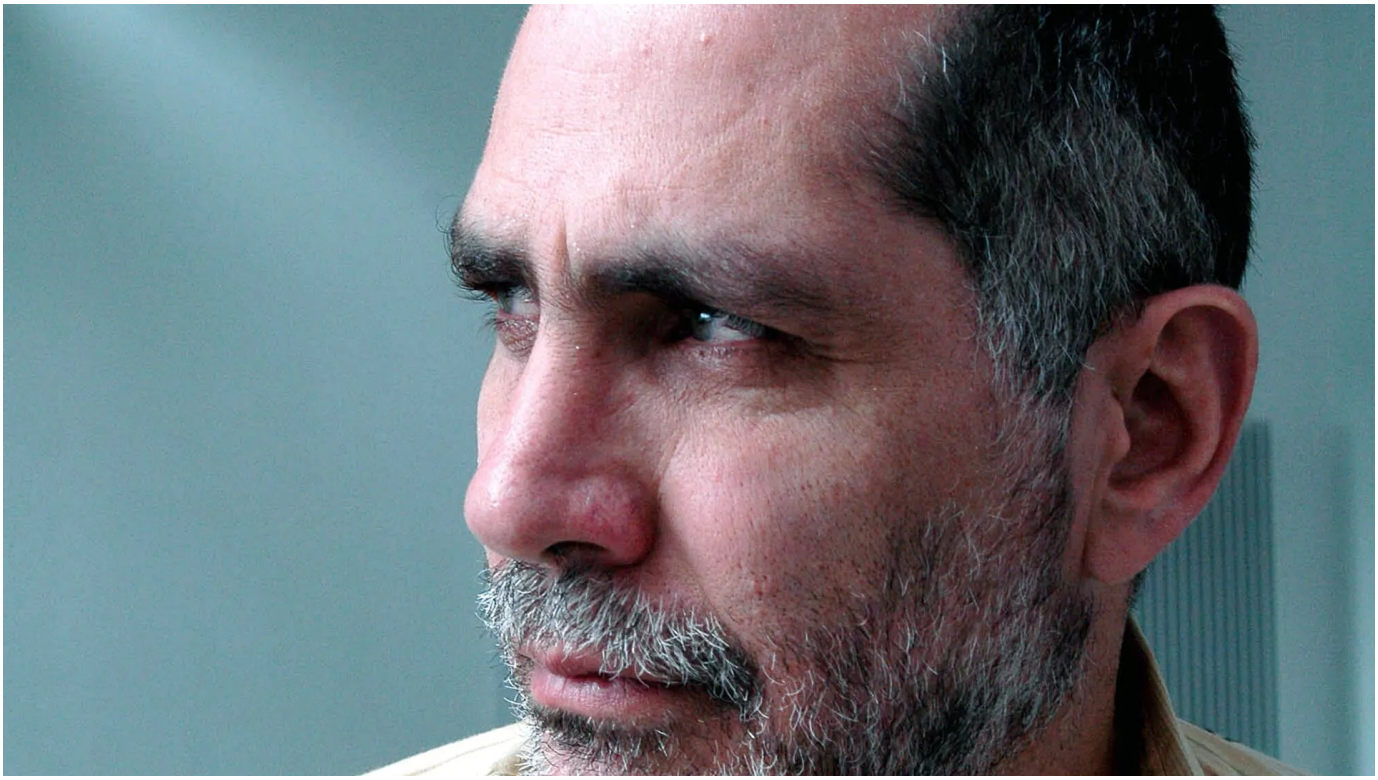
The fire of Guillermo Arriaga (interview)



In an interview prior to his participation in the program Texts, Voices, and Ideas at FIL Monterrey, Arriaga spoke about his views on life and literature.
11/10/2020

