

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers here or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytimes.com for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.



January 28, 2009

A Chilean Writer's Fictions Might Include His Own Colorful Past

By **LARRY ROHTER**

Few writers are more acclaimed right now than the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño, who died of an unspecified liver ailment in 2003, at the age of 50. His posthumous novel, "2666," appeared on many lists of the best books of 2008, and interest in him and his work has been further kindled by his growing reputation as a hard-living literary outlaw.

But his widow, from whom he was separated at the time of his death, and Andrew Wylie, the American agent she recently hired after distancing herself from Mr. Bolaño's friends, editors and publisher, are now challenging part of that image. They dispute the idea, originally suggested by Mr. Bolaño himself, endorsed by his American translator and mentioned in several of the rapturous recent reviews of "2666" in the United States, that he ever "had a heroin habit," that his death was "traceable to heroin use" or even that he had "an acquaintance with heroin."

At the same time, some of Mr. Bolaño's friends in Mexico, where he lived for nearly a decade before finally settling down near Barcelona, Spain, are questioning another aspect of the life story he constructed for himself.

They say that Mr. Bolaño, who is rapidly emerging as the pre-eminent Latin American writer of his generation, was not in Chile during the military coup that brought Gen. Augusto Pinochet to power, despite his claim to that badge of honor.

Regarding Mr. Bolaño and drugs, numerous Latin American and European critics and bloggers have taken the side of his widow, accusing American critics and publishers of deliberately distorting the writer's past to fit him into the familiar mold of the tortured artist. Mr. Bolaño's life and work have been made into "a trivial spectacle," Julio Ortega, a Peruvian critic and scholar, wrote in *El País*, the leading daily in Spain.

The focus of the heroin controversy is a four-page narrative that appeared in a collection whose title translates as "Between Parentheses," published the year after Mr. Bolaño's death but not yet available in English. Called "Beach," the text consists of a single long sentence, whose opening words are, "I gave up heroin and went back to my town and started on the methadone treatment administered me at the clinic. ..."

The title page of "Between Parentheses" describes it as a collection of "essays, articles and speeches." In the introduction Ignacio Echevarría, a Spanish critic and editor whom Mr. Bolaño named as his literary executor, explains that the book should be seen as "a type of 'fragmented autobiography'" and "personal cartography" of Mr. Bolaño.

In separate interviews, however, Mr. Echevarría and Jorge Herralde, Mr. Bolaño's publisher, said that the

Mr. Bolaño's father, León, a former truck driver and boxer, said in a telephone interview from Mexico that he believed his son was in Chile, recalling a conversation in which the younger Mr. Bolaño said that he "was going to travel overland" to visit his father's sister there. Though not sure of the date of that trip, León Bolaño, now 82 and ailing, said that after the coup he sought and obtained through his employer assurances from the Mexican government that it would evacuate his son through its embassy there.

Mr. Pascoe was one of thousands of young Latin Americans who went to Chile after Allende was elected in 1970 to participate in the revolution they all expected. During the bloodletting that accompanied the Pinochet coup, he and several hundred other fugitives took refuge in the Mexican Embassy in Santiago until they could be repatriated. Mr. Bolaño, Mr. Pascoe said, was "definitely not there." He said that he once asked Mr. Bolaño directly if he had been in Chile and "his response was vague enough that it made me want to say, 'Why don't you just answer yes or no?' But I liked him, and our friendship was not based on politics, so I didn't really mind. But it was clear he had not been there."

Mr. Bolaño's Mexican friends said that he was simply ashamed to admit he was absent from what even today is considered his generation's defining political experience, with status and credibility conferred on those who participated. "I understand why he lied, because he was remorseful at having missed out, at not having been there," said Carmen Boullosa, a novelist, playwright and poet who corresponded with Mr. Bolaño.

Rodrigo Fresán, an Argentine novelist living in Barcelona, said, "Roberto's biography is going to be interesting to read, and I am thankful that I was only his friend and not the one who is going to have to write it." Somewhat ruefully, others who know Mr. Bolaño only from his work have come to the same conclusion.

