



Sergio Troncoso is a writer of essays, short stories, and novels, and the author of five books. Among the numerous awards he has won are the Premio Aztlan Literary Prize, Southwest Book Award, Bronze Award for Essays from *ForeWord Reviews*, and International Latino Book Award.

literature.

The son of Mexican immigrants, Troncoso was born and grew up on the eastern outskirts of El Paso, Texas in rural Ysleta. He graduated from Harvard College, and studied international relations and philosophy at Yale University. He won a Fulbright scholarship to Mexico, where he studied economics, politics, and

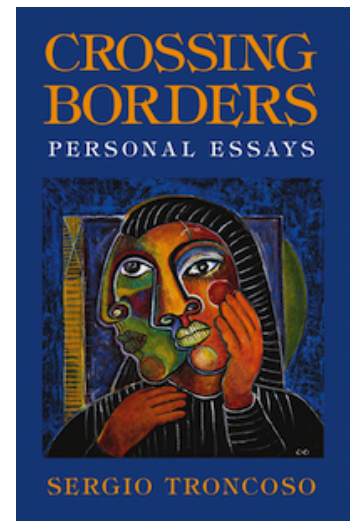
Troncoso was inducted into the Hispanic Scholarship Fund's Alumni Hall of Fame and the Texas Institute of Letters. He also received the Literary Legacy Award from the El Paso Community College. He is a member of PEN, a writers' organization protecting free expression and celebrating literature. The El Paso City Council voted unanimously to rename the Ysleta public library branch in honor of Sergio Troncoso. He served as one of three national judges for the 2016 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

He is currently an instructor at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York and a resident faculty member of the Yale Writers' Conference in New Haven, Connecticut.

The El Paso Times said of Troncoso's book, *Crossing Borders: Personal Essays*, "These very personal essays cross several borders: cultural, historical, and self-imposed.... We owe it to ourselves to read, savor and read them again." *The Portland Book Review* said the book was "Heart-wrenching."

"Why Should Latinos Write Their Own Stories?" is one of the sixteen essays in *Crossing Borders: Personal Essays*.

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Why Should Latinos Write Their Own Stories?

Why should Latinos write their own stories? Why should I write stories about Ysleta and El Paso, Texas? The first and probably most important answer to this question is that we write stories about our community to preserve our heritage. But we should also write stories that challenge this beloved heritage. I think we should be proud of who we are, but we should also be self-critical and reflective about what we might want to be in the future.

Most importantly, we write stories about our community to preserve our heritage. The very first story I wrote, for example, “The Abuelita,” is really the most autobiographical story in *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories*. It is really a story about my *abuelita*, my grandmother, and the ferocious drive and spirit she had when she was alive. When I wrote this story, I wanted more than anything else for others to know my beloved *abuelita* and to understand what she meant when she said: *El que adelante no ve, atrás se queda*. She, more than anyone else, gave me the strength and courage to fight for my dreams. I think I also inherited much of her don't-bullshit-me attitude. Doña Dolores Rivero. She was in many ways my heroine. I wanted to keep her alive in my story. I also wanted to share her with the world.

In other stories, I also wanted to portray the strength of our *familias* in Ysleta, the love that we have for each other, and even the conflicts that can lead to a better understanding and appreciation of each other. In the story “The Snake,” Tuyi, the fat boy everybody ignored, is a seventh grader at South Loop School. Tuyi is in many ways an outsider in school and on San Lorenzo Avenue where he lives. Yet his *mamá* and his *papá* do not ever forget to show their son that they love him, that they are proud of him. Tuyi may be fat. Tuyi may fart a lot. Tuyi may not be the greatest athlete in P. E. But he is loved. And that love propels him to accomplishments that eventually astonish his neighborhood.

So in many different ways, we can write stories to preserve the memory of our *familias* and to remember our old neighborhood. We will always belong in this family and in this place in a way that we will never belong with anyone or anywhere else. It is our duty to preserve this heritage and to affirm it and even to celebrate it by writing stories about where we belong. We have a great culture right here on the Mexican-American border. We have a great heritage in Ysleta and El Paso. There is no need to look somewhere else for approval or for higher standards. We have strong families here. Our people are tied to the land. We are for the most part direct and honest. It is true that there are some *cabrones* here and there. But we are not yet lost in the world. We still do have more civility than hostility toward a stranger. Most of us still believe in something holy. And let me tell you, that is not the case in many places outside of Ysleta and El Paso. In too many places. Sometimes it takes leaving El Paso for a while to appreciate what we do have here. So when you are seeing these hundreds of miles of empty desert between you and the rest of the world, you should not feel isolated or out of touch. You should feel lucky.

I said that many of us write stories to preserve our heritage. I certainly do. But that is also not the only thing I do when I write my stories about Ysleta and El Paso. I do not write autobiography. I do not write history. I write fiction, and I like to explore different possibilities and ideas. So although my stories may often have the familiar backdrop of San Lorenzo Avenue or Ysleta High School, they are also explorations into the variability of human consciousness. My stories are sometimes explorations into the unknown or even into the controversial.

In “The Abuelita,” while I was portraying my grandmother, I also wanted to explore how an older person might face the final years of her life, how she might face her own death. I wanted to explore a reconciliation with death that was practical, instead of abstract, and that valued the everyday wonder of life. That's how my *abuelita* faced those final days. She always wanted to taste the *asaderos* from Licon's Dairy just one more time. And in “The Gardener,” I wanted to explore how two older persons, who are separated by race and class, can make a bridge toward one another. Maggie Johnson and Don Chechepe can build that bridge because the passage of time has given them the perspective that, out here in the desert, we do have more things in common than we don't. I may say “*hola*” and you may prefer “howdy,” but we are both greeting each other and trying to make a connection at the bottom of this prehistoric sea.

