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# Reader Resources

## **Sun, Stone and Shadows**

edited by Jorge F. Hernández



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## Preface

Mexico and the United States share a long border and a common history. Although our two nations remain separate and independent, they are also deeply interrelated not only through economic ties, political cooperation, and cultural exchange but also by flesh and blood through the many millions of Mexican-Americans who personally embody the intermingling of our two great and complex countries.

There is perhaps no better way for two nations to learn about one another than through sharing their stories. *Sun, Stone, and Shadows* presents a superb selection of the finest Mexican short stories of the twentieth century. No one can read this arresting volume without experiencing the wonder and surprise of discovery.



“The temples and gods of pre-Columbian Mexico are a pile of ruins, but the spirit that breathed life into that world has not disappeared... Being a Mexican writer means listening to the voice of that present, that presence.”

## What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

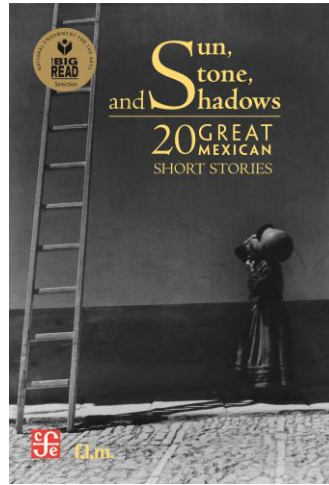
A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



# About the Book

## Introduction to the Book

Mexico is a country filled with stories, some true, others pure fiction. Those united in *Sun, Stone, and Shadows: 20 Great Mexican Short Stories* represent a sample of the best Mexican fiction published during the first half of the twentieth century, featuring some of the most important writers of Hispanic-American literature. Those included in these pages compose a literary geography: their birthplaces span nearly all of contemporary Mexico's regions, climates, and cultural zones. The historical perspective, too, is far from narrow, with authors born as early as the final decades of the nineteenth century during the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Hearing these voices is vital to understanding those to follow.



Once the first shots of the Mexican Revolution were fired, a renewed creative spirit took hold of Mexico's writers and other artists. Such painters as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros covered buildings with murals, recognizing the wealth of Mexico's past and all that had been disdained by the previous dictatorship. Writers inherited a culture with deep traditional roots, yet saw their works cross artistic borders. Creative minds drew on a cruel irony: while the revolutionary government of Mexico oversaw the consolidation of a modern nation, many politicians continued sowing the seeds of corruption and abuse.

Writers such as Alfonso Reyes and Martín Luis Guzmán suffered firsthand the bloody revolutionary days, but later saw their works widely translated and appreciated. Those in the next generation, such as Octavio Paz or Juan Rulfo, were born to survivors of the Revolution. The next generation included Carlos Fuentes and José Emilio Pacheco, who wrote and lived through Mexico's opening up toward the modern world, braved the fears of the Cold War, and bore witness to the tragic massacre of 1968.

The stories collected in *Sun, Stone, and Shadows* are gathered into thematic areas, from an exploration of "The Fantastic Unreal," through images of a tangible Mexico, and concluding with an examination of the "Intimate Imagination." Though strong individually, taken together these works offer a glimpse of Mexico's varied faces, its flavors and colors, the echoing screams or bygone murmurs that define an infinitely diverse and complex nation.

# About the Author

## Juan Rulfo (1918–1986)

Juan Rulfo is considered one of Mexico's greatest writers despite having published only two books: the influential short-story collection *The Burning Plain* (1953), and the immensely celebrated novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955). In 1970, Rulfo received Mexico's National Prize for Literature and, in 1983, the prestigious Prince of Asturias Award in Spain. Born in the western state of Jalisco in the town of Sayula, Rulfo grew up to capture in words the atmosphere and landscape of his roots.



Temple of El Castillo in Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico (Copyright Mark Segal/Digital Vision/Getty Images)

Not until late in his life did Rulfo become a full-time writer and photographer, and he kept a job at the National Institute for Indigenous Studies even after his books had received international acclaim. He also worked on several film projects. His work has been translated into languages the world over, but Rulfo always preferred to shy away from the limelight and gossip of the literary world.

Rulfo's literature blends the many voices of everyday Mexican life in a prose that also honors the quiet murmurs of the human soul. He transformed this particular world into universally recognizable characters and stories. His life of watchful silence and shadows ended with his death in Mexico City in 1986, but his widespread influence continues to grow.

## Octavio Paz (1914–1998)

Octavio Paz received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990, the only Mexican writer so honored to date. Born in Mexico City, Paz soon became a brilliant student and a promising member of important literary circles and publications. He participated in the founding of *Taller*, a magazine that marked the dawn of a new literary sensibility among many young writers.

