

Jaime Manrique

Our Lives Are the Rivers
ISBN13: 9780060820718

Q: The title of the book, *Our Lives are the Rivers*, comes from a poem written by Jorge Manrique, in the 16th century, "*Our Lives are the Rivers that run to the sea, which is our death.*" Why did you decide to use this poem?

A: The title *Our Lives are the Rivers* comes from a poem by Jorge Manrique called "Couplets on the Death of His Father," cA: 1475. So we are talking about the 15th century. I never planned to use those lines. They just came out of Manuela's mouth as she reflected on her upcoming voyage down the Magdalena River after she was exiled from Colombia: "Couplets on the Death of His Father," is one of the most famous poems in Spanish literature. In the Spanish-speaking world, even people who haven't read the poem are familiar with those lines. I decided to keep the verses as an homage to Jorge Manrique. I doubt I am a direct descendant (Jorge Manrique died childless, as far as I know), but my Manrique ancestors did arrive in the New World at the time of the Conquest. Besides, as a poet myself, I do feel a spiritual kinship with Jorge Manrique.

Q: This seems to be a much different genre of writing than your previous books. What brought you to historical fiction in general, and in particular, Manuela Sáenz? Is her extraordinary life well-known or widely taught in Latin America?

A: My first attempt to write in a historical vein came almost thirty years ago when I wrote an epic poem about Christopher Columbus. On the surface, this new novel may look like a complete departure from the rest of my work. But if you scratch that surface, you'll discover *Our Lives* contains themes that I've explored in my other novels: politics, the corruptive nature of power, gender-bending, exile, illegitimacy, the oppression of women, society's rejection of those who dare to be different. Like all my heroes, Manuela is an outcast. To paraphrase Flaubert: "Manuela Sáenz *c'est moi*." For thirty-five years I've been captivated by Manuela's story and thought about writing a novel about her, until it became an obsession. I identify with Manuela completely. I wanted to write this novel as a tribute to all the great women who shaped my life. In particular my mother and my friend Josefina Folgoso. Manuela is well-known and much admired in Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. However, when I went to Peru to research her life, I was shocked to discover that, despite having lived many years of her life on Peruvian territory, being a heroine of its Independence, and dying in Paita, she was a somewhat obscure figure to the people. What's more, when I visited Paita, the local historian told me: "There are many people here who still don't like her. They see her as a scandalous woman and a trouble-maker -- a stain on the reputation of Simón Bolívar." In the rest of Latin America Manuela's story is known by many. In the last twenty years, though, there's been a revival of interest in her life and her great contributions to Latin American history.

Q: Do you have a particular book or author that inspired you to write this book? What do you like to read in your spare time?

A: I'm not an avid reader of historical novels, but I admire the historical fiction of Alejo Carpentier, in particular *The Kingdom of This World*. The ending of *Our Lives* is an homage to that novel. But if I had a model in mind of the kind of woman's novel I wanted to write, then it must be 19th-century novels such as *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss*—the books I grew up reading.

Q: How much of the book is fiction, how much is fact?

A: Little is known about Manuela's childhood and adolescence, so my recreation of those periods is mostly fictional. The rest of her story, for the most part, sticks to the actual chronology of her life. What I'm most proud of is of creating fictional lives for Natán and Jonotás, whose lives (as far as I know) have remained unexplored, until now.

Q: How was it to write from a female, first-person perspective? To which historical figures did you look to flesh out Manuela's unique brand of protofeminism before committing it to the page? What advice do you give to your students who choose to write from a widely different point of view than their own?

A: Manuela's voice did not come to me right away. After many false attempts, in desperation, I sat down and copied Manuela's letters in my own handwriting. I spent maybe a week doing this. As I got inside each sentence, I began to get into her head, to hear her thinking. Then one day I looked up from my desk, and right there, in front of me, I could see the flesh and blood Manuela, breathing, eager to tell her story.

To find believable voices for the slaves, I read classic books such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince*. To my students who choose to write from a different point of view than their own, I would say: approach the writing the way an actor approaches a role—by inhabiting the character. In order to be convincing, you must become that character. Even if you're writing about a character you dislike, you must *become* him or her and find his/her humanity.

Q: In your opinion, is Manuela Sáenz someone to be admired? Why?

A: Obviously, I wrote *Our Lives* because of my deep admiration for Manuela: The people I admire the most are those who defy the prevailing conventions of society, those who go against the current and dare to be different. After they finish reading *Our Lives*, people can decide whether they admire Manuela or not. I cannot tell them how they should feel about her.

Q: You wrote *Our Lives are the Rivers* without conveying your personal feelings regarding the Liberator. Do you have personal opinions about Simon Bolívar? What do you think the sociopolitical landscape of Latin America would look like had his dreams for a Gran Colombia come to fruition? Do you believe this was ever a possibility?

A: *Our Lives* is about Manuela, not about Bolívar. I would have to read about the Liberator for many years before I understood him as well as, I think, I understand Manuela: Perhaps because so much has been written about him, I was less interested in him than in say, Jonotás and Natán. I have no doubt that Bolívar was a very great man, a visionary leader, and a brilliant intellect. His dream of a Gran Colombia was a noble idea, but perhaps not a practical one. Still, I think he is by far the greatest man Latin America has ever produced. To paraphrase Shakespeare: his back rose above the element in which he lived.

Q: Why did you decide to tell Manuela's story not just from her perspective, but from that of her two slaves, Jonotás and Natán, as well? Do you reserve any judgment for her decision to keep slaves for the majority of her life? Were there any other characters to whom you considered giving a voice?

A: When my friend, the novelist Jessica Hagedorn, read an early draft of the novel, she questioned how the slaves were used as mere background figures. One of the things I wanted to achieve by writing *Our Lives* was to examine that historical period with a fresh perspective. Giving voices to the slaves allowed me to do a revisionist take on a story that is well-known to the people of the Andes. The other character in whose voice I considered writing in was James Thorne. In the end, I decide to write the entire book from a female perspective.

Q: Your descriptions of South American scenery and seasons are so vivid. Did you do any traveling to visit the landmarks in Manuela's life? You grew up in Colombia—what, if anything, is Manuela Saenz's legacy there?

A: I did visit some of the places where Manuela lived. Many years ago, I traveled to Ecuador and spent some time in Quito and the region of the Avenue of the Volcanoes. Although back then I was doing research for another novel that never worked out. I did want the landscape of the Andes to serve not just as background, but to be an active force that shaped the lives of my characters. The legacy of Manuela Sáenz in Colombia is alive, and stronger than ever. Women, in particular, feel great affection for her and refer to her as "Manuelita." She does not need a last name, like Shakira:

Q: Do you have any ideas for your next book? Any other historical characters you would like to learn more about?

A: I'm at work on another historical novel. I think I've caught a bug I can't shake off.