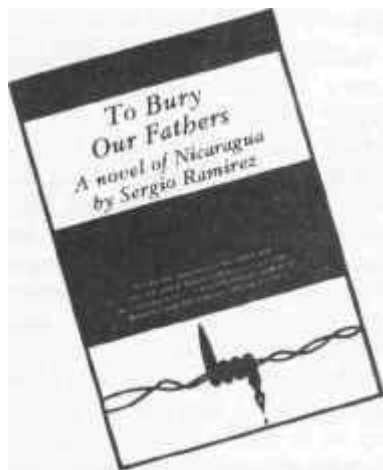


Powerful Memories

To Bury Our Fathers

Sergio Ramirez Readers International £5.95



Sergio Ramirez's first novel to be published in English is an impressive and extraordinary work. It unravels as a series of stories which coincide with the foundation and consolidation of the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua, etching deeply the nightmare of tyranny, with humour, humanity and a powerful historical imagination.

The novel is not perhaps the most expected or likely cultural form to be associated with a revolutionary movement in the late twentieth century. Some advanced literary theorists might even suggest that it is an antiquated form, never quite able to free itself from the inherited illusions of the bourgeois realist aesthetic.

But it is clear that the cultural resources which made this novel possible are highly fertile: in particular, the regional locations of the Latin American novel, and the cultural aspirations of the FSLN.

In the 1960s in Latin America there was a peculiarly Latin second flowering of modernist writing. Its leading figures (Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes) were lionised in the metropolitan nations as bearers of an incomparably rich strain of a new, fashionably designated post-modernism. For Ramirez, writing in the 1970s, there was to hand an available genre of the novel which was native and regional, political in aspiration, and, in its very linguistic form pioneering.

And there was the more immediate, national context of the Sandinista movement. Like many others of the professional middle class in the 1960s Ramirez felt

compelled to break with his family's traditional support for Somoza. In October 1977 Ramirez and a small group of professionals (*Los Doce*, The Twelve) publicly declared their allegiance to the aims of the FSLN, effecting a decisive breach in the middle-class opposition to the regime. As a result he was forced to go underground. After the downfall of Somoza in 1979 Ramirez assumed prominence in the provisional government, and in November 1984 won the office of Vice-President.

To Bury Our Fathers was written in the early 70s before the FSLN victory was assured. Like much Latin American writing, it was in fact written in Europe, and clearly carries the imprint of exile, an emotional pain and sense of loss which underscores each narrative in the book. But it is nonetheless unmistakably a book of the national liberation movement.

The Sandinista revolution depended on a highly developed cultural programme. The priority which the leadership placed on this cultural offensive, at times drawing resources away from the imperatives of economic production, is unprecedented and resulted, perhaps, in one of the speediest cultural transformations witnessed by any nation in the postwar period. Central to these cultural aspirations was the belief not only that the oppressed must be literate but also that it was necessary to open up the history of the people, and break the amnesia induced by the delinquent Somoza dictatorship. Consequently the literacy brigades also engaged in an immediate oral history reconstruction of the revolution in which the voices of the people contributed to the making of the official representations of the Sandinista struggles. The revolution would be theirs in collective memory as well as for the present.

It is within this context that *To Bury Our Fathers* is most telling. It is a book about collective and personal memories, the politics constituted in, and by, the experiences of the various characters. The chronology is exact: from 1930, when the struggle between Sandino and the US forces was at its height, to 1961, when the *Sandinista* movement built itself in the image of General Sandino's forces, actively reviving the rituals and experiences of the past and reshaping them for the future. This formal history provides a beginning and an end for the novel as a whole.

But if the chronology is exact, the progression and interweaving of the narratives and the disturbed sequence of

memories and dreams is not. The reader encounters a variety of shifts in perspective in which the popular culture of the period is reconstructed as a hybrid of experiences and voices. The stories themselves and the figures represented in them form a complex social totality. This sense of totality, which emerges from the fragmented stories, is in fact a sense of *history*. To this extent Ramirez, although perceptibly shifting from the 'magic realism' of Marquez and others, still holds to the aesthetics of realism, but imaginatively reconstituted and extended.

The novel finishes in 1961. It ends with the destruction of one guerrilla force; the death in exile of one of the once celebrated but now forgotten and slightly deranged opponents of the regime; and more simply, with a casual encounter between two of the protagonists in a barber shop, contemplating old newspaper photos pinned to the walls. Their friends are destroyed. They live only by their memories.

But memories can be potent. It does not need the novel to tell us that 1961 was also the beginning of the FSLN and the next step in the long march to victory.

Bill Schwarz