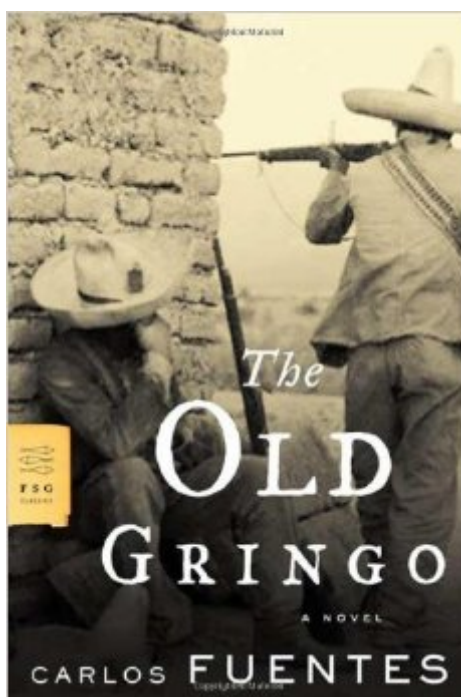


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The Old Gringo: A Novel (FSG Classics)



Synopsis

One of Carlos Fuentes's greatest works, *The Old Gringo* tells the story of Ambrose Bierce, the American writer, soldier, and journalist, and of his last mysterious days in Mexico living among Pancho Villa's soldiers, particularly his encounter with General Tomas Arroyo. In the end, the incompatibility of the two countries (or, paradoxically, their intimacy) claims both men, in a novel that is, most of all, about the tragic history of two cultures in conflict.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Judging by previous comments on *The Old Gringo*, many readers are perusing the novel for the content relating to the fate of American writer Ambrose Bierce. To read Fuentes' novel for that purpose is to miss the fine points of the novelist's craft. Or, perhaps, *The Old Gringo* has simply gotten better since it was first published in 1985. It seems to me that the main premise of *The Old Gringo* is that Mexico and the United States should get to know each other, become less of a mystery to each other. This premise has become more true over the past two decades--particularly as the immigration debate heats up. Near the end of the novel, the revolutionary fighter Inocencio Mansalvo, looks from "What a shame. They're right when they say this isn't a border. It's a scar." To understand that view, the reader has to have read the previous 185 pages. As a reader, I feel I ought to offer a compelling reason for others to seriously pick up this book--something more substantial than simply to read how Fuentes fictionalizes Bierce, a real person with a well-documented life.

What I find so wonderful here is that Fuentes manages to teach me about Mexico and the United States without preaching, without stopping the flow of the story. First of all, the key to how Fuentes constructed the plot is that he knew enough about American life--he spent much of his youth in Washington, D.C.--that he could see very clear reasons how an American journalist like Ambrose Bierce would purposefully go to Mexico in the 1910s. The conjunction of actual, historical events gave Fuentes the main structure: the Mexican revolution coming as Bierce was aging, feeling bitter about his broken family, regretting that he had written lies for a William Randolph Hearst newspaper.

Though this novel has all the hallmarks of a recognized classic, it is, surprisingly, only twenty-five years old. Set during Mexico's civil war in 1914, the author shows Mexico determined to be independent and true to its own history, while the US wants to create outcomes there which coincide with US goals and political agendas here. For more than forty years, Fuentes has also been fascinated with the story of American author/journalist Ambrose Bierce, who is believed to have vanished in Mexico during that war, and he exploits this long interest by making Bierce the "Old Gringo" of the title. Bierce, age seventy-one at the time of his disappearance, had traveled the world and had already written most of what he felt he had to say. Drawn to Mexico, where a popular revolution was threatening to change the country's history, Bierce is thought to have gone there to join up with Pancho Villa and his men, who were fighting the federales and the government of President Victoriano Huerta, known as "the Jackal." Bierce never returned, his fate unknown. On the level of plot, this is a story told by Harriet Winslow, a thirty-one-year-old American from Washington, D.C., who has been hired as a teacher by the wealthy Miranda family. Fuentes uses flashbacks to reveal Harriet's background and that of the Old Gringo, who has just arrived in these lands. Harriet regards the Old Gringo as a father figure, understanding that he has come to Mexico to die, while he in turn sees her as his final temptation before death. Harriet has had a brief but passionate relationship with Tomas Arroyo, the general who has driven out the Miranda family and hanged many of the federales protecting the property, and she is tormented by that relationship.

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