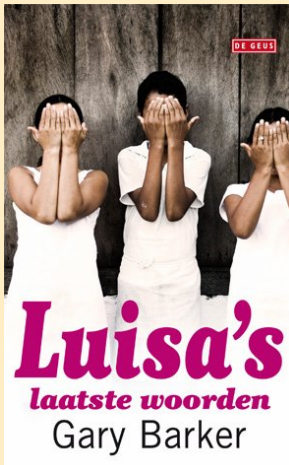




© Liesbeth Kuipers



World Rights
Publishing House De Geus
Contact: Esther Bruls
P.O. Box 1878
4801 BW Breda
The Netherlands
Phone: (31) 76 522 8151
Fax: (31) 76 522 2599
Email: e.bruls@degeus.nl

DE GEUS www.degeus.nl

Gary Barker

Luisa's Last Words

Original title: *Luisa's laatste woorden*

A novel of Love and Guerrillas

Based on the author's personal experience of living and working in Latin America, *Luisa's Last Words* is one of the first works of serious literary fiction to shed light on the personal stories behind Guatemala's tragic civil war.

Gary Barker
Luisa's Last Words

About the author

Gary Barker (1961) is a child psychologist, human rights activist and writer, who has spent his career working in Latin America and Africa to prevent and overcome violence. American by birth, he has lived for more than twenty years in Latin America, including Central America, Colombia and his second home, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. His work to engage men and boys in ending violence against women and to prevent violence in Brazil's slums has been recognized by various U.N. agencies, the World Bank, various governments and international development and human rights organizations. He has published several works of nonfiction, including *Dying to be Men: Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion* (Routledge, 2005). He has co-written and produced a series of award-winning cartoon videos on violence prevention that are widely used in Latin America. He has received awards from Ashoka-Social Entrepreneurs and the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation) for his pioneering work in the slums of Rio de Janeiro. His fiction emerges from his experiences of living and working in Latin America and Africa and incidents of recovery, resilience and hope. He and his bi-national family divide their time between Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Washington, D.C.

'My family has been connected to Latin America since I was a child and I have lived my adult life back and forth between the U.S., Brazil and Central America. I have been an activist on children's rights issues – working to end the killings of street children – and more recently working with governments, the U.N. and civil society groups to end violence against women.

Fiction is my way of making sense of all the stories I have collected. They are stories of chance and not-so-chance encounters throughout the region – stories, that if told as nonfiction, would seem untrue. Street children at my door in the middle of the night in Honduras, sometimes fleeing the police, sometimes just bored and high on sniffing glue. Meeting an off-duty Green Beret in an ice cream shop on the streets of Central America, a man sent to sow the very war and oppression I was working to end.

Colleagues lost in the Sandinista revolution. Finding myself in the living room of men who headed death squads and watching them play with their grandchildren.

Translating for a Guatemalan guerrilla leader as he sought funds for his cause from Chicago's liberal elite. Receiving advice on how to be a good father from former gang leaders in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* who put down their guns to be family men.

I had no other way to tell these stories but by turning them into fiction. Everything in my fiction is true and none of it is true. That is the enigma of Latin America and its 500+ years of encounters and conflict between the indigenous inhabitants and the invaders and all the mixing in between them.

My book is ultimately a love song for Latin America and its glorious and tragic confusion. You can read my book, and my fiction, as sorrow, and as hope. Neither is really the point – the point is to *feel* it.' – *Gary Barker*

About the novel

Luisa's Last Words is a story of love and loss during Guatemala's civil war in the 1980s and 1990s. It follows the story of Daniel Golden, a U.N. human rights diplomat, who has been at the center of peace negotiations in Guatemala, in minefields in El Salvador and on the front-line of clashes between the landless movement and the government in Brazil. Along the way, he has collected deaths – sacrifices. Among the sacrifices that haunt him most is Hector Nawbey Toc. Hector was a self-assured indigenous guerrilla commander, as at ease in the U.S. seducing gringas in country-western bars as he was in Guatemala's jungles. Hector disappeared at the height of the Guatemalan peace negotiations, accused of kidnapping a member of the vice president's family, leaving a wife, a lost son, a hole in the peace negotiations and more doubts than certainties about his final hours in the custody of the Guatemalan military. Daniel meets wealthy Florida liberals who support the guerrillas' cause; Hector's twin brother (who has migrated to the U.S. and works as a stereo salesman); a widowed Guatemalan colonel involved in massacres who likes to sew indigenous clothes for his young daughter's Barbie dolls; and Luisa, the passionate and opinionated Colombian physician, former Sandinista supporter and abortion-rights advocate with skin the color of *dulce de leche*, who becomes Daniel's wife. Back and forth from the 1980s to the present, the losses that Daniel could have prevented pile up and the deaths he may have caused torment his waking hours.

Gary Barker, *Luisa's laatste woorden*

ISBN 978 90 522 1659 3

Hardcover, 236 p.

Fragment from the novel

I had taken my in-laws' suggestion that Carolina and David spent a few weeks with them in Bogotá. *Hasta que Ud. sepa lo que va a hacer ahora*, my father-in-law said, in his formal, slow-pitched Bogotá Spanish: *Until you know what you're going to do now*. Until I know. Yes, until I know. Until my U.N. diplomatic passport expires, or my bosses in Geneva figure out what to do with me. *Ideas anyone? Anyone? Ideas on what Daniel should do with his life?* I heard these words in my head like my father's voice quizzing the students in his biology class. 'Mitochondria, anyone knows what purpose they serve? Why they are important for geneticists? Ideas? Guesses?' In Geneva, my name was now said with a short pause after it, and a knowing look, and then, perhaps, a comment about the case in Recife and my part in it.

