

Interview: Mark Smith-Soto (with Witz Romero Carrizales)

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Where are you from?

I was born in Washington DC in 1948 and raised in Costa Rica. I was almost eleven in 1957 when I came to the US, my father's country.

Where does your family (parents) come from? Why did they migrate to the US?

My North American father married my Costa Rican mother in 1945. My father loved Costa Rica but wanted his children to be proficient in English and have a US education. He brought us to Washington DC in 1957.

Where did you go to school?

Most of my education took place first in San José, Costa Rica and then in the Washington DC area. I graduated as an English major from the University of Maryland and then got my PhD at UC Berkeley.

What was the hardest thing you experienced while in school?

Getting myself accepted by the culture, which was foreign to me and not at all welcoming. I had a very strong Spanish accent for many years, which did not help.

Have you moved a lot? What places have you lived throughout your life?

I've lived in Central America, Washington DC, Maryland, California and North Carolina. I've moved around so much that now I avoid it all costs.

Was it hard growing up learning and speaking different languages?

I had the privilege of being brought up bilingual, so that part was effortless enough. But having two different languages and literatures to master, to become truly proficient in, has taken quite a bit of work.

What language do you speak the most?

Depends. English typically in carrying out everyday concerns, Spanish with my Costa Rican family and some friends who are more comfortable speaking that language. My wife loves Spanish and so we use it a lot.

Do you think it's important to speak Spanish? Why or why not?

Sure. I dedicated forty years of my life to teaching it. Nowadays, fluency in Spanish offers many practical advantages, not least of which is in finding a good job. When it comes to impractical advantages, well, much of the world's greatest poetry speaks in Spanish.

Has your culture/ heritage ever been a problem or a benefit for you?

Both. It has often separated me from my peers, particularly in my early school days, but otherwise has greatly enriched my life.

What is your specific major that you graduated with?

I majored in English with a minor in Spanish. In graduate school, I chose comparative literature as my field.

Do you have a family? Wife? Children? What are their names?

Yes, I have a big family composed of a wife, three siblings, sundry dear nieces and nephews and one little dog.

Why did you decide to become an author?

My mother and various members of her family loved to recite poetry so I heard a lot of it growing up. They respected writers very much, and so naturally I wanted to become one when I grew up.

How long have you been writing?

I wrote my first poems when I was twelve, some 55 years ago.

Who inspired you to write your first piece?

My mother had to leave us for a while to return to Costa Rica when her father was dying. In the letters I wrote her, I included the first poems I ever composed.

Why writing? What about writing got your attention?

Raised bilingually, language always held a fascination for me. Even as a child, I enjoyed putting words on a page.

Was there an inspiration for your writing or you becoming an author?

Even when I didn't fully understand it, poetry struck me as beautiful. I aspired to make something beautiful myself.

What do you prefer to write about? Any certain genre?

Poetry is my preferred genre. I don't have any single theme I prefer over others.

Do you have a writing process, if so what is it?

The Muse whispers something I can't quite hear. I write it down as best I can and rewrite it and polish it until it begins to shine. At least a little bit.

How many books, or published works do you have? Is there a specific one you're most proud of? If so, why?

I've published four chapbooks, two full-length collections, one memoir in verse and a book of translations. I'm proudest, however, of my latest book *Time Pieces*, now available for purchase

from Main Street Rag Publishing Co. of Charlotte. I've worked on that collection for almost ten years now and I feel I finally have it just about right.

What type of messages do your works send?

I'm not sure about that. I certainly don't intend to use my poetry to send any specific message. E-mail is better for that.

What is the hardest thing about publishing something?

Writing it well in the first place.

Has your culture ever gotten in the way of being an author?

No, if anything, it has been a major source of inspiration.

How is it different being a Hispanic author from any other author?

Only in that we often draw from raw material specific to that particular cultural reality.

What culture do you identify yourself mostly with?

I am a combination of various cultures, most importantly the Hispanic/Catholic and the US/Jewish. I therefore very much identify as an American.

What is your favorite genre to write?

Poetry. I do love to write short plays as well, though I have done less of that of late.

What was your biggest fear of becoming an author?

I can't say I have had any fear associated with that. It has been an adventure that has given meaning to my days.

What would you tell all those people that look up to you? Any advice for students now?

Read the great writers, delight in their work, let it filter down into the very fabric of your life.

Would there be anything you would change in your career? Why or why not?

Not really. By the time you reach my age, you realize that the road not taken might be the greatest piece of luck in your life.

Do you have any hobbies? If so, what are they? Is there a specific one you enjoy the most?

Chess is my favorite hobby. Doing crosswords and playing tennis as well.

What do you do now?

I do what I can!

Where do you see yourself five years from now?

When not just hanging around with the dear people in my life, I would like to be reading and writing poetry, playing chess, watching the goings on at the birdfeeder out my window.

Any fun facts about yourself? (anything random you would like to say about yourself?)

One of the proudest moments of my life was when as a teenager I defeated US chess champion Bobby Fisher in a simultaneous exhibition he gave in Washington DC.

Why UNCG? What is your favorite part about working and being there? Least favorite?

Why not UNCG? The university is famous for supporting creative writing, something I have benefitted from even though I was never formally connected to the MFA program. The city of Greensboro has a thriving cultural life, excellent theatre options, an active chess club and the Tate Street Coffeehouse, where the Muse likes to hang out. What more could a poet ask for?