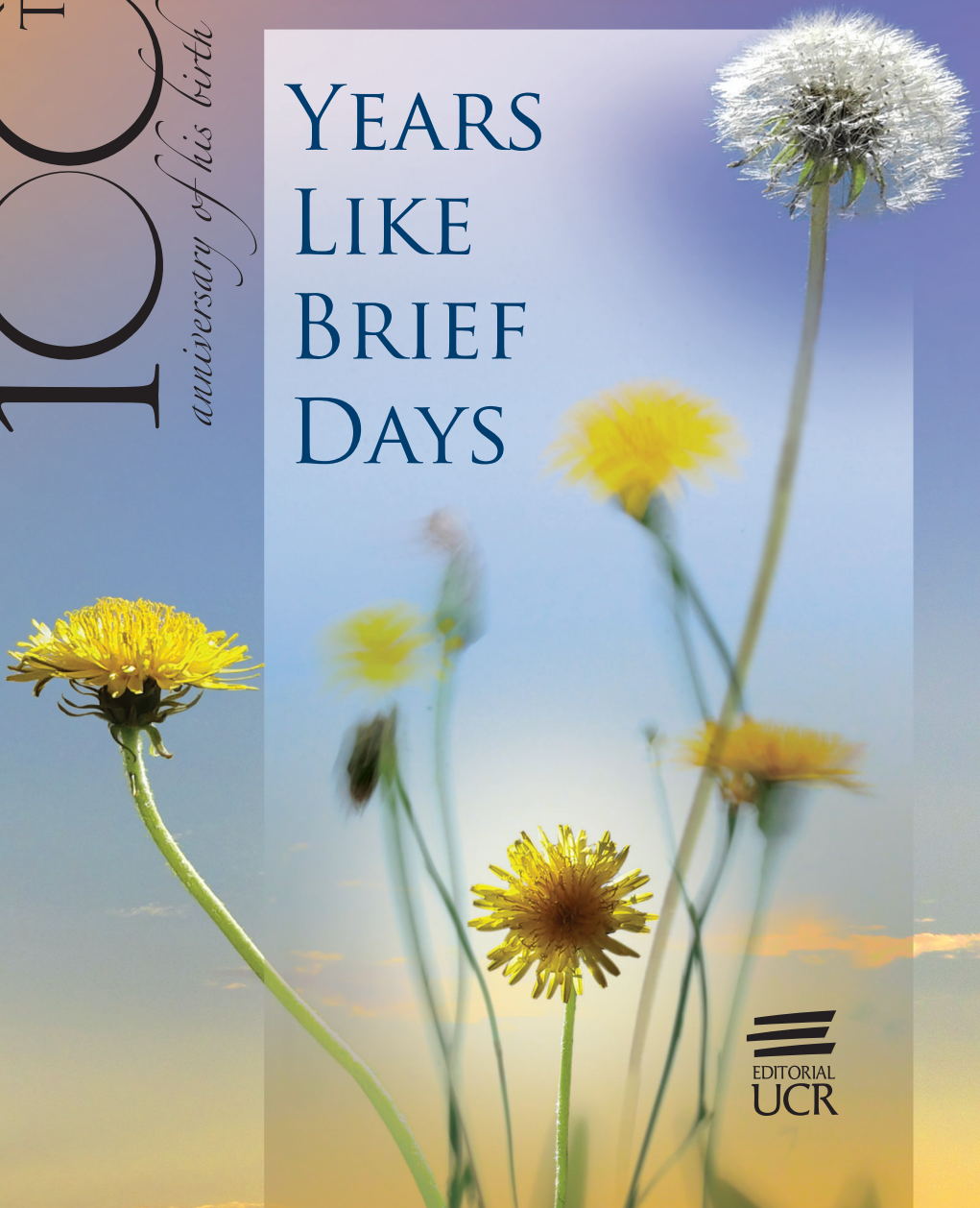
COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

FABIÁN DOBLES

100TH anniversary of his birth

Years Like Brief Days



EDITORIAL UCR

FABIÁN DOBLES

100TH *anniversary of his birth*

YEARS LIKE BRIEF DAYS

EDITORIAL UCR
2018
COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

CR863.4
D633y Dobles Fabián, 1918-1997
Years like brief days / Fabián Dobles; translated from spanish by Joan Henry. –1.ª ed.– [San José], C. R.: Edit. UCR, 2018.
xiii, 99 p.

