

INTERVIEW: Guillermo Reyes (with Ana Bolson)

September 2016

Where were you born? When?

Born in 1962, in the small town of Mulchen, Chile, in the southern part of the country.

Where did you grow up?

Santiago, Chile until my mother and I moved to Bethesda, Maryland, later to Arlington, Virginia, and moved yet again to Los Angeles, CA where I went to high school in the late 1970s.

What was your childhood like?

I wrote an entire book in order to answer this question: *Madre and I: A Memoir of Our Immigrant Lives* (published by University of Wisconsin Press, 2010). The book narrates an entire family history from our early years in Chile to living in Maryland, Virginia, then in California. Each of those places left an indelible mark in me. Let's just say I still read both the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. I feel like I need to keep in touch with the nation's capital and then the entertainment capital in order to feel like I'm part of the nation as a whole. I read the *New York Times*, too, for that matter, for reasons of wanting to be in touch, though I've never lived in New York. I have done theater there, however, and that's something I also need to keep up with. But to answer your question, I think the brief history above should tell you that my mother and I lived from place to place (not in poverty, though we weren't rich) but in an exploratory mood. My mother saw herself as a traveler and an adventurer, and that spirit still lives within me.

Tell me about your family.

Again, there's an entire history as I mention in the previous answer. What matters most, I suppose, is that I was my mother's only child, but I was my father's sixth child, and only one out of wedlock. My father had an entire other family with his wife and kids—I should say, his actual legal family. I didn't get a chance to meet that family until recently. My book deals with all that, but it deals mostly with my mother's side of the family. I know little about my father's family and only recently have I begun to learn more.

What is your heritage? Does it influence your writing? How?

Heritage is mixed, mostly Spanish, I assume (again, I don't know everything about my father's family) and some Indian, most likely the Mapuche Indians of Southern Chile. A lot of Chileans

are of mixed (mestizo) descent. But culturally speaking, I am not in touch with the Mapuche Indians other than what I've read about them. Chileans in general are a Westernized people. I don't know if that's good or bad, but I can't claim to follow native rituals or anything of that kind, and most Chileans don't either. We consider ourselves a "European people," for whatever reason, and I can't begin to unpack all the issues of colonialism. In the U.S., they clash with issues of white privilege, and the whole thing leaves me exhausted. In Chile, I'm a white person. In the U.S., I'm an "underrepresented non-white minority." It's difficult to discuss all these issues of heritage because the politics are just about impossible. Acknowledging too much whiteness sounds like you're rejecting your brownness, but acknowledging that you're partly brown also makes it sound like you're rejecting the European side or are engaging in cultural appropriation, and being "white" in the U.S. means something else altogether. I call myself Latino, but I put some asterisk marks to the term.

What was your education like?

Part in Santiago, part in Bethesda, Arlington, Los Angeles, and then in San Diego where I got my master's degree in Playwriting from UC-San Diego. I also spent a year in Padua, Italy learning Italian through the Education Abroad Program of UCLA.

Do you speak Spanish? Why or Why not?

Yes, Spanish is my native language, English my second language, and Italian and French as third and fourth, though French is a bit more marginal. I read it better than I speak it. Italian, however, became a third language since I lived in the country and have visited since.

If you speak both Spanish and English, do you find it easier to express certain ideas in one language more than the other?

I express myself better in English. I did most of my education in English, and got my master's in playwriting in English. However, I have done considerable Spanish-language theater so I haven't forgotten Spanish by any means.

Are you comfortable writing in both languages?

I'm more comfortable in English, but can handle Spanish, not as formally as I'd like, but can write it well enough. I'm not an elegant stylist in Spanish. I prefer to write in English at this point.

What inspired you to write?

I think I started to write as a genetic urgency. I never lived with my father or dealt with him, but I

found out from my half-brothers and sisters that my father wrote short stories and plays, and also directed theater with his students. It's pretty much what I do. I inherited that gene apparently. None of my half-brothers or sisters are writers or involved in the theater, and they're the ones who lived with him. So apparently this is an urgent psychological need that you can genetically inherit.

