



Manrique, Jaime (b. 1949)

by Linda Rapp

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Versatile Colombian-born author Jaime Manrique has written novels, short stories, poetry, and works of nonfiction with gay themes.

From his earliest days, Jaime Manrique Ardila found himself in the role of an outsider. He was the illegitimate son of Gustavo Manrique, a member of one of Colombia's most prestigious families and the owner of banana plantations, and Soledad Ardila, who came from a peasant family of European, Native American, and African ancestry. The senior Manrique was already married when he met and became enamored of Ardila.

Jaime Manrique was born in the northern city of Barranquilla on June 16, 1949. His father at first expressed happiness at the news of the birth but later refused to recognize publicly Manrique and his younger sister as his children, although he promised that they would be acknowledged in his will--a pledge that he kept.

While the children were still small, however, Gustavo Manrique dropped Ardila for a younger mistress and thereafter rarely saw his son and daughter. It was then up to Ardila to manage to provide for herself and the children.

Manrique relates the events of his early years in *Eminent Maricones: Arenas, Lorca, Puig, and Me* (1999), the title of which plays on Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), while also reclaiming a derogatory term for homosexual, roughly equivalent to "faggot." The family's story, wrote George De Stefano in *The Nation*, "reads like a particularly outrageous telenovela ("Latin American soap opera")." Ardila and the children bounced from one city to another, sometimes in reasonable economic comfort, other times in poverty. A dizzying array of relatives and a new lover (once again a married man) for Ardila populate the drama.

In the midst of this melodrama, Manrique was discovering his homosexuality--and also realizing that it was extremely transgressive in Colombian culture, where *machismo* is the norm. Visible gay couples were virtually non-existent when he was growing up.

Manrique began enjoying pleasurable gay relationships while in his teens, but because of societal pressures, he was tormented. "Guilt ran my life from my adolescence on," he stated in 1999. Coming out to his family "took forever."

Manrique transferred frequently from school to school. His academic performance was uneven, but he developed a love of reading early on. Fortunate in having teachers and friends willing to lend him books from their collections, he joyfully and voraciously read novels, mostly from the nineteenth century.

After watching Ken Hughes's film *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960) as a teenager, Manrique plunged into the writer's complete works. He was particularly drawn to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) and learned parts of it by heart. A short time later a high school teacher lent him a work by André Gide in which he read of

Gide's visits to male brothels in Morocco in the company of Wilde. Manrique and his teacher did not discuss the book, but Manrique felt that the teacher was trying to tell him, "Look, these great writers were like you. It is okay."

Manrique, however, was cognizant of the ostracism faced by gay men in Colombian society and was "terrified of [his] deepening homosexual feelings" as an adolescent. He would not come out publicly until he was in his twenties and living in the United States. He describes himself as "full of internalized homophobia" until he was in his thirties.

Manrique's move to the U.S. came in 1967. His mother settled the family in Lakeland, Florida and found work as a domestic servant.

Manrique, whose English was limited, worked hard and impressed his high school teachers with his intelligence. Several took an interest in the young man and encouraged him to go to college. He attended the University of South Florida, graduating with a bachelor's degree in English in 1972.

From his early years Manrique had dreamed of a career as a writer. While still in high school in Colombia he managed to get an existentialist play, *¿En las manos de quién?* ("In Whose Hands?"), produced at the Teatro de Bellas Artes in Barranquilla. He was still pursuing his goal of becoming a writer when he applied to a fiction workshop with Manuel Puig at Columbia University in 1977. Puig approved his manuscript, and he was admitted.

Manrique called Puig "one of the most effeminate men that I've ever known"--anathema in the culture of *machismo* in which both had grown up--but nevertheless also "an author I idolized with the complete and irrational ardor of youth."

A year after the seminar Manrique published his first major work, the novella *El Cadáver de Papá* ("My Father's Corpse"), which became a best-seller in Colombia but also met with outrage since it dealt with a young man who murdered his wealthy, conservative father and later, dressed as a woman, attempted to seduce his father-in-law.

