



Interview with Jess Wells, author of *Jaguar Paloma and the Caketown Bar* (Mirador, 2021, ISBN 978-1-914965-00-5. eBook, paperback and audio book.)

Jaguar Paloma and the Caketown Bar Two extraordinary women in 1865 establish a trading post in a southern jungle that grows to be a safe haven for cast-off women and the dispossessed. When a murderous forger sets up shop and the mayor on the right-side-of-the-tracks becomes intent on their destruction, the village fights for survival in its own special way. Told in evocative magical realism, *Jaguar Paloma and the Caketown Bar* is a tale of wronged women who stand up to be counted.

Q: Why did you decide to write it in the style of magical realism?

In a way, this is an homage to Gabriel Garcia Marquez so it can't be in any other form, can it? I'm kidding of course but it's a style I love to read and have always longed to write. It has been creeping into my writing over the years

and I'm so excited to be able to pull off in a full-length novel in it. For example, in *The Mandrake Broom* the protagonist doesn't age like others do because of a potion given to her by her mother. In *A Slender Tether*, the doctor in "The Gong Farmer's Tale" is sealed up in a cave by a bear. There is a tiny bit in *Straight Uphill* when people arrived to honor the hero of World War I. But this is the most extensive use of magical realism in my writing to date, and it was absolutely the most fun I have ever had writing anything.

Q: What was the genesis of this story? How did you come up with it?

I love the writing of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is one of the finest books written, ever, in my opinion. I have read it five times and the last time I read it the relationships and positions of the women started to jump to the foreground. For example, Pilar Tennara the saloon keeper and Ursula, the matriarch of the Buendia family, were among the founders of the town and yet Ursula refuses to allow Pilar to attend a founders' dinner because she has given birth to Ursula's illegitimate grandchildren. I thought "wouldn't that hurt Pilar's feelings?" It brought up the whole idea of how 'illegitimacy' is used to oppress people, especially women. And note the double standard: Ursula's sons can attend as the fathers of those illegitimate children but not Pilar. And then there's the question of Petra Cotes. Garcia Marquez mentions that the Buendia boy only has to have her ride through his pastures to increase the fertility of the animals and I wondered "if she's had that ability all along, what did her life look like prior to meeting the Buendia family?" It's her power after all, not his. And the little girl with extraordinary beauty: she has to be locked up and live without education because men die when they see her. But what about her tragedy? When the 17 mothers of the 17 Aurelianos show up at the door and then disappear, I wondered where they might've gone? Plus of course there's the mention of using/raping women everywhere the Colonel and his army went, and it sparked a question for me, especially as we were in the throes of the #MeToo movement, what would happen if all the used and abused women got together and formed a town of their own? Voila, Tartatenango.

Q: Tell us about the research for this book

I went to Columbia on 14-day tour of the country that included the Gabriel Garcia Marquez Museum in Aracataca, Colombia, the house where he grew up with his grandparents. We also went to Mompas, which is considered more of the actual locale of his stories, and we stopped at Cartagena. Some of the things that I saw that I incorporated included the marsh with the cattle on small strips of land, the solitary trees, the birds. The weaverbird, symbol of Colombia. People cutting mud for bricks. The Magdalena River and the caimans. We visited the hilly coffee growing region, and the small houses of the coffee growers/pickers. We were fortunate to be there during the three days that the coffee plants bloom, which is a rare event. The floating village in my book, though there is one in the marsh in Colombia, is actually based on my experience of a floating village in Cambodia and I didn't know until afterward that the area around the Colombian village is the bay of the jaguar.

Q: Why is so much of the plot of this book tied up with water and extreme weather?

Living in California the droughts have become so severe that they really work on your subconscious. The anxiety of watching trees die and everything become dusty is very intense. The extreme weather in the story is a commentary on the current state of the world with climate change. Droughts, floods, heat, weather no one has seen in centuries. I thought it was an apt metaphor. Additionally, it is a fact that water will be the most valuable commodity within the next 10 years.



Q: Describe some of the themes in the book:

- the intense love between women
- the oppression of single mothers
- the violence and sexual oppression of women
- extreme weather and the anxiety it produces.
- the way a women's beauty changes her reality.
- the temptation to use one's beauty as leverage.
- the restorative power of community
- the use of men by men as cannon fodder
- the unique connection between twins
- the frailty, some would say the chimera of legitimacy vs illegitimacy, paper and cake.

Q: Some would criticize you for writing about the Latinx experience when that's not your ethnicity. What is your response to that?

That was of concern to me because I take very seriously the issue of cultural appropriation but much of this is from my own experience. For example: I am a single mother by choice and so have experienced firsthand the ridiculous stigma put on single mothers. I've been assaulted nine times in my life, though never raped, and so am part of the global community of assault survivors, like the women of Tartatenango. I live in California and have experienced firsthand the anxiety that's caused by drought and extreme weather. That's also why this book is set in Calexcibia: an entirely fictional place, but one in which my personal location – California – can be part of the story, not exclusively someone else's country. And the intense love between women, sexual or otherwise, is one of the cornerstones of my life.

Q: This book is set in a country called Calexcibia. Where is that?

It's fictional, but a combination of California, where I have lived for 40 years, Mexico and Colombia where Gabriel Garcia Marquez's books are set.