Commemorative edition
100th aniversary of his birth
ISBN 978-9968-46-561-8

1. LITERATURA COSTARRICENSE – NOVELA. I. Henry, Joan, tr. II. Título.

CIP/3234
CC/SIBDI.UCR

Edition approved by the Editorial Committee of the University of Costa Rica.
First edition: 2018.

Editorial UCR (University of Costa Rica Press) is a member of the Sistema de Editoriales Universitarias de Centroamérica (SEDUCA, Central American University Press System), and belongs to the Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano (CSUCA, the Central American University Superior Council)

This edition follows the spelling of the time and style of the author.

Translated from spanish by *Joan Henry.* • Editing and revising: *Aurelia Dobles T.*
Design and layout: *Grettel Calderón A., Nicole Riquelme G.*
Quality control: *Grettel Calderón A., Alejandra Ruiz B. and Mauricio Bolaños B.*
Cover design: *Priscila Coto M.* • Cover photo: *Alberto Chocano Dobles.*

P.O. Box. 11501-2060 • Tel.: 2511 5310 • Fax: 2511 5257 • administracion.siedin@ucr.ac.cr
Web page: www.editorial.ucr.ac.cr

Content

About the author

Fabián Dobles was born on 17 January 1918 in the small country town of San Antonio de Belén, Costa Rica, the seventh child of the local doctor. After attending a rural school, also high school in San José, he studied law at the Universidad de Costa Rica in San José. While still at university he began to gain a reputation as a poet and storyteller by his success in Central American literary competitions.

In 1943 his first novel, *Aguas turbias*, written in the Costa Rican vernacular, was chosen to represent Costa Rica in the Latin American competition for novelists, promoted by the publishers Farrar and Rinehart in association with the Panamerican Union. This book, together with *Ese que llaman pueblo* (1942), was highly praised by Martin Erickson in his article 'Trends in South American Literature', which appeared in *Intellectual Trends in Latin America* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1945): 'Fabián Dobles is an accomplished writer with more than ordinary ability at plot construction . . . [his novels] have interest beyond the localness of their scenes, and their social significance is certainly as apparent as that of *The Grapes of Wrath and Tobacco Road*.'

Fifty years later Dobles is described in *Contemporary Short Stories from Central America* (University of Texas Press, 1994) as 'one of Central America's outstanding writers', and he is frequently referred to in similar publications as a major figure in Costa Rican literature. And yet as a left wing intellectual he had to struggle to survive as a writer during a period of significant social and political change in Costa Rica. His fusion of social realism and poetically expressed, classically resonant epics has not always appealed to the authorities. Consequently Dobles has had to

make his living in a wide range of jobs in education, industry, commerce, agriculture, journalism and publishing. Though this has restricted the time available for writing, it has greatly enriched the experience on which he draws for his fiction, and provided him with a deep understanding of Costa Rican popular traditions and of the intricacies of the language.

In 1993 the University of Costa Rica and the National University Press jointly published the *Complete Works of Fabián Dobles* in five volumes, which include novels, short stories, plays, poetry, and a few essays and newspaper articles. The best known works are the novel *El sitio de las abras*, an agrarian saga written in a mythical style, which has now gone through ten editions, and *Historias de Tata Mundo*, which has also been published in English and Italian. Dobles's short stories have been widely published in anthologies outside Costa Rica – in English, French, German and Russian, for example – often appearing alongside stories by García Márquez, Borges, Faulkner, Quiroga and Asturias.

In his novels he often takes up the theme of tradition and change in the countryside and in society in general. He underlines the disappearance of traditional values and the transition to modern ways of thinking. In *Years Like Brief Days* he addresses the problem of change as seen in the relationship between the individual, the family and society – the individual gradually establishing his own identity and values. Dobles's treatment of time, in which past, present and future intermingle in the narrator's mind, and its consequent effect on the structure of the work, are regarded as innovatory in Costa Rican literature.

Fabián Dobles and his wife Cecilia Trejos had returned to live in the countryside, although he participated in academic and literary activities and was an active member of the Costa Rican Academy of Language and of the Directorate of the Colegio de Costa Rica. He had received many national and international awards, among them the Magón National Prize for Culture, although he has often stated that the prize he values most is the affection and respect of his Costa Rican readers, who have found in his work not only a national pride, but also a faithful record of their lifestyles, their language and their aspirations.

