One Hundred Years of Solitude is the history of the isolated town of Macondo and of the family who founds it, the Buendías. For years, the town has no contact with the outside world, except for gypsies who occasionally visit, peddling technologies like ice and telescopes. The patriarch of the family, José Arcadio Buendía, is impulsive and inquisitive. He remains a leader who is also deeply solitary, alienating himself from other men in his obsessive investigations into mysterious matters. These character traits are inherited by his descendents throughout the novel. His older child, José Arcadio, inherits his vast physical strength and his impetuousness. His younger child, Aureliano, inherits his intense, enigmatic focus. Gradually, the village loses its innocent, solitary state when it establishes contact with other towns in the region. Civil wars begin, bringing violence and death to peaceful Macondo, which, previously, had experienced neither, and Aureliano becomes the leader of the Liberal rebels, achieving fame as Colonel Aureliano Buendía. Macondo changes from an idyllic, magical, and sheltered place to a town irrevocably connected to the outside world through the notoriety of Colonel Buendía. Macondo’s governments change several times during and after the war. At one point, Arcadio, the cruelest of the Buendías, rules dictatorially and is eventually shot by a firing squad. Later, a mayor is appointed, and his reign is peaceful until another civil uprising has him killed. After his death, the civil war ends with the signing of a peace treaty.

More than a century goes by over the course of the book, and so most of the events that García Márquez describes are the major turning points in the lives of the Buendías: births, deaths, marriages, love affairs. Some of the Buendía men are wild and sexually rapacious, frequenting brothels and taking lovers. Others are quiet and solitary, preferring to shut themselves up in their rooms to make tiny golden fish or to pore over ancient manuscripts. The women, too, range from the outrageously outgoing, like Meme, who once brings home seventy-two friends from boarding school, to the prim and proper Fernanda del Carpio, who wears a special nightgown with a hole at the crotch when she consummates her marriage with her husband.

A sense of the family’s destiny for greatness remains alive in its tenacious matriarch, Ursula Iguarán, and she works devotedly to keep the family together despite its differences. But for the Buendía family, as for the entire village of Macondo, the centrifugal forces of modernity are devastating. Imperialist capitalism reaches Macondo as a banana plantation moves in and exploits the land and the workers, and the Americans who own the plantation settle in their own fenced-in section of town. Eventually, angry at the inhumane way in which they are treated, the banana workers go on strike. Thousands of them are massacred by the army, which sides with the plantation owners. When the bodies have been dumped into the sea, five years of ceaseless rain begin, creating a flood that sends Macondo

into its final decline. As the city, beaten down by years of violence and false progress,
begins to slip away, the Buendía family, too, begins its process of final erasure,
overcome by nostalgia for bygone days. The book ends almost as it began: the village is
once again solitary, isolated. The few remaining Buendía family members turn in upon
themselves incestuously, alienated from the outside world and doomed to a solitary ending.
In the last scene of the book, the last surviving Buendía translates a set of ancient
prophecies and finds that all has been predicted: that the village and its inhabitants
have merely been living out a preordained cycle, incorporating great beauty and great,
tragic sadness.