

INTERVIEW: Isaac Chavarria (with Avery Cypress)

Where were you born? When?

I was born in McAllen, TX on April 27, 1979. But that's just the closest hospital was. I'm guessing in the cluster of cities I'm from.

Where did you grow up?

All except two years of my life have been spent in Alton, TX which is currently a small town of about 12K. It's grown.

What was your childhood like?

My childhood was a mix of poverty (not the too poor to eat kind, more like the no vacations, living off "food stamps," no extra toys kind). Kid wise, I'm #4 of 6 so it was always a house with noise. I preferred being the quiet one, spending my time in my room or exploring the neighborhood canals. I liked my family, to some extent even my father who was occasionally physically and verbally abusive to my mother.

Tell me about your family.

Mom was a housemaid and Dad worked in carpentry. I have an older brother, two older sisters, and a younger sister and brother [in that order]. I think my family lived their life as any other would. Just going day by day. My brother "Jr." grew up around the time of breakdancing, so he was an early "Chicano" influence on me. My sister Yvonne is extremely intelligent and went on to graduate from UT-Austin in Aerospace Engineering. My sister Veronica got married young and had three kids quick. Somewhat similar to my younger sister Elizabeth. My younger brother Noe is in a relationship and has a child.

My mom, now divorced, rotates doing small tasks at most of our houses. There are four of us who live within .5 miles of her. So she comes to water my plants every so often, takes care of Lisa's kids as well, and so on. Only Jr. has moved away, living in Houston for the past 20+ years.

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

My mom is from Mexico, like my father. Every so often I ask the specific location, but I quickly forget. But she often just calls it the "ranchito." Just recently I heard her telling a story about how she identified as "indio-mexicana," like a mixture of indigenous person and Mexican. I need to ask her about that again.

My mom being Mexican, my brother identifying as "cholo" or "chicano" and the area I was raised in (98% of Mexican/Latino descent) definitely influences my writing. It's difficult to say that "we" are all the same since I live along the border and saying "we/Mexicans" are the same is much like saying "we/Americans" are all the same. States develop different ideals at times and the same can be said for the different states in Mexico. Add on the whole idea that I can't leave my area (the

Rio Grande Valley) whether North or South without passing a border patrol checkpoint where they ask if I'm a U.S Citizen (look up Falfurrias, TX checkpoint) and yes, it feels like I have to write about my heritage in some manner.

What was your education like?

I did the normal "advanced" courses which were available during High School. Not the most intelligent, but I studied. I went to the local university (UTPA now UTRGV) and majored in Biology rather than English because I wanted a challenge and also liked biology. Turns out I don't have the drive or memory for Biology, although I did get my degree. I tried taking one Masters class in Bio, but I think I had a panic attack right before class and never went back. Then after 7 years of two-part time jobs I decided to return for my MFA at UTPA. I didn't really want to study poetry. I was more interested in helping others publish. But it was the closest option so I went through with it which changed my life. I took my writing more seriously and met a lot of people (like friends). I was happy but then wanted to get more schooling so I returned for a few classes in order to receive my Certificate in Mexican American studies (UTPA).

Do you speak Spanish? Why or Why not?

I speak "valley" Spanish, meaning a mix of Tex-Mex and Spanglish. It's kinda necessary when you live along the border. I mean, you can live without it, but it makes ordering tacos and eavesdropping a lot easier. Of course, my mom only speaks Spanish so it helps. ☺ It's simply "normal." I'm more peculiar if someone only knows one language.

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

Yes, but I don't know how I could tell you which ideas are expressed easier in one language than the other. It's not like my scientific language is in English and my love language is in Spanish. It's just a matter of education or grasp of language. So, if I just can't remember the word in English then I'll just say it in Spanish (if I know it). There are certain ideas perhaps which I might only express in Spanish, but nothing mystical or secret I imagine.

Are you comfortable writing in both languages?

I'm more comfortable writing in English. I see native Spanish speakers writing in Spanish and they are far ahead of me. I think I probably have an elementary mastery of Spanish. But then again I'm not sure how many people have a "college" mastery of the English language.

I think the ideas I write in Spanish are fairly simple to understand.

What inspired you to write?

I did the whole teen angst thing as my parents were divorcing when I was 15 years old. It was a good way to express my feelings. I didn't share them with others. I also liked writing with journals. Sometimes I would write about social issues, but I don't think I was aware enough to call them

“social issues.” It was all about emotions, surroundings, reacting, problems, and expressing. As I grew older then I started asserting a viewpoint about where I live and my thoughts. But still it dealt with feelings and reactions.

