



[Drawing] Scenes from a Woman's Life

The cover design process as a visual reading guide
to *Dolores* by Soledad Acosta de Samper

By Mariana Sanín A.
for Cita Press

Hi! I'm Mariana, an illustrator and designer based in Colombia. I'm going to walk you through my design process for the cover of *Dolores* by Soledad Acosta de Samper.

Dolores, which was Acosta de Samper's first full-length work of fiction, was initially published in 1867. The story of a young woman whose life is upended by a devastating family secret, it is considered a canonical work of modern Colombian literature from one of the country's most significant authors. Despite its importance, the book is hard to find in translation and is not widely visible outside of Colombia.

Open access publishing project Cita Press put out a bilingual edition in 2026 featuring a new English translation by Sara Abadía Alvarado. Cita's goal was to introduce new readers to *Dolores*, and Acosta de Samper, and to make the book more accessible to everyone, everywhere. As with all Cita books, the cover plays a central role in this project.



How can we use design and illustration to draw readers into the world of an older feminist text?



What do readers need to see to convince them to spend time with an author they may not already know?



How can visual language foster deeper understanding of literature?

Here is how I came to tackle these questions...

Step 1: Turn to the text

To start, I read the book, highlighting passages that evoked imagery that felt especially vivid or representative of the story's major ideas. Here are some examples:

"...I set out early for the hacienda, called The Spring, which was situated on an extensive plain at the foot of lofty mountains covered with wood, in which cattle and a large cocoa plantation ranged."

"The stream was bordered on either side and arched by thick foliage of lofty trees, through which the sun never penetrated, preventing the growth of vegetation beneath, where detached rocks, and decayed trunks of old trees green with moss, partially covered the soil, carpeted by a soft, golden sand. The sun had begun to set, and the lengthened shadows produced a delicious freshness in that spot; flocks of colorful native birds, talkative parrots and paroquets, had collected on the tops of the trees, gilded by the last retiring rays."

"...the most beautiful flower of the district: my cousin Dolores."

"I arose immediately, and passing into the outer corridor, where my birds had been kept, saw for the last time the garden, the trees, the arbor..."

"The favourite seat of my cousin was in a wide corridor in the rear of the house, overlooking an orchard and garden, with some tall mangoes, oranges, and lemons of the choicest kinds, rose apples and pomegranates; the trunks and limbs of the largest trees entwined with star jessamine and convolvulus of several varieties, with musk-rose and geraniums."

"...the horse of Dolores slipped on some rocks and became frightened, and had she not been sustained by the arm of Antonio, who helped her back in her saddle, she would have fallen into the water."

"The birds were silent and nothing was heard but the trickling water of the pond, winding its way by gentle leaps through beds of flowers. From afar I could see Dolores, simply dressed in white, with no other adornment than her beautiful dark hair."

