities of the city.

My question is: Are there any other reasons that explain therefore Dom's depression and posterior addiction to opium that can be also related to the harsh nature of the land, or is his trauma the only explanation for it?

Gloria: I guess my feeling was that Dom was a rather weak person. Not necessarily because of his experience with cannibals, although that had obviously been traumatic for him, although when he finally explains what he remembers, it is unclear if it was a dream, or something that had really happened. I did a lot of research into this. There are a number of reports by people in the early days who had been in the North, in the bush, and of their experience of cannibalism among the Aborigines. But what I felt about Dom was not only to do with that experience. It was about the kind of person he was. He was a very different character from his brother Michael who was full of energy, not only in the way he did things but also in the way he wanted to do things. Dom was more prepared to take the easy way out. He was obviously an attractive man and when he and Marini met it was at a moment when she needed someone with her, someone who would help her to keep the plantation going.

Pedro: She and Dom are as different as night and day.

Gloria: Exactly, and while Marini was ultimately too much for Dom, he was probably not enough for her, whereas Michael fitted the bill exactly. He was gorgeous, Robert Redford right there on the plantation! (Laughs) Marini was young and Dom was never around much anymore. So it was the most natural thing in the world they would fall in love.

Pedro: We get the feeling that Michael not only handles the farm better than Dom, but also that he acts as Joel's father better than Dom does.

Gloria: Dom's depression because of the problems of the plantation, his inability to succeed, his early trauma - it is all too much for him!

Pedro: Opium makes him forget all his problems.

[3] *Hereu* is the Catalan word for the English *heir*. According to the Catalan tradition, it was only the oldest son who inherited the lands and possessions of their parents.

Gloria: I never had the opportunity to go into an opium den, but I remember those old Chinese men, sitting on the street not far from where I lived, smoking their pipes. And in the early days there were places in the town where people would go to smoke opium.

Pedro: And do you think that the rough conditions of the land could also be a reason for Dom's failure?

Gloria: You mentioned earlier the novel *Coonardoo*, set in a part of Australia where conditions were very hard and people had to homestead and move their cattle long distances. Land like that might well be described as treacherous. In a similar way, the tropics, too, can be difficult. But I think that in writing the story I was thinking more about destiny. Although Marini does what she feels will be better for everyone, it all ends in tragedy. Just when it seems nothing can go wrong, it all collapses.

Pedro: And it's quite shocking, because I remember reading the novel in two parts. I first got to almost a hundred pages, and then read the rest of the novel in one night. And I started this second take from the moment they are starting to raise money and things seem to be getting better. I must say that when the disaster arrived, I wasn't prepared for that, it was completely unexpected, and that's maybe the reason why it shocked me so much.

Gloria: Yes. It is interesting that both my children, who were quite grown up when the novel came out, said: How could you? (She laughs) How could you do that to the poor children?

Pedro: Yes, because the end is completely devastating.

Gloria: I don't believe I knew when I began to write the novel how it would all end, at least, not exactly. I knew that Marini would do everything that she could to fulfil the dream, but that, life itself would take over. Gradually, as the story took shape, there was no other way to go. It all just happened.

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Pedro: Immigration plays an important role in the novel, and in fact, the main characters are immigrants working in Australia. What is your own experience of immigration in Australia at that time? How is it reflected in *The Villa Marini*?

Gloria: Well, yes, immigration there was a reality. I suppose immigration has always been something very real to me. For example, my very first book written when I was in Canada was, *The Immigrants,* an oral history of immigrants.

Pedro: Immigrants always bring new life and their specific cultural baggage with them when they arrive in new countries.

Gloria: I remember that a critic once said: There are three things that are always present in Montero's work: displaced people, the Spanish Civil War, and an absent father. I thought it curious at first, but then I started looking at all my work and I realised it was true! What you are, what is part of you, is the way you see the world.

Pedro: Everyone is like a filter.

