

INTERVIEW: Rosa Toledo (with Erika Rasile)

When did you start writing and what inspired you?

I started writing as young as 12 years old. I started writing journal entries. At that time I read the Diary of Anne Frank and of course I love it. It had great impact on me. Before that I was already writing a journal, but after reading hers I started writing so much more into it. I guess I started in an attempt to copy. You see, I am the youngest of four girls and I was always coping my sisters. They will have a fit, but if one started painting, I wanted to paint too, if the other danced, I started dancing too. I learned so much by imitating. During middle school, in Mexico, me and a couple of friends wrote a collective novel. It was basically the adventures and love hardships of three friends. After my friends' interest winded I continue with the story myself. I have no idea what happened to it.

After those first attempts at prose, I started reading poetry. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, Rosario Castellanos, Jaime Sabines.

What is your family background and how does that influence your life and your writing?

I grew up in a middle class family in Mexico City, but my extended family was very diverse. My parents both came from very disadvantaged rural families that moved to the city at the beginning of the twentieth century. My dad strived to get an education and made a fortune through Real Estate. He has a very interesting trajectory and he insisted on us getting an education, reading, traveling. On the other side, we would spend the weekends at grandma's or visiting my cousins on my mom's side, and they were socioeconomically different. I was constantly coming in and out of my circle. I attended private schools, but was part of a bigger family that was not advantaged at all. On the other side, our family was not as affluent as other families in my "school circle". My friends at school would not get permission to come to my home because it was in a far away middle class neighborhood and not in one of those "nice" neighborhoods. I felt very lucky to be where I was, and to be experiencing what I was experiencing, and was never pretending to be more than I was. I saw other classmates trying to pretend to have or to be who they were not. These constant contact with very diverse groups of people, what in Mexico City goes from "la gente bien" to "los nacos" (not narcos), made me part of both circles. However, some other times people would try to exclude me from those same circles and it made me realize how absurd all that is. In Mexico there are racial issues, and nobody wants to address them. I try to talk about that in my stories, although it is not the main focus of my writing, it will always come out, because it is part of who I am.

Briefly describe your childhood. Did you grow up in the US or en su patria?

I guess the previous question overlaps with this one, but let me expand a little bit, and talk to you about the transition. I studied the "Escuela Normal" in Mexico. It was the program to get your Elementary Teaching Degree. This program used to be like a technical school that was from 9th grade to 13th grade. You will come out with your teaching license. So instead of attending a regular High School or Preparatoria, I went to la Escuela Normal and had my teaching degree by

18. I worked for one and a half years, and was having fun, like the young girl that I was. But those years were full of turmoil too. I realize I wasn't cut to teach elementary school and wanted to become a journalist. There were many things going wrong in my family, there were problems of alcohol, drugs, some domestic violence. My boyfriend asked me to come to the US with him, so I got married the summer before I turned 20, and in December I came to live to the US. We went directly to Austin, TX. He was getting his PhD at the University of Texas at Austin. I started my struggle with the English language, which I studied since kindergarten, but one thing is to study the language, and another very different is to function everyday on that language. So, as I struggled to get accepted into the University and assimilated into a new culture, I got further and further away from my writing. The journalism program was so big that they weed people out, and as these were my first years writing in English, I ended my degree in advertising. I spent the next eight years working in advertising, and raising children. I only wrote my journal and some poems that I hid away.

Did you receive any formal education or training for your writing?

I arrived in Tennessee in the year 2000. I started my Masters in Spanish, which concentrated a lot in literature. The previous two years I had spent reading a lot and I had decided to get back on track. After getting my degree I took several workshops at the University of Tennessee on fiction writing, but it was in English. At the beginning I was writing in Spanish and translating to English, but it didn't work out as I was not satisfied with the end product. I started writing in English, but I was still having some structural problems. I think than more than not knowing the grammar, I was still writing with the logic of the Spanish language, and the stories were not working out. Then I started writing in Spanish again, and decided to write in Spanish only. I finished the MFA in Creative Writing in Spanish from New York University last May. It was a great experience. I believe that more than teaching you how to write, a writing program feeds your imagination and helps you become part of a guild. The constant exchange of ideas among other writers is the most valuable element of such a program. Writing is only perfected by reading other writers, sharing your texts and getting positive an—no so positive feedback on what you are doing.

