



In Memoriam: Claribel Alegría

*No estoy sola
ni lo estaré jamás
me acompaña tu ausencia.*
-Claribel Alegría

Es con inmensa tristeza que recibimos, en el Registro Creativo, la noticia del fallecimiento de nuestra querida poeta, amiga y maga Claribel Alegría, el 25 de enero de 2018 en su 93 año de vida.

Claribel Alegría había sido compañera y colaboradora del Registro Creativo desde hace años y, en el 2010, le habíamos hecho un homenaje, con exposición de poesía y arte, un panel académico y un recital durante las actividades del Registro Creativo en el congreso anual de la Asociación Canadiense de Hispanistas.

Tuve la suerte de conocer a la gran dama de la poesía centroamericana en un viaje de investigación en Managua, Nicaragua. Fue una de las primeras escritoras en aceptar de darme la bienvenida a su casa. Gracias a su aval –es decir una llamada de Claribel a las demás escritoras para confirmar la integridad de mi proyecto- pude visitar a muchas otras autoras e investigadoras importantes del país. Siempre permanecerá la resonancia de sus carcajadas en el íntimo jardín-oasis de su casa mientras hablábamos de feminismo y de literatura.

Nuestras sinceras condolencias a la familia y los amigos íntimos de Claribel. En nombre de todos los afiliados del Registro Creativo, nos unimos de todo el corazón al duelo de la pérdida de nuestra compañera, la primera dama de las letras centroamericanas.

A continuación, para los que quieren más información sobre Claribel Alegría, la biografía que publiqué en *The Literary Encyclopedia* (en inglés).

Saludos,
Sophie Lavoie
Directora del Equipo, Registro Creativo (fundado por Nela Rio)

Claribel Alegría

Claribel Alegría was born Clara Isabel Alegría Vides on May 12, 1924 in Estelí, Nicaragua, of Daniel Alegría, a Nicaraguan doctor of humble origins, and Ana María Vides, a Salvadorian from an oligarchical coffee plantation family. Alegría lived in Santa Ana, El Salvador, in her grandparents' house during her childhood because the family was forced into exile as a result of her father's support of Augusto César Sandino, an important opponent of the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua. Sandino's actions would inspire the Sandinista Revolution in the 1970s. Alegría has spent most of her life in a self-imposed exile from El Salvador, which she left at the age of 18. She calls herself a "cementerio apátrida" [a cemetery without a fatherland] in the poem "Éramos tres" (*Flores del volcán*, 1982).

Alegría graduated from the George Washington University in Washington, D.C., with a B.A. in Philosophy and Letters in 1948. The year before, in 1947, she married the writer and journalist Darwin J. "Bud" Flakoll (1923- 1995), with whom she has four children. She travelled the world with her husband, living in the U.S., Mexico, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, France, Spain, and El Salvador. Her books have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Alegría, seemingly tireless, still runs poetry workshops in Managua, Nicaragua, where she has lived since 1985.

Between 1944 and 1947, Alegría was mentored by Nobel Prize-winning poet Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1958). It was Jiménez who helped her prepare the publication of her first book, *Anillo de silencio* (*Ring of Silence*, 1948). As with most of her collections of poetry from the early years, it is a visceral introspective work, concerned with the private sphere. She continued publishing poetry in the following years: *Suite de amor, angustia y soledad* (*Suite of Love, Anguish and Solitude*, 1951), *Vigilias* (*Vigils*, 1953, a book of sonnets written in Mexico), and *Acuario* (*Aquarium*, 1955), composed while in Chile and thematically slightly less subjective.

