

A conversation with
María Amparo Escandón

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I first met María Amparo Escandón at the *Los Angeles Times* Book Festival in UCLA a few years ago. After charming the audience at a panel with her witty comments and sharp humor, she spent the afternoon happily signing books for a long line of readers. I picked up her books and became an instant fan. So, here are some bits of our interview:

Q. Tell me about your personal history.

A. Up until I immigrated to the US at twenty-three, I went with my parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents to spend the weekends and holidays at *Tecajete*, an old and beautiful *pulque* hacienda in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico, that belonged to my paternal grandfather. Sometimes, when everyone was there, there would be over forty relatives spending the weekend at the grand old house. For some, this might seem nightmarish, but in truth those were some of the best times of my childhood. I loved going horseback riding with everyone, having huge meals, and playing cards and games at night. It was like going to a big family reunion every weekend. I'd roam free in the fields, bring my pet goat to sleep with me in my bed, drink warm cow's milk straight from the udder, and of course, get in trouble. I still go there to this day.

Q. What about school?

A. My school life was a mess – I went to ten different schools! I only got expelled from two and the rest I left on my own in different circumstances, like, I had to do seventh grade over because I was sent to live on a pig farm in Faribault, Minnesota, and Mexico's school system did not credit my school year in the States. This happened when I was thirteen. My parents decided I had become too rambunctious, so they sent me away for a year as an “exchange student in oblivion,” as I told my friends before leaving. But as soon as I got there, I realized I was at the center of the world, learning English and feeling for the first time what it was like to be far from my parents. This farm had seven kids and one bathroom, and it was eighteen miles from town. I'm still thankful to this wonderful family, the Beckers, for welcoming me into their home and for teaching me English and house chores. This experience changed my life in many ways and prepared me for a life in the States.

Q. Why did you come to the States?

A. When I went back to Mexico after Minnesota, I had a boyfriend for six years, and we got married. But then I got divorced at twenty-two. My family's scrutiny and my friends' judgment began weighing on me. It wasn't easy being a young divorcée in Mexico City in the early eighties. The accumulation of traditions and conservative thinking made me turn north, where people move about in lightness and anonymity. When my new boyfriend said, "Let's go somewhere," I said, "Sure, where do we go?" He said, "LA," and I said, "Let's go." So, we eloped. He already had LA in mind because he had a friend there, which worked out great because I wanted to put as many miles between my past life and me as possible. I have been in Los Angeles since 1983, except for four years in New York from 2014 to 2018.

Q. What inspired you to be a writer?

A. Writing and telling stories is something you have a knack for, and I had it. When I was seven years old, I had gotten a big bruise on my shoulder. Rather than tell my mother the truth, I told her that the nanny had pinched me, and she fired the nanny immediately. When I saw the awful consequence of my "innocent" lie, I came back to my mom and confessed to her that the nanny had done nothing wrong. The bruise was really due to the immunization I had gotten in school the previous day. I wasn't trying to get the nanny fired. In fact, I liked her. I just needed a story to tell. My grandmother pulled me aside and said, "You know you have a lot of imagination, and you don't know what do with it. If you go in the wrong direction you can hurt a lot of people. I want to make sure that you know that the only difference between a lie and a story is the intention. If you want to trick people into believing you then you're telling a lie and it hurts other people, but if you want to entertain them, then it is a story and it is okay." So, she gave me a writing notebook, and as I wrote my stories, she would give me feedback. I spent my entire second grade writing my little stories in that notebook and sharing them with my friends. I also made my first film. I would get kicked out of class a lot for not paying attention, so the teacher would make me stand right outside, writing "I must pay attention in class" one hundred times. Of course by the third line, I'd get bored of writing the same and started adding to it something with a little more pizzazz, like, "I must pay attention in class because if not I will make Sister Salas mad at me and she'll tell my dad and I will be spanked," and so on. I must have felt that this resource had its limitations, so one day I scraped a two-inch square of paint off the class window (the nuns had painted the windows white so the students would not get distracted by looking out onto the schoolyard), tore a strip of paper off my notebook, drew a sequential story (I don't remember which) and knocked slightly to get my friends' attention. When they were looking in my direction, I slowly slid the paper strip on the hole I'd scraped

so they could see my sequential story “projected” on it. By the end of the year I knew nothing about school, flunked, and got expelled from Sacred Heart Elementary. That was the first time I got expelled. So, I went to a new school and did second grade over, which was somewhat of a blessing, because I was the oldest in the class and had a whole new batch of readers. I became quite popular.

Q. Who do you write for? Who is your audience?

A. I write mostly for myself. I think it’s the honest and truthful way to write. I try to stay true to my passions, my fears, and to the things I believe in. In this respect, I think my first book, *Esperanza’s Box of Saints*, was successful. It’s a very Mexican book because it deals so much with Mexican culture. Yet, it is a bestseller in Sweden, Germany, Holland, India, Spain, France, Italy, and other countries. It has twenty-one international editions in many languages. So, what makes it universal? I think it’s the honest treatment of the subject matter, that is, the loss of a child and the search for self, that attracts such a diverse audience. In the case of *González & Daughter Trucking Co.*, another intimate story, this time about a father and daughter living as truckers on the run, I also searched inside of me, in my memories, in my relationship with my own father, and out came this story. I believe that by writing honestly about my own issues, I reach many readers from all walks of life. I’m not unique. I’m sure that my feelings and fears and desires are the same as those of many other people, and I’ve proven it with my novels. The more intimate I get, the more of myself I put out on the paper, the more personal my stories are, the more people I connect with.