Is Spanish your native tongue? If yes, what was it like to try and learn English? If no, did this cause a disconnect from your heritage?

Because I was already 20 years old when I arrived to the US I don't feel that I lost my cultural heritage, but I think it has been influenced by my experiences in American. We are what we live, and there are certain cultural cues that will always be with you. However, as I told you before, there was a huge halt on my writing because of a language blockage.

How do you feel being a Latino American writer has both helped and hindered you?

I am very proud to be part of the Latino community in the US. So far, I think that life experiences and my own reservations have stopped me on my way to become as successful as I can, but I don't think it has been related to my Latino heritage at all.

What are some of your favorite topics to write about?

Love, relationships, solitude and alienation, Mexico, marginalization.

What will you advise young writers to do?

First of all, I would like to change the question a little bit. I would like to direct my answer to writers that are just starting out, regardless of age, because I believe that people, at any age of their lives may start writing. My advice is “just do it.” Sit down and start writing, either on a notebook or in your computer, but if you don’t start, you will only be dreaming about it. You can write about anything, but start as soon as possible. Don’t postpone it. Also, have some discipline. Write every day, for a specific amount of time. Half hour, one hour, two hours, you set the mark. Do it consistently. Lastly, find a community to be part of. There are always writer’s guilds in every community. If there is not one around where you are, start one. Find someone (not your sister or your father) that can read your texts. Be part of other artistic communities. Being in contact with other artists will feed your creative mind.

What were your wishes, fears and challenges when you started?

I wanted to be an intelligent writer, I didn’t want to be racist or to perpetuate stereotypes on my writing. This concerned me so much that was stopping me from writing. To write intelligently you have to read, read the news, read other authors, be informed, read nonfiction too. You have to know about other subjects, you have to know your history, your culture. This is an everyday challenge because we live in such a fast paced and ever changing world. We need to be constantly changing too, even if you are writing something very local, very specific to one community, you cannot overlook the details.

How do you describe your creative process at the beginning? Has it changed, and if so, How has it changed?

This is a very interesting question. At the beginning my creative process was very intuitive. I would write whenever I had time—and for years I had very little to none. I would write in the middle of the night, or very early in the waking hours. I will write as the inspiration came, as a stream of consciousness. Then I will tuck the poem or story inside the journal, and put it away. I would very rarely reread, revise or edit. I felt that those words were born and existed independently of me. I was just putting them out there.

As I tried to take my writing seriously I started trying to gather poems together to look for themes, and I formed projects. I worked on “Tianguis” a collection with a thematic connection. So I had to gather material to complete the project. Interview people, read everywhere, in history and anthropology books, watch movies, all connected to the same theme. I was looking for quotes connected to markets, everywhere. It is important to keep writing any ideas that come up during this research period; it is an incubation period that is primordial to the creative process. Then you can sit down and finish the project. During this period you have to systematically write, revise and order the project until you feel that it is completed. Then you can share it with other people and listen to their advice before you close it.

Why did you chose to write under RE, and not your full name?

There are two very different reasons. First I feel that, even now, in the twenty first century people are still very sexist. People read a text differently depending if the writer is a man or a woman. In this sense it is an experiment. I guess that in some poems and other texts, it is very obvious that I am a woman. However, on those that it is not obvious, I want the reader to leave that part as an incognita. I don't think I will ever be so popular that people know right off who I am, so I want people to guess, and if they cannot tell, then my writing is not biased in that sense.

The second reason has to do with my personal identity, I think that a name sticks to a person's identity and because in many ways I am changing all the time, my name has changed too. Just recently I became a US citizen and I took advantage of the opportunity and legally changed my name.