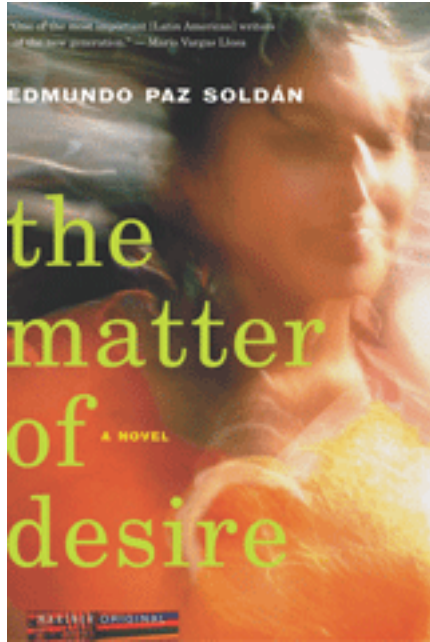


Press Release



The Matter of Desire

by Edmundo Paz Soldán

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"One of the most important [Latin American] writers of the new generation." — Mario Vargas Llosa

[A] captivating, well-written thriller." — *Críticas*

"A tale of equivocal heroes, treacherous revolutionaries, and rejected love . . . evokes a gritty urban milieu permeated by pop culture and technology." — *Kirkus Reviews*

About the Book

Edmundo Paz Soldán is one of today's hottest Latino writers. His novels and story collections, published in Spanish to great acclaim around the world, have won accolades, including the National Book Award in his native Bolivia, and he has become a leading spokesman for the gritty urban and pop culture – influenced Latin literary movement known as McOndo. This April, Houghton Mifflin is proud to bring Paz Soldán's extraordinary work to English-speaking audiences for the first time with the publication of his novel *The Matter of Desire* as a Mariner Original paperback.

Currently based in the United States, where he teaches at Cornell, Paz Soldán draws on the intricate relationship between Latin America and the United States to create an erotically charged tale of political intrigue, private mystery, and dangerous, all-consuming love. *The Matter of Desire* is the story of Pedro, a young Bolivian political scientist who becomes involved in a torrid affair with Ashley, one of his students at a university in upstate New York. When their obsessive passion threatens to cost him his job and reputation, Pedro returns to Bolivia to solve the mystery surrounding the death of his father, a writer and political revolutionary killed in a shootout with police two decades earlier.

Feeling his own life coming unmoored, Pedro hopes to find an anchor by discovering the truth about his father, also named Pedro, whose slaying caused him to become an icon of the Latin American left. Assisted by his uncle David, the only survivor of the massacre that killed his father, by his father's famous — and cryptic — revolutionary novel *Berkeley*, and by a local drug lord, who knew his father in his youth, Pedro soon uncovers a dense web of deception and unreality that explodes every truth he has ever known about his country, his family, and himself.

Caught between North and South America — between the dictates of modern society and the political ideals of the sixties and seventies, the cold sex appeal of Ashley and the loving pull of Carolina, a childhood love from Bolivia, between his own murky past and an uncertain future — Pedro embodies the complexities of finding an identity in a world where fixed ideas of culture, politics, technology, and even love have blurred and bled together in new, barely recognizable variations.

A Conversation with Edmundo Paz Soldán

Q) How did you get the idea for the book?

A) I belong to a generation that does not believe in big projects to change the world. I thought it would be an interesting project for a novel to compare and contrast this generation's attitude to life with that of the sixties' and early seventies' generation, which really believed in utopian projects of social change.

First I imagined Pedro, who is a young political scientist working at an American university and writing a book about an icon of the Latin American left (a Che Guevara type who dies fighting a dictatorship in Bolivia and becomes enshrined by his followers). The project took off when, in order to make the research more personal for Pedro, I made him the son of this icon. The larger issues became intimate ones.

I also wanted to write a novel about an affair between a professor and one of his graduate students. Somehow, this different project became fused to the first one, and the result is a novel that deals at the same time with political issues, passion, and heartbreak.

Q) How much of it is autobiographical, and is anything based on real events?