"It's a tough dance trying to keep up with the games of a writer who is playing with fact and fiction," said Marcela Valdes, one of the American critics who has referred to heroin use in her essays on Mr. Bolaño. "On this one, he may have got us."

Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

The New York Times

Arts Beat

The Culture at Large

NOVEMBER 23, 2009, 3:25 PM

Stray Questions for: Roberto Bolaño?!

By BLAKE WILSON

*The novelist Roberto Bolaño died in 2003. What follows is an excerpt from his last interview, published in *Playboy Mexico* the month of his death and now appearing in English in "Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview & Other Conversations" (Melville House Publishing), which goes on sale tomorrow. The interview was conducted by Monica Maristain and translated by Sybil Perez. (It is also reprinted in the current issue of *Stop Smiling*, though not available online.)*

Monica Maristain: If you hadn't been a writer, what would you have been?

Roberto Bolaño: I would like to have been a homicide detective, much more than being a writer. I am absolutely sure of that. A string of homicides. I'd have been someone who could come back to the scene of the crime alone, by night and not be afraid of ghosts. Perhaps then I might really have become crazy. But being a detective that could easily be resolved with a bullet to the mouth.

M.M.: Have you shed one tear about the widespread criticism you've drawn from your enemies?

R.B.: Lots and lots. Every time I read that someone has spoken badly of me I begin to cry, I drag myself across the floor, I scratch myself, I stop writing indefinitely, I lose my appetite, I smoke less, I engage in sport, I go for walks on the edge of the sea, which by the way is less than 30 meters from my house and I ask the seagulls, whose ancestors ate the fish who ate Ulysses: Why me? Why? I've done you no harm.

M.M.: Which five books have marked your life?

R.B.: In reality the five books are more like 5,000. I'll mention these only as the tip of the spear: "Don Quixote," by Cervantes; "Moby Dick," by Melville. The complete works of Borges, "Hopscotch," by Cortázar, "A Confederacy of Dunces," by Toole. I should also cite "Nadja" by Breton; the letters of Jacques Vaché. Anything Ubu by Jarry; "Life: A User's Manual," by Perec. "The Castle" and "The Trial," by Kafka. "Aphorisms," by Lichtenberg. "The Tractatus," by Wittgenstein. "The Invention of Morel," by Bioy Casares. "The Satyricon," by Petronius. "The History of Rome," by Tito Livio. "Pensées," by Pascal.

M.M.: John Lennon, Lady Di or Elvis Presley?

R.B.: The Pogues. Or Suicide. Or Bob Dylan. Well, but let's not be pretentious: Elvis forever. Elvis and his golden voice, with a sheriff's badge, driving a Mustang and stuffing himself full of pills.

M.M.: Have you seen the most beautiful woman in the world?

R.B.: Yes, sometime around 1984 when I worked at a store. The store was empty and in came a Hindu woman. She looked like a princess and well could have been one. She bought some hanging costume jewelry from me. I was at the point of fainting. She had copper skin, long red hair, and the rest of her was perfect. A timeless beauty. When I had to charge her, I felt embarrassed. As if saying she understood and not to worry, she smiled at me. Then she disappeared and I have never again seen anyone like her. Sometimes I get the impression that she was the goddess Kali, the patron saint of thieves and goldsmiths, except Kali was also the goddess of murderers, and this Hindu woman was not only the most beautiful woman on earth, but she seemed also to be a good person — very sweet and considerate.

M.M.: What do you wish to do before dying?

R.B.: Nothing special. Well, clearly I'd prefer not to die. But sooner or later the distinguished lady arrives. The problem is that sometimes she's neither a lady nor very distinguished, but, as Nicanor Parra says in a poem, she's a hot wench who will make your teeth chatter no matter how fancy you think you are.

M.M.: What kinds of feelings do posthumous works awaken in you?

R.B.: Posthumous: It sounds like the name of a Roman gladiator, an unconquered gladiator. At least that's what poor Posthumous would like to believe. It gives him courage.