

Romantic Love in Mexico and Latin America: An Interview with Enrique Serna

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Abstract: Enrique Serna is one of Mexico's most celebrated living writers. In this interview with Michael K. Schuessler, Serna discusses his ideas regarding romantic love in Latin America.

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Enrique Serna (Mexico City, 1959) is one of Mexico's most celebrated living writers. Although he is best known for his novels of historical fiction, for example, *El seductor de la patria* (1999) and *Ángeles del abismo* (2004), Serna's literary career began in 1987 with the publication of *Señorita México*, a crude portrait of an erstwhile beauty queen whose life as told to a reporter is a pretext for much deeper (and biting) social criticism. This inclination flowers most brilliantly in *El miedo a los animales* (1995), a piercing satire inspired by the author's own experiences within the perplexing mafia of Mexico's intellectual and political underworld. Not only a novelist, Serna is also one of Latin America's most talented short story writers, and his first collection, entitled *Amores de segunda mano* (1991), foresaw the publication of *El orgasmógrafo* (2001) and his most recent book, entitled *La ternura caníbal* (2013). In 2002, the literary review *Nexos* included Serna in a list of the top ten Mexican short story writers of the last twenty-five years. Given his enormous success in Mexico, it is at once surprising and discouraging to consider that of his twelve works, only one of them (*Fear of Animals* [Aflame Books, U.K. 2008]) has been translated into English. In this interview, Serna discusses his ideas regarding romantic love in Latin America, an underlying theme to be found in many of his literary creations, where the sheer tawdriness (and cheesiness) of many intimate relationships experienced by his literary characters is imbued with the saccharine verses of Mexico's romantic ballads, soap operas, films, and other manifestations of popular culture.

Michael K. Schuessler: *Enrique, I'd like to talk with you about the concept of romantic love in the literature and culture of Mexico and Latin America. I have assembled some questions and I would like to start with this: In what ways has romantic love been portrayed in cinema, literature, television, and popular music in Mexico and in Latin America, now and in the past?*

Enrique Serna: In my opinion, the 1930s were the golden age of Mexican popular culture. This period came before the intensification of mass popular culture, with its wide range of marketing strategies, all designed to evaluate the reaction of the consumer... that is to say, to prevent the reaction of the consumer. This was the era of XEW radio broadcasting, and the owners of the station believed that by hiring the best composers and singers, they would corner top ratings. So, it was understood that the owners would allow free artistic license, which was necessary, of course, and they gave us the works of Agustin Lara, for example...

Starting in the 1920s, Lara began to frequent the brothels of Mexico City, and, in fact, most of his songs were composed based on his experiences there. It is curious how music composed in bordellos became the popular music of the day, listened to by housewives, whose fantasy was to be treated like "adventuresses" or "loose women" invoked in his songs.

MKS *And I believe that this phenomenon also occurred in Mexican cinema of the period. The 1932 film Santa, for example... Does this movie have anything to do with what you are describing?*

ES Of course it did. First there was the silent version and then the "talkie" version that included a soundtrack and Lara's song (of the same name). It was perfect for the movie. The song is about a prostitute, and it is likely that Lara got his inspiration from the special type of love he came to know in the brothels.

There is a difference between this type of ballad and that of the Yucatecan *trova*, the songs composed by such artists as Guty Cárdenas, whose style has been kept alive by artists such as Armando Manzanero. The *trova*-type ballad is more in keeping with conventional morality. These kinds of songs can be sung to your girlfriend and her parents can enjoy them, too. There's no strong erotic content, as in the compositions of Lara and later in the works of another famous songwriter: Roberto Cantoral. He was the author of *Reloj* and other songs like *Soy lo prohibido*. In this era, we also have *Ranchera* music. This type of music is more dramatic and exalts lost love. In this sense it is similar to the music of other countries, like the Blues of the US or the Argentine tango. These genres also elevate failure as an emotion: it hurts, but it gives you pleasure.

