Discussion Questions for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

1. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has been viewed as a kind of allegorical history of Colombia or, by extension, of post-colonial Latin America. The novel has also been viewed in broader mythic terms and is replete with mythical and Biblical allusions as the original patriarch, Jose Arcadio, leads his people to Macondo—an ironic version of the "promised land." How would you characterize the "mad scientist," Jose Arcadio? How do you think Garcia-Marquez intends us to view his obsession with inventions? Is Garcia-Marquez celebrating or satirizing scientific curiosity? How would you characterize Jose Arcadio's relationship to the 'Prophet' Melquiades?

2. Ursula is perhaps the most powerful character in the novel—the matriarch who holds the family together, who endures despite incredible adversity. To what extent do you think the character of Ursula is an embodiment of the stereotypes of a patriarchal culture? To what extent do you think she represents a challenge to those stereotypes? What does the dispute between Ursula and Jose Arcadio in the opening chapter reveal about them and the nature of their relationship?

3. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is some ways like the old-fashioned nineteenth century novel: it begins at the beginning and moves in straightforward chronological fashion with one "omnisicient" narrator. However, Garcia-Marquez breaks the old-fashioned novelist's compact with the reader: he includes impossible events—for example, the flying carpets of the gypsies—as if they were perfectly realistic occurrences. How did you respond to this naturalization of the bizarre? To what extent did Garcia-Marquez' technique present a problem for you?

4. An attraction to incestuous relationships seems to be the ancestral curse of the Buendia family—beginning with the marriage of two cousins—Jose Arcadio and Ursula—and ending with the sexual relationship between Aureliano and his aunt Amaranta Ursula. The great fear of the Buendia family is that sexual intercourse between close relatives will result in a grotesquely deformed child with "the tail of a pig." What significance do you attach to this theme? What thematic point do you think Garcia-Marquez was trying to make?

5. The sons of Jose Arcadio and Ursula have radically different personalities. Jose is physically powerful, sexually charged; with his outgoing personality, he is the classic extrovert. The dreamy, withdrawn, almost asexual, Aureliano is the classic introvert. These personality types recur in subsequent generations of Buendias. Why do you think Garcia-Marquez peoples his novel with these recurrent types? Do you think that personality types do tend to recur in families?

6. A major theme of the novel is how we reconstruct the past and the potentially tragic consequences of losing touch with our past. One of the first variations on this theme occurs with the description of the surreal "insomnia plague." (See pp. 44-50.) What thematic point[s] do you think Garcia-Marquez is developing here? What are the implications of memory loss? Of an inability to remember the past?
7. The "insomnia plague" is ultimately cured by the mysterious Melquiades who has returned from death because "he could not bear the solitude." (p.50) Disentangling the ambivalent attitudes towards solitude is one of the major challenges for the reader of One Hundred Years of Solitude. How should we view the predilection for solitude which characterized the Aureliano strand of the Buendia family? As a curse? As a mark of insight into the nature of reality?

8. Scene after scene in One Hundred Years of Solitude takes place in a house of prostitution or involves prostitution -- an institution prevalent throughout 19th century Latin America. One of the most striking early scenes in the novel involves Aureliano's encounter with a young girl forced into prostitution by her grandmother -- an incident later turned into the novella, Innocent Erendira. (See pp. 53-54.) What does this scene reveal about Aureliano? To what extent can we determine Garcia-Marquez's attitudes towards this institution? Do you view this scene as an implicit criticism of prostitution on the part of Garcia-Marquez?

9. The institution of government comes to the town in the person of Don Moscote who orders that all the houses in town be painted blue. (See pp. 57-58.) How would you characterize the attitude of the residents of Macondo towards government? Do you see any parallels with modern day Colombia?

10. Garcia-Marquez describes the process of "civilization" coming to Macondo: commercialization and connections to the wider world with Ursula's discovery of neighboring settlements; European culture with Pietro Crespi; the government which in turn institutes formal schooling and brings organized religion to the town. How did the townspeople react to the arrival of Father Nicholas Reyna? To what extent can we determine Garcia-Marquez's attitude towards organized religion? (See pp.84-86.)

