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## **Books by Former Captives of Colombia's FARC Flood Market**

by LADB Staff

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During the past year, the largest Spanish-language publishing houses have turned many former captives of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) into best-selling authors whose success is unequalled in recent times by other Colombian or foreign authors. Since mid-2008, ten such books have been published, and, in February, *Out of Captivity*, published in the US, was added to the list. *Out of Captivity* is the account of three US civilian contractors who were doing photographic mapping in Colombia for the US Defense Department when they were captured by the FARC and held for 1,967 days in the Colombian jungle (see NotiSur, 2004-09-03, 2008-07-25).

By midyear, a French publisher will join the others, when it releases the story of a former political candidate who bore a son during her captivity, after having a consensual relationship with one of the guerrillas (see NotiSur, 2009-03-06). Beyond the emergence of a new literary genre based on relating the routine, hardships, and human misery of people with nothing in common but their unfortunate situation, the jungle books as the publishers are calling them have become an instrument that can ruin a political career, put forth a proposal to achieve peace in a country that has lived through internal war for four decades, or simply earn good money by telling the intimate life of some of the thousands of hostages in FARC-controlled territory.

Besides marking US publisher HarperCollins' entrance into the jungle best-seller business, *Out of Captivity* has made authors Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes, and Keith Stansell the political gravediggers of Ingrid Betancourt, the most famous of the guerrilla-held hostages. Daughter of a diplomat and former wife of another, former presidential candidate for Verde Oxigeno, a now-defunct party with a strange name, Betancourt was a symbol of struggle for Colombians, and she became a state cause for the government of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, since she also has French citizenship and her two sons were born in Paris.

### ***Out of Captivity slams Betancourt***

Gonsalves, Howes, and Stansell arrived in Colombia in 2003, after US-based Northrop Grumman won a Pentagon contract to map the jungle area where the rebels had been operating for 43 years. After their plane crashed, they were captured by the FARC and released in mid-2008.

The US contractors accuse Betancourt of alleged moral and political deviations ranging from promiscuity to obtain certain small privileges that could make life in the jungle a little easier like receiving a book, an English-Spanish dictionary, or a new toothbrush, or being able to decide when to bathe, to stealing food from her companions in misery or not acting as a party leader but instead becoming an individualist who forgot about her companions and only thought "of herself and her pleasures." The three contractors repeat this narrative throughout their 457-page book.

Stansell, a former Marine, is the one who lays out the reasons for so much hate: he insists that Betancourt used her relationship with some members of the FARC to accuse the US captives of being Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents and asked that they be taken somewhere in the jungle where they would be deprived of the companionship of the other prisoners. Various Colombian analysts agree that *Out of Captivity* could mean the end of Betancourt's political career. She had suggested, however, that she might retire from public life when voter-preference polls taken after her release showed her even with President Alvaro Uribe.

### *Tell-all accounts of captivity in great demand*

Until *Out of Captivity* appeared, books about hostages had centered on telling of the difficult life in the jungle, where illnesses known only by name in the cities are common and where there is often a risk of dying from "friendly fire" from bombing by the Colombian Army. They all devote chapters to analyzing possible ways to achieve peace and, above all, freedom for the more than 2,000 captives still in FARC hands.

But what none of the books lacks are tales of sex and scandals involving the hostages. It would seem to be one of the instructions the publishing houses impose on the authors to guarantee the books' success. A columnist in Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* quipped, "The first thing captives receive when they regain their freedom is a bouquet of flowers and a telephone call from some publisher interested in the latest love scandal from the jungle."

### *Former captives criticize Uribe*

Among those freed in recent weeks none of whom has yet written a book many have severely criticized policies of President Uribe, who, despite more than four decades of internal conflict, believes a military victory is still possible and therefore refuses to consider initiating peace negotiations to examine exchanging FARC hostages for some of the hundreds of guerrillas detained in Colombian prisons.

The last political leaders who came out of the jungle say that the FARC is very strong and capable of attracting combatants, which makes its military defeat unthinkable. Until these opinions began to come out, the only ex-hostage who had written a book explaining the causes of the political violence and supporting the premise of an exchange of hostages for jailed guerrillas was Luis Eladio Perez, a petroleum engineer, former senator, and former leader of the Partido Liberal (PL).

"We don't accept the FARC's ideas," wrote Perez in his book *Siete anos sequestrados por los FARC* (Held by the FARC for Seven Years), "but we have to admit that neglect and lack of opportunities generate violence. The government needs to understand that the guerrilla is a life option for many Colombians in areas where the state doesn't operate. As long as we have no effective state presence in every corner of the country, we are going to find it difficult to end the structural factors that generate violence."

### *Record sales of jungle books*

In just two weeks in the US, *Out of Captivity* sold more than 15,000 copies. To give an idea of the excitement its publication has caused in Colombia, on March 30, little more than a month after its publication in English, Colombia police dismantled a printing press in the city of Medellin where

10,000 pirated and translated copies of the book by the three Americans were ready for distribution to book stores.

Perez's book has now sold out of its third printing (more than 20,000 copies), and former foreign relations minister Fernando Araujo's work has sold more than 25,000 copies. But the most resounding success was former police officer John Frank Pinchao's account of the sexual life of the captives, particularly former vice presidential candidate Clara Rojas' consensual sexual relationship that produced a son. Now in its tenth printing, the book has sold more than 35,000 copies.

The jungle best sellers have been launched by some of the largest Spanish-language publishing houses: Aguilar, Planeta, Circulo de Lectores, Grijalbo-Mondadori, Santillana, Norma, and Oveja Negra. HarperCollins now joins the group, and French publisher Editions Plon will soon follow with the release of the book written by Clara Rojas. In addition, Rojas is preparing a movie script, with shooting set to begin late this year under the direction of someone whose name is still a closely guarded secret.

### *Behind the story-telling*

Aside from being an excellent business opportunity, the stories raise the question, "Why the need to write a book?" In an interview with the Argentine newspaper La Nacion, Luis Eladio Perez was very direct. "Basically," he said, "I was looking for a way to raise awareness about this violent drama being lived out in Colombia. Not only did the guerrillas kidnap us, but the government and society forgot us. It is a drama involving thousands of kidnap victims and no one cares."

Former senator Jorge Gechem said that, for him, "writing was therapy, something to close the wounds." Andres Ossa, Editorial Planeta representative in Botoga, says, "The publications serve to raise consciousness. People are more sensitive, and that's reflected in greater citizen participation in the debate regarding the hostages."

Ingrid Leon of Santillana Colombia prefers to see the phenomenon as just a business opportunity and not get into political analysis. "The success of the captivity stories is so overwhelming that sales could be compared with the fever generated by the Twilight-series books by US author Stephenie Meyer."

The assessment of Grijalbo-Mondadori's Alfonso Carvajal is shared by most literary critics. "Kidnapping is an undeniable reality that is bound to be expressed in one way or another in the Colombian culture," he said.

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