A) Part of the novel is set on an American campus. In order to write that, I used my own experiences as a professor at Cornell. It is too easy to satirize life in academia, so I don't try to do much of that; I think I have the best kind of relationship with the academic world, which is a love-hate relationship. Unlike Pedro, I don't teach Latin American politics and I'm not a political scientist, but I got a B.A. in political science and I thought about following that road. Luckily for me, I decided to go with my true calling, which has always been literature. In a way, Pedro is a projection of what I might have been if I had continued with political science.

In the novel, paramilitary soldiers killed Pedro's dad as he was having a secret meeting with the leaders of his clandestine group, which was working against the dictatorship in power. A killing like this took place in real life. It is known in Bolivia as "the Harrington Street

Massacre," which refers to the death of eight leaders of a left-wing party at the hands of the military in the early eighties.

Some important characters in the novel are also based on real-life figures. Pedro's dad has the charisma of Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, a left-wing politician who was destined for great things but whose life was cut short by the military in the early eighties; and the drug trafficker, Jaime Villa, bears more than a passing resemblance to Roberto Suarez, Bolivia's number-one drug trafficker during that same time, who offered to pay Bolivia's foreign debt in exchange for immunity and who served as an inspiration for a very minor character in *Scarface*.

Q) Berkeley is an important symbol in the novel, playing a large part in the lives of both Pedro and his father. Why?

A) I studied for my Ph.D. at Berkeley, and those six years were some of the best of my life. In the novel, however, I was not that interested in the real Berkeley, even though some sections are set there. I was more interested in Berkeley as a symbol of the anti-establishment, of the Free Speech Movement, of the student protests of the sixties, and of radical politics in the early seventies. Living there in the early to mid-nineties, I was struck by how many students were still going to Berkeley with the dream of finding what earlier generations had found. Of course, many things have changed, so in the novel Berkeley stands for a lost utopia as well, for the impossible desire to go back to the place and time where we once achieved communion with the universe.

Q) How have your own experiences coming to the United States as a student and your multiculturalism affected your writing?

A) I arrived in this country fifteen years ago on a soccer scholarship. I lived for three years in Alabama, then six years in Berkeley, and since 1997 I have been living in upstate New York. I have been able to see different regions of this country, and one of the things that I have enjoyed most is seeing how truly multicultural it is. From the outside, the U.S. is seen as a monolith, with just one point of view. Even though the myth of the "melting pot" is that here we all become one culture with a shared set of values and assumptions about the world, the truth is that we all become American without ever losing sight of the culture we come from. There are many ways of being American, and this country is all the richer for it.

After more than ten years of living in the U.S. and having put down roots here — my wife is a Californian, my three-year-old son is a New Yorker — I had a natural desire to explore what this newly acquired American identity meant for me, which was something I hadn't explored in my fiction. Of course, being optimistic in real life about how I have adapted to my new country does mean not realizing the pain and anguish one feels at being displaced from one's own culture. In *The Matter of Desire* I wanted to explore the darker side of the immigrant experience.

Pedro became an embodiment of a feeling that many immigrants have, that of living torn between two countries and two cultures, being Latin American and also being a U.S. Latino. That sensation of being in between two worlds is what gives Pedro his sense of melancholic instability, his feeling of being unmoored, craving so desperately to find an anchor for his life. Pedro tries to find stability by looking back, by finding out who his dad was. Knowing

the past may mean, then, finding a way to understand his present identity. But, you know, Pedro might discover that it is too late for him.

Q) What has your experience been as a Latin author publishing in the U.S.?

A) Quite interesting, since in the whole decade of the nineties I published only in my country of birth, Bolivia. Three years ago my Spanish-language publisher, Alfaguara, realized that most of my novels, which were in Spanish, sold better in the U.S. than in Spain and Latin America. And since Alfaguara has local subsidiaries in about twenty countries, they decided that, starting with *The Matter of Desire*, my books would be published by their imprint in Miami and exported to Latin American countries.

It is quite exhilarating to be living in this moment of phenomenal growth for books in Spanish in the U.S. I still remember the late eighties, when in order to read the new novel by Vargas Llosa I had to ask friends to bring it to me from Mexico or Spain. Now I can find in American bookstores nearly everything of importance that is published in Latin America and Spain.

People are buying and reading books in Spanish in massive numbers. To give you an example, the U.S. is Alfaguara's third largest market, after Spain and Mexico. They sell more books here than in Argentina and Colombia, two traditionally important markets. Spanish is alive and kicking, and since more and more Spanish-speaking immigrants are arriving each year in the U.S., we can safely say that it will continue to be that way in the near future.

