

## ***A Conversation with María Amparo Escandón***

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. I was born in Mexico City, the oldest granddaughter in a large, old family of Spanish conquistadors and immigrants. My great-grandfather on my mother's side, Ramón Corral, was the vice president of Mexico during the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship for thirty years. He fled in 1910 when the Mexican Revolution began and went to Paris, where my grandmother was born. In 1912, they moved to Cuba, and then to Wilmington, Delaware, where they lived for several years (once, when visiting New York, I checked their entry into the US through Ellis Island.) In 1917, they came back to war-torn Mexico and started all over. It's somewhat exciting to know you're closely related to some of the players in the history of a country. In school, you actually study with curiosity the chapter in your textbook where they're featured and even get an "A". Having famous ancestors is really nothing to be proud of, let alone if they were politicians, dictators. Getting an "A" is, though, at least for me it was. Whatever their accomplishments were, you can't claim any of the merit just because the same blood runs in your veins, but it's still fun to open the pages of your history book and recognize their portrait. I remember enhancing my great-grandfather's moustache with a ballpoint pen. I never got scolded for this.

On my father's side, also a family sprinkled with famous people since back in the 1700's, we own an old and beautiful hacienda. Up until I immigrated to the US at 23, I went with my parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents to spend the weekends and holidays at *Tecajete*. Sometimes, when everyone was there, there would be over 40 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 to go 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. My best friend Margaret Tulley and I lived magical childhood moments there until she went to live in the UK in sixth grade. We'd roam free in the fields, bring our pet goat to sleep with us in our 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 10 different schools! I only got expelled from two and the rest I left on my own for different circumstances, like, I had to do seventh grade over because I was sent to live in a pig farm in Faribault, MN and the Mexico's school system did not honor that 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 really oblivion became Mexico. 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 seven years, and we got married. But then I got divorced at 22. After my divorce, I did not go back to my parents, as tradition holds, and I rented an apartment. I eventually started dating again, but my ex-husband would follow me around and not leave me alone. So 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 ex-husband and me as possible. I have been here since 1983.

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 not pinched me. 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 do not know what to 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 on that notebook and sharing them with my friends. By the end of the year I knew nothing about school and flunked and got expelled from the Sacred Heart School. 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 who hadn't read my

stuff. I became quite popular thanks to my stories. I also made my first film at the Sacred Heart. I would get kicked out of class a lot for not paying attention, so the teacher would make me stand right outside, writing one hundred times, "I must pay attention in class." 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 Miss Salas mad at me and she'll tell my dad and I will be spanked" and so on. I imagine 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.

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

A. I write mostly for myself, but I want to believe that I write for everybody. I do not want to alienate any readers, and I think the only way to do that is to be very honest and truthful with what I 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's been translated into 21 languages so far. 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, which 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, which were all men--Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, Mario Benedetti. 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 here and there 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. I call English the language of emails. It's 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.* The rhythm is different, the sentence construction, the choice of words, the length of the paragraphs, even dialogue. It's all very different. And of course, with my limited English vocabulary, my work ends up being much more direct and simple than if I wrote in my native language, Spanish.

Q. Are you comfortable writing in both?

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.

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 official 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 non-fiction 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 only where all writers influence other writers. 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 that 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. I want to write stories like this one." See? There's my arrogance kicking in again.

Q. What about North American writers or Chicana/o writers?

A. I was so ignorant when I came to the US I really thought I was coming to a place where nobody spoke Spanish. I didn't know that so many Latinos lived here. Yes, Carlos Santana, Anthony Quinn, Lynda Carter, and Raquel Welch were Latinos and lived here, but they had morphed into Americans, they had gone mainstream, they performed in English, so they didn't really count. So my discovery of literature by Latinos 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.

Q. Julia Alvarez has been asked if she considers herself a Dominican writer. Do you see yourself as a Mexican writer or a Latina writer? Where do you see yourself fitting into the framework of literature of the US?

A. Well, that is a tough one. When I started writing and getting my work published in American journals and magazines, I had an identity crisis of sorts. I felt, and still do, like an imposter when somebody considers me a Latina writer because I am not. And it took a while for this notion to sink in. I wanted so much to belong to the Latino literature movement, but the truth is that I am simply a Mexican writer who just happens to live in the United States. To qualify as a true Latino author, I would have had to be born or raised in this bicultural environment. By definition, I am a writer born and raised in Mexico, who by chance, lives in Los Angeles, and who writes in both English and Spanish. So, where does that place me? Do I fit in with Isabel Allende? No. She does not write in English. Am I part of the Sandra Cisneros bunch? No, because writers like her were raised in the US and do not write in Spanish. I am far and removed from my Mexican fellow writers that live in Mexico and breathe the culture day in and day out, and I'm not a legitimate, born and raised member of the Latino community of writers who navigate in the bilingual waters since childhood. I feel homeless as a writer.