Photos: AFP

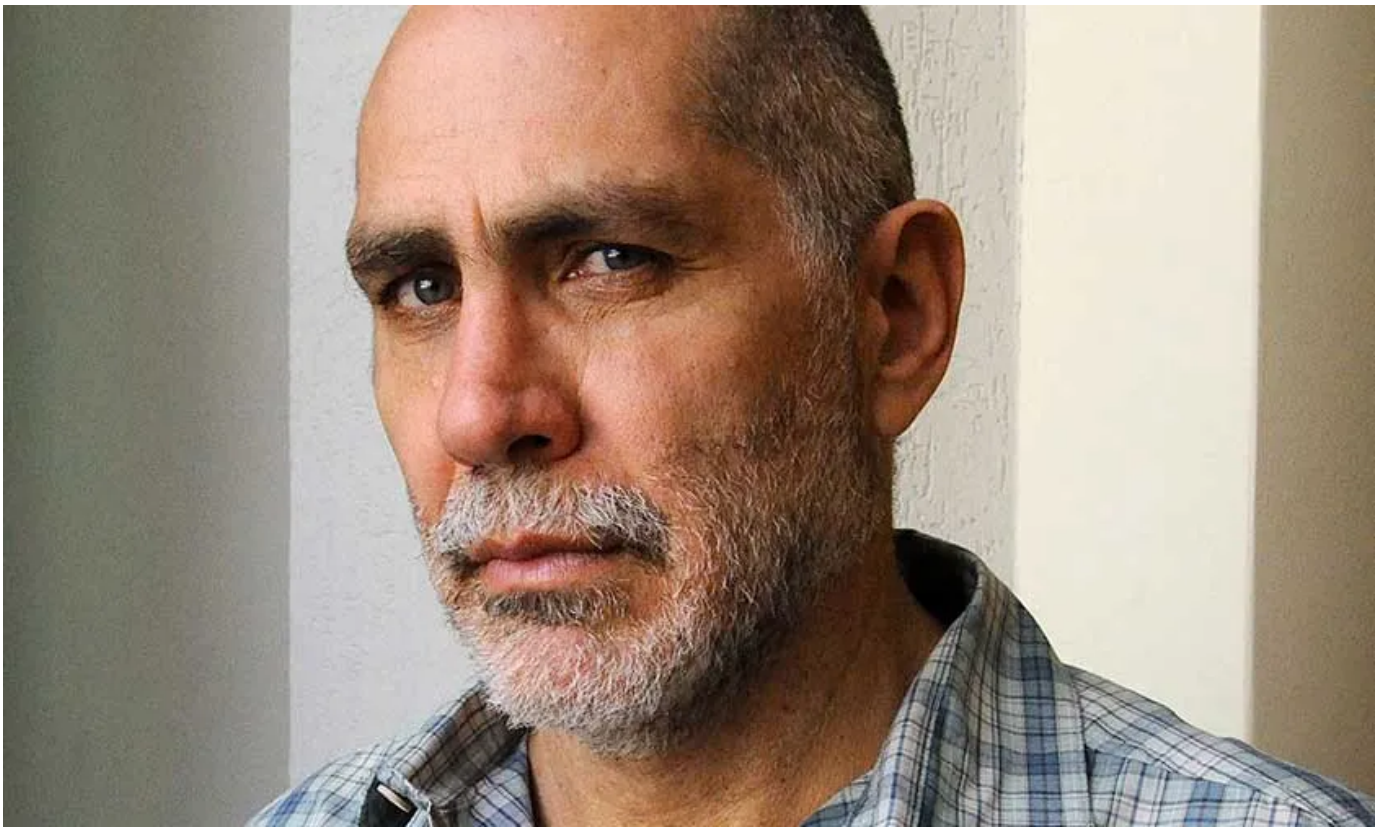
"Talent is overrated," says **Guillermo Arriaga.**

*"What is not sufficiently valued is **self-motivation, drive**... 'I'm going there and I'm going to give it everything I've got', doing it with **gusto**."*

Recognized in the world of cinema for his scripts to films such as ***Amores Perros***, ***21 Grams***, ***Babel*** and ***The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*** (best screenplay at Cannes) and in literature for novels such as ***A Sweet Scent of Death*** and ***The Untameable***, Arriaga expresses happiness for what he has achieved, but also a **hunger for more**.

And it is that reason, **he maintains, we should not talk about dreams, but rather about goals**. Years ago, he told a friend all the things he would achieve.