11. Throughout the novel, romantic love is generally viewed as an obsession: Aureliano's bizarre passion for the child, Remedios; Rebecca's passion for Pietro Crespi and later for Jose Arcadio; Amaranta's obsession for Pietro Crespi and her fanatical vindictiveness towards Rebecca. At one point, the old patriarch, Jose Arcadio Buendia, states that "Love is a disease." (p. 71) Do you think there is a grain (or more than a grain) of truth in this assertion? Do you think Garcia-Marquez intends to convey the attitude that romantic love is a disease?

12. In contrast to the romantic obsessiveness which characterizes the Aureliano strain of the family, Jose Arcadio represents (and evokes in others) another kind of passion -- raw sexuality. Prostitutes compete to see who will pay him the most for his services. (See p.93.) How do you think Garcia-Marquez intends us to view Jose Arcadio's exuberant sexuality? To what extent do you think Garcia-Marquez intends us to view Jose Arcadio as a parody of machismo?

13. The surreal, fantastic aspects of One Hundred Years of Solitude (what critics have called "magic realism") have sometimes obscured the social
realism of the novel—that is, the extent to which the plot is based on actual incidents in the history of Colombia. The protracted battles between liberals and conservatives described in the novel are based on actual historical occurrences, and Colonel Aureliano Buendia is thought to be modeled on an actual historical figure. Can you determine Garcia-Marquez's political sympathies from the description of the Liberals and Conservatives on pp.98-99?

14. Garcia-Marquez explores the ambiguous motivations of political leaders and the moral ambiguities involved in political endeavors. He is aware that reactionary forces can have decent individuals in their ranks—for example, Raquel Moncada—and that morally dubious people can serve worthy causes. He also explores the issue of the morality of violent means in pursuit of an ostensibly worthy cause. How would you characterize Garcia-Marquez portrait of the "terrorist," Dr. Noguera? (See p.100-104.) To what extent can we determine Garcia-Marquez's attitudes towards the use of violence in a 'worthy' cause?

15. Although many of the characters are exaggerated and bizarre, Garcia-Marquez, nonetheless, endows them with complexity, with psychological nuances. Jose Arcadio, for example, despite his liberal rhetoric and ideology, turns into an authoritarian monster; yet Garcia-Marquez provides us with an explanation for his brutality. How does Garcia-Marquez account for Jose Arcadio's cruelty and lust for power?

16. The violence of the civil wars and the brutality of her own grandson, Jose Arcadio, leads Ursula to enter the world of public affairs, a world she had up to this point been content to leave to men. (See p.108-109.) Ursula's world had revolved around her family, tending to their emotional and material needs. What are the implications of Ursula's brief foray into public affairs?

17. As the war grinds on, it begins to take on a momentum of its own. How do you think Garcia-Marquez intends us to view the exchange between Colonel Aureliano Buendia and Colonel Gerineldo Marquez about their motivations for continuing the struggle? (See p.139.)

18. As the war progresses, we witness the deterioration of Colonel Aureliano Buendia. Ursula begins to see her son as "an intruder," as "a man capable of anything." (p.160) She now views him as a kind of moral monster. She tells him: "It's the same as if you had been born with the tail of a pig." (p.174) How do you account for the deterioration of Aureliano Buendia? What psychological and/or political insights do you think Garcia-Marquez intends to convey as he traces the changes in Aureliano?

19. Abruptly, Colonel Aureliano Buendia decides to end the war once and for all. Why the sudden about-face? What larger political points do you think Garcia-Marquez is making here?

20. The novel now shifts to the fortunes of the next generation of
Buendia—she twins Aureliano Segundo and Jose Arcadio Segundo. After presenting the reader with one depiction after another of the apparent passage of hereditary traits from one generation to the next, Garcia-Marquez seems to undermine his theme with the suggestion that there may also be environmental influences on human character. Under the influence of his mistress, Petra Cotes, Aureliano Segundo defies his genetic inheritance:

"Nature had made him reserved and withdrawn, with tendencies toward solitary meditations, and she had molded an opposite character in him, one that was vital, expansive, open, and she had injected him with a joy for living and a pleasure for spending and celebration until she had converted him, inside and out, into the man she had dreamed of for adolescence." (p.209)

How seriously do you think Garcia-Marquez intends us to take this counter-theme? What ideas do you think emerge from One Hundred Years of Solitude about the influence of heredity vs. environment on human personality?