In 1943, Paz left Mexico for Los Angeles, where he became acquainted with American modernist poetry. He entered the Mexican Foreign Service in 1945 and was posted to Paris, where he collaborated on projects with prominent Surrealists such as writer André Breton. In 1962, Paz was named Mexico's ambassador to India, an experience later reflected in several of his most important books. He resigned from his post in 1968 to protest his government's murderous repression of the student movement at the Plaza of Tlatelolco in Mexico City.

Paz later founded and edited two other very significant literary magazines, *Plural* and *Vuelta*, and became one of the most brilliant critical and poetic voices of modern Mexico. As an essayist, he published many important books, among them *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), which remains unsurpassed for its evocation of the Mexican character. Paz died in Mexico City on April 19, 1998.

## Rosario Castellanos (1925–1974)

For centuries, poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz remained the only celebrated example of women's contribution to Mexican literature. In the past century, however, Rosario Castellanos wedged open a door for such contemporary writers as Laura Esquivel and Angeles Mastretta.

Castellanos was born in 1925 in Mexico City but grew up on her family's ranch in Comitán, Chiapas—an environment reflected throughout her considerable work. She was a poet, novelist, essayist, and a translator of Emily Dickinson. She won the Chiapas Prize for her autobiographical novel *Balún Canán* (1957); three years later, she received the prestigious Xavier Villaurrutia National Prize for her novel *Ciudad Real* (1960).

An advocate of the culture and folklore of Chiapas, Castellanos worked at the Institute of Science and Arts in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, and directed the indigenous puppet theater of the Center for Tzeltal-Tzotzil Culture. She dedicated the last years of her life to the Mexican Foreign Service and became ambassador to Israel. The last novel she published was *The Book of Lamentations* (1962), which recreates an Indian rebellion near San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas. Tragically, she died from an accidental electrocution while trying to plug in a lamp at her home in Tel Aviv on August 7, 1974.

## Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012)

Carlos Fuentes served as Mexican ambassador to France from 1975 to 1977, and through his writing, he became Mexico's foremost literary ambassador to the world. Fuentes was born in 1928 and, owing to his father's diplomatic career, spent his childhood in Chile, Argentina, Washington, DC, and other international postings. In college, he co-founded the magazine *Universidad de México* in 1955, which soon grew into the influential *Mexican Review of Literature*. In 1957, he also founded and directed the Department of Cultural Relations of the Mexican Foreign Service.

Fuentes published his first novel, *Where the Air Is Clear*, in 1958, and took his place alongside Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and José Donoso in El Boom, the international explosion of Latin American literature in the 1960s. His later novels include *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), *Aura* (1962), and *The Old Gringo* (1985). In his stories and essays, Fuentes consistently opposed injustice and authoritarianism, championing the individual through a literature composed of many cultures and voices. He died in Mexico City on May 15, 2012.

# Historical and Literary Context

## 20th-Century Mexican Culture and History

### 1900s

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- The dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) presents Mexico to the world as a land of promise and progress.
- 1904: Mounted inspectors begin to police the U.S.-Mexican border.
- 1906: The workers at Río Blanco textile factory and Cananea copper mine go on strike. Both are brutally suppressed.

### 1910s

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- 1910: Francisco I. Madero runs for president against Díaz, claims victory in fraudulent elections, calls for revolution.
- 1910: Armies led by Emiliano Zapata in the south and Francisco "Pancho" Villa in the north revolt against Díaz, beginning the Mexican Revolution.
- 1911: Francisco I. Madero becomes Mexico's first democratically elected twentieth-century president, 1911.
- 1917: A new constitution is written forbidding reelection, curtailing the authority of the Catholic Church, giving mineral rights to the nation, and granting new powers to organized labor.

### 1920s

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- 1923: Secretary of Education José Vasconcelos gives artists permission and support to paint revolutionary themes on government walls, beginning the mural movement.
- 1926-1929: The government of President Calles bans religious services and confiscates properties of the Catholic Church; young Catholics revolt in defense of their religion; the government negotiates peace and reinstates religious liberties.
- 1929: After recently elected President Alvaro Obregón is assassinated, Calles runs Mexico behind the scenes through the precursor to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

### 1930s

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- As the Great Depression worsens, more than 500,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans are repatriated.
- Diego Rivera has a one-man show at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1931, but when he refuses to change the face of Lenin in his mural for the RCA building at Rockefeller Center, his creation is destroyed, 1934.
- 1938: President Lázaro Cárdenas expands industry and land reform, while also expropriating foreign oil companies, founding Petroleos Mexicanos (PEMEX).
- 1939: Germany invades Poland, beginning World War II in Europe.

