

## **INTERVIEW: Sandra Ramos O'Briant (with Courtney Stoner)**

### **When were you born?**

1949, but please don't hold that against me.

### **Where are you from?**

Santa Fe, NM. Delivered by nuns at my maternal grandparent's home. My father, 24, held me and wept. He kissed me even though I hadn't yet been washed. The rest of the Gallegos family attests to this. Mom was his second wife. He already had two children from a previous marriage while in high school. He joined the Marines for WWII before graduating. I think. My mother had a 9th grade education. She said she married my dad to save my aunt's marriage. Marrying an Anglo was a high priority for her.

### **Do you speak Spanish?**

No. I'm not fluent, even though I studied it for years. I have a good ear for New Mexican Spanish, and I can get by in Mexico. In Spain, I pick up enough to make the conversation a funny story later. I don't follow Guatemalan Spanish, nor El Salvadoran, unless they speak very slow. My grandmother only spoke Spanish, and I communicated with her. But like many New Mexicans, my mother experienced discrimination for speaking her native language. Her fondest wish was that I would be fluent in English.

### **What was your childhood like?**

I had two distinct childhoods, with slight overlap. When my parent's were married, I took dancing, piano, swimming, and even accordion lessons. We had a piano. I attended a private parochial school, and my dad bought a set of Encyclopedia Britannicas when I entered first grade. My mom told me I was beautiful and smart, and I believed her. More importantly, she didn't work outside of the home, and while my dad traveled for business, mom counted out 100 pennies from a giant Schlitz bottle-bank almost every day so we could go to a matinee. We saw all the glorious classic movies of the 40's and 50's there, many of which featured heroines like Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, Lana Turner, Ginger Rogers and Rosalind Russell. I was the only child until my brother was born when I was 7-years-old, which also coincided with my parent's divorce. My mother got all the furniture, me and my brother, and a lifetime of hard work and sexual harassment. She was 31. My dad got self-indulgence, selfishness, and self-interest. I still loved my father, and began to resent my mom. Nothing made sense.

### **Tell me a little bit about your family.**

After the divorce, Mom moved back to Santa Fe. We ate dinner at my grandparent's home most days. The Gallegos were strange. Both my grandmother and aunt were

paraplegics, so every supertime included two wheelchairs. My grandfather cared diligently for my grandmother; he sat her on her bedpan and emptied it, wiped her butt, wheeled her to the dining room table where he washed her face, and brushed and braided her hair. He made her every meal, and wheeled her back to her bedpan (chamber pot) when she needed it. So he seemed like a good guy, but he was an alcoholic and pedophile. My aunt was especially interesting. She could swing her legs up over her shoulders, and even crook them at the knee to provide a headrest. She did it in one fluid motion like she was a member of Cirque du Soleil. When she left them sticking straight out, I'd often crash into them and knock off her ballet slippers (I was only 7 or 8), which covered only three toes on each foot cause that's all the toes she had. Other than that, she had quite a bit of sexual allure from the waist up and attracted male admirers, especially from the VFW. It's all so weird, but even more so in the telling. Sounds sort of carnivalistic. And it was. I missed my mom. And what had passed for normalcy back in East Texas, which wasn't all that normal. In the bathroom back there, my dad had pasted up these pictures of Vargas girls (google them), so they were an early influence. Beautiful girls. He drank a lot and beat the dog. And my mom.

**Next, I would love to know about your education background.**

I started first grade at the age of 5. They let me into St. Rita's because I could already read. With the divorce and the move to Santa Fe, I attended a barrio school catty-corner to my grandparent's house. On the first day of 4th grade, I walked onto the gravel-strewn playground and approached a line of students waiting to go inside. They were a ragtag group. None of the girls wore petticoats (this was 1957-58), and their dresses hung limply down their dirty legs. Most didn't wear socks. One boy picked his nose. This turned out to be a kid named Tom Glass who had allergies. He wiped his snot on the wall of the school. My mom and I had carefully picked my outfit. Not only were my skirts plumped with a starched petticoat, but I had lace-trimmed socks with patent leather shoes and a purse to match. Mom had twisted my hair into Shirley Temple curls. I smiled big and said, "Hi, y'all." Remember, I had just moved to NM from East Texas. Silence. They laughed and picked up gravel to throw at me. After that, I had to stay close to the teacher on patrol during recess. To make matters worse, I was academically ahead of everyone in my grade.

