



## Our Lives Are the Rivers

By Jaime Manrique  
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### Introduction

Before Eva Peron or Collette, there was Manuela Sáenz. She was one of the most fascinating and sexy women in all history, who single-handedly helped secure independence for South America from Spain.

Based on actual events, *Our Lives are the Rivers* tells the life story of a woman who was willing to risk it all for her country—and her lover—and in whose legacy lies the history of an entire continent.

The novel begins in 1822, when Simón Bolívar, known as "The Liberator," marches into Quito, victoriously leading an army that had overthrown its Spanish rulers, winning independence for a giant swath of land in what is now South America.

As he makes his way through the cheering crowds on the streets, he is hit on the forehead by a crown of laurels, thrown by Manuela Sáenz, a beautiful young woman of means who wore on her chest the gold medal of Knight of the Sun, the first honor given by the new republic to any woman in the New World. The attraction between them was so strong, they became lovers that same night, and remained together for the following 8 years, the last of Bolívar's life.

Told from the point of view of Manuela Sáenz, as well as her two loyal slaves, *Our Lives are the Rivers* is a novel of intoxicating love, loyalty, passion, and adventure.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Who do you think Jaime Manrique chose this epigraph? What does it have to do with the story of Manuela Sáenz?
2. Right at the beginning of the novel, it becomes apparent that Manuela Sáenz is narrating, but speaking of herself in the 3rd person. What reason could you come up with for this?
3. What purpose is served by narrating the book from three different perspectives: Manuela, Natán, and Jonatás?
4. When Manuela's father informs her that she is to be married to James Thorne, she has an incredibly strong negative reaction. Why did Manuela oppose so strongly to the marriage?
5. Why do you think Manuela waited until Natán asked for her freedom to grant it? Why didn't she set her slaves free earlier?
6. Why do you think Jonatás was so much more loyal to Manuela than Natán?
7. The themes of love and loyalty weigh heavily on Manuela's story. Examine 2-3 instances where these themes are evident.
8. Manuela seemed to think that her eight-year long relationship with Bolívar was worth losing her place in society, her wealth—everything she had once valued so dearly. Do you agree with her in this respect?
9. Once you have finished reading the story of Manuela Sáenz—considering how passionate Manuela was about the liberation from Spain—examine the love she has with Simon Bolívar. Do you believe she was more in love with the man or the idea? Explain your decision.
10. Why does Manuela compare herself to a condor at the end of the book? What symbolism could be derived from that comparison?

### About the Author

Jaime Manrique is a poet, novelist, essayist and translator who has been hailed by *The Washington Post Book World* as "the most accomplished gay Latino writer of his generation, a picaro prone to shock his readers by pushing the moral standards of his time." He was born in Barranquilla, Colombia in 1949. His first volume of poetry received his country's Eduardo Cote Lamus National Poetry Award in 1975. In English he has published the volume of poems *My Night with Federico Garcia Lorca*; and the novels *Colombian Gold*, *Latin Moon in Manhattan*, and *Twilight at the Equator*, and award-winning *Eminent Maricones*. A contributor to *Salor*, *Bomb Magazine*, and several other publications, he lives in New York City and is an associate professor in the MFA program at Columbia University.