Sick of school and the expectations placed on him, 18-year-old Gabriel Garcia Marquez joined a musical group, partied all night, and disappeared for days at a time at a local whorehouse. Not the kind of behavior, his mother told him, for someone with the potential to be a novelist. If he was going to be a writer, Garcia Marquez shot back, he wanted to be "one of the greats and they don't make them anymore."

A little more than two decades later, with the publication of "One Hundred Years of Solitude" -- a history of the settlement in Colombia he named Macondo, set on the border between true facts and imagined details -- Garcia Marquez became world famous. In 1982, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1985, he attracted millions more readers with "Love in the Time of the Cholera," a remarkable meditation on the human terms of endearment.

In "Gabriel Garcia Marquez," Gerald Martin, a Professor Emeritus of Modern Languages at the University of Pittsburgh, provides a richly detailed authorized biography. Though Martin pulls a punch or two in assessing Garcia Marquez's fidelity to Fidel Castro, his book is a judicious and occasionally juicy examination of Gabo's life, his politics and work.

The great themes of Garcia Marquez's fiction -- power, solitude, and love -- Martin reminds us, were shaped by his adoration of his grandfather, Colonel Nicholas Marquez (a staunch liberal and supporter of a strike against the United Fruit Co.), with whom he lived until he was 8. And by his disdain for his father, Gabriel Eligio (a ne'er-do-well pharmacist, quack doctor, and political conservative), who dismissed his son as a perennial liar.

Perceptively and persuasively, Martin lays out the literary antecedents of Garcia Marquez's "magical realism." As a student at the National University in Bogota, Garcia Marquez read Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and learned that even the most fantastic events can be presented in matter-of-fact ways. A few years later, he began to view his childhood experiences in Aracataca through the lens of modernist writers Faulkner, Joyce, Proust, and Virginia Woolf.

An extended stay in Mexico, provided a tutorial in imperialism and the tools to make Macondo a continental, as well as a national symbol.

Published in 1967, "One Hundred Years of Solitude" was a literary sensation and Martin's short, smart summary makes you want to read it. The story of four generations of the Buendia family, he notes, the novel contains items on every page, including the massacre of United Fruit Co. banana workers that correspond directly to Garcia Marquez's biography.

It weaves biblical styles, anthropological insights and Latin America's experiences of aspiration and failure, ending with the
birth of a child following a wild affair between the last Buendia and his youthful aunt, as the town of Maconda is blown away by a hurricane.

With its immensely long sentences and narrators who aren't certain about anything, Garcia Marquez's next novel, "Autumn of the Patriarch," posed puzzles in both topic and technique. It's best understood as a cynical riff on power.

The appetite for power, Garcia Marquez often said, is the result of an incapacity for love. This sentiment may have provided the motive for the far more accessible and touching "Love in the Time of the Cholera."

By daring to explore and endorse bourgeois cliches, Martin argues, Garcia Marquez risked his reputation.

And he produced a dazzling disquisition on love as an irresistible sickness and on time "as the worst disease of all, the one that gnaws away at everything," except in one moment of magical realism, when, "however temporarily, it is defeated."

In his own life, Garcia Marquez has tried, sometimes feverishly, to beat the clock. He's found love inside and outside of his marriage. Petrified of illness, he has stayed away from funerals. Now in his 80s, as his short-term memory has faded, he's begun to realize that it's all coming to an end.

Warning Martin that he'd supply limited access and insight into his private life and none about his "secret life," Garcia Marquez recognized that, when he's gone, "I will be whatever you say I am."

He need not worry. Gerald Martin's Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a great artist and a good man. And this biography may well stand the test of time.