Dobles felt that the practice of writing is like running an enjoyable marathon towards a goal which is never attainable. In a place of honour

in his house he had a memento – a racing trophy – which a champion cyclist gave him as a present. The cyclist asked the writer to keep the trophy as a symbol of friendship, in exchange for autographing his most recent novel, *Los años, pequeños días*, the one about years which turned into years like brief days.

He died peacefully in 1997.

CHAPTER ONE

The seventy-year-old man woke up that day long before dawn. He wasn't able to go back to sleep for a little longer, until six or seven o'clock, as he usually did. He realized he had to act in response to something fascinating and mysterious, but which he was able to locate and which had been drawing him, for some nights past both in his dreams and in his waking moments, towards its source.

He was feeling so strangely compelled that he didn't hear the blackbirds and sparrows which had been singing incessantly since dawn in the cypresses, avocado, lemon and orange trees around his house. He wasn't bothered either by the wind that was blowing in through the window and chilling his bones. He went out into the passage in his pyjamas, briefly looked at the last stars, which the rising splendour in the east was beginning to fade out of the sky over the dark green shape of Irazú, fed the dog and sneezed. He always sneezed at the first rays of the sun, which were now beginning to appear.

Anyway, he had a bath and ate his breakfast. He didn't shave. He hated shaving because his damned tender skin hurt. He opened the garage, warmed up the engine of his van, told his wife, 'I'll be back soon. Shut the gate, please', gave her an affectionate 'See you soon' wave and took to the road. The sun had already risen to the height of a tall man and was comfortably warm. He put on his dark glasses, breathed in the fresh air and soon found himself on the main road going in the direction he had been urged to follow. He hadn't been that way for years. He was growing old and tended to lose interest in things like that. Hang it all, he was

getting wrinkled, and that's not good. (´I always said it's the prettiest, pleasantest valley in the world. What the devil, I've a mind to. . .´)

He went through Heredia, the town of his forebears, and on towards the west along the inter-city highway, which was already crowded with cars and buses taking people to work and students to their classes, and trucks full of all sorts of goods. When he arrived at Alajuela he stopped at a petrol station. While they were filling the tank and checking the tyre pressures, he rang his wife.

'Look,' he said, 'don't be cross with me. I'll be a bit longer than you think. I'll get your shopping when I get back.'

'But why, why? The eggs and bread are the most urgent. They're for lunch.'

'Something's happened. I'll explain later.' (She's already cross with me. What a fuss!) 'Do you remember? A few days ago we were talking about taking another breather in the valley.'

'Oh, yes, how nice, you on your own, but weren't we going to do it together?'

'Yes, of course, we'll do it. Today's trip is only a short one to see what it's like. Perhaps I can have a lunch in the Las Rodriguez restaurant if it's still there. It's just that I'm attracted by the mahogany trees, the cicadas and the hills. Don't get cross with me, girl. Another day you and I'll come, and when we've got more time we'll stay a couple of weeks, recall places we knew, recognize old friends, all that.'

'OK, but don't drive too fast and be careful over the Río Grande bridge. I'm scared of those bends.'

'But I'll be back soon. It's only a few kilometers.'

And in those days, he thought, when he was driving again along the asphalt and a huge jet was going over making a horrific din as it came to land at Santa María airport, we used to come on horseback or by wagon through fiendish mud as slow as tortoises. In summer, we used to clear a path for ourselves through some herd of cattle rustled from Guanacaste, the clouds of dust raised by the wind very nearly suffocating us beneath the bright sky and the buzzards. Wherever the devil I go, if all this was and is no more, and I've changed, I'm now living cross-eyed by computers.

I'm bored by people so overwhelmed they can't even say plainly 'today' but 'on the day of today', nor 'last night' but 'yesterday night'. They haven't 'just come' because they 'came recently', and they don't 'think so' since they think what Tom, Dick and Harry think and don't have an opinion themselves. They 'would be of the opinion'. And they don't 'believe', they 'would believe', nor do they 'say', because where they 'had to say' they 'would hardly say'.