During the fifties and sixties Alegría was part of "la Generación Comprometida" [the Committed Generation], writing against dictatorship, war, and social injustice. Marked by the Cuban Revolution of 1959, her poetry became more politically aware, featuring themes of female identity, love, death and suffering, and focusing in on her commitment to radical political change in Central America. The books of poems *Huésped de mi tiempo* (*Guest of My Time*, 1961), *Vía única* (*One-way Traffic*, 1965, about love, death and childhood), *Aprendizaje* (*Apprenticeship*, 1970), and *Pagaré a cobrar* (*Installment Payments*, 1977) followed. She was awarded the Casa de las Américas Prize for Poetry the same year for *Sobrevivo* (*I Survive*, 1978), shared with fellow Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli.

Alegría dedicated considerable effort to political projects during the decade following Monsignor Romero's assassination in El Salvador (1981) and her own move to Nicaragua (1985). She returned to poetry with *La mujer del río Sumpul* (*The Woman of the Sumpul River*, 1988) in which she gave voice to the victims of the 1980 massacre. It was followed by *Y este poema-río* (*And This River-poem*, 1989) and *Variaciones en Clave de mí* (*Variations on the Key of Me*, 1994). Critic Marcia Phillips McGowan concludes that, in the collections written before the nineties, "Alegría's vision of hope is a collective transformative vision, one in which suffering and art play important roles" (7). Her poetry, like most of her other writing, is characterized by resonances of orality in its musicality and creativity.

Saudade (Sorrow, 1999) is a reflective collection of love poems written after her husband's passing (1995); the collection broke Alegría's vow never to write again (Phillips McGowan, 25). In her next collections she returns to her former themes: *Soltando amarras* (Letting Go, 2004), *Mitos y delitos* (Myths and Felonies, 2008), *Otredad* (Otherness, 2011), and *Voces* (Voices, 2014), which she published at ninety years of age.

Her first anthology of poetry, *Suma y sigue* [Add and Carry] came out in 1981 and was quickly followed by *Poesía viva, El Salvador* (Poetry alive, El Salvador, 1982). *Umbrales* (Thresholds) and *Clave de Mí* (Key of Me) were published in 1996, the latter with a prologue by Mario Benedetti. In 2003, Alegría published *Una vida en poemas* [A Life Through Poems], an anthology with a prologue by Daisy Zamora (2003) and, the following year, *Esto soy* (I Am This, 2004), compiled by Luis Alvarenta with an introduction by Gioconda Belli. *Ars poética: antología, 1948-2006* [Ars poética: Anthology, 1948-2006, 2007], was edited by F. Ruiz Udiel. Alegría's poems have been included in a great many collective anthologies. Bilingual (Spanish-English) editions of her collections have been published since the eighties: *Flores del volcán/Flowers from the volcano* (1982, translated by Carolyn Forché), *Fugues* (1993, translated by D. Flakoll), *Umbrales/Thresholds* (1996, translated by D. Flakoll) and *Sorrow/Saudade* (1999, translated by C. Forché).

Alegría authored her three novellas while living in Mallorca: *El Detén* (The Talisman, 1977), a Bildungsroman about political awakening, *Álbum familiar* (Family Album, 1982), and *Pueblo de Dios y de Mandiga* (Village of God and the Devil, 1985). The last novella brings magical realism to Mallorca; it is a fantastical tale featuring British poet Robert Graves as one of the characters. Written in Nicaragua, *Despierta, mi bien despierta* (Awake, My Love, Awake, 1986) is about the revolutionary enlightenment of a woman in a country fraught with authoritarianism and violence, foregrounding the importance of women's voice in producing social change.

Her only single-authored novel is *Luisa en el país de la realidad* (Luisa in Realityland, 1987), an experimental autobiographical novel that includes short stories, diaries, poems and vignettes. Alegría has also published children's stories: *Tres cuentos* (Three Stories, 1958) and *El niño que buscaba a ayer* (The Boy Who Looked For Yesterday, 1996).