MKS *Might one affirm, then, that Mexican popular music begins with the compositions of Agustín Lara in the 1920s, and that subsequently what was originally conceived as a literary manifestation enters the world of cinema, as well as a music that modifies the way love and suffering are portrayed?*

ES Not precisely. Lara had literary abilities; as a youth he studied in the French *Lycée*. He had read the works of Baudelaire, for example. He created sumptuous metaphors inspired by the *modernistas*, that is, the Latin American symbolists. These metaphors were complex: "eyes made drunk by the sun"... they were not common clichés. What he did was to mix

these metaphors with lines that were more easily understood. And in this way he kept the public from being frightened away (or confused) by these unusual images.

MKS *How do you compare these romantic composers, along with parallel representations in cinema and literature, with others presented to the general public? How have they been used to serve the aims of national, state, and regional political figures of the time, and how did they affect political change?*

ES Well, for *Ranchera* music, the center of action was the Mexican state of Jalisco. In fact, it was the image of the “*charros cantores* – singing cowboys” that Mexico first exported to the world. The first hit was *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, and the second was *¡Ay Jalisco no te Rajes!* As a result, this style becomes known as the epitome of Mexican music. The original *mariachis* were poor Indian farmers who wore plain cotton clothing, while the *charro* costume of the time was worn by the *hacienda* owners. Consequently, the *mariachi* groups settled on outfits that were considered elegant apparel of the time. In turn, the musical groups that traveled to Mexico City to play at elegant parties also wore this signature outfit.

There are old photographs where the *mariachis* appear in plain clothing, but then stars such as Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante came onto the scene wearing the elegant *traje de mariachi* costume. As I have said, without doubt they became symbolic of Mexican music and were warmly embraced by the population at large. The songs are representative of an age; they also clearly were identified with the *criollo* (white) *hacienda* owners. In all honesty, this is the music that really touched the Mexican soul. *Ranchero* music is similar to styles such as *Flamenco* – it is a plaintive music very similar to *cante jondo* (of Andalucía). This is one of the reasons that Mexican *mariachi* music was so well accepted in Spain. The *mariachi* heroes there. Their music can be heard everywhere.

MKS *And does this concept of romantic love–painful and cruel–make Mexican romantic music stand apart from the romantic music of other countries?*

ES I don’t think there’s much difference. After all, the Blues, the Tango, the *Ballenato* from Columbia, and the *Cante jondo* of Spain all generally speak to failure in love. I think it’s a universal tendency. But in Mexico, the particular mournful style has enriched the genre worldwide. But what has made the huge negative difference and degraded Mexico’s image is mass-marketing. It has tried to take the musical artists away from the people. It has attempted to dictate and manipulate their tastes while seemingly giving the public what it wants. That is not to say that since the 60s, everything produced has been garbage, but I venture to say that we have moved away from the excellence of the earlier times.

MKS *And how do you relate these concepts to romanticism in literature, for example, in that of Mexico. This Romanticism, is it too related with romantic love? Is there continuity from the 19th to the 20th century?*

ES Well, I don’t know if the *Bolero* is very faithful to the concept of romantic love without analyzing romanticism in literature of the 18th and 19th centuries: the German school or that of French Romanticism. It is more of a sentimental type of music than a melodramatic one. It has been called Romanticism, but this is an oversimplification. This music has, of course, had a great impact on Mexican literature during the second half of the 20th Century. Titles such as “*Arráncame la Vida*” by Ángeles Mastretta come to mind, and the *Bolero* is

still the fountain of inspiration. This is logical because many of us were educated listening to music. In my case, this was the music my parents listened to, and I liked it. I continued listening to it, and I think this is the characteristic of Mexican popular music: its longevity. And we can see that now, the music of Agustín Lara has outlasted the music of the 70s, for example, which has been more or less forgotten.

