



Colombian writer Juan Carlos Botero

Being the son of the Colombian painter and sculptor Fernando Botero, one of the best known contemporary artists in the world, has not spared Juan Carlos Botero and his family from any of life's blows.

Gloria Zea, his mother, was kidnapped (and released) in 1973. The following year, he lost his little brother Pedro in a terrible auto accident in Spain. In 1993, his father was nearly overtaken by a kidnapping net, and because of the danger he faces in his native country, Juan Carlos had to abandon Colombia and move to the United States. Here, two years ago, he began a battle against cancer, an illness he is recovering from today.

So it's not too much to say that this sailor and professional scuba diver has navigated turbulent waters and confronted his own dangerous reefs. That may be why the sea is both setting and character in Botero's new novel *El Arrecife* (The Reef, Seix Barral).

"The sea was one of the motors for this novel and for the one that came before, *La Sentencia* (The Sentence)," says Botero during the annual party in North Miami Beach for authors with the publisher Grupo Planeta.

"We have an existential affinity for water," says the 46-year-old writer from Bogota, who lives in Key Biscayne with his wife Uchi Carbonell and their daughters Natalia and Tatiana. The novel, the author explains, rescues the themes of initiation and the sea, rarely seen in Latin American literature.

"The main character, Alejandro, saves himself at a certain moment when he remembers his aquatic condition, and that's where we see him born as a man. That's why I include an epigraph from Marguerite Yourcenar that says, 'Nothing is slower than the true birth of a man.'"

Botero's birth as a fiction writer took place 20 years ago, when he won the Juan Rulfo Short Story prize for "El Encuentro" (The Encounter). Four years later, he went on to win the XIX Latin American Short Story Contest of Mexico. But it wasn't until 1992 that this columnist for prestigious Colombian newspapers (*La Prensa*, *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador*) published his first book, *Las semillas del tiempo* (epífanos) [The Seeds of Time (epiphanies)] which was re-released in 2007.

A strong autobiographical current appears to circulate through the pages of *El Arrecife*, in the character of Alejandro, the son of a comfortable Bogota family who discovers a world of adventure and knowledge with his uncle Ernesto when he is taken to the island where his uncle lives as a teenager.

"There's a lot of me in Alejandro," his creator admits. "But it's not autobiographical. The other characters are not the people in my family, since we have good relationships and are quite united."

Two of Botero's brothers, Fernando and Lina, live in Mexico. His mother lives in Colombia, where she directs the Museum of Modern Art in Bogota and the Colombian Opera. His father has a number of homes throughout the world.



“My parents divorced when I was very young,” the writer recalls. “But I have a special relationship with them. My father lives in Europe, with Paris as his base, and he spends time in Mexico and New York, and he makes his sculptures in Italy. Where ever he goes, he stays awhile.”

Botero describes his father as “a mountain man” – there’s nothing of the sea in him. But, because of childhood friendships, he traveled to the island of San Andrés, object of a territorial dispute between Colombia Nicaragua, very much like the Caribbean paradise of El Arrecife.

For his next novel, already in progress, Botero intimates, will take up a theme he has treated in the past: the urban violence in his country.

“That’s why it was such a relief to get away from [the violence] in El Arrecife,” says the novelist. “It was like taking a break.”