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

My community is my audience. Meaning if they get something out of it, then I’m happy. I think it shows them how you can write about anything, even a small town which doesn’t exist to millions and millions of people. Sometimes I hope they understand that life is tough, silly, unfair, lucky, and unexpected. Or at least realized that their experiences and voice are valid.

How would you describe your style of writing?

Honest. Colloquial. Spanish. English. Minimalist. Observant. Confessional. I sort of don’t want to or can’t describe my style. I write most often how I am as a person. Sometimes I try to be humorous because reality is frustrating. Other times I need to bring up an important issue and use a serious tone. I let my purpose guide my style.

What do you do besides writing?

I teach, volunteer making chapbooks, off and on edit books, am currently editor for the South Texas College literary journal, sometimes have a personal life, take care of my two little girls (who are actually “puppies” that are 7 years old). I like to go to concerts and music festivals. I am unintentionally busy a lot. I think I’m making up for those years where I didn’t do much.

What is your favorite novel or short story?

My favorite novel is *The Stranger*, by Albert Camus. I think it describes life perfectly: all these events happen around a person and there’s not much more to be done at times besides seeing where it goes.

What's your favorite topic to write about?

I write about being pocho, which is a derogatory term meaning “Americanized” Mexican American. I’m trying to redefine the term in a more truthful aspect. Yes, I have lost some of my “Mexican” identity but at the same time I have gained a world perspective. Pocho usually refers to language but I also attempt to explain it in a historical, personal, and cultural form. It’s difficult to live in the U.S without becoming at least slightly American, and it’s even more difficult living in this technology age without being influenced by world cultures. And I’m fine with the concept of loss and gain. I also love writing about Alton (hometown) because I have lived my life here. I jokingly say I want to die here as well, just not anytime soon.

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

Gloria Anzaldúa, Americo Paredes, Edgar Allen Poe, William Blake, Punk music, Ranchera music, Jose Montalvo, Alma Villanueva, and more and more. I use portions of their ideas and style

to guide me. I like to keep my poems short, like punk songs are. Paredes and Anzaldúa are from the valley and speak much about it and the idea of pocho, so I continue that tradition. Blake and Poe could be dark and my poetry is not the happiest. All other influences are about style, and then trying to apply it to a modern or regional aspect.

Is there a deeper meaning to your work?

My work is easy to understand and straightforward. I'm not trying to add layers and layers of metaphors and interpretations. I try to be authentic and honest. I'm impressed by some poets use of imagery, but I don't focus on it so much. I'm a minimalist and I sometimes write in first person. Other times it sounds like "confessional" poetry although I don't see it that way. If there is a deeper meaning it's probably about social issues and relationships between different members/groups of society.

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

New writers: don't be the same person. Change every so often or at least attempt it. Learn from different people and sometimes or often make yourself uncomfortable. Be honest with your words. Respect others, don't use them. Read. Read. Read. Make friends. Live. With some of those friends you should workshop and share your ideas. And people keep telling me that keeping a writing schedule is good, and even though I don't do so, I would suggest it as well.

What advice do you have for your younger self?

I don't even know if I told myself anything if it would matter. lol. I think there are decisions (positive and negative) which simply have to be made. I'm not sure if any advice would make a difference or if I would want to be different. All I have gone through is in my poetry and I can't imagine writing differently. And it's not only me who has gone through these experiences so no reason to change my younger self. But I saw someone like me around that time I would probably just let them know that it's important to grow as a person. Keep moving forward and do what's best. Who knows what's "best" but if you don't, it's okay. You can apologize for it. Oh, read though. I definitely should have read more.

How do you define success?

I define it the way my mother advised me to achieve it: "no más con que estés feliz y pague los billes" aka "As long as you are happy and pay the bills." So, happiness is success. But if it was a sort of superficial dreamy type of success then I would like to be recognized for my writing. Even better would be to make some sort of influence on my particular subject of interest (pocho identity). Otherwise, I don't ask for much considering I am financially doing better than when my mom raised us.

Is writing your principal occupation?

I wish. I work as a lecturer at South Texas College. I also do volunteer work creating chapbooks for non-profit organizations, but I usually end up spending money rather than earning it in this endeavor.