Now he'd already reached the asphalted bridge with the river facing him as he drove in third gear. He remembered his wife and got into second. He thought at one and the same time how majestic the kapok tree at the next-but-one bend still was with its tremendous trunk and formidable top. It was an everlasting sentry that a hundred and fifty years ago must have been guarding the ancient fortified Customs House. Don Braulio Carrillo[1] had ordered it to be built on the cliff at the top close to the road that he'd had constructed by criminals with their picks and shovels, and paved by bandits with the strength of their shoulders and arms.

He braked and came to a stop on the level a few metres from the hundred-year-old stone bridge and the arch. He stopped the engine and got down to walk along and contemplate, making a devil of a mix-up of his feelings, as he used to say, but first he took off his jacket. It was hot, but although the heat was prickly it smelt fresh, with tamarind. His back hurt a little when he bent down to look at the river bed, now almost without water, small and dirty. The water had been drained for the dam. He knew that, but it didn't matter to him. Earlier it was lived in by sea bass that were fished here, and then it was used for lighting, heating, driving engines, or whatever. ('In any case I go on seeing it because I want it to be limpid and rippling as before or turbulent and chocolate-coloured in the rough winters, even with bubbling tree-trunks brought down by the current and some inflated pot-bellied cow carried along towards the sea by this, that, the other, same river Tárcoles el Grande unassailable by time.')

A truck driver who watched him bending over the parapet shouted at him as he came up. 'Silly old man! Watch out you don't get killed. This bridge is narrow and if you don't get out of the way I'll knock you down.' He raised

1 Braulio Carrillo (1800-1845), Head of State of Costa Rica twice (1835-1837 and 1838-1842).

his arms by way of apology, got astride the guard-rail and made signs indicating that he wouldn't do that again. The driver passed by laughing, with an 'Adiós, señor! So long, old chap! It's OK. Don't worry!'

Then there he was with the enjoyment of youth caressing the stones as if they were flesh and not granite. The river was really filling up with torrents and foam as it did in the thirties, and in his ears he could hear Franz Schubert's[2] *Trout* swimming and leaping, making his fingers dance as they did when he was a youngster and tried to work out the music on the piano belonging to his aunt, the one who sang in the choir at Carmen Church in Heredia.

Just then, almost as swift as an arrow, there rose up in front of him the crag that from the other side of the river looked like a wall of a hundred shades of green and yellow. No sooner had the old cart-road crossed the bridge and passed the crag than it went upwards in a steep zigzag of interminable bends. It used to bear the weight of oxen and drovers and hobblers of mules and horses. Old men and their forebears used to pass along it. Nowadays it was no more than a scar half worn away by rain and wind and covered in fresh vegetation.

He started up his van and crossed the bridge. He stopped again in the bend at the foot of the crag. The Trout was now silent and in its place the cicadas and crickets, as though bubbling in the sunshine, were chirruping wonderfully in the foliage, now and again accompanied by the warbling of birds. And a bus was coming down, a red car going up. A motorcyclist in an orange-coloured shirt appeared round the gentle curve in the modern road, which was constructed alongside the crag, at first parallel to the river and then in a long barely-curved line rising in a gentle gradient almost as though it was flying.

'Almost as though it's flying, yes,' he repeated, smiling to himself as he remembered the driver and the Chevrolet Hunter, a stuttering old crock cram-full of people going up by the ancient devil of a switchback. The driver's hands were gripping the steering-wheel and his foot was pressing down hard on the accelerator. The old crock was whirring and groaning, spitting and vibrating in only first gear. Behind, a bare-footed chap was

2 Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828), Austrian composer.

getting the wind up, and with a big stone in his hands was ready to wedge the back wheels at every turn or twist where the distressed motor could make no further effort. ('And on the return journey how was it we didn't get killed as we drove head-first towards the riverbank? God alone knows.')

He turned to look at the crag, laughed out loud and said to himself: 'What devilish embarrassment I had to put up with then, and how awful I still feel. I don't like to think of it, but was I right or not? Did I act for myself or for all of them?'

He went back to his van and drove at half speed the way the motorcyclist had just come down. ('Yes, I know the Guácimo trees on the left, the reddish-brown edge of the road on the right, half covered with grass.') He carried on taking to himself, like some crazy man, with his eyes fixed on the road.