21. Petra Cotes is a variation on the stock character—"the whore with a heart of gold." Like Pilar Ternera who provided consolation to an earlier generation of Buendia men, Petra Cotes is warm, exuberant and sexually giving—in sharp contrast to the cold, sexually repressed Fernanda. Do you see similar contrasts between the sexually exuberant and the sexually repressed characters among the male characters in the novel? What point[s] do you think Garcia-Marquez is making about human sexuality?

22. In the portrait of Fernanda del Carpia, Garcia-Marquez deals explicitly with the theme of social class. Fernanda's parents are apparently impoverished descendents of the old Spanish nobility. How does Fernanda attempt to change the values of the Buendia family? What do we learn about the class antagonisms in Colombian society (as well as the regional antagonisms between the peoples of the coastal regions and the peoples of the highlands) from Garcia-Marquez' description of the struggle between Fernanda del Carpia and the Buendia family?

23. The portrait of Fernanda del Carpia also provides some insight into the historical connections between the Colombian aristocracy and the Church. Ursula, although she dislikes many of Fernanda's pretensions, has more in common with Fernanda on this issue than with most of the male members of her family. Despite her advanced age, Ursula insists on raising Aureliano Segundo's first son herself: "This one will be a priest she promised solemnly. And if god gives me life, he'll be a pope someday." (p.194) What does the relative absence of anti-clericalism among the Buendia woman suggest about relationship of Latin American women to the Church?

24. One of the most bizarre female characters is Remedios the Beauty—viewed as mentally retarded by most of her relatives and as "preternaturally lucid" by Colonel Aureliano Buendia. She is both a parody of the 'femme fatale' figure and, with her assumption into heaven, a
parody of the Virgin Mary. How do you think Garcia-Márquez intends us to view her? How do you think the portrait of Remedios fits into thematic structure of the novel?

25. A theme which assumes greater importance as the novel progresses is the experience of aging. The characters tend to experience a concentration of their typical characteristics as they age. Amaranta, for example, always obsessive and bitter, continued to nurse her hatred for Rebeca, now a pitiful old woman:

Amaranta thought about Rebeca because solitude had made a selection in her memory and had burned the dimming piles of nostalgic waste that life had accumulated in her heart, and had purified, magnified, and etenalized the others, the most bitter ones. (p.225)

How does this contrast with the process of aging in Ursula? What psychological insights do you think Garcia-Márquez provides into the process of aging?

26. One by one, we witness the major characters in the novel grow old and die. To what extent is the moment of death a defining moment, a crystallization of character for Colonel Aureliano Buendia, for Amaranta, for Ursula?

27. The final section of the novel shifts focus to the tragic lives of the children and grandchildren of Aureliano Segundo and Fernanda del Carpio. In what sense is Meme different from the other members of the Buendia family? How does her tragic fate develop the theme of class conflict which assumes greater prominence in this section of the novel?

28. The refusal of official historians to acknowledge the strike against the banana company and the massacre of the strikers (an actual event in the history of Columbia, the reality of which was denied by the official historians) becomes one of the major themes of the novel: How can we know the past and what can we know of it? What answers—if any—does One Hundred Years of Solitude provide?

29. Although Garcia-Márquez deals with political/historical issues—such as the massacre of the strikers—to what extent do you think that One Hundred Years of Solitude is ultimately a political novel?

30. A flood of almost biblical proportions engulfs Macondo wreaking havoc on the town, yet in the wake of incredible destruction, the one hundred year old Ursula begins to try to restore her house. Similarly, Petra Cotes starts again to rebuild Aureliano Segundo's wealth after the devastation of the rains by raffling off her one remaining animals. What sense of human life and human resources do you think ultimately emerges from one One Hundred Years of Solitude—a sense of waste, devastation, and defeat or the resourcefulness and determination to survive exemplified by characters such as Ursula and Petra Cotes?
31. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* embodies a cyclical theory of history: "The history of the family was a machine with unavoidable repetitions, a turning wheel that would have gone on spilling into eternity were it not for the progressive and irremediable wearing of the axle." (p.402) How can we reconcile the essentially optimistic, progressive political views of Garcia-Marquez with the more pessimistic view which seems to emerge from a reading of the novels?