poverty, especially the political,” Fuentes says of Destiny. “What we've done culturally in no way corresponds with what we still have to do politically. The culture is first-rate and universal. The politics remain Third World.”

Fuentes decries Mexico’s powerful crime cartels and rampant murders, but insists they don’t reflect the entire nation. “It hurts all Mexicans that this situation exists,” he says, adding that Mexico and the United States share responsibility for drug- and arms-related crime. He calls for the decriminalization of drug use, advocates rehabilitation and says drugs must be confronted globally.

And he faults Mexico’s politicians for not educating everyone. “Without education, there's no knowledge. Without knowledge there's no development. Without development there's no progress. Everything is linked,” he says.

Such declarations reflect his commitment to social change, says his longtime editor and publisher, Marisol Schulz: “He’s always aware of what’s happening to Mexico, and that’s a unique form of community service, a very powerful way of being part of change.” And, she says, he supports new and young writers.

One such author is Jorge Volpi, probably best known for his international bestseller, In Search of Klingsor. Reading Terra Nostra was “an awakening” that led Volpi to become a writer and Fuentes's friend. At Fuentes's request, Volpi helped coordinate Mexico’s celebration of the author’s 80th birthday. “Fuentes is one of the most generous writers I know,” Volpi says. “In a field characterized by its meanness and hypocrisy, he never speaks ill of anyone, in public or in private. If there's something to be admired it's his integrity and consistency.”

Silvia Lemus. Thirty-seven years haven't dimmed the joy on Fuentes’s face upon hearing the name. The two met while he was married to the late Mexican actress Rita Macedo, with whom he had a daughter, Cecilia Macedo Fuentes, now a TV producer in Mexico.

The couple cleaves to their relationship, but not as if to a life raft. “There’s always a sense of mystery between a couple,” Lemus says. “That’s what's most attractive to me, never knowing exactly what keeps us together.” Not so mysterious is their shared passion for opera, art, travel and “magnificent food,” she says. Then, giggling like a schoolgirl with a crush, she adds, “I don’t just love him, I like him.”

Fuentes gets serious when he describes their marriage. “We’ve made a life together by respecting one another. [Our love] springs from our differences, from respecting each other’s professions,” Fuentes says, referring to Lemus’s work as a television journalist. He, too, talks of their shared passions. Then he pauses. “And we had children, whom we lost. The pain, the memory; that also unites us.”

Carlos Fuentes Lemus died in 1999, at age 25, from complications of hemophilia; Natasha Lemus Fuentes died in 2005, at age 30, of undisclosed causes.

As parents, each has found a way to cope. “I once was told that when someone dies, you need to let them go in order to go on with your own life,” Lemus says. “Not I. I won’t let them go. But they don’t want to leave, either.”

Lost writes itself on Fuentes’s face with every mention of his children’s deaths: His jaw tightens, his lower lip disappears and his head dips slightly.

“Now they live in my books,” he says. “I didn’t have to think about them when they were alive because they were right there. But when they died, I brought them into my writing, into my work. I don’t write a single line without thinking of them. It’s my way of keeping them alive, and it helps me a lot to keep them close.”

As his children inhabit his works, so does his soul. “Carlos is each one of his books, each one of his works,” Lemus says. “Even when a writer puts on a mask, it’s his own mask, the one he chose.”

Whichever mask he chooses—political analyst, funny man or grieving dad—Fuentes knows it is painted by life itself: “First comes love, for one’s wife, children, family and friends. Then comes what we do as writers. Without that life, I couldn’t have written those books; without those books, I wouldn’t have lived.”

Watch our exclusive interview with Fuentes at aarp.org/viva.

Excerpt

DESTINY AND DESIRE

by Carlos Fuentes

Permit me to introduce myself. Or rather: introduce my body, violently separated (you know this already) from my head. I speak of my body because I’ve lost it and will not have another opportunity to introduce it to all of you, gentle readers, or to myself. In this way I can indicate, once and for all, that the following narration has been dictated by my head and only my head, since my detached body is nothing more than a memory: one that can be transmitted and left in the hands of the forewarned reader.

Forewarned indeed: The body is at least half of what we are. Still, we keep it hidden in a verbal closet. For the sake of modesty, we do not refer to its invaluable and indispensable functions. Forgive me: I will speak in detail about my body. Because if I don’t, very soon my body will be nothing but an unburied corpse, a slaughtered fowl, an anonymous loin. And if you, being very well bred, don’t want to know about my bodily intimacies, skip this chapter and begin your reading with the next one.

I am a twenty-seven-year-old man, one meter seventy-eight centimeters tall. Every morning I look at myself naked in my bathroom mirror and caress my cheeks in anticipation of the daily ceremony: Shave my beard and upper lip, provoke a strong response with Jean-Marie Farina cologne on my face, resign myself to combing black, thick, untamable hair. Close my eyes. Deny to my face and head the central role my death will be certain to give them. Concentrate instead on my body. The trunk that is going to be separated from my head. The body that occupies me from my neck to my extremities, covered in skin the color of pale cinnamon and tipped with nails that will continue to grow for hours and days after death, as if they wanted to scratch at the lid of the coffin and shout I’m here, I’m still alive, you made a mistake when you buried me.

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