

CRITICAS

An English Speaker's Guide to the Latest Spanish Language Titles

The Best Books of 2002

REVIEWS:
Adult & Kids'
Books, Videos
& Magazines

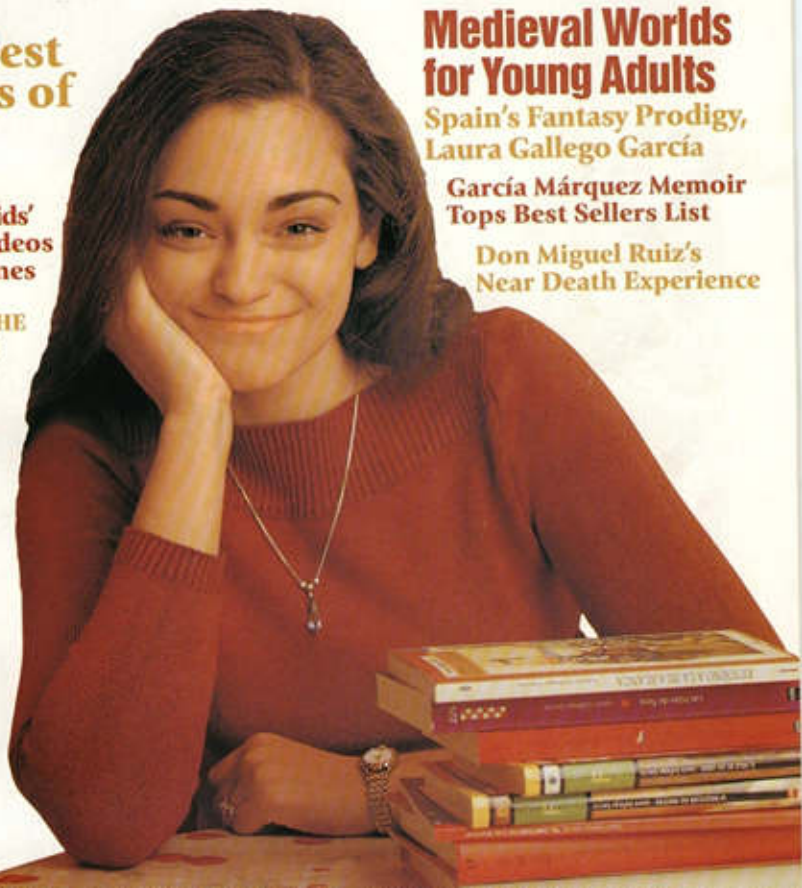
BEST OF THE
BACKLIST:
Business
Books

Medieval Worlds for Young Adults

Spain's Fantasy Prodigy,
Laura Gallego García

García Márquez Memoir
Tops Best Sellers List

Don Miguel Ruiz's
Near Death Experience



Spanish Lords & Swords & Magic



When 25-year-old Spanish novelist Laura Gallego García sits down in front of her computer screen, she creates grandiose, over-the-top worlds that her young adult readers can't seem to resist. In *El valle de los lobos* (*The Valley of the Wolves*), a destitute country girl finds her life utterly disrupted when a mysterious archwizard whisks her away to learn magic in a remote, desolate tower. Then, when she grows up to become a powerful wizard herself, she learns that to survive she must defy her mentor and face his eternal curse. In *Finis Mundi* (*Apocalypse*), it's the year 997 and a young, naive monk discovers through an ancient document that the Apocalypse is coming and that it's his job to prevent it—God is essentially giving man a chance to prove himself again.

Since publishing her first book in 1998 at the age of 21, Gallego García has written fantasy, historical, and science-fiction novels for Ediciones SM, a respected Madrid publisher of widely read children's books. Fueled by global fervor over *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and Harry Potter, sales are up for fantasy books geared toward children and adults, and readers in Spain and Latin America have responded to the eggheaded Gallego García.

