

INTERVIEW: Chris Gonzales (with Iris Del’Villar)

Where are you from?

When you’ve lived in many places in the early part of your life, it’s difficult to claim a place. Broadly speaking, I’ll say that I’m from that place where Texas and New Mexico come together. I was born in Lubbock, TX, but my family also lived for a time in southeast New Mexico. But even when I lived in New Mexico, I always felt that I was still linked to Texas. We were less than twenty miles from Texas, and since we were in the Llano Estacado, it still looked like west Texas. I’m a native Texan, as they say, though I’ve lived for short times outside of the state.

When were you born?

Lubbock, Texas. Also the birthplace of Buddy Holly.

Where does your family live?

My immediate family is still in this New Mexico/Texas zone that I mentioned earlier. Part of my family still lives in New Mexico, and another part of my family lives just west of Lubbock. I have a sister who lives in Austin, and I am currently about an hour east of Dallas.

Where did you go to school? What was school like?

I began school in Lubbock and was there until the third grade. My mom moved to Lovington, New Mexico and I continued my education there until I graduated. Higher education has taken me to Sam Houston State University (for my Bachelor’s degree), to Texas A&M University-Commerce (in Commerce, TX), and The Ohio State University (in Columbus, OH).

In public school, particularly in New Mexico, I always felt like I was not invested in the community, both in school and in town. Part of this comes from my family; we’ve always kept to ourselves for better or worse. My family lived about seven miles from town, and so it was never easy to have friends over or to hang out with friends from school. These factors contributed to a sense that I was a visitor in my own school. This feeling didn’t come from racial or identity politics. For instance, there was a high proportion of Latinos/as in school. But for whatever reason, I never felt a sense of pride in my school. Looking back, I’m not sure if that is my fault, my family’s fault, or my school’s fault. One thing is certain: because I didn’t have a sense of belonging to the school, my education became uninteresting as I neared my high school graduation.

Tell me about your family?

I grew up without my father, but I had several father figures. My mom’s parents lived

with us, or she lived with them—it was never clear. My mom’s younger brothers (my biological uncles) were close enough in age to me that I saw them as older brothers—I still do. In fact, for all intents and purposes they are my brothers. Though I lacked the presence of my father (I’ve met him twice, right about the time I was fifteen), I had my grandfather (whom I call “Dad”) and my tíos. They shaped the man I am today, and I’m grateful for them. I think having father figures in lieu of a biological father is still terribly important in minority communities.

My family is composed of very bright people who never sought out higher education beyond community college. The driving ambition for them was always to get a well-paying job. But during the late 1980s and ‘90s, such jobs soon became difficult without college degrees. Therefore, my family—and especially the men—took jobs working construction or oil-industry related fields. Today, my brothers work in labor-intensive jobs. My sister works as a manager for Walmart. And I am an Assistant Professor of English at Texas A&M University-Commerce.

Your childhood?

As a kid I was always reminded that a good work ethic is invaluable. In fact, being a hard worker was kind of like the Holy Grail. If you could do more physical labor, you were somehow going to succeed. I suppose there is a large measure of truth to this, and I’m appreciative of the hard work I did growing up. Some cultures call this type of work “chores,” but it was hard work. When we lived in New Mexico, we lived on a large plot of land where we essentially had a farm. All sorts of animals that needed to be cared for. There were sheds and barns that needed building. Every day there was some project that needed doing. At the time I hated it, of course. I’d get home from school and I’d be helping build or fix something around the house. But there was also a lot of fun. My older brothers were very sports-oriented, and I took after them in this respect. We played basketball or football at home. Oh, sure, we participated in organized sports at school, but we played each other at home. It fed our competitive spirit.

What was your education like? What is your postsecondary education?

I did very well in school as a young boy. I was in the so-called gifted program in elementary, until the program was eliminated due to budget cuts. I was a bright kid, but I lacked the discipline to sit down every night and study the way I was supposed to. So, as I got older, I did only enough to make average grades. It wasn’t until my senior year that my studies became somewhat serious.

But as an undergraduate student, I again was more invested in other parts of my life than studies. I was a very good track and field athlete (I threw the shot put and discus at SHSU), and I often neglected my classes—doing only what I need to stay eligible. I’m embarrassed at that as I look back on it today. I worked as a high school English teacher for years until I decided that I was ready for graduate work. I completed my MA in English at TAMU-C, and most recently, my PhD from OSU.

