The Informers by Juan Gabriel Vasquez

Book Description A virtuosic novel about family, history, memory, and betrayal from the brightest new Latin American literary talent working today. When Gabriel Santoros biography is scathingly reviewed by his own father, a public intellectual and famous Bogotá rhetorician, Gabriel could not imagine what had pierced his icy exterior to provoke such a painful reaction. A volume that catalogues the life of Sara Guterman, a longtime family friend and Jewish immigrant, since her arrival in Colombia in the 1930s, A Life in Exile seemed a slim, innocent exercise in recording modern history. But as a devastated Gabriel delves, yet again, into Saras story, searching for clues to his fathers anger, he cannot yet see the sinister secret buried in his research that could destroy his fathers exalted reputation and redefine his own. After his fathers mysterious death in a car accident a few years later, Gabriel sets out anew to navigate half a century of half-truths and hidden meanings. With the help of Sara Guterman and his fathers young girlfriend, Angelina, layer after shocking layer of Gabriels world falls away and a complex portrait of his father emerges from the ruins. From the streets of 1940s Bogotá to a strangers doorstep in 1990s Medellín, he unravels the web of doubt, betrayal, and guilt at the core of his fathers life and he wades into a dark, longsilenced period of Colombian history after World War II. With a taut, riveting narrative and achingly beautiful prose, Juan Gabriel Vásquez delivers an expansive, powerful exploration of the sins of our fathers, of wars devastating psychological costs, and of the inescapability of the past. A novel that has earned Vásquez comparisons to Sebald, Borges, Roth, and Márquez, The Informers heralds the arrival of a major literary talent. Juan Gabriel Vásquez on The Informers In 1999, three years after leaving Colombia, I travelled back to spend the holiday season with my family. I didnt go looking for stories; but four or five days before the end of the century, I met a woman of German-Jewish origin who had arrived in Colombia in 1938, and a story came to me. She had fled with her family from Emmerich, her hometown, when she was thirteen; her father opened a hotel in the small provincial city of Duitama, a couple of hours from Bogotá; the hotels
reputation, particularly among politicians, ensured them a good living. Then the war started. Colombia broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, and Colombian authorities began persecuting enemy citizens—Nazi spies, Nazi sympathizers, Nazi propagandists—but also citizens who, while not declared enemies, were deemed dangerous to the security of the hemisphere. Blacklists were brought into play, informers hired, and soon a German name was cause for suspicion, and feelings of mistrust and paranoia—all this a few years before the rise of McCarthyism in the United States—surrounded the German community in Colombia. After that, things got out of hand. The woman told me all this. I wanted to know more; so she sat with me for three days and patiently dictated her life to me. I wrote on a hotel notepad, staggered by the story, but more so by the fact that she was telling it to me with such freedom, such eagerness. At the time, I didn't know I would use that conversation as the narrative backbone of a novel. In fact, I seriously doubted I would use it at all: in those days, my fiction amounted to a group of stories set in France and the Belgian Ardennes, places I had lived in, watched closely with a writer's eyes, and felt I understood. I had never written about my country, mainly because I didn't understand it, and I had grown up believing one should only write about what one knows. Sometime in the middle of 2002 I realized how mistaken that advice was. I realized not understanding something is perhaps the best reason to write about it; I realized my favorite novels were, with rare exceptions, novels of inquiry, of investigation. From Conrads Under Western Eyes to Sebalds The Emigrants, certain works of fiction give us the sense that in writing them authors are entering an undiscovered country. They seem to know their story no better than their narrators; we read them and feel that writing, for them, is finding out. In writing The Informers, I wanted to find out about the way the war was experienced in Colombia: about the existence of a Nazi party there, about the blacklists, about the way my generation has inherited the consequences of what happened in those years. After my interviews in 1999, I had a whole life written down in notepads; my task was to transform it and then to invent other lives that would bring the historical moment to the surface. My task, in other words, was to look for that place where private secrets cross paths with public ones, and shed a little light on it. Novels, said Balzac, are the private history of nations. That idea carried me through the writing of The Informers. (Photo © Peter Drubin)

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