

Memories of My Melancholy Whores
 by Gabriel García Márquez, translated from
 the Spanish by Edith Grossman
 Knopf, 115 pp., \$20.00

GABRIEL García Márquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* ends with Florentino Ariza, at last united with the woman he has loved from afar all his life, cruising up and down the Magdalena River in a steamboat flying the yellow flag of cholera. The couple are seventy-six and seventy-two, respectively.

In order to give unfettered attention to his beloved Fermina, Florentino has had to break off his current affair, a liaison with a fourteen-year-old ward of his, whom he has initiated into the mysteries of sex during Sunday-afternoon trysts in his bachelor apartment (she proves a quick learner). He gives her the brushoff over a sundae in an ice cream parlor. Bewildered and in despair, the girl commits unobtrusive suicide, taking her secret with her to the grave. Florentino sheds a private tear and feels intermittent pangs of grief over her loss, but that is all.

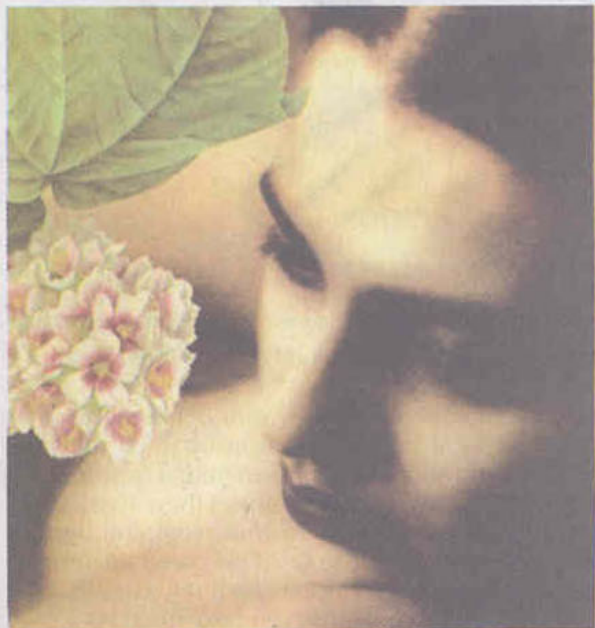
América Vicuña, the child seduced and abandoned by an older man, is a character straight out of Dostoevsky. The moral frame of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a work of considerable emotional range but a comedy nonetheless, of an autumnal variety, is simply not large enough to contain her. In his determination to treat América as a minor character, one in the line of Florentino's many mistresses, and to leave unexplored the consequences for Florentino of his offense against her, García Márquez drifts into morally unsettling territory. Indeed, there are signs that he is unsure of how to handle her story. Usually his verbal style is brisk, energetic, inventive, and uniquely his own, yet in the Sunday-afternoon scenes between Florentino and América we pick up arch echoes of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*: Florentino undresses the girl.

Florentino is a lifelong bachelor, an amateur poet, a writer of love letters on behalf of the verbally challenged, a devoted concertgoer, somewhat miserly in his habits, and timid with women. Yet despite his timidity and physical unattractiveness, he has during half a century of surreptitious womanizing brought off 622 conquests, on which he keeps aides-mémoires in a set of notebooks.

In all of these respects Florentino resembles the unnamed narrator of García Márquez's new novella. Like his predecessor, this man keeps a list of his conquests as an aid to a book he plans to write. In fact he has a title ready in advance: *Memoria de mis putas tristes*, memoir (or memorial) of my sad whores, rendered by Edith Grossman as *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. His list reaches 514 before he gives up counting. Then, at an advanced age, he finds true love, in the person not of a woman of his own generation but of a fourteen-year-old girl.

Sleeping Beauty

J. M. COETZEE



MEMORIES OF MY MELANCHOLY WHORES

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

A NOVEL

Translated by Edith Grossman

The parallels between the books, published two decades apart, are too striking to ignore. They suggest that in *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* García Márquez may be having another go at the artistically and morally unsatisfactory story of Florentino and América in *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

The hero, narrator, and putative author of *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* is born in the port city of Barranquilla, Colombia, around 1870. His parents belong to the cultivated bourgeoisie; nearly a century later he still lives in the decaying parental home. He used to make a living as a journalist and teacher of Spanish and Latin; now