

BIOGRAPHY

Marvel Luz Moreno Abello was born September 23, 1939 in the aristocratic El Prado neighborhood of Barranquilla, the principal river and maritime port on Colombia's Caribbean coast. She belonged to an upper middle class family that managed to maintain appearances while slipping into financial decline. Her mother, Berta Abello Falquez, came from an old family of the established upper class that counted among its forebears a Spanish admiral, a governor and a renowned mayor of Barranquilla. Her father, Benjamin Moreno, came from a middle class family in Cartagena de Indias that was a mixture of Dutch Jews and Caribbean Indians; he was a respected Cartagena lawyer. In October 1938 she was baptized as a Roman Catholic. Two years later her only brother, Ronald Eduardo, was born. She grew up in an atmosphere that was predominantly feminine, the first education she received being from her maternal grandmother, an important person in Marvel's life who impressed upon her from childhood the importance of winning her own personal independence.

In 1944 her mother enrolled her in a religious school, *Nuestra Señora de Lourdes*, where she embarked on her primary education and where three years later she received first communion. Her father introduced her to music and reading, with a healthy orientation toward the classics. In 1950 she began secondary studies at *La Enseñanza*, a school run by the Company of María religious order. Eventually she was expelled for defending Darwin against the Doctrine of the Church and its dogma condemning evolutionary theory. She subsequently lost her Catholic faith. She read tearfully the novel *María* by the romantic novelist Jorge Isaacs; she died with laughter reading *Don Quijote* fifteen times and one of them crying, as she later recalled. Transferred to a public school that took in working class boys, she was forced to abandon her studies at age 16.

She worked in a private clinic owned by one of her uncles, first as a floor nurse and later in the operating room. In deference to the fading traditions of her social class, she made her social debut in 1956. At this time, aware of Marvel's beauty, her mother forced her to participate in beauty pageants until, in 1959, she was named Queen of the Carnival at Barranquilla, turning Marvel, within a matter of weeks, into the biggest celebrity in the city and winning her press notices throughout the country.

At the beginning of the seventies she met Alejandro Obregón, the most important Colombian painter of the last half of the 20th Century, with whom she maintained a close and deep friendship that was life long. She pursued her studies in a public school while working in various health dispensaries. During this period she discovered the weighty classics of 20th century literature, which exerted a profound influence on the future writer, particularly those of James Joyce, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf and Carson MacCullers. During this period she varied her readings of these authors while avoiding the work of Colombian writers altogether.

In 1961 she assisted in the production of a documentary about the Baranquilla Carnaval, directed by the writer Alvaro Cepeda Samudio with Gabriel García Marquez operating a camera. With the former she would share years of warm camaraderie; she read his novel *La casa grande* in manuscript.

In 1962, to escape the suffocation of Barranquilla's restrictive atmosphere, she married a journalist and writer from Bogotá named Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, the son of a politician and

journalist from the liberal Gaitanista area of Boyacá. Their intimate friends Alvaro and Tita Cepeda Samudio served as best man and maid of honor. She became acquainted with a few of her husband's friends, including the priest and future guerrilla, Father Camilo Torres and the relatively unknown writer Gabriel García Márquez, with whom she had a warm fraternal relationship. She socialized regularly with the members of the "Barranquilla Group" in the *La Cueva* café and developed a significant attachment to the young painter Norman Mejía and "el mono" Vilá Fuenmayor, the café's proprietor. Another young painter, Noé León, captivated as all of them were by Marvel's beauty, painted an oil portrait of her in which she is surrounded by three tiger cubs.

Her first child, Carla, was born in 1963. Her friendship with the famous journalist Germán Vargas intensified into a relationship that would prove decisive in her literary life, because it was he who inspired her to write in a systematic way. In 1964 she returned to her studies, enrolling in the university to study economics and becoming the first woman admitted to the department. Guided by one of her professors she opened a marketing consultancy and later a publicity agency that she managed profitably until 1969.

Her second daughter was born in 1966 and she named her Camila in honor of Camilo the priest. In 1967 she became friends with the prestigious Argentine art and literary critic Marta Traba. She developed a special affinity for painting and began to study it, eventually becoming a connoisseur. From that time her preference grew for friendships with painters and artists. This was her period of leftist political activism and militancy and she participated in clandestine activities in support of the guerrillas. In October, 1969 she published her first story, "El Muñeco" in *Eco* of Bogotá, the most important Colombian literary journal of this period. The same story was published a few months later in the prestigious *Magazín Dominical* of the independent liberal daily, *El Espectador*. First marital crisis. After a brief stay in Bogotá she returned to Barranquilla and a little later traveled to Europe. On September 6, 1969 she arrived in Paris and reconciled with her husband. Financial difficulties forced them to move to Deyá in Mallorca, where Marvel became a personal friend and conversational partner of the English poet Robert Graves who, in addition to affectionately calling her "the witch" gave her a copy of his most famous novel, *I, Claudius* with the inscription: "To Marvel, from Claudius, Emperor of Rome and his humble British biographer Robert Graves." In April 1970, accompanied by Marvel's mother, her two children arrived at Deyá, having been temporarily left behind in Barranquilla.