'I had made myself comfortable in the seat next to the one and only door of the Hunter in case there should be an accident. I had begun to feel more and more nervous even before we approached the damned hill and because it seemed to me that the foot-brake – was it responding or not to the driver? I didn't know how to drive. Who was to know that? But I was an adolescent lad at that time, already inquisitive and dazzled by the first cars and trucks that appeared in the village. I used to drive them in my dreams and was able to explain about first gear here, second there, third this way. I said, "This is the hand-brake, that's the foot-brake, that's the accelerator, and – wait a minute, chum, get into first now, and slowly, be careful, the bend's very tight. This is a mule and cart track. The men who made it could never have imagined Ford speeds or Chevrolet gear-changes, and the axles of the old crock which you – you devil, Sanahuja – try to force down through the dust and precipices, must have got jagged already. They sound like rattles, and the engine's whirring threateningly and heating up. See how the radiator cap's giving off more steam than a coffee-pot! For God's sake, Sanahuja, stop on this flat stretch and don't go on! Why are you grabbing the hand-brake and pressing the foot-brake while it skids and skids and you tug with your right hand at that lever and with your left try to stop the steering-wheel from going crazy and swerving?"

‘We were all silent, saying our prayers. When I turned round to glance behind me the people looked like astounded masks lining up now at the gates of heaven or hell. Heat and swirling dust were coming in through the windows. Sweat was pouring down the back of Sanahuja’s neck and wetting his shirt. And that was only the beginning. Those men and women weren’t aware that we relied on a pathetic gearbox and a wretched hand-brake brum zum brum zum, and the bends they were going round were steeper brum zum brum zum brum downwards, further down. If you were on horseback you’d have to cling on to the animal’s head because you can’t stay on just with the stirrups. . . . And when the peasant woman came alongside me she grabbed my arm and gripped it as she shouted, “Help me!”, sharing her fear.

‘I saw the next bend appear at a ravine. The Hunter couldn’t stop and gradually increased its speed more recklessly – that’s what I thought then. . . . Somebody, it wasn’t me, certainly lifted me from my seat and flung me out of the door. I didn’t think of it, didn’t make a decision. A force stronger than me decided for me and commanded me to drop down steadily on to the road barely a yard from the rockface, to keep on my legs and make them react like bouncy springs that didn’t let me fall but made me go with the impetus of the shove until I could stop, while the vehicle passed on my left like a huge beast. It went on towards the bend and rounded it without tipping over or going into the ravine, except that people were bursting out of the windows and the door just like bundles or bunches of bananas. And they tumbled down and got up in the cloud of dust, one here, one there, a child beneath, a mother on top. By God and all the saints! What a long winding distance I had to cover! I began to run towards the Hunter, which Sanahuja had finally managed to restrain by driving it against the rising wall at the next bend. And there a man came out transformed into a fury, waving his arms in the air and threatening with his fists. He swore and shouted at me, calling me an idiot.

“See what you’ve done, wretched boy! You very nearly killed us all.” And I felt small and shrunken, wanting to be a ghost, to make myself into a cloud and turn into nothing. I looked him straight in the eye and said:

‘“But the brakes are bad.”

‘“Yes, the brakes don’t work,” I heard a man repeat. And a woman who was rubbing her knee with a look of pain on her face came up to me hobbling and in a trembling voice – “She’s going to kill me,” I thought – even called me her guardian angel, saying:

‘“Thanks to you we’re alive.”

‘And somebody else said: “Thanks to you that brute understood he had to stop the whatsit come what may. If he doesn’t manage to get it up over that hump now, who knows.... You see how things are.”

‘For my part I just wanted the earth to swallow me up, just swallow me up.

‘The people were kind.

‘Sanahuja and his assistant, the one who wedged the wheels with a stone at the top of the hill, produced tools and began to tighten nuts here and adjust springs there, but in the meantime all the women and two of the men who were distrustful were walking down on the return journey. It was three-quarters of an hour before they could be expected at the entrance to the bridge once the Hunter began the descent again, but now slowly, very slowly, with Sanahuja in front, certainly cross, and me behind, more dispirited than he was, frowning, still sulky and disconcerted. Who the devil or what the devil had compelled me to create that panic, which did no more than cause grazed skin, sprained ankles and a few falls on the layer of dust on the hill? A few innocent travellers could have been injured or even killed.