"My parents' generation looked down on this kind of literature as childish and strange," says Gallego García. "Now even the grown-ups seem to have a hunger for escape." She's sold 40,000 copies of her five novels in Spain alone, an impressive number considering the country has only about 7 million young people between the ages of 10 and 24, compared with the 57.7 million in that age range in the United States. Spain's youth population is expected to decrease over the coming years, so Gallego García's publisher has wisely set its eye on the international market for Spanish-language books. Despite its large youth population, the United States publishes surprisingly few original Spanish-language young adult titles. Ediciones SM has issued five printings of *Finis Mundi* (*Apocalypse*) since 1999, and is currently negotiating for English translations. With their easy-to-read style, rich vocabulary, and compelling subject matter, her novels show strong sales potential here, in both English and Spanish.

FROM BOOKWORM TO BARCO DE VAPOR WINNER

Before she made international waves as a hot new children's writer, Gallego grew up as a solitary, bookish girl in Valencia. "The first big book I ever finished as a child was *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende," she says. "I was seven or eight years old, and I was fascinated by the overflowing fantasy of that novel. I reread it at least

12 times." Countless other fantasy novels followed, including the pivotal *Lord of the Rings*. By age 11, Gallego García had written her first novel.

"It was a fantasy book called *Zodiaccia* that I wrote with my friend," she says. "It was about a girl who navigates a magical zodiac world via a special medallion. The world has 12 regions, each under a curse. She has to go to each and find the zodiac medallions and break their evil spell. The book's not very good." The overly ambitious teenager didn't get discouraged but didn't believe she would make it until she found a fellow *española* willing to break the mold. "The work of Joan Manuel Gisbert, a Spanish author who writes fantasy novels for children and young adults, fell into my hands when I was 14 or 15 years old. I had already dreamed of being an author, but I saw how fantasy was considered a 'substandard' genre in Spain, and everything published was by outsiders. When I discovered Gisbert, I knew that I could do it too," she says. Gallego García entered her wildly fantastical fiction into contests but didn't have much luck getting published.

"I think I was really book smart but a little emotionally immature," she says. The turning point came when she enrolled in the University of Valencia's Spanish philology department. There she studied medieval literature and mythology, and became inspired by the world of lords, swords, and magic.

When Gallego García entered her manuscript for *Finis Mundi*, the story about the monk and the Apocalypse, for the prestigious El Barco de Vapor award it blew the jury away. "We unanimously agreed that this was a great work, written by someone consumed by the pen," says Miguel de Ríano Goyarrola, international operations executive at Ediciones SM. "We were shocked to learn that she'd never been published." By winning the award,

considered by many to be the most pivotal in Spain for young adult authors, Gallego García scored a coup in more ways than one.

Ediciones SM not only agreed to publish *Finis Mundi* but the other four books Gallego García wrote after it. And they are more than satisfied with their investment.

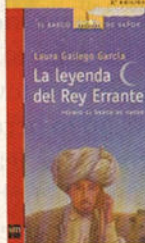
"Laura's books spin by with a lot of tension, rhythm, and plenty of action—that's why the teenagers can't get enough of them" Ríano Goyarrola says. Gallego García is currently researching her dissertation on *Belianis of Greece*, a book published in 1579 B.C.E. Although the background for her novels stems from her scholarship, her characters show an adventurous spirit that attracts both kids and teachers.

"Those books have sold very well with teachers," says Gallego García. "I think the kids get into the characters, and the educators love the fact that the books describe a rich cultural period for them to discover." Since publishing *Finis*, Gallego García has experimented with many different styles, from William Gibson inspired science fiction in *Las hijas de Tara* (*Tara's Daughters*) to fantasy-adventure stories, including one about her most popular Spanish heroine to date, Dana, the protagonist of *El valle de los lobos* (*The Valley of the Wolves*).