***"I didn't get the Oscar, but I got close**…,"* he recalls. *"(But) **I did get Cannes, I got Venice; I won the Alfaguara,** which was a goal."*



The lion has escaped

Indeed, as **unanimous winner** of the **Alfaguara Prize** this year, Arriaga speaks in an **interview** about this recent work, ***Salvar el fuego,*** and about his **artistic vision, the state of the country, and life**.

For the Alfaguara -as with other goals- **Arriaga did not give up.** With ***The Untameable*, he came in second place,** but he tried again and**, now, the vote** of the jury, chaired by Juan Villoro, **was overwhelming.**

The text, which **vividly narrates a story of violence, love and redemption,** is a **novel** told **by 4 different voices** (narrators) that intertwine **throughout its 700 pages.**

“I’d rather be known for great failures than mediocre successes”.

Two of the narrators are its main protagonists: **Marina, a dancer and choreographer** aiming to become well-known through her art; and **Cuauhtémoc, a brutal but cultured murderer** who becomes a writer in prison.

Arriaga said that, of all the **writing styles** used in the book, the one he most identifies with **is Cuauhtémoc**, the ***“Lion behind the glass”*** -the original title of the book- **waiting to be released.**

However, as a result of the **stylistic risks that he sought to take** in **the novel**, he decided to take on a phrase which, in the text, he attributed to Marina and her intense search for art:

“I’d rather be known for my great failures than for my mediocre successes.”

Live life and then write about it

“What writer hasn’t dreamed of beating the crap out of a dumbass critic?” says a character in *Salvar el fuego.*

Has Guillermo Arriaga **ever wanted to do that**?

“Of course,” he replies immediately. ***“I don’t mind critics talking about my work.*** *But* ***when they make fun of you,*** *when they* ***make it personal,*** *it becomes personal.*

“*I do* ***put my life in every word.*** *So, I* ***expect all the critics to put their lives into every word.”***

Arriaga assures us that he is not one of those writers who goes through life trying to find experiences to write about. And he maintains that he doesn’t do any research for his books and movies.

“I don’t live life just to inspire myself. I live life because I want to experience it.”

He tells **new writers to** just keep writing**.**

“We are all qualified to write. *But are we all qualified to write a* ***story that has repercussions and consequences? No.*** *But****, that’s not in your hands.***

“When you write, never try to be deep. *If you are deep, the story will be deep. But being deep on purpose is impossible.*

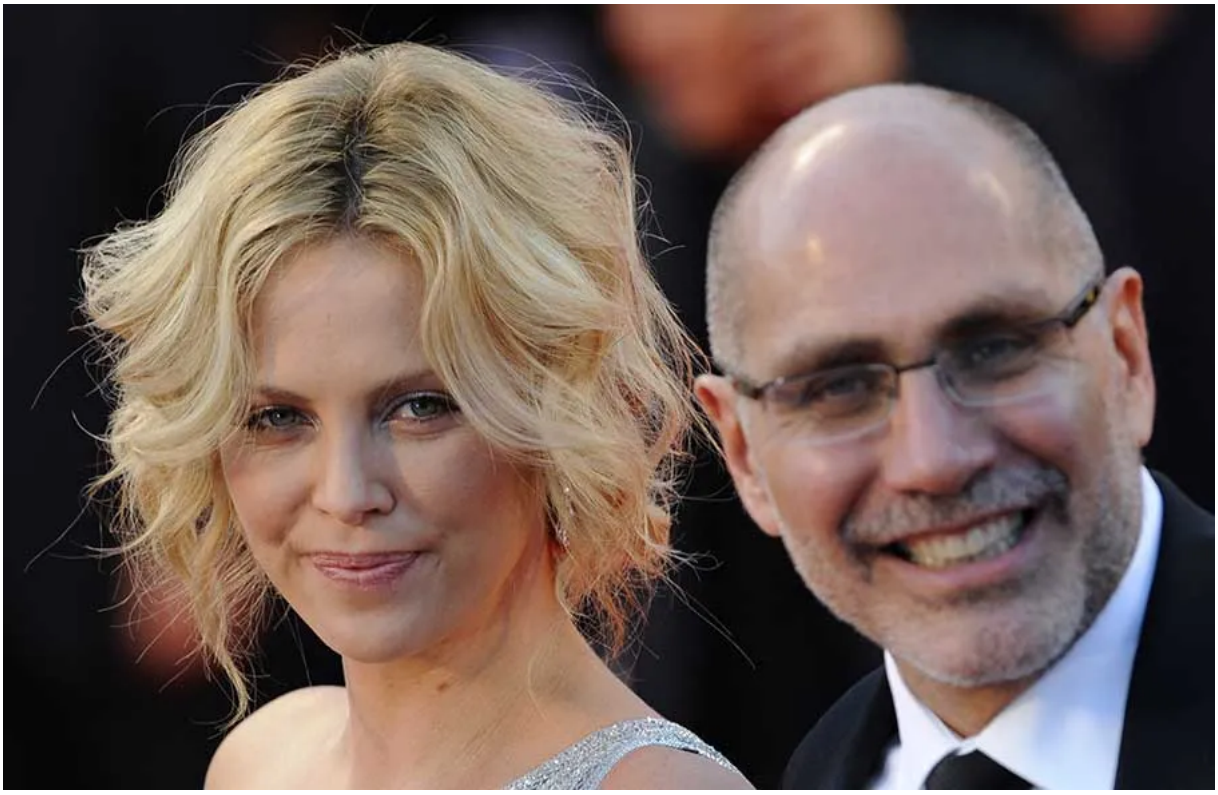
He tells young people who think they need to have had many intense experiences to be able to write, to **write about their lives, be they shocking or boring.**