‘I remember clearly that when I got up and jumped about I shouted out loudly “Bloody hell!”, but I don’t think I felt any fear, only a passionate desire to live. I suspect that the only guardian angel there was mine, this same stupid old thing who’s now arriving at the entrance to the intersection, which was called The Timberyard at that time, and who has lived many years and who, that morning, grabbed this adolescent by his thick mop of chestnut hair and carried him off with his desire to live and breathe free from anxiety.’

CHAPTER TWO

('What's that? There's a landslide. Nobody told me. It looks as if the hill has cracked and the rock scattered over the road.') He slowed down. ('But it's April, summer. It hasn't rained recently and there've been no earth tremors. Why's this stupid thing happened now – since yesterday, last night? How did trucks and cars and that motorcyclist manage to get through? Damn! What a set-back! What hellish bad timing!')

He stopped the engine, got down, tore off his dark glasses and, screwing up his eyes, walked to the edge of the huge fall of rock, beat his forehead with his fist and sang, who knows why, the liturgical phrase, elongating the vowels, 'tantum eerguun sacrameeentuuum'.

He saw on his right a gently-sloping paddock. He'd perhaps be able to get by through its groves of guava trees. He went back to the van to get the pliers ('I hope to goodness they're there') which he kept amongst his tools. What luck! there they were. He cut the barbed wire of the fence ('I don't like doing any damage, but what else can I do? The owner's going to be angry – "Sorry, my friend, I didn't order an obstruction on the road") and he finally opened up a way through. The pasture was dry, the ground hard, and in first gear, just right, he was testing out the terrain little by little and barely accelerating. ('Go forward, come on, van, nothing's ever been said about you, don't do a skid, don't get scared, you coward!') He drove on amid a few skinny animals that were grazing, going round obstacles to avoid them. In front of him he saw a gate made of sticks of bamboo, opened it and went out on to the road again. ('What a pleasure! How lovely the dusty road used to be with its earth tracks and hoof prints!') He saw a peasant wearing rough leather sandals riding on his mare. 'Adiós,

friend,' he waved, but the peasant, as though pretending to be deaf, didn't respond. However, he didn't take much notice of what was what as he went on driving to prevent the vehicle from swerving in some rut or other, or the transmission from getting scraped on the treacherous ridges in the middle of the path.

The anis that were there before were circling around now and settling on the cattle in search of ticks. The jays were in abundance and the golden oriole nests swaying in the wind in a pejibayero palm tree. Here there was a horse under a leafy locust tree, there a man and his team of oxen ploughing a stretch of land. ('This is the thatched farm, that's the ramshackle family home with its tiled roof. They're milling in the Sandovales' sugar-mill. There's a smell of hot cane sugar bubbling in the two big pans, pigs rooting in the muddy sludge and cockerels crowing. . . . Now the road's flatter, they've just repaired it, what a good thing! Although there's no bridge over the stream, shall I be able to get across? I can hear the screeching of a saw coming from Pacheco's saw-mill, and the hissing of a boiler and steam pistons. Almost in front of me I'll find the smithy belonging to. . . I forget his name, but I bet he's now taking hold of the red-hot horseshoe with his tongs, shaping it on the anvil and struggling a little with the animal that doesn't let it self be shod easily. It's kicking out frighteningly at him; but if you do that to me, you stupid colt, you'll find that the devil knows better than you it'll be your strength pitted against my skill. I'm an old man and the blacksmith an obstinate one. Gently, gently, my fine one, take it easy now, you devil of a colt. . . .') And the seventy-year-old man was arriving in his van just when the animal had been shod and a boy was leading it by the bridle, turning the corner where the house was still to be found in which Don Próspero Fernández had breathed his last at the end of the last century, just as if it were yesterday.

'And now what?' he thought. 'What day is it today? I know this boy, and Don Juvenal González bought the colt from Don Fadrique Ovares a little while ago. It's the offspring of the Sánchez family's stallion and a gently trotting copper-coloured mare belonging to Father Lombardo. Papa had his eye on that colt but Don Juvenal got in first, because the one who can do most, does most, and Papa's not rolling in money like him.'