When the "Padilla case" began, Marvel, without renouncing her principles, distanced herself from the Cuban revolution, which in her view had been "contaminated by sectarianism and dogmatism." In September 1971 she returned to Paris, where she decided to settle permanently and never return to her native city. She participated actively in the launch of *Libre*, the most important Spanish-language literary magazine in Paris at the time, directed by Plinio Mendoza and organized as a literary gathering place for the Latin American writers living or exiled in Paris. While working as editor of the magazine until 1972, she established connections with all the great writers of the Latin American boom, including Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Severo Sarduy and Jorge Edwards. She met with Julio Cortazar, Octavio Paz, Jorge Semprún, the Mexican painter José Luis Cuevas, the Peruvian novelist Rodolfo Hineztrosa and the Cuban dramatist Eduardo Manet. Among the hundreds of persons she encountered were the Venezuelan ex-guerrilla commander Teodoro Petkoff – in exile in Paris after being granted amnesty by the government of his country – and the ex-right hand man of Fidel Castro, Carlos

Franqui, to whom she dedicated one of her stories. In the busy clamor of those years she did a series of important interviews and noteworthy literary profiles published in Caracas.

She began to distance herself from the “revolutionary left of the Paris cafes” without embracing positions of the extreme right. A little later, she not only severed her connections with politics, religion and “whatever dogma, ideology or regimen that stands in opposition to the freedom to be”, but she also distanced herself from her new “great and acclaimed colleagues” in order to gain the solitude required for her proposed task: to become a writer with an autonomous and original voice. At this time she began an intense and deep lifelong friendship with the Catalan novelist Juan Goytisolo.

Second marital crisis. At the end of 1972 she unexpectedly became gravely ill and spent two years hovering between life and death, in the midst of enormous economic difficulties and the responsibility to educate her two daughters. A year later she was treated as an indigent at the Saint-Louis Hospital. The doctors diagnosed a mortal illness, lupus, with a bleak prognosis of no more than two years to live. The certainty of living with an incurable illness that could kill her at any moment did not dampen her urgent desire to write. On the contrary, her desire grew and developed into an authentic and ambitious literary project.

Between 1973 and 1974 she was subjected to a long and probing psychoanalysis. One day her therapist, running into her by accident in the Saint-Anne asylum, saved her from being committed after she had been declared insane. She returned to live with Plinio Mendoza until 1980.

She embarked on a frenetic period dedicated to writing. To survive she gave private Spanish lessons and in 1975 she worked as a language teacher at the Berlitz and Pigier schools. The same year *Eco* in Bogotá published her second story, “Oriane, tía Oriane / Oriane, Aunt Oriane”. In November she met Jacques Gilard for the first time, surrounded by her cats in a house on rue Croulebarbe. He was destined to become the executor of her work and her second reader after Plinio. In 1976 Gilard published Marvel’s third story, “La sala del niño Jesús/ The Baby Jesus’ Room” in the University of Toulouse’s magazine *Caravelle*. She pursued her tireless work as a writer – always by hand, always in school notebooks, always with a pencil in her diminutive and precise handwriting, impeccable and with nothing crossed out. After five months of ceaseless work the group of stories and tales that she would later title *Algo tan feo en la vida de una señora bien/ Something So Ugly in the Life of a Wellbred Woman* assumed its final form with the writing of the novella “The Happy Night of Madame Yvonne”. The book debuted “officially” in 1980. In reality it was poorly printed and distributed in 1981 in Bogotá by the Pluma editorial house, which arbitrarily censored the story “Autocrítica / Self-criticism”. It was deemed “inappropriate” that it dealt with an anti-Stalinist metaphor. At this time, Marvel was reading the stories of Félix Fuenmayor and Cepeda Samudio for the first time.

Starting in September 1977 Marvel dedicated herself exclusively and passionately to writing a novel that completely absorbed her for seven consecutive years: *En diciembre llegaban las brisas/ In December the Breezes Blew*, “the Bible of Barranquilla”, as intimates call it. She continued to cultivate her friendships with Servero Sarduy and Juan Goytisolo. In this period she broke with many of her acquaintances and maintained close relations with very few individuals: the Venezuelan anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos, filmmaker Fina Torres and Colombian painters Luis Caballero, Darío Morales and Fabio Rodríguez Amaya, the last destined to be the faithful and secret third reader of her work.

In 1980 she met the French engineer Jacques Fourier and moved to rue de Ridder. In December 1982 she married this man after divorcing her first husband. A year later the French edition of her book of stories was published, translated by Jacques Gilard. The tragic deaths of many friends affected her profoundly, among them Marta Traba and Angel Rama, victims of the Madrid air accident in which more than 100 perished, among them important Latin American writers, artists, musicians and intellectuals.

