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**—Carlos Fuentes, 1996**



**I DID NOT HAVE THE PRIVILEGE** of knowing Nancy Hanks personally. But through the addresses delivered here, year after year, in her honor, I have come to feel a deep bond of sympathy and understanding with that extraordinary cultural leader. I am

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## **Carlos Fuentes**

stranger to your city or indeed to your culture. I spent my school years, between 1934 and 1940, when I was in the ages between six and eleven, in what was then a much smaller Washington, at times a sleepy Tidewater town, but intermittently and in appearance only: the energy of the New Deal galvanized the Capital City, and if air conditioning was then unknown, European diplomats could always claim a higher salary for coming to a hardship post. So I lived in Washington between the election of Citizen Roosevelt and the interdiction of Citizen Kane, and between the courtship of Tess Trueheart by Dick Tracy and the rumors linking Clark Kent and Lois Lane.

I also went to a public school near the Mexican Embassy on 16th Street where our single teacher, Miss Florence Painter, gave us the cultural foundations that permitted me, in due course, to become a writer. I admit to the tensions — even the political tensions, during those years when the Revolution in Mexico climaxed with the Cardeas presidency — between my allegiance to my own country and the education I was receiving in the United States.

flattered to follow in the footsteps of the splendid North Americans who have spoken here, from Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to Winton M. Blount only last year.

I also deem it a special honor to be the first foreign citizen to give this lecture. Yet I am not, in truth, a

My teacher, Miss Painter, was keenly aware of my Mexican nationality and devoted, I recall, one whole term to studies revolving around Mexico. I was able to contribute the love of my country — the Southern neighbor of the United States — to my D.C. schoolmates, but they were also able to understand Mexico better thanks to Miss Painter's generous interest. My schoolmates (both my memory and several snapshots tell me) were representative of the migratory variety of the United States. In a photograph, surrounding the star pupil, a flaxen-haired little girl of Scandinavian origin named Dolly Osterwald, I see children of Greek, Chinese and Puerto Rican descent. No blacks, however.

What were we taught? What bonded us beyond natural human sympathy? My answer is quite simple: Our teacher went straight to the basics that permit young people to discover, right then and there, before the opportunity is, sometimes, forever lost, that each child is the bearer of a unique tradition that gives him or her an irreplaceable personality, but also that our individual personalities can only survive if they learn to appreciate and assume the values of people different from ourselves.

Sure, Miss Painter taught us the three Rs, but along with them I remember her insistence on knowing geography, history and the arts. We were, she implied, in the planet Earth, not in Mars or in an isolated or isolationist USA: Miss Painter insisted on our knowing where Mexico, France and even Yugoslavia and the Congo were. She then taught us the facts of history in the land we chose to study. Then, she made it clear that history is a empty urn without the living substance — the earth, the water, the fire — that should fill the vessel: and these elements were the artistic products of any given community. She obliged us to understand that beyond dates, beyond frontiers, we could recognize ourselves in the music, the paintings, the books, that those distant people had created.

We quickly understood that what was theirs was ours as well, and that what we contributed also became the, not only rich, but enriching, property of others, beginning with the young students in my Washington schoolroom.

These "others" — Latin Americans, Africans, Asians, Europeans — ceased to be a distant abstraction through Miss Painter's methods of education, which emphasized knowledge of self and others in the

meeting ground of the arts. We were kids, of course, and the Mexico term marched in to the strains of *La Cucaracha*, while during the French term we all sang *Sous les pontes d'Avignon*, and the Japanese studies were meant to coincide with the cherry blossoms here in Tidal Basin.

Simple enough, true enough. But retrospectively, I am convinced that my own curiosity about form and language, dialogue and encounter, tradition and creation, began right there in that public school room. What I, personally, received from first-rate teaching in this city was, I am convinced, inseparable from a planting of the seeds of curiosity, learning, love for what is different and challenging, but especially respect for one's own self, for one's peculiarities and possible contributions, which is the basic wealth that early exposure to arts and the humanities brings to young people, giving them, as Leonard Garment said in an earlier Hanks Lecture, "a head start in meeting uncertainty."

I have lost track of my grade school companions, with one exception. He was a 10-year-old Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany and everything about him — excessive height for his age, faltering English, German gymnasium clothes, including short pants — gave him an eccentric, un-American air and predisposed him to be the object of prejudice. Yet our teacher had created such an atmosphere for the understanding of what is different that this young man was promptly accepted as part of the gang and ultimately besieged because he was so talented and because he brought new information and new experience to our school.

