

SV: That statement makes me happy because it defines a truth. When I wrote it, it gave me the joy of discovery. I was hoping that the reader would experience the same joy of discovery.

55) "I don't believe in charity, charity multiplies the unfit. What we need is more gifted people - we need them as badly as we need leopards and elephants," says Sir Henry. What do you think about this?

SV: This is spoken by a billionaire who by his own admission has a heart of stone, and is proud of it. One of the things a reader may realize reading An Innocent Millionaire is that people have the most plausible rationalizations for every stupid or cruel thing they do.

56) "These days nobody sees anything wrong with cheating and stealing. Crooks are the heroes of our time." Isn't such a world in its death throes?

SV: This is spoken by a New York magazine publisher (he is specifically referring to movies, books, newspaper features) and there is, certainly some truth in it. I was shocked a few years ago - I could hardly believe my own eyes - when I read an article by García Márquez urging the Colombian government to make a deal with the drug barons. His advice seems to have been accepted because subsequently the Colombian government did make a deal with Pablo Escobar, who gave himself up and then ran his drug empire from his luxurious private "prison", and even brought in people to have them murdered there before he escaped and was eventually killed in a shootout with the police. The media glorification of criminals must have contributed to García Márquez imagining that a psychopathic killer like Escobar would honour any deal he made with the government. As for the world being in its death throes because of the moral insanity of the mass-media, I never think about death throes. I try to expose and ridicule evil in my books, and hope for the best.

57) Would you like to add anything about "the business of the law", twelve years after all that you said about this in An Innocent Millionaire?

SV: The novel shows you the dark side of the law and lawyers. What I would add is that the law is a field where brave and honest men can do a tremendous amount of good, and many do, working for the poor, for civil rights, for consumers' rights, risking their lives in the fight against organized crime. Indeed, some of the greatest men of our time had been lawyers - you have only to think of the Italian investigating magistrates and prosecutors who have been killed by the Mafia - Cesare Terranova, Gaetano Costa, Rocco Chinnici, Giovanni Falcone, Paolo Borsellino and many, many others. There are many such heroic lawyers also in Colombia - and I'm sure also in Mexico.

You can be a clerk without confronting great moral choices, you can be a morally indifferent dentist, but if you are a lawyer you can't avoid choosing every day whether to be honest or dishonest.

58) On page 349 it is said that "Such theft ought to be a capital offence". Do you agree with that?

SV: Fraudsters often cause the death of their victims. I think certain frauds which utterly ruin people should be considered crimes as serious as murder.

59) "Evil is stronger," the corrupt lawyer tells Mark. Do you agree?

SV: Evil people certainly believe so. The whole phrase is "The trouble with you is, you don't understand that evil is stronger." This was said to me by my then New York lawyer when I did not want to accept that I could be robbed of the royalties from the sales of In Praise of Older Women. He turned out to be right in my particular case - I could never get the royalties from my first New York publisher - but I still wouldn't agree. I would rather side with Bertrand Russell, who defined genius as the conviction that justice and goodness will triumph. But who is stronger, who is weaker, who will win, who will lose, isn't really the point. When you're in a fight you don't worry about whether your opponent is stronger than you - you just fight. The point is that you do your best to defeat him. As Camus said, we must act without faith.

60) Do you have any words of hope for those who "despair of everything" and see life "as a great wrong"?

SV: Work and helping other people are the best cures for despair.

61) "Mothers do more harm than chemical companies... We need about a billion people to die before childbearing age, of cancer or whatever, I don't care, if anybody is to survive." Hardwick says to Marianne on page 367. What do you think of those sentences?

SV: Again, it is the manufacturer of toxic chemicals who is speaking. Over-population is certainly the most convenient rationalization for poisoning people.

62) Did you cry or were you on the point of crying when Mark Niven died? (Excuse the confession, but I couldn't hold back the tears.)