It was two o'clock by the church clock. The two strokes of the bell didn't mean anything for the moment, but afterwards he deferred to them and

looked at his watch. It was eight o'clock. He must be dreaming. He was well aware of having left the house a few minutes after six and he'd only just got there. The church clock was wrong. It wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last. He turned the ignition key to carry on to the village crossroads, but the ignition didn't work. He vigorously tried again but there was nothing for it, blasted thing. He'd have to open up the bonnet and test the battery terminals; and that's what he did, but it was no good. Everything looked all right: the distributor was firmly in place, the spark plugs recently changed. He tried the horn. It didn't sound. The lights didn't work. What the devil was going on? And then he looked at his shadow. It was short, very short. He glanced up at the sky and of course the sun couldn't be wrong. It was two o'clock. He raised his wrist to his ear and his watch was going, and kept on going. . . . ('In the street we stopped in, van, this heat rightly made us sweat blood with the sun already at its height.')

He had parked at the edge of the street. It was wide here and covered in weeds on either side. Sitting in front of the hut belonging to Señor Damián whom he knew so well was the woodman, almost a hundred years old, who had fought at Santa Rosa and Rivas in the 1856 war. He saw him in the doorway and wanted to greet him but as he drew near the old man turned to go back indoors and vanished. At that very moment three day-labourers were approaching, coming back from work. They were barefoot. One was old, two middleaged. They carried their machetes in their belts and their sticks over their shoulders. They slipped past him, sweating and gaunt. He would have liked to talk to them, shake their earthy hands. He had seen the oldest man before now, coming into his father's surgery, suffering from a persistent hoarse cough. But the seventy-year-old man smiled knowingly with a certain sadness because he knew it would have been no good. They were with him, but he was not with them. He decided to walk along in step with them, leaving his van to the mercy of God, they and he in peaceful silence until they got to the crossroads along the gritty street where they'd find fresh horse manure or bullock droppings already dried out. ('The woman who's sweeping the passage of her house containing lots of begonias and geraniums is Doña Hortensia and she's saying goodbye to my three companions, while at the front, on this side of the footpath, the orange-red flowers of the malinche shrubs belonging to the Espinoza sisters are bursting into bloom today.') Already the cross on the top of the church tower was visible, because they were coming out at a corner of

the square with the draper's and the grocer's shop, the shop over there and the butcher's round the corner. ('See how the mangoes are already ripe on the tree at the corner and are swaying in the breeze and the blackbirds eating their fill in the fig-tree!') He could swear now that at the other end of the street three or four horses would be tied up to the trunks of the purple plum-tree hedge while waiting for their masters and were sure to be dozing in the shade. One of the men would be at the barber's, the others perhaps making theft purchases in the shop or drinking beer in the nearby canteen.

The day-labourers went diagonally across the square to the kiosk in the centre, went round it and soon became misty and lost in time, while a cloud of dust got up and whirled in a semicircle like a huge gangling swaying stretch of barren land. Then it stopped, leaving in the air a few dry leaves that fluttered in the breeze and then leaped on the grass like tiny hunted creatures just as children were coming out of school over there in the distance on the high landing and were going down its little flight of steps running home.

'There he is! It's him! That's me as a boy,' he said, and quickening his pace was getting near him. He reached him as he rounded the corner of the market, intending to follow him, but another whirl appeared and swept the street from the south. It was a capricious spinning-top of dust and dead leaves that swept up to the roofs of the houses, came down again, scattered, reappeared and finally enveloped them both.

When the seventy-year-old man came out of the mischievous dust cloud he was coughing, wiping away his tears and the bits and pieces and the dust from his face. He wasn't cross, but dying of laughter. In the meantime the boy had begun to run with his schoolboy's load held fast and stopped suddenly on arriving at the next corner. He began pretending he wasn't looking out of the corner of his eye, although he was really looking, crouching down as if to tie his shoelaces, but he didn't tie them. He just looked out of the corner of his eye and waited. And the man went on laughing to himself because he knew what the boy had just seen coming.

They were the ones! The same! Most Holy Virgin of Miracles! They were the same, they didn't change. They were the same age as ripe oranges, custard apples, star apples and pineapples from Cacao de Alajuela and

Zarcero. Enough to make you lick your fingers. The boy couldn't be aware yet, but he had an inkling, and it distressed him and got a hold on him, attracted him and frightened him, making his pulse race and his breathing short. Now for that reason, thinking nobody was looking at him and the girls taking no notice of him, he didn't hide, but with his eyes wide open watched them approaching as if he were taking in their firm breasts, their graceful bodies, their rhythmically swaying hips, their scent of woodland flowers.