His name is Hans Berliner and he has become, I understand, a top-flight expert in cybernetics. He fled the intolerance of Naziism and found something far more important than simple tolerance in the United States: he found human warmth and intellectual stimulation. He found respect for his difference and exposure to the simplest, most generous forms of communicating culture.

**I OFTEN WONDER** what two foreign-born boys, from Germany and Mexico, would have become if, instead of the bonds of recognition through the humanities, they had been exposed, not to art and the intellect — what your Washington community gave us — but to frustration — what your Washington

community still damns other young children with today, for lack of interest or lack of resources. What if my young German friend and I had not been given the basic instruments of culture right here in your capital city, but isolation from them? Not the widening horizons of curiosity, diversity, and imagination, but the closed and menacing clouds of ignorance, disdain for the arts, or biased considerations that culture is for the few, that art is an illusory value lacking in pragmatic consequences, a frivolous curiosity or, even, a dangerous cocktail of rebellion and immorality?

Forget drugs, violence, economic disadvantage and social inequality: the real danger is a painting that shocks our inherited tastes, a photo that challenges our habitual blindness, a musical offering that penetrates our plugged ears.

Ladies and gentlemen: what a terrible loss when a child is wantonly isolated from art and the humanities, on the perverted notion that culture is only for the privileged, a minority issue, and a dangerous one at that! This is shocking to me, this willful insistence on the expendable nature of art, these short-sighted policies that perpetuate the gap between the majority of the people and the culture that, after all, the people themselves created.

Were not Michelangelo and Goya, Mozart and Irving Berlin, Katharine Anne Porter and Katherine Dunham, Charles Chaplin and John Ford, men and women

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of the people, bearers and translators of a tradition created and nourished by the people? What turns them into unreachable icons? Not the meaning of their works, but only this: sloppy education, laziness, and perhaps even fear that, if everyone heard them and read them and saw them, then everyone, as Maya Angelou said right here, then everyone would stand up: “Art allows us to stand erect.”

Two schoolboys in Washington D.C. — one German, the other Mexican — were able to find their creative vocations thanks to Miss Painter’s class in an excellent public school. How many more, unknown to me, did not become writers or scientists, but discovered,

because they were exposed to language, to the arts, to history and geography, that they were talented CPAs or actresses or surgeons or businessmen or administrators?

Coming from a country where enormous efforts in public education have yet to catch up with the population

explosion, I can only wonder if, today, the most powerful and richest country in the world is fully aware of the deprivation it imposes on its citizens or the diminution it imposes on itself when it subtracts from the community the basic tools for widening the horizons of its young people, forbidding them that head start against uncertainty, denying them that right to stand up erect?

When I have taught at United States universities, I have been agreeably surprised by the bright minds of the students I have dealt with. Their intelligence is astounding. But so is, in many cases, the absence of basic knowledge that, back in the 1930s, was considered essential. Brilliant, and often specialized, minds, have at times a shocking ignorance of geography, history, literature, languages and, notably, the cultures of other peoples.

Deprivation at the lowest levels; narrowness at the highest levels. Can the United States — I ask this as a friend and admirer of your culture — truly contribute to this changing world of ours as a new century and a

new millennium approach, if it ignores the soul, the differences and even the location in space of the peoples and nations it will have to deal with if it is to maintain its status in a planet, we are told, of increasing interdependence, where no nation, no matter how powerful, can go it alone?

Culture and the arts are at the very root of that fragile and powerful creation which is a human personality. They are also at the summit of any given nation’s capacity for acting constructively on the world scene. Within a person’s soul, culture both integrates and differentiates. So it does within any national community. But more and more, to integrate without losing our differentiations is becoming a bigger and bigger demand in a world defined, at the level of the global village, by economic interdependence, technological advances and instant communications; and, at the local level, by an anguished need to rediscover the shelters of family, tradition, religion, identity.

How to integrate these two worlds, the global and the local? How to avoid the sickness that both the global and the local village are menaced by: a soul-less, mechanical, money-grubbing, racist and xenophobic world up in the penthouse; a deprived, mendicant, fundamentalist, even tribal world in the gutter?

