



## Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

### *Love in the Time of Cholera*

by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Knopf, 1988)

**Target Audience:** Adult readers who enjoy epic love stories.

**Synopsis:** *Love in the Time of Cholera* details a passionate love triangle that unfolds in turn-of-the-century South America. Two young lovers who bide their time for years while anxiously awaiting the day they can finally be together. Through marriages, affairs, careers, and deaths, the couple never loses hope that destiny will unite them in the end.

**Author Biography:** Gabriel García Márquez is the product of his family and his nation. Born in the small coastal town of Aracataca in northern Colombia, he was raised by his maternal grandparents. As a child, he was mesmerized by stories spun by his grandmother and her sisters – a rich gumbo of superstitions, folk tales, and ghost stories that fired his youthful imagination. And from his grandfather, a colonel in Colombia's devastating Civil War, he learned about his country's political struggles. This potent mix of Liberal politics, family lore, and regional mythology formed the framework for his magical realist novels.

When his grandfather died, García Márquez was sent to Sucre to live (for the first time) with his parents. He attended university in Bogotá, where he studied law in accordance with his parents' wishes. It was here that he first read *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka and discovered a literature he understood intuitively – one with nontraditional plots and structures, just like the stories he had known all his life. His studies were interrupted when the university was closed, and he moved back north, intending to pursue both writing and law; but before long, he quit school to pursue a career in journalism.

In 1954 his newspaper sent García Márquez on assignment to Italy, marking the start of a lifelong self-imposed exile from the horrors of Colombian politics that took him to Barcelona, Paris, New York, and Mexico. Influenced by American novelist William Faulkner, creator of the fictionalized Yoknapatawpha County, and by the powerful intergenerational tragedies of the Greek dramatist Sophocles, García Márquez began writing fiction, honing a signature blend of fantasy and reality that culminated in the 1967 masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This sweeping epic became an instant classic and set the stage for more bestselling novels, including *Love in the Time of Cholera*, *Love and Other Demons*, and *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. In addition, he has completed the first volume of a shelf-bending memoir, and his journalism and nonfiction essays have been collected into several anthologies.

In 1982, García Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his acceptance speech, he called for a “sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness is possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.” Few writers have pursued that utopia with more passion and vigor than this towering 20th-century novelist.

### **Reviews:**

#### **Publishers Weekly**

“The ironic vision and luminous evocation of South America that have distinguished Garcia Marquez’s Nobel Prize-winning fiction since his landmark work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, persist in this turn-of-the-century chronicle of a unique love triangle. It is a fully mature novel in scope and perspective, flawlessly translated, as rich in ideas as in humanity. The illustrious and meticulous Dr. Juvenal Urbino and his proud, stately wife Fermina Daza, respectively past 80 and 70, are in the autumn of their solid marriage as the drama opens on the suicide of the doctor’s chess partner. Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, a disabled photographer of children, chooses death over the indignities of old age, revealing in a letter a clandestine love affair, on the “fringes of a closed society’s prejudices.” This scenario not only heralds Urbino’s demise soon after when he falls out of a mango tree in an attempt to catch an escaped parrot but brilliantly presages the novel’s central themes, which are as concerned with the renewing capacity of age as with an anatomy of love. We meet Florentino Ariza, more antihero than hero, a mock Don Juan with an undertaker’s demeanor, at once pathetic, grotesque and endearing, when he seizes the memorably unseemly occasion of Urbino’s funeral to reiterate to Fermina the vow of love he first uttered more than 50 years before. With the fine detailing of a Victorian novel, the narrative plunges backward in time to reenact their earlier, youthful courtship of furtive letters and glances, frustrated when Fermina, in the light of awaking maturity, realizes Florentino is an adolescent obsession, and rejects him. With his uncanny ability to unearth the extraordinary in the commonplace, Garcia Marquez smoothly interweaves Fermina’s and Florentino’s subsequent histories. Enmeshed in a bizarre string of affairs with ill-fated widows while vicariously conducting the liaisons of others via love poems composed on request, Florentino feverishly tries to fill the void of his unrequited passion. Meanwhile, Fermina’s marriage suffers vicissitudes but endures, affirming that marital love can be as much the product of art as is romantic love. When circumstances both comic and mystical offer Fermina and Florentino a second chance, during a time in their lives that is often regarded as promising only inevitable degeneration toward death, Garcia Marquez beautifully reveals true love’s soil not in the convention of marriage but in the simple, timeless rituals that are its cement.

#### **Library Journal:**

While delivering a message to her father, Florentino Ariza spots the barely pubescent Fermina Daza and immediately falls in love. What follows is the story of a passion that extends over 50 years, as Fermina is courted solely by letter, decisively rejects her suitor when he first speaks, and then joins the urbane Dr. Juvenal Urbino, much above her station, in a marriage initially loveless but ultimately remarkable in its strength.

Florentino remains faithful in his fashion; paralleling the tale of the marriage is that of his numerous liaisons, all ultimately without the depth of love he again declares at Urbino's death. In substance and style not as fantastical, as mythologizing, as the previous works, this is a compelling exploration of the myths we make of love. highly recommended.

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. Why does García Márquez use similar terms to describe the effects of love and cholera?
2. Plagues figure prominently in many of García Márquez's novels. What literal and metaphoric functions does the cholera plague serve in this novel? What light does it shed on Latin American society of the nineteenth century? How does it change its characters' attitudes toward life? How are the symptoms of love equated in the novel with the symptoms of cholera?
3. What does the conflict between Dr. Juvenal Urbino and Florentino Ariza reveal about the customs of Europe and the ways of Caribbean life? How is Fermina Daza torn between the two?
4. Dr. Urbino reads only what is considered fine literature, while Fermina Daza immerses herself in contemporary romances or soap operas. What does this reveal about the author's attitude toward the distinction between "high" and "low" literature. Does his story line and style remind you more of a soap opera or a classical drama?
5. After rejecting Florentino's declaration of love following her husband's funeral, why is Fermina eventually won over by him?
6. Why does a change in Florentino's writing style make Fermina more receptive to him?
7. What does Florentino mean when he tells Fermina, before they make love for the first time, "I've remained a virgin for you"?
8. Why does Florentino tell each of his lovers that she is the only one he has had?
9. What does Florentino's uncle mean when he says, "without river navigation there is no love?"
10. Do Fermina and Dr. Urbino succeed at "inventing true love"?
11. Set against the backdrop of recurring civil wars and cholera epidemics, the novel explores death and decay, as well as love. How does Dr. Urbino's refusal to grow old gracefully affect the other two characters? What does it say about fulfillment and beauty in their society? Does the fear of aging or death change Florentino Ariza's feelings toward Fermina Daza?

**12.** Compare the suicide of Jeremiah de Saint-Amour at the beginning of the book with that of Florentino's former lover, América Vicuña at the end. How do their motives differ? Why does the author frame the book with these two events?

**13.** Why is Leona Cassiani “the true woman in [Florentino’s] life although neither of them ever knew it and they never made love”?

**14.** When Tránsito Ariza tells Florentino he looks as if he were going to a funeral when he is going to visit Fermina, why does he respond by saying, “It’s almost the same thing”?

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Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**