They passed by him so closely that he almost felt their warmth and turned his head to follow them with an irresistible desire to creep along behind them. The old man was no longer staring at him, but was holding the bodies of the two girls in his arms like a wicked old man in his glory transformed suddenly into a violent wind which sculpted them to his taste and fondled them, laughed and danced with them.

'There come that pair of virgin mangoes,' said a tailor's apprentice from the window of the shop when they approached harrying along and chasing each other because that's how they were. They liked playing tricks on each other and raising the dust like fillies on heat.

'Adiós, delights of my life!' the apprentice shouted.

'When, my loves? When?' shouted the master tailor.

'What legs that brunette's got! What a waist this blonde has! By all the saints in heaven!' the stout fifty-year-old mayor said to himself on his way to the office. But the girls took no notice.

'Such things go in one ear and out the other, dirty pigs,' the brunette thought, as if she was shouting at them, licking her fleshy pink lips only to fill them with desire. 'Get stuffed, all you lot, be satisfied with the one you've got. Tell that fat sweaty priest who admonishes us from the pulpit every Sunday at Mass, calling us temptresses of Satan, that we don't go to his church or set up with anybody or do anybody any harm. We don't feel guilty either at being so pretty and naughty and loving, because that's how Mama brought us into the world by the grace of God who's not in that church but in our hearts. That's what Papa says. He's not the fool or the wretched mare-breaker all you lot, who are a bunch of greedy-guts, think

he is, only because you nicknamed him Patachinga because he's got one short leg and always runs along limping behind a filly. . .'

And then the man couldn't resist. Sentimental, amorous and roguish too, he took one and the other by the hand, drew them to a bench beneath the leafiest fig-tree in the square and kissed the blonde and the brunette, the brunette and the blonde umpteen times like fruit, and breathed in so deeply their scent like marango flowers that the tunes of *La Fantasia and The Wanderer* reached his ears, he didn't know where from. And wandering and fantasizing he gradually became drowsy, resting on a warm, warm breast and a lap pleasurable, innocent and mysterious.

Thereupon he woke up, and they weren't there any more. In the presence of those ladies making the sign of the Cross: Doña Orminta and Doña Celia, Doña Cata and Doña Teodolinda, Felicitas the spinster and Maria's daughter, with smiles of angels and seraphim and saying 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' which helped the parish priest to teach the catechism, Rosa Stealerof-Hearts and Dalia Makes-me-Mad had got up from the bench with their bare knees and shiny calves full of life. Giggling again and playing like those swallows that described scrawls up in the blue sky, there they'd been, freeing themselves from his hands and disappearing from his vision, and he heard himself murmuring to them, 'So long, girls, my blessed temptresses!'

And he sang to them in a cheerful voice, elongating the vowels, 'Per omnia saecula saeculooorum. . . Aaaameeeen!'

At the age of 70 Fabián Dobles published his last novel, *The Years Like Brief Days*, praised for its vital prose and contemporary structure, which received the 1992 Áncora Literature Prize.

It becomes an incomplete biography of the author, relating that which had not yet been told, and for that reason there is a subtle tone of longing for what is gone, and a joyful hug for that which was experienced and for the present. He returns to his social commitment, to the essence of his dreams.

This novel by Fabián Dobles, a beloved and necessary author, was written in another tone, another key, another language. But just as in everything he wrote, he confronts us with the essence of the country we are, and forces us, sometimes subtly and sometimes brutally, to look at ourselves in perspective and reappraise ourselves.

It has also been said that *The Years Like Brief Days* culminates the arc of rebelliousness initiated by one of his previous novels, *Una burbuja en el limbo* (1946), and represents the author's reconciliation with his life.

Álvaro Quesada Soto says:

> "In *The Years Like Brief Days*, perhaps the most experimental of the Fabián Dobles novels, several central concerns of Costa Rican novels in general and of the writer in particular coalesce, acquiring a groundbreaking and complex narrative expression: the concern for language; the problem of time conceived of in its dual faces as interior time and as historical time; the problem of the relationship individual-family-society; the problem of tradition and progress, or of change in continuity […]. Just as innovative is his treatment of time and of his narrative structure. The journey of a seventy-year old man to the land of his childhood turns into a journey through time and memory, into a complex inquiry into the links between consciousness and reality, which is also an inquiry into family and social structures that comprise them […]".

EDITORIAL UCR