**THE GROWING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC GAPS** between different societies, developed and developing, and within each society, developed or not, will not be breached only by culture and the arts. But take these away and the chasm dramatically widens. Our sense of belonging to the same human species is going to be severely challenged in the years to come by the faceless movement of speculative capitals manipulated by invisible forces; by the insults we are accumulating on the roof of our common house, the biosphere; by the dangers of nuclear accident; by the profound crisis of urban civilization shared by the first, second and third worlds; and by the untouchable powers of a megacorruption beyond the scope of national or international jurisdictions.

Can our answer to these challenges be indifference, frivolity, or the mentality of “after me the deluge”? Can it be a complacent hedonism fostered by the fast-buck entertainment industry? Will we all become cheerful robots, amusing ourselves to death? Even the

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availability of instant information might not save us: Are we perhaps witnessing, on a planetary scale, an explosion of information along with an implosion of meaning? Are we sure that we are better informed simply because so much information is obtainable—even if it is meaningless information?

The responses to these dangers are both cultural and political. Miss Painter's schoolroom, granted, thrived in a political milieu where the greatest value was given to human capital, not to flight capital. We have to restore this essential value, the reminder that the real purpose of economic activity is the well-being of concrete human beings and their families. This will not happen without an approach to education that stresses the variety, the universality but also the necessity of exposure to the greatest values created by any given community, our own and those of other nations: the arts, the letters, the visual and verbal treasures created by humankind. That this effort starts at the local level goes without saying. That it possesses an international dimension must be said. That in any case it costs money is said over and over again.

Bill Clinton put it most succinctly in his remarks honoring the members of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities: government can give a crucial, but only a small measure, of support for the arts and the humanities. These are a public good — it is agreed — that can flourish without government support, but that flourishes even more with government support.

Private funds and private contributions to the arts in the United States, John Brademas informed us last year, have jumped from \$250 million in 1965 to \$6 billion in 1995. The general philosophy governing these matters — and it is a good philosophy — is that private sources must go on being the principal support for the arts and the humanities, and that public funds should be matched by private contributions.

True as it is, this philosophy constantly requires imaginative policies to further itself. The Arts Council of England, for example, has been highly successful in finding partnership funding and profiting from the National Lottery that gives the Council 200 million pounds a year, actually doubling the flow of funds to the ACE from other sources and permitting it to multiply its partnerships with the Regional Art Boards and with the arts community as a whole.

Given these basic strengths, the ACE can call upon specialized consultants such as Anthony Fawcett, who has proved that private companies are willing to back unconventional, ground-breaking events, and to do so transnationally. For example, Becks, the German beer, has committed £2 million to the arts in Britain during the past decade. Why? Because it wants to attract the young, prosperous audience that regularly visits art shows in the U.K. The Tate Gallery in London is a showcase for a combination of sponsorships from these sectors: charitable, private, public and business — including Haagen Däs ice cream. But Tate is a great and traditional museum. It is quite another, both surprising and stimulating, matter, to turn a divisive, polemical work of art such as Rachel Whitehead's "House" in a derelict building in London's East End into a huge success for its commercial backers. This has been a milestone, convincing arts sponsors in Britain that they must not fear commercial contamination or private backers.

Numerous prejudices break down in a case such as the Rachel Whitehead "House." Old notions are abandoned. Multiple forces — creativity, commercial benefit, the youth culture, and both public and private support — join and become involved in innovative, contentious artistic offerings, none losing, all gaining. Imagination, of course, is the name of the game. But at the same time that it encourages private and even openly commercial backing, support for the arts and humanities must hold high its own public philosophy, independent of the private sources.

The best example is France. Under the brilliant stewardship of President François Mitterrand's Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, France since 1981 declared the arts and humanities a national priority. By 1991, the arts and humanities received fully one percent of the national budget, and today cultural activities and cultural production account for 3.5 percent of France's GNP. The budget for the French Ministry of Culture, the largest in the Western world, links its financial considerations to the public good. Government backing for art and the humanities is explicitly oriented to reducing social fractures, fighting prejudice and exclusion, enlarging the audience for the arts, establishing centers of artistic education — in 10 years, support for national theaters has doubled, and theater training centers have multiplied by 20. This

year, furthermore, the French Ministry of Culture has been given attributions that formerly belonged to other departments: architecture, which was part of the Ministry of Equipment, as well as the audiovisual and scientific and industrial research, formerly the purview of the Ministry of Research.