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

Mom got a job as a cocktail waitress and worked 10-11 hour shifts at night. She was exhausted and not up to see me off to school. Within weeks, I looked like everyone other kid in my grade and lost my accent, but I still had that onerous O'Briant last name which made me a target. Wanna be chollas attacked me all through grade school and jr. high. One bright year was 7th grade when I got to go to St. Francis school. They gave my mom a break on tuition because our neighbor worked as a teacher there. One of my proudest days was when I was told I had to wear glasses. All the smart girls wore glasses. After 7th grade, my choices were either another barrio jr. high or a private parochial girl's academy. We couldn't afford it. 8th grade at Young Jr. high was the beginning of my absentee-daydreaming-nightmare school years: I rarely went to

school. My only saving grace was that I read, and read, and read everything the Public Library would allow me to check out. I missed so much school my mom thought I'd be a drop-out. She did nothing to forestall the inevitable. Her hands were full with making a living and my bratty younger brother. We could no longer communicate. I blamed her for our misfortunes and for being gone from my life and since my dad was absentee, I idolized him. Me and Mom fought. I moved out a lot. Mom always took me back. I had all the symptoms of depression, except suicide. There seemed no hope and no way out for me.

### **Where did you go to school? What was it like?**

Five good things happened in my school years: 1.) My mom put no restrictions on my outdoor activities and I was allowed the full glory of tomboyhood. The girls in my neighborhood all stayed inside and helped their moms. I played baseball w/the boys, rode my bike all over Santa Fe, climbed moving freight trains and jumped off, explored all the dark storm drains looking for treasure and/or dead bodies, climbed trees and built cardboard treehouses, created snow ramps on discarded car hoods to use w/our sleds. The last four of these were all my ideas and the boys followed my lead. 2.) Mom worked at a popular restaurant and jazz club owned by a renowned lesbian. Two of her patrons, another lesbian couple, gave me a subscription to National Geographic. I learned that there was life beyond the narrow confines of Santa Fe. 3.) A young male friend of my mom's was traveling to Spain to study flamenco. He gave me lps (vinyl records) of Gershwin and Ravel and Mozart. 4.) A girl's club opened up and even though Mom wouldn't let me take free piano lessons because she said the teacher was a lesbian, I've held close to my heart that woman's endorsement of a never realized talent. 5.) My senior year I confronted my Algebra II teacher after class for picking on me. I was frightened, but very angry. Didn't notice the girl sitting over in one corner. She was the class valedictorian and became my friend. No one had spoken to me about college, either at home or at the school. Gloria told me all I needed was a 2.0 to get into UNM. She took me w/her family to the financial aids office, and she became my first roommate there.

College was simultaneously tough and glorious. Hard because I had no discipline, didn't know how to write an essay, had a hard time following instructions, and my daydreaming, while it had kept me alive and away from big trouble in high school (boys, drugs, and driving fast), now threatened to drown me: I'd miss whole sections of lectures. The glory came from no one, almost, knowing who I was. O'Briant didn't matter. I was still weird and isolated and my social skills were severely lacking, but it was 1966 and everything was cool. Also, in those days you could be a liberal arts major and not worry about any future unemployability. I was curious and interested in everything, and fortunately all the reading I'd done while not attending school helped me.

I am so grateful for the tremendous opportunity I received. Worlds opened up for me, but I was still very frightened of people, and forced myself to speak up more in class. I went to graduate school because I wasn't sure what else to do w/myself, and I'd finally conquered academia. U of Texas and Arizona State u both accepted me, but ASU offered more money. In retrospect, I see that I needed more growing up time. I have a masters in

secondary education, but I've never used it. My life went in another direction.

### **What inspires you?**

Daydreaming. In my youth, daydreaming nurtured me, provided a safe haven. I'd sleep for twelve hours and even when awake escape to the safe place in my mind. Of course, I was a terrible student. Still, I managed to get into college, but my daydreaming threatened to sabotage me. I used behavior modification to break the cycle. I started by setting an arbitrary time limit on studying: for every 15 minutes of study, I'd allow myself an hour of daydreaming. I set the alarm. My roommates thought I was weird. I was. Gradually I increased the studying time while reducing the daydreaming. My GPA went up. I got into grad school. I rarely daydreamed.