Manrique's next novel, *Colombian Gold: A Novel of Power and Corruption* (1983), was a political thriller.

Neither of the books received much notice outside Colombia. In each the main character was, as Manrique stated in a 1999 interview, "basically bisexual." His "first openly gay novel"--and the one that brought him to international attention--was *Latin Moon in Manhattan* (1992).

Through the eyes of Santiago Martínez Ardila, Manrique paints a vivid picture of the Colombian community in New York as well as various other characters--most of them quirky, but depicted affectionately--that the narrator meets. Manrique explores Martínez's identity as both a Colombian and now an American and also as a gay man. Long celibate, Martínez reawakens to his sexuality and eventually finds romance.

Manrique's next novel, *Twilight at the Equator* (1997), loosely autobiographical, is considerably darker. His main character, once again his alter ego Santiago Martínez, confronts homophobia in Colombia, Spain, and New York. Reviewer Teresa Ortega called the novel "nothing if not a deeply sacrilegious book--a rage against the patriarchal, death-dealing world the author and his protagonist find themselves in."

She further noted that "gay sex is for Santiago a touchstone of life force and grace" and that "Manrique excels at describing those moments in which an ardent sexual encounter with a stranger or the beauty of watching night fall over the Caribbean succeed in holding back the decay, desperation, and confusion of Santiago's everyday existence."

Manrique has also, in collaboration with Joan Larkin, translated the poetry of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in

Sor Juana's Love Poems: In Spanish and English (1997). A poet in his own right, Manrique is also the author of five volumes of poetry. *Los Adoradores de la Luna* ("Those Who Adore the Moon," 1976) won a national book award in Colombia. The other volumes are *Scarecrow* (1990), *My Night with Federico García Lorca* (1997), *Mi Cuerpo y otros poemas* ("My Body and Other Poems," 1999), and *Tarzan / My Body / Christopher Columbus* (2001). The middle section of the last is a dual-language version of the 1999 collection.

Critic David Rosen wrote in the *Lambda Book Report* that Manrique's poems "spark erotic and spiritual blazes" and are "poems to savor and contemplate for hours and hours."

Some of Manrique's poems celebrate the joy of sharing one's body with another in physical love; others, wrote Rosen, "map the utter heartache of uncertain, unrequited longing." Manrique also meditates on death in his poetry, reflecting on individuals like the poet Luis Cernuda, the explorer Christopher Columbus, and the gay martyr Matthew Shepard, the victim of a brutal homophobic murder.

Manrique has contributed to the short-story collection *Bésame Mucho* (1999), which he co-edited, and *Whistler in the Nightworld: Short Fiction from the Latin Americas* (2002, edited by Thomas Colchie). His story from the latter book, "The Documentary Artist," was given a dramatic reading by award-winning actor B. D. Wong in January 2005 in New York.

In *Eminent Maricones* Manrique describes his own early life and also discusses the lives and works of Reinaldo Arenas and Manuel Puig, both of whom he knew, and Federico García Lorca, whose work he began reading as a young man and came to appreciate more and more over the years. Reviewers praised the book, George Monteiro writing, "Working at the top of his literary form, Jaime Manrique gives us an engaging work that belongs, at least in part, to a tradition stretching back, in the history of English literature, to Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and North's *Plutarch*."

Manrique's latest project is a biographical novel about Manuela Saenz, the mistress of the South American military hero Simón Bolívar. No publication date has been set.

Manrique is a frequent contributor of book reviews to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. He has also taught writing and served as writer-in-residence at several colleges. He is currently an Associate Professor in the Master of Fine Arts program at Columbia University. In December 2004 he participated in a Queer Writers of Color reading in celebration of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the organized glbtq community at Columbia.

At the end of *Eminent Maricones* Manrique writes, "From my earliest childhood . . . my life has been a struggle to find dignity as a maricón." He expresses gratitude to Puig, Arenas, and Lorca for setting examples that helped him become "a fulfilled human being." He hopes, in turn, that his book will "be an inspiration to all the maricones--and heterosexuals--who dream of being men and women capable of taking on whatever kind of windmill stands in their way."

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