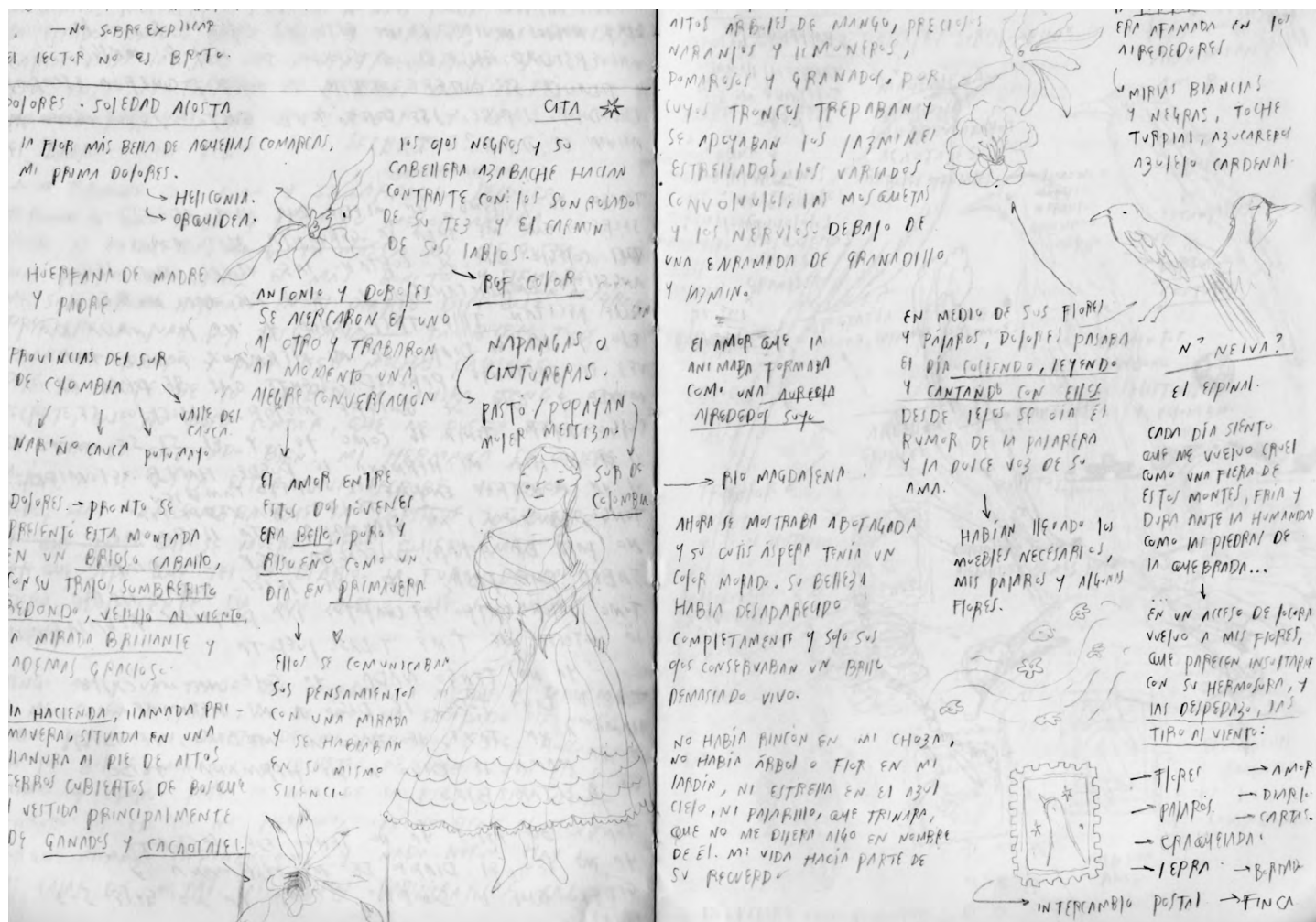
"The moon illuminated the landscape. A warm, delicious breeze fanned the trees, wafting the perfume of innumerable flowers. The smaller birds, disturbed by the moonlight, we heard in gentle murmurs, while the philosophic owl, always taciturn and upset, set forth his hoarse and ominous complaint."

"Under a canopy of pomegranate and jessamine stood a water pond, whose constant murmur harmonized with the voices of numerous small birds. The aviary of Dolores was well known in the vicinity. It occupied one end of the corridor. In it were collected birds from every quarter and climate who had taught themselves how to live together peacefully. There sang the harmonious blackbirds, the cheerful oriole and the artistic troupial, the noisy sugarbirds, and the bluebird and the cardinal. In the midst of flowers, sewing, reading, and singing with her birds, Dolores passed the day."

"Everything around me spoke of him; there is not a corner in my cottage where he did not live in spirit; there is not a tree, a plant, a flower, a radiant star, a lovely weed, that is not in it something of Antonio for me..."

"[The house] was composed of a small sitting-room and an alcove, separated from the kitchen and pantry by a moderate-sized patio, filled with flowers, surrounded by a corridor supported on slender pillars filled with vines, between which were cages that contained her numerous birds."

As the pages of my notebook filled with quotes and related sketches, visual themes began to emerge.