### 1940s

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- 1942: The United States and Mexico adopt the Emergency Farm Labor, or "Bracero" Program, allowing Mexicans to do contract work in the U.S. for a limited time.
- 1942: Mexico declares war on the Axis powers, joining the Allied forces in World War II.
- 1945: The United Nations is established after World War II ends, with Mexico as one of its original members.

### 1950s

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- 1950: XHTV transmits the first Mexican television broadcast.
- 1952: The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) opens at its new campus in southern Mexico City.
- 1955: Inauguration of the International Bridge between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo.
- Acapulco becomes a major international tourist destination in Mexico.

### 1960s

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- 1962: César Chávez begins to organize farm workers in Delano, California.
- 1965: The Mexican Border Industrialization Program establishes the first border factories, or maquiladoras.

- 1968: Ten days before the Mexico City Olympics, riot police open fire on student protesters demonstrating for democracy, killing many and incarcerating even more in the Tlatelolco massacre.

### 1970s

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- 1970: Mexico hosts the World Cup for the first time.
- 1977: The U.S. promulgates the "Carter Plan" to regulate migrant workers.
- 1978: After a monolith representing Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui is discovered by chance in Mexico City, archaeologists begin excavating the Aztec Templo Mayor.

### 1980s

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- Mexico leads the Contadora Group to unify and modernize Central America.
- 1981: Mexico faces severe economic crisis, causing a major breakdown in investment and social welfare.
- 1985: An 8.1 earthquake strikes Mexico City, killing thousands.

### 1990s

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- 1990: Octavio Paz wins the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- 1994: The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) goes into effect and creates the second-largest trade block in the world.
- 1994: The Zapatista Army of National Liberation, an armed revolutionary group named after Emiliano Zapata, begins its campaign against the Mexican government.
- 1994: Presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio is assassinated in Tijuana.

### 2000s

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- 2000: Seven decades of uninterrupted rule by the PRI are democratically ended with the election of Vicente Fox (National Action Party, or PAN).
- 2000: Hispanics become largest minority group in the U.S., of which Mexican Americans are, by far, the biggest component.
- 2006: Felipe Calderón (PAN) becomes President of Mexico.

## A Brief History of Mexico

The history and heritage of Mexico are alive in her city streets and rural towns. The magnificent stonemasonry of the Olmec, Toltec, Zapotec, Maya, and other indigenous civilizations still peeks through the lushness of contemporary Mexico. We know the exact spot where Montezuma first met Captain Hernán Cortés on the morning in 1519, marking the beginning of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Neither a triumph nor a defeat, the conquest marked the painful birth of a nation's limitless fusion: genetic, cultural, artistic, economic, and architectural.

What was known as New Spain, an immense territory stretching from what is now Oregon down to Central America, would be governed as the jewel among Spanish colonies. The apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the indigenous Mary of Catholic belief, led to the conversion of more than nine million Indians to Catholicism and later became the symbol for independence from Spain. Today, she remains a symbol of cultural and national identity, even beyond the borders of Mexico.

The priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla sparked a movement for independence from Spain in 1810. Influenced by both the French and American Revolutions, Hidalgo laid the groundwork for a new nation he would not live to see. Throughout the nineteenth century, Mexico wavered between the twin pulls of monarchy and republicanism. More than half of her territory was lost in a war with the United States between 1846 and 1848.

In 1858, an indigenous lawyer from Oaxaca, Benito Juárez, became president of Mexico. For a time, he suppressed the struggles between the liberal and conservative factions. Mexico suffered a military invasion by the French in the 1860s; Juárez defeated the Emperor Maximilian in 1867. Juárez and his generation expelled the imperialist French and instituted democratic reforms.

Juárez died in office in 1872; subsequently, General Porfirio Díaz came to power in 1876. An initially popular veteran of the war against the French, Díaz ruled for more than thirty years. Under his dictatorship, Mexico made substantial economic progress and embraced modernity, but at the excruciating cost of widespread hunger and repression.

All this left Mexico ripe for revolution. An uprising culminated in its own institutionalization: the founding of a political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), that would win every election for the rest of the twentieth century. During this period the PRI governments had no official relationship with the Catholic Church, seen as a symbol of the old political order, although Mexico was undeniably and predominantly

Catholic. Those same governments encouraged the work of artists, painters in particular. Twentieth-century Mexico also saw a tremendous flowering of literary talent, nowhere more than in the short-story form.