THE LONELY HERO

Gallego García's heroes maneuver alternate dimensions, search for unicorns, and study ancient stones, often operating with the weight of the universe on their shoulders. They inhabit worlds that either reject or misunderstand them, and yet they always seem to prevail over bleak and overwhelming situations with blind hope and inquisitive minds. Although often raised in solitude and humility, they approach enormous challenges with a rare blend of emotion, uncertainty, and wavering confidence—just as any adolescent would.

Gallego García insists her stories are pure invention, but a bit of her nature remains hidden in the heart of her readers' favorite heroine, Dana, an isolated girl who learns how to manage her special powers and open her heart to others. "I was a lot like Dana as a teenager, in that my head was always buried in a book and I could never really relate to the kids around me," says Gallego García, whose shy, girlish voice and round, open face at times make her appear not much older than her characters. "I like to say that *El valle de los lobos* was my most personal book because like Dana I also had an imaginary friend, Jack, whom I felt close to."



Kai, Dana's soul-mate in *El valle de los lobos*, is a phantasmal creature who takes the form of a human boy and becomes her best friend and confidant. "I think the girls like Kai because he's the special kind of friend that a lot [of us] want to have—someone who understands you, supports you, and is there when you need him. I imagine that he's something like the perfect man," Gallego García says.

Despite Kai's seeming perfection, it's her characters' flaws and weaknesses that seem to draw so many to Gallego García's frequent presentations at schools and conferences. "The boys like Fenris, an elf that turns into a werewolf during a full moon [in *El valle de los lobos*], because he's a mysterious being with a big secret, but

Books by Laura Gallego García

Finis Mundi

Apocalypse (1999)
Ediciones SM, 252p.
ISBN 84-348-7011-8

Las hijas de Tara

Tara's Daughters (2002)
Ediciones SM, 267p.
ISBN 84-348-8629-4

El valle de los lobos

The Valley of the Wolves (2001)
Ediciones SM, 221p.
ISBN 84-348-7361-3

La leyenda del rey errante

The Legend of the Roving King
(2002)
Ediciones SM, 215p.
ISBN 84-348-8818-1

La maldición del maestro

The Curse of the Master (2002)
Ediciones SM, 219p.
ISBN 84-348-8686-3

above all, they identify with him because he's not perfect. He's a tortured person that doesn't know if he's doing right, and that's much more attractive than Kai, who has things together from the beginning."

El valle de los lobos and *La maldición del maestro* (*The Curse of the Master*) are two parts of the Navegante series; the third and final part, *La llamada de los muertos* (*The Call of the Dead*), will be released in the spring of 2003.

POSING THE BIGGER QUESTIONS

A major element of Gallego García's adolescent appeal is her yearning for answers to life's big questions, which she poses with the gravity of a young person beginning to encounter the world. In *Finis Mundi*, Michel struggles with the essence of time and God's hand in destiny. The chosen women in *Las hijas de Tara* weigh the benefits of industrialization against the destruction of nature; Dana questions existence itself and the presence of life after

death. Many may question what inspires Gallego García to incorporate these deep ponderings into her novels' themes. Stated simply, all roads lead back to Paulo Coelho. "His novel *El alquimista* [*The Alchemist*] reached me at a turning point in my life, and it made me rethink my way of seeing the world," Gallego García says. "In my novels, I pose the questions that often I ask myself."

Although this might seem too intense for the pubescent crowd, it's what reels them in. When kids get together at her frequent presentations, they get right to the philosophizing. "I remember once a boy asked me 'How does Michel [of *Finis Mundi*] see the future through the Stones of Time if the future is what we create ourselves?' and he stopped me in my tracks. I've been trying to address that question ever since."

Perhaps it is this level of respect for readers that earns her such steadfast loyalty; she makes them believe she sees what they see. Whether she continues to hold on to her young adult niche or grow into more mature territory, Gallego García is sure to cast her spell over the world. ▶

Herrera Mulligan is a New York writer.