Q. What kinds of themes transpire in your writing?

A. Issues dealing with women usually, but my male characters are very much developed as well. What is interesting is that when I started to become more serious about my writing, I read all the Latin American writers—Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, Mario Benedetti, all men. While there was the occasional woman here and there—Rosario Castellanos, Elena Poniatowska—literature was basically male-dominated in those times. It’s not because there weren’t any good female writers, it’s just that the culture made it more difficult for women to flourish as writers.

So, I used to write from the point of view of a man. You read the short stories I used to write in Mexico, when I was in school, in college, and they are from the perspective of a man. It may seem odd, but I didn’t start writing as a woman until I came to the US. I read Toni Morrison, and I said, “I can write my own stuff and it is okay. I don’t have to write from the point of view of a man.” When I started to write from a female’s point of view, I began writing

about different issues that related to me, like immigration, father-daughter relationships, which I find tremendously complex. I still have a couple of pieces from the point of view of a man. Ultimately, I think it was really good practice because it helped me empathize with my male characters.

Q. Does writing in English, Spanish, or both influence your writing?

A. Absolutely. English is very much to the point, direct, precise, and economical. But with Spanish, I can go on and on just to say something as simple as “no.” Even the way of thinking about storytelling in different languages is different. I think if I would have written *Esperanza’s Box of Saints* first in Spanish and then translated into English it would have been quite a different book, and the same goes for *González & Daughter Trucking Co.* and *LA Weather*, my latest novel. The rhythm is different, the sentence construction, the choice of words, the length of the paragraphs, even dialogue. And of course, with my limited English vocabulary, my work ends up being much more direct and simpler than if I wrote in my native language, Spanish.

Q. Are you comfortable writing in both languages?

A. Yes. Well, writing *Esperanza’s Box of Saints* was difficult because I had little knowledge of the language. I could speak conversationally in English, but I really had to use a dictionary and thesaurus in order to write it correctly and called on my English-speaking friends for words. By the time I wrote *González & Daughter Trucking Co.* I was a little more fluent and noticed that I used the dictionaries less. There was a notable improvement, but I still had my daughter read the manuscript and make corrections. She was in tenth grade and returned a manuscript full of notes. She is a second-generation Mexican and speaks English flawlessly. In the case of *LA Weather*, my English had improved tremendously.

Q. Why did you choose to write *Esperanza* in English? Why not just write it in your native tongue?

A. I came to the States in ’83. I always thought I would go back to live in Mexico—I guess we expats all have that wish—but after a few years I decided I was not a tourist anymore; I was an immigrant. So, I decided to start writing in this country’s language, first very simple short stories, and eventually, my arrogance helped me believe I could write a whole novel. It was very difficult, but I loved every bit of it. And the bonus was that I improved my vocabulary! I also write in Spanish. In fact, I do my own translations and I have also written some of my nonfiction work in my own language. It’s almost as if the work called for the language in which it wants to be written.

Q. Which Mexican/Latin American writer(s) influence your work?

A. I think there is an invisible community bound by words where all writers influence one another. Everything you read affects you in a way and somehow it gets assimilated into your own life. I see that happening with everything I take in—movies, people I see on the streets. So, for the most part, I am influenced by life itself.

However, I think the one writer who changed my desire to be not just a writer, but to be a serious writer, was Gabriel García Márquez. I remember reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and thinking, “I want to do this.”

Q. What about North American writers or Chicano(a) writers?

A. I was so ignorant when I came to the U.S. I really thought I was coming to a place where nobody spoke Spanish. I didn't know that so many Latinxs lived here. Yes, Carlos Santana, Anthony Quinn, Lynda Carter, and Raquel Welch were Latinxs and lived here, but they had morphed into Americans, they had gone mainstream, they performed in English, so they didn't really count in my limited perspective at the time. My discovery of literature by Latinxs came much later in life for me. I think one of the first books I read was *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros. I was so fascinated by the whole culture. It was such an eye-opener. You could go from Spanish to English to Spanglish. It was freeing to be able to speak like that and write like that. I just loved being in a world where people could be culturally amphibious. My linguistics background has taught me that language is dynamic, alive, and constantly changing. Those purists who try to preserve the language as if it were a snapshot frozen in time are wasting their efforts. It must be frustrating for them when brands become verbs, like FedEx, or when English words morph into Spanglish, like *aseguranza*, *carpeta*, *troca*, *draigualero*, and so on. It's really fascinating for me to observe this phenomenon and experiment with what the evolution of language has to offer to a writer. And even though words fail me all the time, they're not to blame. They are my tools and I'm madly in love with them.

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WRITER.