**I FIND IT DISHEARTENING** that while France strengthens its Ministry of Culture, the United States, which does not have such a Ministry, should try to downgrade and whittle down its two equivalents of the French institution, the NEA and the NEH. Are the French in the wrong? I would not say so as I admire I. M. Pei's Louvre pyramid, the new theaters at the Bastille, the magnificent new National Library and all the other superbuildings housing French culture since President Charles de Gaulle appointed Andre Malraux as his first Minister of Culture. Or perhaps Laurence Sterne was right when he wrote: "They order...this matter better in France."

The fact is that as visitors to France, we profit from the public offerings of its culture. Yet, are we truly aware that the underpinnings of these great showcases of French civilization are public policies in which public support for the arts is based on the obligation to fight social discrimination, especially in underprivileged neighborhoods; on the duty to engage in social activities in the arts, and draft young men and women as the principal activists for public support of the arts?

A comparable philosophy permits me, in Britain, where I live part of the year, to enjoy the best theater in the world for a ticket price of less than ten dollars a seat, and to feel a warm rush of comfort as I realize that these are not casual or intermittent productions, but part of a national repertory theater such as the United States lacks, where the great values of the language, of humanity and its dreams emotions and warnings, are permanently, passionately alive.

I mentioned the international dimension of public support for the arts and humanities as a necessity in today's highly integrated global community. Again, the ACE in Britain opens its funding projects to applicants from other European community countries. It presents British audiences with international artists and events from the other EEC members and it sponsors British artists seeking opportunities abroad. It also encourages, through the International Initiatives

Fund (IIF) and the Visiting Arts Program, the flow of foreign arts into England. All of this creates greater cultural awareness in Britain, but also better relations between the UK and the world.

I offer you this vast and encouraging panorama not to indulge in odious comparisons, but to recall what a challenging and fruitful task lies before public support for art and the humanities in any given nation, and how mean-spirited, to put it bluntly, seem the arguments that dispute the need for comparable policies and institutions in the United States.

Let me put aside, for one moment, the financial argument, which is necessary but which can be solved. A much more flighty, even ungraspable argument, is that which refuses or cripples cultural institutions on the grounds of taste, decency, morals.

First of all, I seem to detect a prejudiced attitude that if one single example of tasteless or obscene art can be given, then the whole structure of public support for the arts becomes suspect. Yet, as John Brademas has recalled, of 110,000 grants given in this country under the NEA, only 20 disputes in matters of taste and decency have surfaced.

To be sure, art offers the extremes of good taste and bad taste, but experience shows that works in bad taste tend to eliminate themselves and they do so, if for no other reason, for the very good one that the second time around, the tasteless work ceases to provoke scandal, and without that thrill, it curiously evaporates. Unless, of course, it becomes an object of camp admirations, like Liberace's paraphernalia.

But the matter of obscenity, if it comes to that, is not the province of the NEA; it is the competence of the courts, and when such charges are brought against a work of art, the first thing to do is not to throw the work out, but to closely question the censor and his motives. Because, after all, nothing is more obscene than discrimination and its all-too-common sequels: racism, xenophobia and religious fundamentalism. If censors had their way, they would have banished everything they did not like, from Michelangelo's *David* to Manet's *Olympia* to Joyce's *Ulysses* to Mae West's quips.

**CONTROVERSY, NEVERTHELESS, IS WELCOME,** but only if, along with criticism of the artists, we are permitted to criticize the critics of the

artists. For if there is good art and bad art, there is also challenging art and conformist art. And if there is good taste and bad taste, there is also challenging taste and conformist taste. No wonder that Hitler did not appreciate George Grosz and dumped him in the category of “degenerate art.” No wonder that Stalin did not care for Marc Chagall and sent him to the basement of “decadent art.” But a civilized democracy has to give all forms of art the benefit of the doubt and clearly distinguish between the challenging and the tasteless.

Let us not confuse our own aesthetic prejudices, routines or limitations with the novelty or challenge of the work at hand. No less a judge than Dr. Samuel Johnson said of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*: “Irresponsible, nasty, trifling,” sealing Sterne’s revolutionary novel with this epitaph: “Nothing odd will do long; *Tristram Shandy* did not last.”

Well, it did. But what did not resist the test of time is the following dismissal of Beethoven’s *Second Symphony* by a Vienna music critic: “This is...a crass monster, a hideously writhing wounded dragon that refuses to expire...furiously beating about with its tail erect until the desperately awaited finale arrives.”