## The Mexican Revolution

In 1910, Francisco I. Madero, a young liberal from northern Mexico championing free elections, term limits, and land reform for poor farmers, challenged the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Madero beat Díaz at the polls, and the Maderistas managed to topple Díaz's government and make Madero one of the youngest presidents in Mexico's history. Yet military officials and aristocrats, longing for the restoration of the Díaz kleptocracy, imprisoned and killed him before he could complete his first term.

The lack of civil liberties (freedom of press, freedom of association), coupled with extreme poverty in many areas, ignited the revolutionary spirit Madero had channeled. Even without Madero, a fundamental change was already palpable in Mexico. The country no longer depended on the imitation or adoption of foreign economic and political models, but instead strove to pursue its own, including farmers' cooperatives and workers' unions.

After Madero's death, three revolutionary leaders attempted to carry the mantle of revolution: Venustiano Carranza, arguing for a new constitution; Pancho Villa, an overwhelmingly popular bandit-general; and Emiliano Zapata, a peasant whose dedication to the downtrodden transcended any theorizing about impoverished masses. All three contributed to overthrowing the government that had killed Madero, and all three took an active role in the disputes and bloodbaths that followed, even among the revolucionados themselves.

The revolutionaries finally laid down their arms in 1917 and established a stable government. Many of its leaders and their followers didn't live to see the Revolution evolve into the political party that would govern Mexico from 1929 until 2000—forty years longer than Díaz had ruled. One at a time, General Carranza, Pancho Villa, and Emiliano Zapata were all ambushed and assassinated.

Only two important generals, Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, survived to help institutionalize the movement. They accomplished this politically (with the founding of a one-party system), socially (by letting the state absorb all economic activity), and culturally (by making government censors the final arbiter over all artistic production).

Many revolutionary leaders and political chieftains from different factions lie buried in Mexico City in the Monumento a la Revolución. After all their battles, military and political, they

rest in peace together—all except for Emiliano Zapata, who was buried in his homeland of Morelos, among his people, and who alone, according to Octavio Paz, truly embodied the ideals of the Revolution.

## Mexican Surrealism

The artistic movement known as Surrealism first emerged in France, partly as a reaction to the slaughters of World War I and the advent of Freudian psychology. As an artistic movement, whether in literature, film, or the visual arts, Surrealism tried to recreate the workings of the unconscious mind, especially as it is experienced in dreams. Combining illusion and reality, a loose affiliation of poets, novelists, photographers, painters, sculptors, and filmmakers helped shape Surrealism's haunting imagery of the unconscious.

Considered the father of Surrealism, French poet André Breton visited Mexico in 1938. He returned to Paris convinced he had been to a land that lived and breathed Surrealism on an everyday basis. According to legend, Breton once ordered a table from a carpenter, describing the measurements he needed by drawing it in perspective. Two weeks later, the carpenter delivered a beautiful piece of woodwork in triangular form, with two very long legs on one side and a pair of very short ones on the other. He had built exactly what Breton had drawn and, in his defense, muttered that if the foreigner wanted a table he should have said so in the first place.

Once in Mexico, Surrealism quickly took root in unexpected ways. In literature, Octavio Paz, Juan José Arreola, Jorge Ibargüengoitia, and others avidly incorporated its parallel worlds and striking, often comic imagery into their work. Such painters as Frida Kahlo and Remedios Varo embraced Surrealism as Salvador Dalí had in Spain, granting themselves license to imagine landscapes obedient to dream logic, yet almost photorealistic in their detail. The Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel, who had collaborated with Dalí on the landmark Surrealist film *Un chien andalou* (1929) in Europe, fled the Spanish Civil War and wound up in Mexico, where he made such classics as *The Exterminating Angel* (1962).

As depicted in the engravings of José Guadalupe Posada, the phantasmagoric dreams of Kahlo, and the murals of Diego Rivera, Mexico is a land where death matters as much as life. In connection with the Catholic holy days of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day (November 1 and 2), Mexicans commemorate the dead by bringing food, drinks, flowers, or photographs to graves of their loved ones, a time known as *El Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). It is customary to give all living friends and neighbors skulls crafted from sugar, as a reminder of the destiny that awaits us all. No wonder European Surrealism and such gifted practitioners as



Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, and Luis Buñuel found their purest expression an ocean away, in Mexico.

