

RELEASE IN FULL

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To: H
Subject: S/P staff member's article on Mario Vargas Llosa

I thought that you might enjoy this by our newest S/P member, who was a journalist for the Wall Street Journalist and other places before she joined us in September. She is on an International Affairs Fellowship from the Council on Foreign Relations. They asked her to write the following; it was cleared by L. It is quite profound.

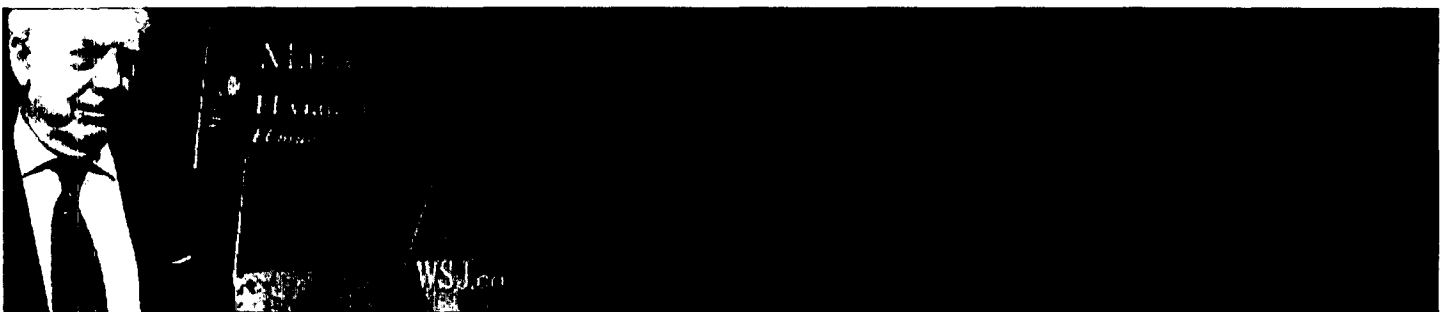
By EMILY PARKER

In 2007 I flew down to Lima to interview Mario Vargas Llosa for this newspaper. We talked in his elegant home, surrounded by thousands of books. Mr. Vargas Llosa offered me a glass of red wine. Then he proceeded to discuss why he believes that literature can change the world.

Mr. Vargas Llosa's Nobel Prize is a great victory—and not just for a talented and prolific author. His work is perhaps the greatest rebuttal to those who believe that literature exists on the periphery of history and politics, or who claim that they have "no time" for fiction.

In a New Republic essay in 2001, Mr. Vargas Llosa argued for granting literature "an important place in the life of nations." He wrote, "Without it, the critical mind, which is the real engine of historical change and the best protector of liberty, would suffer an irreparable loss."

Mr. Vargas Llosa's novels reflect his deep, personal hatred of dictatorships and his staunch belief in the value of individual liberty. He is hardly the only novelist to have shed light on these themes, but I would argue that he is among the most successful.



Columnist Mary Anastasia O'Grady on the anti-Communist Peruvian writer.

A case in point is "Conversation in the Cathedral," the work that Mr. Vargas Llosa has said he would rescue first from a fire. The novel is set in Peru, in the dark days of the Manuel Odria dictatorship of the 1950s, which is when Mr. Vargas Llosa grew up. He told me that this was the book in which he wanted to describe how dictatorships impregnate "every act of life."

To demonstrate this, Mr. Vargas Llosa paints around Odria rather than confronting him outright. The book opens with a grim landscape of "uneven and faded buildings" and describes "dull and defeated eyes at the tables of Zela bar, hands that reach for ashtrays and glasses of beer." The narrative, which rapidly jumps from past to present, describes a stalled, confused world. You don't know who to trust.

Mr. Vargas Llosa attacks politics more openly in "The Feast of the Goat," which explicitly details the horrors of the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic. Rafael Trujillo was notorious for his victimization of women, and so we see life under his rule through the eyes of one young girl unlucky enough to have crossed his path. "The woman is almost always the first victim of a dictatorship," Mr. Vargas Llosa told me.

For some, Mr. Vargas Llosa's victory will be controversial because of his political background and his outspoken views. He unsuccessfully ran for president of Peru in 1990, losing to Alberto Fujimori. During the campaign Mr. Vargas Llosa gained notoriety for his emphasis on a market economy, free trade and private property. He was no less controversial for his support of the invasion of Iraq, which he saw as necessary to ending what he called the "monstrous dictatorship" of Saddam Hussein.

Mr. Vargas Llosa has now left politics, and he believes that he can better shape the world with his pen. Or as he told me in Lima: "Through writing, one can change history."

Not all of his work is dark. "Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter" is punctuated with humor, and "The Bad Girl," about one man's world-wide pursuit of an elusive lover, is a thoroughly entertaining read. The one constant is a perceptive and empathetic glimpse into a wide range of human experience.

As Mr. Vargas Llosa wrote in his 2001 essay about literature, "Nothing better protects a human being against the stupidity of prejudice, racism, religious or political sectarianism, and exclusivist nationalism than this truth that invariably appears in great literature: that men and women of all nations and places are essentially equal."

Ms. Parker is an international affairs fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.