The Eiffel Tower was received with cries of outrage from the defenders of the classical Parisian landscape; the Franco censorship in Spain did not like Luis Buñuel’s parody of *Leonardo’s Last Supper* in the film *Viridiana*; and the Iranian Ayatollah’s were not amused by Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*.

My friends and I were once expelled from a Mexico City book review section for publishing a photo of the Venus de Milo on the front page, which the newspaper owner’s wife deemed obscene, and the statue of Diana the Huntress in a Mexico City square was suddenly graced with a pair of panties when my country’s First Lady at the time found that she could not be driven past the naked Moon Goddess without grave offense to her sense of propriety. So if obscenity there be, ventilate it in the courts. And if art there be, respect it even when you don’t like it.

Back in 1936, France elected the Popular Front government with the Socialist Premier Leon Blum as its head. The Blum parliament passed France’s first law granting workers paid vacations. The outcry was thunderous. Private enterprise decried this giveaway, this Santa Claus legislation, this dagger pointed at the

heart of profits and productivity. But the bill on paid vacations immediately promoted hundreds of new businesses such as more hotels, more restaurants, a whole new vacation, garment industry, T-shirts, parasols, rubber balls, sandals, bikes, more automobiles than ever, more train travel than ever, more gas stations and the emergence of sun-tan lotions. As profits and production — not to say the good health of the workers themselves — grew, the early assaults against this “socialist” measure were seen with kinder, more capitalist eyes.

**TODAY, IN THE UNITED STATES**, the foreign visitor is astounded to witness the fantastic growth of tourism allied to culture. Believe it or not, many of us have been traveling to this country for many years just to catch the latest exhibitions, movies, theater; browse through the great bookshops and libraries; go to lectures and visit campuses.

A few years ago, all these attractions seemed to be concentrated in a few great cities. Today’s surprise is double. First, there are more and more cultural attractions inside the U.S.A., far from the metropolitan centers. Second, you see more and more American citizens searching out and traveling to attractions such as *The Age of Rubens* exhibition which pulled in a quarter of a million visitors to Toledo, Ohio’s Museum of Art, or the *Splendors of Mexico* show that gave the city of San Antonio nearly \$8 million dollars in taxes.

What are nearly 9,000 visitors doing in Jonesborough, Tennessee, with a population of just over three thousand? They are there for the annual storytelling festival and they are giving Jonesborough a windfall of \$5 million dollars every year.

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Why is KLM now flying directly from Amsterdam to Memphis? To get European culture lovers to the Blues Alley Festival promoted by the city and the Mississippi state tourism office.

Very few people would even consider putting numerous towns in Texas, Indiana, Tennessee and Wisconsin on their travel plans if the National Endowment for the Arts had not created, in association with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, heritage corridors in all of these states.

Tourism is a \$512 billion dollar industry and it assures the United States a \$22 billion dollar trade surplus in this area. Public funding for the arts is an essential component for the flourishing of an economic and cultural activity that, a few years ago, was practically invisible, and would have perhaps remained so if the NEA and the NEH had not organized, supported and publicized it.

Should they not get back some money, and at least some credit, from and for this culture boom in the American heartland? How narrow, indeed, how hollow, seem the ungenerous arguments against these North American institutions that have gained so much respect for themselves and for the United States throughout the world! How sick, indeed, how isolated your country would look in the world without institutions that the other nations of the West take for granted! But, most especially, how impoverished would the rest of us in the world be without the contributions that the NEA and the NEH bring both to the United States and to the global community!

One final and perhaps more personal consideration. I am sometimes alarmed by the excessive cult of celebrity in your country. Modern culture, of course, enshrined individualism since the Renaissance, when Michel de Montaigne said that it was no longer enough to be known; one had to be, as well, renowned. *Nom et renom.*

The culture of the Middle Ages preferred anonymity. No one knows who built the Cathedral at Chartres or, indeed, the Mayan pyramids at Chichén-Itzá. I am not pushing for a return to Gothic or pre-Columbus collectivism. But I am attracted by the possibility of the artist and his work recovering the identity between the society and the work of art. Of *The Illiad*, the great Judeo-Christian philosopher, Simone Weil, wrote that it was a document that revealed the original identity between poetry and history. I had occasion to prove her

right one evening, on the beach in Lota, Chile, in South America.