In spite of grave difficulties imposed by her fragile health, the writer made several short trips to cities in the French provinces to present her book of stories. The novel, meanwhile, was accepted by the jury as a finalist for the 1985 Plaza & Janés International Literary Prize in Barcelona. Having won the prize from the jury, the novel was nevertheless disqualified thanks to the pressures of the publisher, who decided that the editorial house would neither underwrite nor promote the notoriety of any other work identifiable as part of the –already very recognized– Latin American literature. In spite of this humiliating criticism, the novel was published – with serious mutilations – by the same editor in February 1987. Meanwhile, the writer gained recognition and distinction from other sources: the Venezuelan filmmaker Fina Torres made the film *Oriana*, based entirely on the second story published by Marvel Moreno. The film won the Gold Camera at the Cannes Festival of 1985 as well as many other prizes, including recognition at the Colombian Film Festival in Cartagena de Indias. The same year she met with Alejandro Obregón for the last time, on the occasion of the artist’s personal exhibition in Paris.

Aside from the resounding success of the film, the literary work itself began to gain a certain notoriety: the novel, translated into Italian by Monica Molteni, was published in 1988 by the Guinti editorial house of Florence in the collection “Astrea” with the title *In dicembre tornavano le brezze* (currently in its fifth edition with numerous reprints). In 1989 it won the prestigious Grinzane-Cavour international literary prize, awarded to the best foreign book; the other finalists were Russian writer Leonid Borodin and British writer Doris Lessing. Marvel traveled to Milan and later to Turin for the awards festivities. The national press and the Italian critics paid close attention to her and she granted numerous interviews. In Milan she met important Italian writers and poets and was the guest of honor at receptions and parties, the most gratifying example being the invitation from Lucy Nieto de Samper, at that time Consul General de Colombia. In Turin, at the *Salon del Libro* she met, among others, the Portuguese storyteller and dramatist José Saramago and the Italian novelist from Greek/Eritrean origin Alfredo Antonaros. Like them, she signed a contract for assignment of the Italian rights to her work to the Einaudi editorial house in Turin. Upon her return to Paris she moved to the rue de Couronnes. The French version of the novel, translated by Eduardo Jimenez, appeared publicly the following year published by Robert Laffont under the title *Les dames de Barranquilla* (*The Ladies of Barranquilla*).

In 1986 Marvel Moreno began to write a series of stories and tales – the first entitled “Barlovento” – that were published sporadically in magazines in France, Italy, Venezuela, Mexico and Colombia. The complete collection was published in 1992 with the title *El encuentro y otros relatos / The Encounter and Other Tales* by the El Ancora editorial house in Bogota.

Time, according to Marvel herself, began to heal the interior injuries caused by a hectic life; slowly the nightmares, ghosts, fears and depressions began to lift in the course of her daily life with Jacques Forrier who, after their marriage, provided all the attention his bride required, leavened with love and wisdom. A gradual peace settled over her relations with her ex-husband and she made the deliberate choice to maintain a retired and solitary life dedicated to writing,

surrounded by very few friends. Marvel met with very few people as her illness continued to progress, leaving her with less and less time to write. Marvel observed with sadness the slow deaths of two of her closest friends from Paris: the painters Dario Morales and Luis Caballero. She spoke with serenity of her illness and was not in the habit of burdening friends with details of her physical and spiritual discomfort. Perhaps in these years her greatest suffering came from the fact that she did not feel recognized and she did not foresee a general audience ever sharing the feverish interest that her work was inspiring among her growing legion of secret readers.

While in the grip of an irreversible worsening of her illness, and with the modesty and discretion that always distinguished her, Marvel Moreno pursued her race against time in order to reach the fated goal: to conclude her mature output with a second collection of stories. At the beginning of October in 1990, the year that they diagnosed her with pulmonary emphysema, she began to write her second novel, autobiographical in form, with which she proposed to evoke through fiction the three lively, dramatic and melancholy decades she had lived through in Paris.

The first version, completed toward the end of 1993 – the year her second daughter got married – had as its objective to produce a large amount of memorable material originating in her long process of self-analysis. The first months of 1994 allowed the writer to rework this opus whose roots were autobiographical but whose final result exceeded this scope. In June of the same year she stayed for one week in the Necker Hospital. The following summer she began work on the final point of the second version, the point at which it could be considered finished. The title of the manuscript was *El tiempo de las Amazonas / The Time of the Amazons*.

That same summer Marvel Moreno began the reworking of some notes that concerned her second novel and she wrote some new texts, yielding a total of seven unedited stories that potentially constituted enough to put together a new book. Since day by day she was becoming more disabled and the wear produced by her long illness was irreversible she happily dedicated herself to revising and correcting the unedited material.

On June 5, 1995, while she was writing the first paragraph of a story entitled “Un amor de mi madre / A Love of My Mother” Marvel Moreno died at dawn’s first light, in the Paris of her dreams and misfortunes, her heartbreaks and joys: the Paris that witnessed her important artistic production. A few days before her death she had authorized the Italian edition of her first book of stories, *Qualcosa di brutto nella vita di una signora perbenne*. In 1997 Jacques Gilard and Fabio Rodríguez Amaya organized an International symposium at the University of Toulouse le Mirail dedicated to her work and her memory. In 2001 the Norma editorial house in Bogota published the collection *Cuentos completos / Complete Stories* which includes the two collections of previously published stories and the group of unedited stories entitled *Las fiebres del Miramar/ The Miramar’s Fevers*.

J.G./F.R.A.