While in Paris and upon meeting many Latin American writers in exile (Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, et al.), Alegría began collaborating with her husband in 1962. Together they published a great number of works, including a series of anthologies: *New Voices of Hispanic America/Nuevas voces de Hispanoamérica* (1962), and *Cien poemas de Robert Graves* (One Hundred Poems by Robert Graves, 1982) whom the couple met on the Island of Mallorca in the sixties. The anthology *Nuevas voces de Norteamérica* (New Voices From North America, 1983) features emergent U.S. poets. Upon returning to Central America, Alegría and Flakoll would also anthologize poetry from the Salvadorian guerrilla, *On the Front Line/En el frente de guerra* (1990). They also translated a number of authors from English to Spanish (Morris West, Noam Chomsky and Salman Rushdie) and from Spanish to English (Miguel Angel Asturias, Mario Benedetti, and Carlos Fonseca).

Alegría and Flakoll published their acclaimed novel *Cenizas de Izalco* (Ashes of Izalco, 1966), a finalist in the Spanish publisher Seix Barral's prestigious Biblioteca Breve Prize. This novel uses a female

protagonist's reading of a man's diaries as its narrative instrument and returns to "La Matanza," the 1932 massacre of over 30,000 peasants by Salvadorian troops, an event that had greatly affected Alegría during her childhood. About a historical event that had been erased from the collective memory by the government, the novel was banned in El Salvador for years but started being used in schools in the mid-seventies. Critic Arturo Arias writes that this novel signals the end of social realism in Central America and a move towards aesthetic qualities of language and innovation in the narrative style (25).

Given Flakoll's work as a journalist and the background of political turmoil in Central America, they also wrote about the conflicts they witnessed and collected testimonies: Nicaragua and El Salvador were at the forefront. On El Salvador, they first published a collection of historical-political essays titled *La encrucijada salvadoreña (The Salvadorian Crossroads, 1980)*. Blurring the lines of fact and fiction in its form but overtly political, the book *No me agarran viva: la mujer salvadoreña en lucha (They Won't Take Me Alive: Salvadoran [sic] Women Struggle for National Liberation, 1983)* tells the story of a martyred Salvadorian guerrilla and mother, Ana María Castillo Rivas, known as Eugenia in the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation. One year later, they published *Para romper el silencio: resistencia y lucha en las cárceles salvadoreñas (Breaking the Silence: Resistance and Struggle in Salvadoran Jails, 1984)*, a shocking book that compiles 22 testimonials from guerrilla fighters tortured in jail during the Salvadorian junta's reign of terror.

They coauthored *Nicaragua: la revolución sandinista: una crónica política/1855-1979 (1982)*, a history of the Sandinista revolutionary movement. Their later book, *Somoza: expediente cerrado, la historia de un ajusticiamiento (Death of Somoza: The First Person Story of the Guerrillas Who Assassinated the Nicaraguan Dictator, 1993)*, was written using testimonies from the individuals who participated in the action. The authors state in their prologue that the book "is not an apology for terrorism, but rather the chronicle of a tyrannicide."

Their attention was also drawn to a number of other liberation movements in Latin America. *Fuga de Canto Grande (Tunnel to Canto Grande: The Story of the Most Daring Prison Escape in Latin American History, 1992)* tells of the spectacular 1990 escape of 47 Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement prisoners from the Canto Grande jail in Peru.

A fixture in Nicaragua's literary scene since the eighties, Alegría was the co-founder and is Honorary President of the Asociación Nicaraguense de Escritoras [Nicaraguan Association of Women Writers], Honorary President of the Nicaraguan Chapter of PEN International, and a member of the Centro Nicaraguense de Escritores [Nicaraguan Centre for Writers]. Among her numerous honours, in 2004, she was made Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French Minister of Culture and, two years later, she received the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in the United States (2006). The Granada International Festival of Poetry was dedicated to her in 2011 and she won the Rafael Albertí Prize for Poetry at the 2014 Havana International Poetry Festival.

Lavoie, Sophie M.. "Claribel Alegría". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 06 July 2014 [<https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=13363>, accessed 26 January 2018.]