Gloria: Even in my last novel, *Punto de Fuga*, which is a contemporary story about a war photographer, set around the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, those three elements are present. As you say, one reflects the world through one's own filter.

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Pedro: From my point of view, the land and working on it is depicted as treacherous in the novel, and its dangers become evident in various parts of it. After Mariano's death while working out in the fields, there's one moment where tension invades the reader, fearing that such an accident can happen again with Dom. At the end of the novel the dramatic end is exactly at the same location.

Do you agree with this interpretation of the land being treacherous, or do you attribute this evilness to destiny itself?

Gloria: It is all part of Life itself, although there's no doubt that the land can be treacherous. Natural events are often devastating for human beings. And in the tropics, everything seems bigger and more exuberant: flowers and birds are more colourful, trees are bigger, the climate is hotter, the sea is wilder; it's like an exaggeration of the global environment.

Pedro: Perhaps that very thing often makes the land itself seem legendary. I'm thinking now of the film "Picnic at Hanging Rock" have you seen it?

Gloria: Of course, that was a completely different part of Australia. But those kinds of legends, of feelings, myths about the land, exist in part because there were huge areas that were inhabited. You get these enormous expansions of land, where the country itself is very beautiful, but there is something that we don't understand about it, thus we attribute all kinds of things to the very land itself. The Aborigines in Australia live very much with an idea that the land itself is sacred. They are much more respectful than we are with the land.

Pedro: They believe the land rules their lives.

Gloria: Yes, and they have their Song Lines which define their areas, and their totems for different animals. When I lived in Australia you didn't see a lot of Aborigines in the area where I grew up. Aborigines then weren't integrated in any way into the population at large. There was one singer, Harold Blair, a tenor, I think he was, who was well known. The painter Albert Namatjira was also famous. But Australian Aboriginal art, the way we often see it now, was unknown. Aboriginal art was traditionally ceremonial. There were, I believe, only certain people in a tribe who were allowed to paint these ceremonial objects. I think it was only in the Sixties that people working with Aboriginal artists began to get them to paint on canvas and sell their work. Some of the big canvases that you see now are painted by two and sometimes by three people. Imagine, they decide they want to paint the legend of the crocodile. So they simply start, without making any draft. Someone asked an Aborigine artist once, how can you

do this? Aren't you afraid to make a mistake? And the artist answered: There are no mistakes. As a writer that impressed me enormously when I heard it: that idea of there not being anything good or bad, right or wrong, but that whatever we do living in the here and the now has its own validity. It is undoubtedly how we should consider whatever we do.

Pedro: Now for one last question. There's an old gramophone in Mariano Grau and his daughter's first house. Do you remember what music would be played on it while they dance together, their only company the wooden statue of Guillermina?

Gloria: I always imagined they would waltz. He would hold up his hands and take her in his arms and they would waltz. I never thought much about it, but I'm certain the records for that old gramophone would be of something like Machín, maybe *Angelitos Negros*. In any case, when they danced I'm certain they would have waltzed.

The interview is about to end, and after the questions there's still time to talk a bit about everything. We talk about music, the possible cinema adaptation of *The Villa Marini*, theatre, future dreams and projects and many other things. It's time to go now, and I feel that I'll be missing the magic feeling that Gloria's words have created in the apartment. As one last detail, she shows me her beautiful and unique unicorn collection. She explains to me that many of the different figures were presents from friends or family members. Judging from the large number of unicorns all around it would seem that Gloria must have very many loving people close to her. As I walk down the street, with my autographed copy of *Todas esas guerras*, I hope that during my stay in Ireland as an Erasmus student next year, I will find a beautiful Unicorn for Gloria's collection. As I walk down the street again, I realise how privileged I have been to meet such a special person as her.

Quote taken from the following edition of *The Villa Marini*:

Montero, Gloria. *The Villa Marini*. The Ecco Press. USA. 1998.