I saw the miners come out, mole-like on their knees, from the coal mines under the sea. Then they sat around a bonfire, strummed a guitar and sang a song. Hearing them, I recognized the lines from Pablo Neruda's epic of Latin America, *El Canto General*. I told the miners that the author would be happy to know that they were singing his poems. Author?, they answered me quizzically. What author? For them, the poem had no author. It was a gift from the sea, from the past, perhaps even from the future.

This in no way diminished Neruda's greatness, I then thought. Perhaps it even made him greater, as was proven when, during his funeral in Santiago on a dark day of September 1973, a crowd of thousands recited Neruda's poems by heart.

**WHAT I WISH TO SAY** is that the seed, the opening, the opportunity to discover the document, the word, the image that identifies history and poetry, art and society, is fragile, it is fugitive, and must be seized with urgency, but also with love, lest it be gone forever.

Culture, wrote the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, is our answer to the challenges of life. It is the way we walk, and eat, and dance, and sing, and look, dress, dream and struggle, and furnish our homes, and greet others, and pray, remember, desire and love.

What is often forgotten when public support for the arts and humanities is discussed, is that apart from giving talented men and women the chance they would not otherwise have, they give the audiences, the public itself, the chance to become active discoverers of their own value and dignity as bearers of the culture that we all share, as we walk and talk and say hello and sit down to a meal and whistle a Gershwin tune and laugh at a Woody Allen joke and feel a sea of emotion in our hearts reading a poem by Shelley or feel that our mind has changed forever watching a play by Arthur Miller or scratch our heads in front of a Henry Moore statue.

Ladies and gentlemen: I began by evoking my school years here in Washington and now would like to end by recalling that education is the basis of creativity in art and the humanities.

Today, as Peter Drucker has insisted, education has



become a life-long pursuit. The more education an individual receives, the more education he or she will require throughout his or her life. Education in the 21st century will train people not only for their first job, but prepare them for their last occupation.

First, knowledge was identified with being. Then, it became synonymous with doing. Applied to instruments and products, it gave birth to the first industrial revolution. Applied to work, it created the revolution in productivity.

But now, says the eminent teacher at California's Claremont College, knowledge applied to knowledge has become the principal factor of production, since it makes both capital and labor function with unprecedented speed and scope: management makes information productive, but knowledge, as distinct from information, can only be embodied, amplified and borne by the creative, educated person, who is the representative of the society as a whole in each of his or her productive activities.

So let me turn the tables on convention and ask: Can this whole educational and creative process take place without the support of humanities and the arts? Can it survive if it does not culminate in the creation of works of art and enrich the field of the humanities? Can we now have, in the world of the new century and the new millennium, economic performance without knowledge and knowledge without art and the humanities? Can we, in other words, have development without culture?

Do not fracture the wholeness of our being as mirrored in art and the humanities. Permit us all, as Maya Angelou asked from this same podium, not only to survive, but to stand erect. ■

## Carlos Fuentes

Carlos Fuentes is one of Latin America's most distinguished novelists and a one-man international cultural and political force. Born in 1928, he spent his youth in Washington, D.C., where his father was posted as a Mexican Diplomatic representative. As a teenager, Fuentes lived in Argentina and Chile, as well as his native Mexico.

Fuentes has been celebrated around the globe as one of the world's leading literary figures. His fiction ranges from political spy thrillers (*The Hydra Head*) to erotic ghost stories (*Aura*), from baroque world dream histories of the Spanish-speaking world (*Terra Nostra*) to caustic indictments of the frozen Mexican revolution (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*). His novel, *Old Gringo*, was the first by a Mexican author to become a bestseller in the United States. The president of Mexico has honored Fuentes with that nation's highest prize for literature. He is also a recipient of the Romulo Gallegos Prize, a prestigious literary award bestowed by the Venezuelan government only once every five years. Fuentes is a member of the Colegio Nacional in Mexico, a trustee of the New York Public Library, and a member of the American Academy Arts and Letters. He holds several honorary degrees from the most prestigious universities in the world, including Harvard, Cambridge and Dartmouth.

His political influence as an international statesman is nearly as great as his literary fame. Fuentes served as Mexico's Ambassador to France from 1974 through 1977 and was an active participant in the quest for peace in Central America. Fuentes now resides both in Mexico City and London.