Step 2: Identify key visual elements

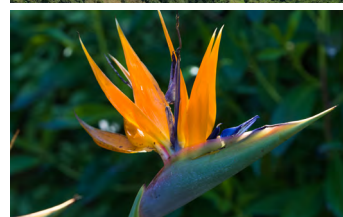
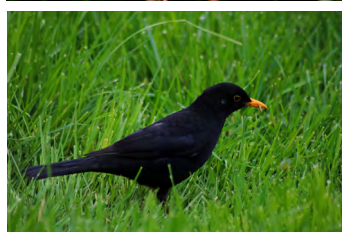
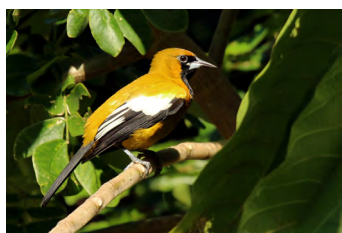
Through my reading and sketching, I noted repeated ideas and images:

Birds blackbirds, oriole, troupial, sugarbirds, bluebird, cardinal

Flowers jessamine, convolvulus, musk-rose, geraniums

Landscape Río Magdalena, lemons, oranges, pomegranates, horses, rose apples, cacao

Themes love, solitude, isolation



Step 3: Graphic exploration

For the graphic exploration I also considered other bird and flower species native to the region depicted in the book, such as heliconias, orchids, and anthuriums. I also researched visual language consistent with the period in which the novel is set. For this I drew from the graphic archive of Colombian design history. Most of the images shown below date from between 1890 and 1930, sourced from the exhibition catalogue *Tipo, lito, calavera: historias del diseño gráfico en Colombia en el siglo XX*.

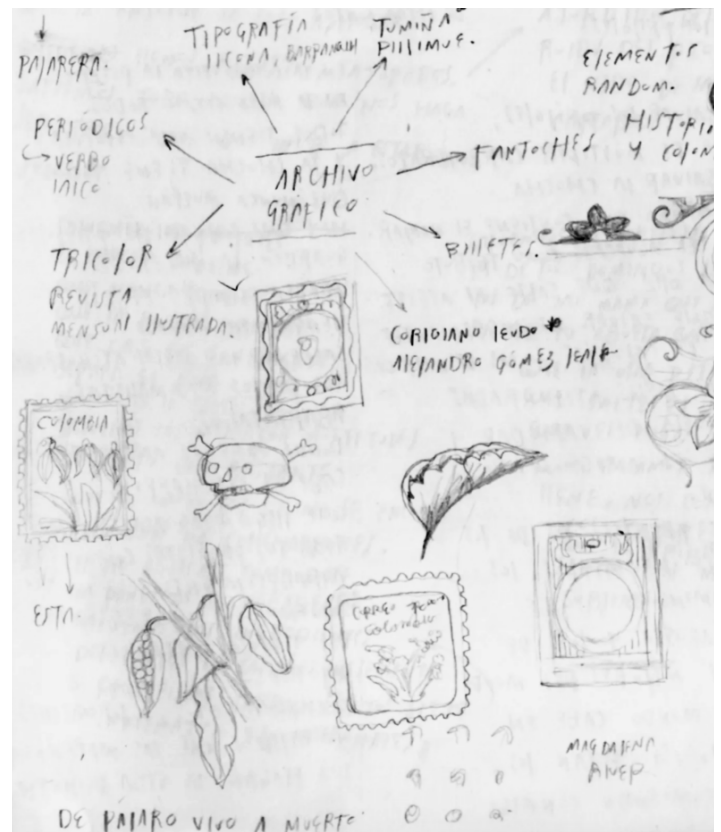


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Step 4: Choose a direction for the illustration

The concept for the cover grew from my research, informed by my close reading of the text.

Since letters are central to the novel, I wanted to highlight Dolores's correspondence through stamps and envelopes. I also wanted to weave in recurring images from the story (birds, flowers, cacao, cattle), in a style consistent with imagery from the graphic archive.



A pencil sketch of a flock of birds in flight, spread across two pages of a notebook. The birds are shown in various stages of wing movement, with detailed feather patterns. The sketch is done in a simple, expressive style.



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Cover



Bibliography

Acosta de Samper, Soledad. *Dolores: Scenes from a Woman's Life*. Translated by Sara Abadía Alvarado. Cita Press, 2026. <https://citapress.org/dolores-scenes-from-a-womans-life/>

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Image Sources

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About the artist

MARIANA SANÍN A. is an illustrator and designer from Colombia. She also likes writing poems, short stories and haikus for children (and grownups).