In the business world, I did fairly well, but wasn't happy. Only now do I realize that what I wanted was a creative challenge. A bout of sciatica put me flat on my back. All I could do was read, listen to my mother's stories about the Sandovals, and daydream: a return to self. My writing career had begun.

Exercise also helps. While focusing on my body and trying not to hurt myself, my mind goes to new and unexpected places.

### **What themes do you like?**

Survival themes are one of my interests, especially if the protagonist is female: woman vs nature, woman vs the machine, woman vs woman, woman vs herself. I also like themes wherein the protagonist is challenged to be creative, flexible, to change coping strategies.

### **What are your favorite books?**

I've always read broadly: literary fiction, scifi, fantasy, chicklit, historical, dystopian, nonfiction, memoir. I've even read Westerns.

*Little Big Man, Interview with the Vampire, House of Spirits, Clan of the Cave Bear, Like Water for Chocolate, The Color Purple.* A growing list at Goodreads, where I'm also sponsoring a giveaway of The Sandoval Sisters. <http://www.goodreads.com/review/list/1998519>

### **Who is your favorite author?**

Those that most influenced my writing: Allende and Rice.

### **What made you become a writer?**

It was a challenge I made to myself. I grew up in Santa Fe, New Mexico, an area steeped in history, but I'm not aware of much fiction written about the New Mexican women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are references to the "first white woman" in Santa Fe, and most of the other period pieces (nonfiction written by men) barely mention women, or are

unflattering when they do. My goal was to tell a story about women who interested me, women who bravely dealt with whatever life dished out to them. The issues confronted by the Sandoval sisters are contemporary: racism, sexual intolerance, the power of superstition, dealing with mother-in-laws.

The story also has a fair bit of romantic eroticism which the centuries-old Sandoval diaries dealt with candidly. The Sandoval sisters were encouraged to read the diaries and learn their secrets. My research didn't yield much information on rebellious Latinas of yore. They obeyed their fathers, brothers, husbands, and priests, so I wrote the Sandoval sisters—not exactly as firebrands—but as women who make a change toward owning their power, each in their own way, and all while living on a rough frontier at the juncture of three cultures.

When I tell people I'm from Santa Fe, their eyes light up; they've either visited the Land of Enchantment, or it's on their bucket list. Growing up there, tourists were a mixed bag. The woman running through the plaza shouting that “real Indians” sat on blankets outside the historic Governor's Palace (now a museum) was an idiot in my opinion. I played tag in the plaza near the End of the Santa Fe trail marker, and listened to viejas sitting on the park benches. They complained about all the gringos taking over the tiendas, and how expensive everything was, and that la raza should do something about it. They also told stories of the devil and witches and unholy events in the night.

The plaza is still there, but the locals don't gather like they used to. They shop at Walmart now. In the privacy of their homes, some of them still complain about big-shot Anglos. Even though my natal family still lives there, it wasn't until I traveled to Santa Fe with friends that I allowed myself to feel the “magic.” But I couldn't answer my friend's modern questions regarding identity: “Are the people here Spanish or Mexican? What are you?”

Initially, my research was to gain a better understanding of my New Mexican ancestry (Sandoval and Gallegos), but also to find the root of Northern New Mexican identity. I wanted to know why they insisted on calling themselves Spanish, and why they seemed to resent Texans, in particular.

Merchants have always loved the Santa Fe Trail. The Mexican-American War was fought to gain more land, but it was also about controlling trade, and that meant controlling Santa Fe: it was the first foreign capital captured by the U.S. An unbelievable influx of men occurred, but nary a word has been written about how that affected the New Mexican women. Until now.

### **What is your style like?**

Eclectic, changing to suit the subject matter.

### **How many books/stories/poems have you written?**

1 novel and 22 short stories published. Go here for links. [http://www.sramosobriant.com/about\\_sandra.html](http://www.sramosobriant.com/about_sandra.html)