I called my in-laws to give them my flight information. *I'll arrive on Tuesday. I'll be taking David and Carolina home*. My father-in-law paused, then responded. *Por supuesto; of course, we'll come and get you at the airport*. He did not ask me if I wanted to speak to my children. I did not insist. The last two times I called, he told me they were out, or sleeping, or busy. Maybe that was true. No matter what my in-laws felt about me, they adored my children.

Real estate agents, Olan Mills photographers and representatives of makers of plastic food containers look at me in awe when I tell them I am a human rights lawyer, that I worked in Guatemala on negotiations to end the civil war, and in Brazil with the landless movement, on truth commissions, on pressing governments to investigate

political killings and genocide. *That must be fascinating*, they say. *I once thought about doing something like that*, they say, or, *My sister was in the Peace Corps*. As if it were a decision as simple as choosing a brand of dental floss at the checkout line in your neighborhood pharmacy or the destination for your next vacation. Occasionally they will have written letters for an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience. I usually smile when they say this. Sometimes, I will let out the smallest detail about exhuming bodies or interviewing torture victims and wait to see how quickly they scratch their heads or clear their throats and walk away. (My daughter would know what I mean. She has understood the uniqueness of her life from the time her mother took her in her stroller to pro-choice rallies in Washington, D.C., and to her clinics, when the pro-lifers cursed and spat at both of them. She knew from way back then that her life, our life, was not just a collection of *Washington Post* articles mentioning her Mami's or my work.)

In the many, numbing hours traveling from a conference in Rome, to Madrid to Bogotá, I felt homesick for a home I did not have. I experienced something resembling a word I learned in Brazil, *saudade*, a word that has no adequate translation in English, but which means something like 'longing', the soft d's merging into j's and spilling off the middle of the tongue. It is as if the physical effort of pronouncing the word called the spirit of the missed thing or person into your gut. It is a visceral word, a felt word – not a rational or objective one.

Before I left Rome, I had checked my e-mails, to make sure there was nothing urgent, wondering if my U.N. bosses might have some ultimatum for me. There was one that caught my attention. In the message field it said, 'Seeking information about Hector Nawbey Toc'. It had been nearly four years since he went missing. If he were alive, we would have heard long ago. We would be the ones to know. The books and articles had been written, with my name cited as a source or reference for many of them. Chapters were written about him in the various accounts of the peace negotiations in Guatemala, and all of the accounts and all of us involved concluded he was dead.

The message said:

Dear Mr. Golden: I have some information about Hector Nawbey Toc that may be useful. It is possible that together with the information you have, we could figure out some of the missing pieces. I know that you knew Hector well. I would like to meet at your convenience. I found your contact off the U.N. website, and do not know where you are presently based. I look forward to hearing from you. Regards, L. Schmidt.

I was mostly removed from that now – the double motives, the political assassinations, the skullduggery that had been and still is standard fare in Guatemala. A journalist would have identified him or herself, and checked the previous articles. The human rights agencies who had investigated the case knew me; I had previously worked with many of them, and years ago we had already spoken on numerous occasions. Hector's family knew as much as I did. They knew all that I knew and I knew all that they knew about the case. Hector would not be coming back. I could make a list of possibilities of who it might be. Someone who wanted money in exchange for information. Someone working for a Guatemalan politician trying to make sure that no one had any information that might incriminate his boss and keep him or her from running for public office. Some graduate student of Latin American

history who thought he had come across information that the rest of us – those of us directly involved in the case – did not have.

The name itself meant nothing. It was a common enough last name, German, North American; it could even be Guatemalan. It was the last name of a former Guatemalan vice president, part of the small but influential German migration to Guatemala – more fair-skinned European descendents controlling land and power. But they would not succeed in getting in touch with me. I left the message in my in-box, neither responding nor deleting it.

On the last leg of my journey to Bogotá, between writing the *aide mémoire* on the conference on my laptop and sleeping, I looked out the window into the darkness, that faint airplane whirring noise filling my ears. Most of the other passengers were asleep. I was awake and alert in airplane stasis and Luisa's voice was in my head. There were layers of *saudade*, different kinds of *saudade*, nuances of *saudade* not yet described by Brazilian poets and songwriters, that came to mind. There was the absolute *saudade* that prevailed. There was the *saudade* for the earlier Luisa, the *saudade* for that moment in time when we met and wanted to right the world, when sex and social justice were all we wanted. And then there was the common, everyday *saudade*, the longing for her smell on my pillow, her everyday sexy underwear drying in the bathroom, or a few of her long black, wavy hairs in the sink in the morning, or her dark eyes looking over me, whether with *cariño* or anger; either would do. This was common *saudade*, common anyway for those of us who spend half of our lives traveling.

And then there was *regret*. That word has no melodious, poetic, rhythmic Latin version to warm the soul and soften the blow. That is a word to sit in the gut like undigested meat, a word that jerks through the mouth like a car limping in the wrong gear. In English, our expressions of regret – the 'I'm sorry's' and 'forgive me's' and 'I didn't mean to's' – have been used in so many pop songs that they have lost all meaning. It is a case of too little honesty hung on too few overused words.

If I were telling this to my children, I would start it this way: A long time ago, long before Disney made cartoon movies about indigenous emperors, the Maya resolved the problem of what to say to someone as you sacrifice them. *Otzilen*, they would say. Some of them say this still to the land they till for planting and to the animals they kill for food. Way back, when they used to offer up humans to appease and honour their gods, they said it too, to the poor souls about to be sacrificed.

Otzilen, I would tell them all.

I have need. I had need.