Q: Garcia Marquez actually was considered an illegitimate child, wasn't he? And didn't he mention part of the rebel platform being the honoring of legitimate and illegitimate children equally?

Yes, and there's a moment in *Jaguar Paloma* where that agenda is repeated by the rebels.

Q: Speaking of Tartatenango, how did you come up with that name?

I wanted to name it Caketown because of the whole idea of paper and cake so when I was in Colombia, the tour guide asked a hotel caretaker who told us the name in Colombian slang. It's a mouthful but I love it.

Q: As an homage to Garcia Marquez, what are some of the elements you have incorporated?

The reference to ice that is mentioned in the first paragraph of Garcia Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude* shows up here as hail. The two rocks in the river that he calls eggs I describe as the breasts of a new mother in the morning. The loss of memory is actually based on information from *The Robber of Memories: a River Journey Through*

Columbia by Michael Jacobs and I did my research to be sure that the resulting memory loss could be caused by pesticides. And the fecundity of Petra Cotes is an occasional gift to our heroine Jaguar Paloma. Gabo's Pilar Tennara, who is the mother of the entire second generation of Buendias but is oppressed for her unmarried status, has a saloon named The Golden Child, like Paloma has the Caketown Bar. There's a morose General, rather than Gabo's Colonel, and I try to imagine the reality of the three mistresses he brings home together. The exquisitely beautiful girl in *One Hundred Years*, whose beauty kills men, is seen from her side with Orietta. Her beauty is a burden, but she doesn't let it keep her child-like. This is an imagining of what she would be like as a woman. Gabo's child is hidden and Orietta chooses to hide as well. In the end, she is seen by men to rise into heaven in the fire (though I won't say more about that without a spoiler alert.) There are enough to be an homage while being an entirely original work.

Q: You say this is a story of mirth and mayhem. What do you mean by that?

I always want my books to be filled with vivid language but especially with *Jaguar*, I want readers to be delighted with the madcap happenings and the oddities in the landscape, to really feel immersed in life in the village. I want amused smiles on the faces of my readers. My goal, my desire, is that the book is seen as joyful, while bringing some important ideas to mind.

Q: What are some of your favorite visual images in this very visual book?

I love the monkeys in the trees with the wigs, the way they cradle them like babies.

I think Dr. Valdez is so precious. The image of this waist-high light, his bioluminescent hands moving towards you across a dance floor. That's the image that made me want to include this character.

I can see the sandbar encircled with bushes where she meets Ian, the way the light filters through the branches, the eggs stacked like cannonballs (the anti-weapon, if you will, or the weapons of women).

I love the birds in the trees that were mistaken for blossoms until they fly away on the sandbar where Jaguar got pregnant.

I love the visual of Old Man Orjuela with a young woman's hand clasped between his as he tells her everything she always wanted to hear.

I think the storm when she comes home is really vivid and I can see them coming down a mountainside with the goats so desperate to be near her that they put everyone in danger.

The abandoned wheel of fortune when a bird lands on it and sets it in motion.

The mold that covers the town. The blue mist that hugs the ground around the house when Paloma makes love with Gonzago the muleteer.

The whole project actually was ready to begin when I thought of the final scene when the village marches into Araca. I wanted to write a scene where women who were considered of "ill repute" march en masse toward a funeral even though they have been expressly forbidden to attend. They claim their rights and are formidable.

Q: Explain to me how this is a feminist story.

You notice there aren't any sex workers in the story. There's no tolerance in the town for violence against women for example. Sometimes I think of it as "#MeToo comes to Macondo." Weddings are not sacred and not a way to divide 'good girls' from bad. An ancient philosopher said "women's virtue is man's best invention" because of the way that the concept of 'virtue' is used to oppress women, keep them locked up (like in a harem or just a suburban home), or cordoned off (as in a red-light district), or to make their children 'unworthy' of support or recognition. It's also a feminist story in that it addresses Orietta's extreme beauty: people hate her for it, or hunger for her like she's a foodstuff. How men feel excused from morality in the face of beauty, how defining beauty is for a woman.

Q: *What about the men in the story?*

I love the men in this book. Gonzago is luscious. I actually get choked up thinking about Old Man Orjuela and what he does for people. The fey men who dance in the bar. Cosimo the swindler was supposed to be a minor character, but he wouldn't leave the stage and so became a key character. And Dr. Valdez and his tiny hands making love and birthing children, what can I say?

Also by Jess Wells

Straight Uphill: A Tale of Love and Chocolate (Fireship/Cortero, 2020)
The Disappearing Andersons of Loon Lake (Audio book, 2017)
A Slender Tether (Fireship, 2013)
The Mandrake Broom (Firebrand Books, 2007)
The Price of Passion (Firebrand Books, 1999)
AfterShocks (InsightOutBooks 2002; The Women's Press, London, 1993; Third Side Press, 1992)
Two Willow Chairs (short stories, Library B Books, 1987)
The Dress, The Cry and a Shirt with No Seams (short stories, Library B Books, 1984)
The Sharda Stories (Library B Books, 1982)
A Herstory of Prostitution in Western Europe (non-fiction, Shameless Hussy Press, 1982)
Run (Library B Books, 1981)

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