Do you speak Spanish?

I do, but not as fluently as I would like. I'm a strange case. I can understand it perfectly, to the point that I can correct a grammatical mistake when I hear it. And I can read in Spanish with relative ease. But speaking Spanish is like writing with my non-dominant hand. I can do it, but it is somewhat shaky. The reason for this is that I was spoken to in English when I was growing up. It was the language primarily spoken in my home. My mom is the perfect example of being verbally bilingual. But she can't read Spanish, yet I can. In my mind, my Spanish has to be as easy as my English if I am ever to say, yes, I can speak Spanish. But I'm most likely being too hard on myself. I can speak Spanish well enough to carry on a conversation.

How many books/stories/poems have you written?

I wish I could say that I've written more. I certainly have the intent to write more. But because I've lately been involved in writing *about* literature rather than writing literature, I don't have as many pieces out there. But very soon I hope to have a book out. Probably within the next year or two.

What inspires you?

I am inspired by acts of selflessness, even little ones. I'm a sentimental guy who tears up during a commercial. I think it's beautiful when people do the right thing, especially when it is not the easy thing to do. I'm inspired by art, whether it's film, paintings, sculpture, drama, poetry, short stories, or novels. I'm moved by the power of narrative. I wonder how words on a page can compel me to imagine a world—one that can tug at me on an emotion level. All of that is a kind of magic. It shouldn't be able to happen, and I think, sadly, there are some people who can't experience this. They don't like to read; they have no imagination.

What made you become a writer?

The best part about writing is not in the creation of the story, it's in the impact it can have on another person. One of the coolest things I've experienced is to have someone read one of my stories while I'm sitting in the room with him or her. To know that when she laughs in the right place, and think, "I made that happen." Or to see how my story challenges the reader. Don't get me wrong, the act of creation and the craft of stringing words and phrases together to do something beautiful is well worth it. But I love how those acts of creation can impact people. It makes it all worth it.

Do you have children?

I do. I have two daughters: Olivia (8 yrs) and Emilia (5 yrs). They are just at the age where reading is an empowering act. I am amazed at what they teach me about stories

and the act of reading.

What themes do you like?

I'm not really a themes kind of guy. Nor am I a genre kind of reader. I like a great book, by which I mean a story that seems to have originated organically and doesn't smack of artificialness. Narratives that don't feel contrived, like they are engineered to do a specific thing. Having said that, I do like books that some people call "depressing." They remind me that this world is not the most hospitable of places, and that terrible things occur even in the most ordinary of places. I think it's good to remind ourselves of that. But in terms of writing, I think I gravitate towards the suggestion of violence and the promise of redemption. I mean, it can't be all bad, you know? There have to be small victories along the way.

What is your style like?

Right now I like the in-your-face kind of character narrator that is telling you about his or her life—and perhaps the life of someone else. I think character narrators are far more interesting than third-person narrators because you know they are fallible. You know they aren't getting the whole picture. They are flawed from the moment they use the personal pronoun. And yet, the character narrator has a hell of a lot of power in that voice. They have a bully pulpit, so to speak. They are the only one whose story is being heard. I like that sense of power that comes from a flawed character. I also like presenting what might be otherwise unlikable characters in a way that makes us almost want to excuse their nastiness. It is difficult to pull off, but I think that when it happens, it can be magic on the page.

What are your favorite books?

I like books that give me something unexpected but memorable. *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville is a book that continues to give me pleasure every time I pick it up. Some other of my favorite books include *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison; *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz; the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges; and *Dubliners* by James Joyce.

What are your hobbies?

I really enjoy cooking. Related to that, I am enthralled by cooking shows and some cooking competitions on tv. Watching sports consumes a huge part of my free time, and I am consistently swept up by the next "big game." I must also say that I am a news junkie, and I have a hard time turning off cable news shows. Running and physical fitness are a mandatory part of the day, as well.

Who is your favorite author?

My favorite author who is no longer alive is probably Borges, mostly for his sheer imagination. My favorite living author: a toss-up between Junot Díaz and Colson Whitehead...and probably Gary Shteyngart as well. You can see these authors have something in common, and for me it is their freedom of language. I admire that in them.

What did you study in college?

My Bachelor's degree is in Psychology. My master's and doctorate are in English, but specifically I am interested in Latino/a literature and narrative theory.