Q) You belong to the McOndo movement, which distances itself from "magical realism" as the main mode of narrating the Latin American experience. What can you tell us about it?

A) Let me make clear that I teach García Márquez's work every semester at Cornell. He is a wonderful writer, one of the few twentieth-century writers who will surely remain. As a reader, I admire him and I love to get lost in his books. The name McOndo is a play on García Márquez's Macondo, which shows his importance. However, as a writer, I feel closer to other Latin American writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Manuel Puig, and even closer to American writers such as Don DeLillo and Philip Roth. And I am not the only one to feel that way — it's a whole Latin American generation, writers such as Alberto Fuguet and Rodrigo Fresán. I think it is a question of a different sensibility, of another temperament.

We started publishing in the early nineties, when it seemed that the only thing readers wanted was more magical realism. And we felt that magical realism was starting to exoticize Latin America, "the continent where the extraordinary is part of daily life." We did not want to contribute to that. We are more urban and are interested in the relationship between literature, popular culture, and mass media. We don't want to deny the importance of magical realism; rather, we just want to say that fortunately Latin American literature encompasses diverse registers. There is a place for magical realism, and there should be a place for McOndo.

Q) One more question: what is your obsession with crosswords in the novel?

A) I grew up solving crosswords. The crossword puzzle is for me the perfect symbol of the

meeting between high and popular culture that takes place in contemporary life. Crosswords can be quite challenging, daunting, and sophisticated; they require knowledge of many things; and yet there they are, day after day, being published in newspapers, being solved in the subway. In the novel, they also give clues to understanding that decade of violence and turmoil that was the seventies.

The crossword is a metaphor for my understanding of literature as well. Like a puzzle, a novel is an enigmatic code that should challenge the reader and take him or her to many dead ends. But eventually, if the reader is patient and enjoys the challenge, the code will be solved.

From *The Matter of Desire*

Here, in this plaza full of retirees on benches and pigeons surrounding the shoe shiners, a couple of people were killed in April when an army captain fired on a group of defenseless demonstrators. He (Robinson is his name) wasn't even forced into early retirement. Ten people were killed in Cochabamba, a few more in La Paz. Every now and then the country wakes up; every now and then a group says that's enough, that such poverty, such injustice, such corruption can't go on. The government quickly looks for answers, but the underlying problems are never solved; they're only postponed for a future occasion when the people's patience again runs out (the government trusts there will always be a bit more patience and resignation). There will be other protests, other demonstrations, other deaths. The dizzying, chaotic wheel on which the country turns doesn't stop, cannot be stopped, will never stop.

This isn't my city anymore. I'm a stranger, a foreigner here. It escaped my grasp and left me behind, moved on without me towards its splendid and unfortunate future . . . Like a mirage that continually moves away on the horizon, Río Fugitivo comes within reach but then always drifts away. I push the city away, afraid as I am to return to it. Or maybe the city I want to return to no longer exists — I left it behind the day I first went away . . .

This city isn't mine anymore, and wearing the headphones of my Nomad I feel protected. Still, there's an unmistakable smell in the air — a mixture of food (roasting *pollo al spiedo*, *chola* sandwiches) and carbon monoxide from the ancient buses — and a particular shade of blue in the sky. I recognize these as being part of what was mine, of what, imperfect and all, might still be my real home. I want to give myself over to them, merge completely with them. But that only lasts a few minutes, and I quickly emerge unsatisfied from my utopian dreams of fulfillment.

Six blocks from the cathedral in a small, unkempt plaza is a statue of Dad. Even though I hadn't headed in that direction, my predictable steps lead me there. I walk around it, shoo the pigeons away, turn off the Nomad. Dad is standing on a pedestal, looking steadfastly towards the future; someone has left roses at his feet. He could easily be mistaken for a patrician founder of states. The stone doesn't shine the way it did more than fifteen years ago, when a well-intentioned president inaugurated the statue in homage to one of the best-known heroes in the long struggle to regain democracy. I look at Dad and look at him again. I wish the stone could talk, so it could tell me what I yearn to hear.

Silence. The pigeons soon forget their fear and return to reclaim their lost territory.

I turn on the Nomad. Ashley liked to make love with "They Might Be Giants" on at full volume in the room.