“One of the greatest teachers, one of the most brutal geniuses in literature is ***Borges****, and he had* ***no life experience.*** *All his books come from the library.*

“Jane Austen, what did she talk about? How boring her life was. What does Sofía Coppola talk about? How boring her life has been.

*Sometimes****, your experience might be spending all the time eating chips and drinking Coca Cola in front of a TV*** *and* ***that is*** *what you’re* ***going to make a masterpiece out of.”***

“I put my life into every word”.



The actress Charlize Theron, accompanied by Arriaga, writer and director of the film “The Burning Plain”, in which she starred. Photo: AFP.

Literature à la Cristiano Ronaldo

“Don’t judge. Polish,” says Arriaga about how to improve a text.

He was able to learn something from sport***: “Those who reach the highest levels are those who are most strict with*** *themselves****.”***

“Take ***Cristiano Ronaldo*** *and* ***Michael Jordan****, for example. They spend two or three hours training. Michael Jordan put balls in a thousand baskets; Cristiano Ronaldo perfected his shots.* ***They’re big stars and they don’t give up. They keep trying, and trying, and trying, and trying...”***

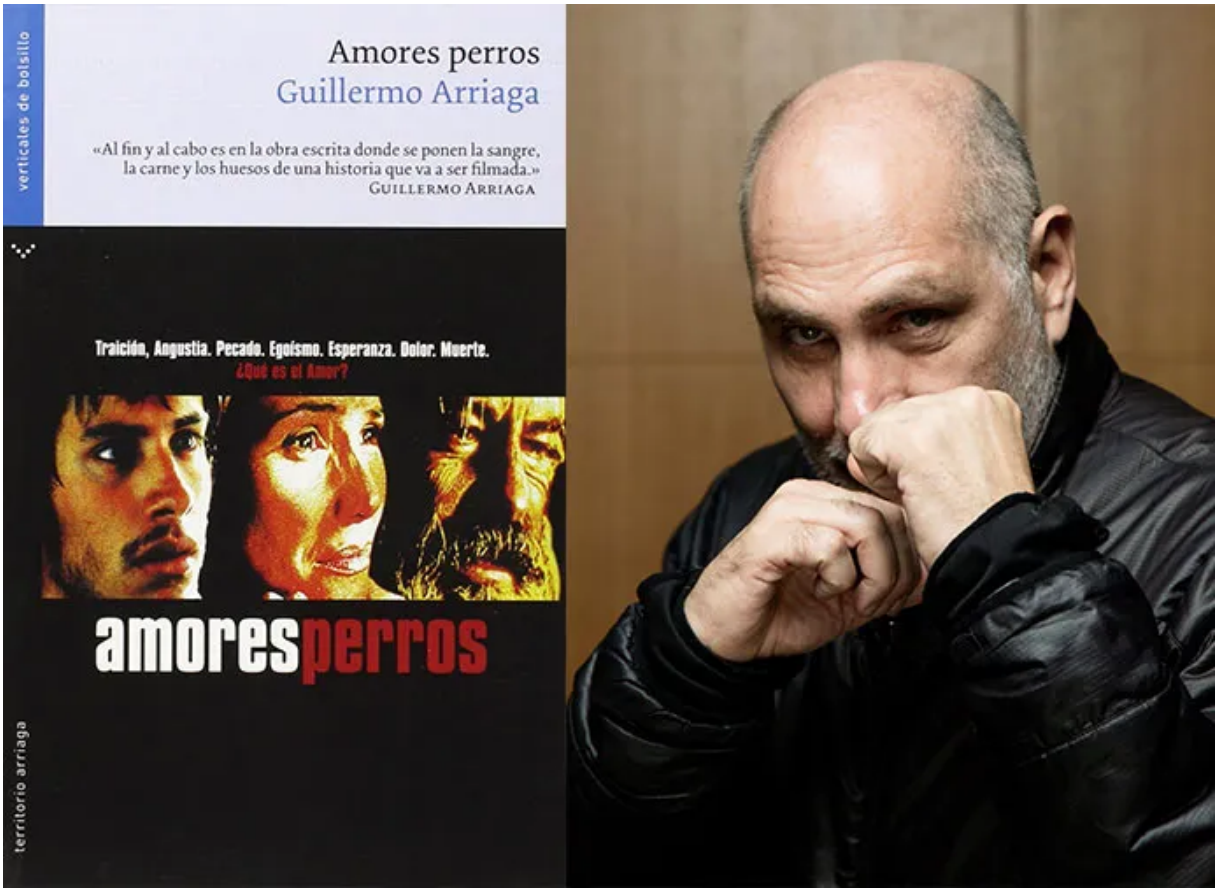
“What saves a piece of work is rigor, not talent. Talent is overrated,” he concludes.

And although there are often distractors***, “people who want to do things,*** *people who have drive,* ***who fly straight like an arrow, (...) nothing can stop them.”***

Personally, he said, there is no way that he can stop. And his fire always needs to be stoked.

"What do I need? For me, this is an addiction. What I need is to feed my addiction..."

"For me, this is an addiction".



