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## Political Notes from a Venezuela Writer

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Panel: Writing and Politics (IC Book Festival panel)

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**Carlos PATIÑO PEREDA**

## **Political Notes from a Venezuela Writer**

### **The Writer's Environment**

No writer is obliged to write or talk about politics. The issues addressed in a particular work are part of the artistic freedom enjoyed by the author. Nevertheless, what we have seen flourish throughout history are despotic regimes that censure and punish those who use their pen to reveal abuses of power.

But that does not mean that the writer must be isolated from the public sphere. It is precisely under the control of these Orwellian governments—where politics invade all aspects of personal life—that reality corners the writer, often without warning, to the point that he is forced to confront it with paper and ink.

In times of strife, writers are seen as intellectuals who should provide answers to the crisis and the actions of their rulers. In a country like Venezuela, marked by a totalitarian revolution that is at the same time a factory manufacturing poverty, the option of silence becomes complicity and posturing.

Chávez's and Maduro's siren calls achieved the unthinkable: they transformed the country with the biggest oil reserves into the most violent one, with shortages of food and medicine, and the largest inflation in the world. There are good arguments which assert that the Bolivarian Revolution is not a dictatorship, but neither is it a democracy. Countries with a democratic tradition should look into that mirror, during times when they flirt with the possibility of being governed by egomaniacs that use aggressive and exclusionary discourses.

### **Artists Speak**

This is palpable in all areas of culture—especially theater, music and literature, where we have seen interpretations, public discourses, and political debates. Gabriela Montero—a Venezuelan pianist known for her fight for human rights—suggests that artists have a greater obligation to contribute to society than others. According to her, the artist's role is not only to express beauty, but rather, they should take advantage of their notoriety to expose economic and social crises in their countries. It's no coincidence that one of her best-known compositions is entitled "Ex Homeland."

The Venezuelan writer Alberto Barrera Tyska, winner of Spain's prestigious Tusquets Award in 2015 for his novel *Patria o muerte* (Homeland or Death), when asked if addressing political strife in his work is a form of opportunism, responded:

"So the entire history of world literature is full of opportunists. From Victor Hugo to J.M. Coetzee. From Leo Tolstoy to Michel Houellebecq, not to mention our own countrymen: Romulo Gallegos and Adriano González León. Before, Venezuelans were known for our soap operas, and today, we are recognized for living nearly two decades in a strange political

experiment that has aroused a lot of curiosity. But writing a novel about Chavism does not guarantee success; editors are not idiots. They know how to recognize the virtues of a text beyond the weight that the context of our political reality carries.”

Another Venezuelan writer, Rodrigo Blanco Calderón—who, by the way, was a participant in the International Writing Program, and who won the French prize Rive Gauche in 2016 for his first novel *La noche* (The Night)—believes that despite the political references in his novel, it is a work of fiction and should be interpreted as such:

“This clarification is a result of the place where I wrote my piece: Caracas, the capital of a country where laws do not exist. Despite being fiction, I create stories that can injure those who are susceptible. On the other hand, you never know what excuse will be used as an attack. Fortunately—or unfortunately—I don’t know, for writers, Chavism is an illiterate dictatorship. All the same, I felt the need to protect my work.”

### **The Snake’s Embrace**

Several of my stories and nonfiction articles address politics, as an act of liberation from an asphyxiating reality. But not all. It is important to incorporate politics, so long as it contributes significantly to the work—and, furthermore, to the public discourse. But not all literature must be devoted to scrutinizing the issue, nor must every writer present him or herself as a devoted militant of a particular political cause.

For me, for example, I find it difficult, if not impossible, to write children’s literature in this context. At any rate, to continue writing in a country in which when faced with the choice of buying a book or buying food, people will choose food—if it’s available and if they can afford it—is already in itself a political act.