

Peter Guttridge talks to Carlos Fuentes

The Exorcist

'I wish I could be described in my passport with nothing else but this: "Profession: writer, which is to say Don Quixote's shield-bearer".' For Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, 'writing is essential to my life, it is absolutely my human condition'. Yet the 60-year old author, awarded in 1987 the Cervantes Prize, Spanish writing's most prestigious award, is also known as a diplomat, university lecturer and distinguished political thinker.

Calling writers 'distinguished' often means they are worthy but dull. What distinguishes Fuentes' writing in his first novel, *Where The Air Is Clear*, through his magnum opus, *Terra Nostra*, to his latest, **Christopher Unborn** (*Andre Deutsch, hbk £13.95*), is his giddy use of language, his inventiveness and his wit. Nor has advancing age slowed him down.

'When I reached 60 the Proustian worm started tickling my belly,' he says, 'so I have a very full agenda. One of the advantages of reaching my age is that I now have the experience to write the books I wanted to write when I was 20.'

A collection of novellas is ready for publication, he has completed the first draft of another novel and he is in London for the first part of this year working on a massive documentary about the Hispanic world for the BBC. 'It's a six-hour series. We've been working on it for five or six years but now it's ready to go into production.'

The son of a diplomat, born in Panama City and raised in Washington DC, Fuentes trained as a lawyer at Mexico City and Geneva universities but always intended to commit himself to writing: 'I decided that although the English language didn't need another writer, the Spanish language did.'

His first novel *Where The Air Is Clear* was an immediate success, translated into 25 languages. It was about Mexico City. 'The city has been the theme of much of my work,' he says, 'although with *Christopher Unborn* I think I have finally exhausted it as a subject. I hope

my writing about its death in *Christopher Unborn* is exorcism not prophecy. In my time I have seen the death of several Mexico Cities. I still have a great nostalgia for a city where the air is clear.'

Aside from the city, another presence in much of his work is an ambivalence towards Mexico's overbearing neighbour, the United States. It permeated his novel *The Old Gringo* (recently filmed starring Jane Fonda) and the ambivalence is clearly expressed in *Christopher Unborn*. Although he has been a professor of Latin America studies at Harvard and regularly does the lecture circuit of North American universities, he is outspokenly critical of the US's conduct towards Latin America.

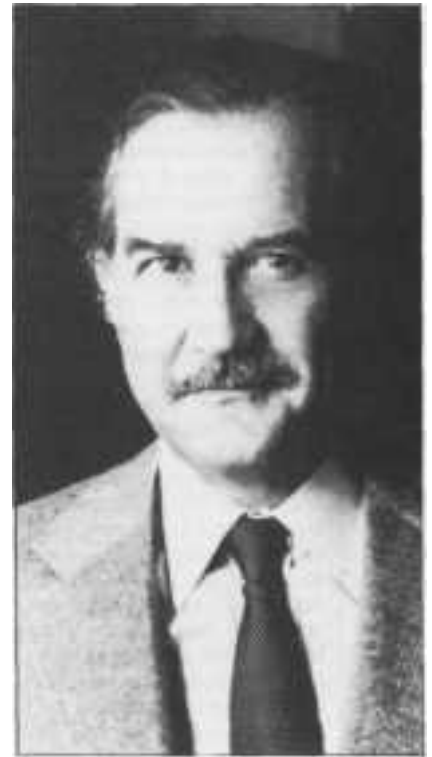
He likes to tell a story from his youth when his father took him to see a film about the Alamo in Washington. At the climax the young Fuentes stood on his seat to scream: 'Viva Mexico! Death to the gringos!'

'There are only two democracies in Central America - Belize and Costa Rica,' he notes, 'and they have only one thing in common. Neither has been subjected to US military pressure. If the US preaches democracy why does it impose dictatorships?'

His concern for the fate of Mexico has contributed to his involvement in politics over many years. 'I am a citizen therefore I am interested in politics,' he says simply, 'but, you know, Latin American intellectuals must wear many hats.'

He is often lumped in with those other Latin American intellectuals, Llosa and Marquez, in a South American school of fiction. A Latin American writer? Magical realism will do nicely. 'Garcia is my good friend - in the 60s we collaborated on film scripts to pay for our real writing - and I like his work immensely. But I do something different.'

In fact, Fuentes has as much in common with Joyce and Sterne as with his Latin American contemporaries. 'Latin American writers keep on re-inventing and developing the language to make it



Fuentes: Magic realist

their own. This is what Borges or Paz did. So when I read Joyce I discovered I had always been a Joycean. He was a writer who was in the air for people of my generation.'

In *Christopher Unborn* Fuentes cuts loose with all sorts of post-modern tricks, pinching lines from other writers and from his own work, mixing fact and fiction at will. The real hero of the book is language. He shows the text with puns - Make-sicko Shitty, Kafkapulco, Acapulcalypse - relentlessly playing with words, twisting and re-shaping them.

Not surprisingly, then, Fuentes is a great champion of the Spanish language. 'Recently the state of California gassed a law confirming that English is the main language there. That of course means that it is not.' He adds, quite sincerely: 'I believe the approaching millennium should establish Spanish not only as the dominant language of the three Americas - North, Central and South - but possibly as the world's second language.' Don Quixote's shield-bearer would then be much in demand.*