Who is your audience? How do you think your writing impacts your audience?

I've given up trying to figure out who my audience is. I suppose people interested in the lives of Latinos in the U.S. might be an audience, which includes other Latinos, but I don't really worry about it. I just try to be true to my experience or my knowledge.

How would you describe your style of writing?

Confused, or perhaps "multi-layered," that's a nicer word. I write primarily dramatic writing---plays, though I'm also trying screenplays. I wrote a memoir (non-fiction), and I also write fiction. I alternate between highly comedic writing in some of my plays to serious socio-political drama, to memoir, to short stories that could be considered "realism," not always "magic realism," though I suppose I've tried that, too, and yes, several unpublished (unpublishable?) novels. Every form brings out a different side to me. I seem to enjoy alternating between forms and stylistic moods.

What is your favorite novel or short story?

I suppose a favorite short story (among many) might be Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People." The dark humor in it, the strange young woman with a wooden leg who falls in love with a phony Bible salesman who steals her leg stirs up some strange feelings of pity and laughter at the same time. O'Connor seems to get it. She got all of it.

Novels? I had to narrow it down to Dostoyevsky's "The Idiot." Again, there's a central character who's dismissed as a fool who ends up being the noblest and kindest. Dostoyevsky, like O'Connor, uses humor to explore darkness---maybe there's a trend there in terms of how I see the world and how I write.

What's your favorite topic to write about?

I gravitate towards people who are slightly delusional, and yet loveable, involved with the worst people in the universe, sometimes murderous tyrants. I think my Chilean background speaks to that firmly, particularly the shadow of General Pinochet. When Trump was elected, I'm sorry to say, I felt I was suffering through flashbacks, the same type of sounds in those men's voices, the bragging and cruel snide remarks, ugh. The Chilean dictatorship, though I didn't live under it like most of my relatives, still left a mark in me, psychologically speaking. It emerges in my writing

sooner or later even when I'm trying to avoid it.

Who were your influences on your writing? How are you similar or different?

Well.... there's a combination of forces that have come together I think to shake me up: It's the people I just mentioned, Dostoyevsky, Flannery O'Connor, but also Joseph Conrad, Edgar Allen Poe, Isabel Allende, Pablo Neruda, playwrights like Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Edward Albee, Luigi Pirandello, Luis Valdez, and so many others. I must add, though, that because I'm also a cinematic person, I'd have to add that some screenwriter/directors like Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman who have been highly influential as well, with Woody Allen in the mix as well, a filmmaker who credits Fellini and Bergman as well as influences.

Is there a deeper meaning to your work?

Conrad says it in his title: "Heart of Darkness." But on the other hand, for me it comes out as humor, so that it might need to be altered, "Heart of Darkness as it provokes laughter." Why does it do that? I don't know.

What advice do you have for new writers? Do's? Don'ts?

Reading everything that you have time to read, avoid Netflix (I can't follow my own advice on that one), but really what I mean is that even if the temptations of streaming, film or television come your way, you've got to get yourself back to the printed word sooner or later. It's not an option. Just like exercise isn't an option. You've got to find the time.

What advice do you have for your younger self?

Eat less, read more, go running and do some weightlifting.

How do you define success?

Success is a worldly illusion. A writer has to write first, worry about "success" later, if not at all. (Maybe that's one of the don'ts: don't think of writing as a means to success. Think of it as a necessity.)

Is writing your principal occupation?

I'm a professor of dramatic writing to be exact. I write, I also teach writing.

What do you do besides writing?

I direct plays, and that becomes my primary secondary activity. I don't always have time to direct every year, but I do try to get back to that when I can. In my spare time, I eat too much but then go running and try to run at least several races, including half marathons, per year. My weight fluctuates in seasons. In Arizona, I avoid the outdoors in summer because I'd die of heat stroke,

but in winter, I thrive. I run my races and suddenly feel in shape again. Something else I do is go to the movies and keep up with the Oscar race. I'm now teaching a class at ASU called The Oscars in addition to my writing classes. I figured I might as well get paid for the enjoyable things I do.