Twenty years after **the iconic Amores Perros**, Arriaga says in the interview that it still gives him ***"enormous pleasure"*** that continues to be celebrated: **"it is a film that continues to be analyzed, not only in schools in Mexico but also by foreigners,** including by people from India, from Belgium, from Australia... **It's funny that people who were not even one year old, or even born when it came out, tell me about Amores Perros."**

And Mexico... hitting rock bottom

In *Salvar el fuego*, **Arriaga describes a Mexico dominated by violent** drug trafficking**, great social inequality,** and with **institutions tainted** by crime.

He maintains that he simply shares what he saw*: "In Coahuila and Tamaulipas, I could see the visible deterioration. It was there, right in front of me. I saw it with my own eyes."*

But, for Arriaga: is there any hope for a Mexico like this?

"I think we're about to hit rock bottom," he says.

However, he believes, that Mexico can **begin to rise again.**

"It's like alcoholism, brother. You have to hit rock bottom to come back from it.

"All countries have a breaking point. This is our breaking point."

> ***"I think we're about to hit rock bottom".***

Texts, voices and ideas, at FIL Monterrey

Due to the pandemic, the **Monterrey International Book Festival** –organized by **Tec de Monterrey** each year– will not be held in person this year, but will instead **have a virtual program**.

The ***Texts, Voices and Ideas* program**, running during October and the following months, will include **talks with authors via Facebook** Live.

Guillermo Arriaga talked about his novel Salvar el Fuego on Saturday, October 10.

*“That **authors of the stature of Arriaga, Jorge Volpi, Mariana Enríquez, or Chloë Aridjis** participate in **Texts, Voices and Ideas** is a reflection **of the importance and relevance that FIL Monterrey** has achieved in the eyes of the public**, authors, and editors**,”* commented **Armando Ruiz, executive director of FIL Monterrey.**

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