MKS *How are such stereotypes as that of the Latin Lover developed in countries like the US?*

ES Well, I think this is a stereotype promoted by people from the United States. There they see the Latin Lover as someone exotic and attractive. Probably they see this figure as someone like Rudolph Valentino. In the US, the figure of the Latin Lover was converted into that of a sex symbol, whereas in Mexico it is the reverse. Here the sex symbol is the blond – we Mexicans have always found them attractive. Moreover, the blonde *gringas* are seen as the ultimate sexual conquest. And we see this a lot in the novels of José Agustín, Ricardo Garibay, a little in those of Carlos Fuentes, such as *Frontera de Cristal*, in which bedding a *gringa* is the maximum sexual conquest that a Mexican macho can aspire to. I think this comes from the way many *gringas* come to have sexual flings with the beach boys in Acapulco. And of course, the *gringos* do the same...

MKS *Are there expressions of love, of romantic love, in Mexico's gay culture, as well? Is there transference or a rejection of these heteronormative phenomena?*

ES Actually, these are not gay songs, but the gay community has appropriated them. There are legends, and you probably have heard them; for example, there is the story that the song "Usted es la culpable de todas mi angustias," written by Gabriel Ruiz Galindo, was originally entitled "Daniel" and written for a man by a man. The song's author apparently sold the rights to the person who is now credited as being the composer, a composer from Chiapas, I believe, but I forget his name. And then in the 70s, things started to become much more liberal. There are strong insinuations in the songs. For example, the one by José José that says: "I have rolled around from here to there, everything within reason... with this one (éste y aquel) and that one (ésta y aquella) with everything (con esto y aquello)." It's a great song!

MKS *Now, to finish up, I'd like to know if you think there's an enormous difference between "high culture" and "popular culture" in Latin America, and if this distinction is gradually becoming blurred?*

ES There is a difference in the different countries of Latin America. I think that in countries where a cultural elite exists, you will find a distinction between "high culture" and "popular culture," and for this reason, the "higher class" rejects "the popular class." However, this has been changing. For example, the national writers' guild contains in its roster many composers of *Boleros*: they include Lara, Álvaro Carrillo, Luis Alcaraz, and others. This indicates to me that this music is considered among the best in Mexico. And I think this trend will continue. But still there is a tendency to maintain separate worlds. There are other countries where great poets also write music. In Brazil, for example, there is Vinicius de Moraes, a member of the country's avant-garde, as well as Chico Boarque. Both were great poets and composers. In these cases we have no distinction. And then we have the tangos...

MKS *And what to say about the television genre that Americans see as wholly Latin American – the telenovela? How do you relate the telenovela with this concept of romantic love?*

ES The *telenovela* is a form of entertainment that has borrowed much from the *Bolero* – in fact, many *telenovelas* are named after songs. I remember in the 1960s there was a *telenovela* called *Fallaste Corazon*, just like the famous song by Cuco Sánchez. And so we can see that the songs have outlived the *telenovelas*. This phenomenon began towards the end of the 1950s. The first *telenovela* was *Sendas Perdidas*, written by Fernanda Villeli.

MKS *These were women scriptwriters? Did they write to express their point of view, their personal experiences? How do you see this?*

ES Well, I think it was always a purely commercial enterprise. I don't think anybody has written a *telenovela* as a means of expressing themselves. That didn't exist before, and I don't think it exists now. But now there is more creative freedom. There was not in the beginning. Early scriptwriters like Caridad Bravo Adams lived these dramas authentically; they believed in the drama and they transmitted it to the public. For this reason, they were so effective. Normally these dramas were based upon the story of Cinderella. That's why there have been hundreds and hundreds of *telenovelas* about the poor girl who overcomes bad treatment by her employer and ends up marrying the son or the boss and consequently has the last laugh. In the end, the producers want to exploit the same successful formula, over and over, until they "kill the goose that laid the golden egg."

MKS *It certainly is a theme that is repeated time and again in the telenovelas of Latin America in general and those of Mexico in particular.*

ES Well. It's the same every time because in Mexico and Latin America you can't have love without passion. And this love includes ardent sexual desire. So I think in the most representative Mexican popular songs we find this fervent, blood-boiling passion of Latin America that is identified with the region, thus it is seen by the world as a characteristic of Latin America, for better or worse.