## **The Virgin of Guadalupe, the Queen of Mexico**

Twelve years after Spanish explorers landed on Mexican soil, the miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe was recorded. In 1531, a dark-skinned mother of Jesus appeared several times to a peasant Indian man named Juan Diego, a Catholic convert. She asked to have a church built on the site. After Diego told a bishop what had happened—only to be turned away—a colorful image of the Virgin was emblazoned on Diego's cloak to validate his story. This miracle led to the conversion of about nine million of Mexico's Indians to Catholicism. The Vatican officially recognized the miracle of Guadalupe in 1745, and the image now hangs above the altar in the Basílica de Santa María de Guadalupe in Mexico City.

# Discussion Questions

1. How would you characterize the relationship between the United States and Mexico as seen through the stories in the anthology? Choose two stories and discuss them.
2. Identify common themes of the stories in *Sun, Stone, and Shadows*. Discuss three you feel are most important to understanding Mexican culture, history, or religion.
3. Examine the role of violence as a catalyst of change in both Martín Luis Guzmán's and José Revueltas's stories.
4. Choose two stories that describe Mexico's landscape. How might this setting suggest universal themes?
5. How might the bureaucratic satire in Juan José Arreola's "The Switchman" relate to the modern world?
6. What is the attitude toward capital punishment in Juan Rulfo's "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!"?
7. Although Octavio Paz's "My Life with the Wave" is a fantastical story, does the plot resemble other stories you have read? How does the story describe a conventional love affair, and how does the wave act in ways a real woman might?
8. In Carlos Fuentes's "Chac-Mool," how do you interpret the anger and aggressiveness of the statue as it comes to life?
9. In what ways are feminine stereotypes challenged in Rosario Castellanos's story "Cooking Lesson"?
10. In what ways are the portrayals of indigenous people similar in the stories by Elena Garro and Inés Arredondo? How are they different?
11. How does the narrator's point of view contribute to an eerie atmosphere in Francisco Tario's "The Night of Margaret Rose"? How would the story change if it were told from a different perspective?
12. Choose your favorite story from *Sun, Stone, and Shadows*. Which aspects of it seem particular to Mexico, and which remind you of the United States? What might these similarities or differences suggest about the two countries?

# Additional Resources

## Book-length Works From Selected Writers

- Arreola, Juan José. *Obras. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica*, 1995.
- Castellanos, Rosario. *A Rosario Castellanos Reader: An Anthology of Her Poetry, Short Fiction, Essays, and Drama*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988.
- Fuentes, Carlos. *Burnt Water*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980.
- Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. New York: Grove Press, 1985.
- Rulfo, Juan. *The Burning Plain and Other Stories*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1967.

- Monsiváis, Carlos. *Lo fugitivo permanece*. Mexico: Ediciones Cal y Arena, 1990.
- Rulfo, Juan, from *Los cuadernos de Juan Rulfo* (1994), transcriptions of his writing notebooks, presentation by Clara Aparicio de Rulfo, transcribed by Yvette Jiménez de Báez. Ed. Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1994.
- Traven, B. *Canasta de cuentos mexicanos*. Mexico: Selector, 2000.

## If you would like to read other Mexican fiction, you might enjoy:

- Carlos Fuentes's *Aura*, 1962
- Rosario Castellanos's *The Book of Lamentations*, 1962
- Octavio Paz's *Sunstone*, 1957
- Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, 1955

## Anthologies of Mexican fiction

### In English

- Allende, Isabel, et al. *A Necklace of Words: Short Fiction by Mexican Women*. Fredonia, NY: White Line Press, 1997.
- Appelbaum, Stanley. *Mexican Short Stories/Cuentos mexicanos*. A Dual-Language Book. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2008.
- *Passages: Short Stories*. Bloomington, IN: 1st Library Books, 2004.
- Stavans, Ilán. *Prospero's Mirror: A Translator's Portfolio of Latin American Short Fiction*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, Bilingual Edition, 1998.
- Swanson, Phillip. *Latin American Fiction: A Short Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

### In Spanish

- Alatríste, Sealtiel. *Cuentos mexicanos*. Antología. Mexico: Alfaguara, 2006.
- Beltrán, Rosa. *Los mejores cuentos mexicanos 2006*. Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 2006.
- Millán, María del Carmen. *Antología de cuentos mexicanos, 1 y 2*. Mexico: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1977.

# Credits

## Works Cited

Fuentes, Carlos. *Myself with Others: Selected Essays*. 1988. New York: Noonday Press, 1990.

Hernández, Jorge F. ed. *Sun, Stone, and Shadows: 20 Great Mexican Short Stories*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 2008.

Paz, Octavio. "In Search of the Present." *Nobel Lectures: From the Literature Laureates 1986-2006*. New York: The New Press, 2007.

## Acknowledgments

Writer: Jorge F. Hernández

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