I know that we often have problems between the classes and the races in Ysleta and El Paso. Simply because I write *fiction* does not mean I do not have my eyes open to the harsher realities that do exist. The door has been slammed in my face too, even as a graduate of Harvard and Yale. I will tell you a story about something that really happened to me a couple of years ago. I was visiting my parents, and I was walking along San Lorenzo Avenue, the street in Ysleta where I was born. And I was stopped by the *migra*. There was only one guy in the pale green truck. He gunned his motor and stopped his vehicle in front of me to prevent me from going anywhere. He asked me for identification, and I told him that I was an American citizen and that I was just walking around my neighborhood. I was a little angry. “Was it illegal not to have a car in Ysleta?” I asked. “Was I suspicious simply because I like to take long walks?” I told him that I would show him nothing and to leave me alone. I walked away. He muttered a few expletives and spat out his chewing tobacco. I heard him drive away a few seconds later.

I know what you are thinking. But you're wrong. That *migra* guy wasn't a *güero* with a cowboy hat. He was a Mexican-American, just like me. So the reality of life can get more complicated than the stereotypical stories we often want to believe. As a writer, I try not only to portray the harsh conflicts we sometimes have with each other, but also the complexity of those conflicts. I really don't want to make the world of my stories too easy for you, or too easy for me.

“Day of the Dead” is one of my favorite stories in *The Last Tortilla*, but it is also a story with a hard edge. Again, I wrote this story not just to describe Juárez and El Paso, but also to

lead the reader into a sometimes uncomfortable, but I hope illuminating, exploration. Lupe Pérez is a maid from Juárez who crosses the river every day to work for a well-to-do family in El Paso. She works damn hard every day. She lives a terribly poor life. She sleeps on a foam mattress on the floor. Yet she also has dreams. Lupe is the kind of person we might see every day, but whom we might ignore. She is easily forgotten and dismissed, even in death, unless we force ourselves not to close our eyes.

We dehumanize *ourselves* when we don't take a good hard look around us, when we forget people like Lupe Pérez. We cannot save the world. I know I can't save it. I will be lucky if I can save myself from having a cold heart. I will be lucky if I can keep my eyes from simply skipping over the unpleasant, the wretched, this person who might seem, at first glance, from an alien world. Yes, I will not exaggerate the terrible of the world like some news shows that seem to select stories with the motto, “If it bleeds it leads.” But I will also try to challenge myself, and my community, to look and think about things that our busy world too easily ignores.

In the title story of my collection, “The Last Tortilla,” I also wanted to focus on the wonderful heritage we have in Ysleta, our *familias*, but I also wanted to give this focus a twist. The Márquez family in “The Last Tortilla” has lost its vital center of being. The mother has died in a tragic accident, and she has been replaced by another, a *madrastra*, who is hated by the children. *Nuestras mamás* are so important to us. They will always be at the center of our being. But sometimes we take them for granted. Sometimes we do not appreciate how much of the world of security and love and hope they create by what they do for us every day. The good mother. *La luz de nuestra vida*. I wanted to remove the mother from the Márquez family and play out the slow and painful disintegration of this blessed world we all-too-often take for granted.

In this story, I took away the mother to see, for example, how selfishness can start taking over your world when the selfless individual, the ideal mother, is not there anymore. Alejandra Márquez, the oldest child who is thirty-years-old, finds it much easier to leave the family and get her own apartment now that her mother is gone. Yes, Alejandra still feels responsible for Juanito, the youngest one, and she tries to be a surrogate mother for a while, to no avail. But her sense of “family responsibility” is slowly withering away. And the little boy Juanito, of course, misses his mother terribly. He sees her in his dreams. He imagines that he is responsible for provoking God to kill his mother. God, for him, becomes a vengeful and punitive figure. Juanito's view of the world, of course, has radically changed because of a tragedy whose secret cause is also an act of selfishness. So this story, “The Last Tortilla,” is in part a warning never to forget our good mothers. We should appreciate and love *nuestras mamás* while they are here, and we should never forget the often unseen, but heroic, role they play in our lives every day.

In other stories, I have tried to portray the moral character of our people. Often, we are portrayed as physical and visual beings without a mental life. This is not just a problem of

American Latinos being stereotyped, but also a problem of the Hollywood and TV world we live in. This is a world of the visual portrayal of simple desires, not of describing the difficult and sometimes ambiguous choices that form character. When is the last time you saw a movie or a TV show that gave you a sense of the inner worth of a person, of the thinking behind that person's choices? This Hollywood world is certainly not very good at portraying true moral dilemmas. It is not very good at portraying your mental life.

Another story, “A Rock Trying to Be a Stone,” is a story not only about three children playing a dangerous game, but also about character. When we are judging someone's character, appearances can truly be deceiving. Turi, Joe, and Fernández, three boys playing in a ditch behind San Lorenzo Avenue, have tied up a retarded friend of theirs, Chuy, and have taken him “prisoner.” Joe is the older boy. He smokes pot and carries a knife in his pocket. Turi's mother calls him a *cholo* and warns Turi to stay away from Joe. But Turi likes Joe and respects him and knows that Joe is not manipulative. Fernández, on the other hand, is not honest and direct like Joe. Fernández is always trying to fit in and will do everything the easy way if he can get away with it. Although he looks like Turi and Turi's mother approves of him, Fernández has no center of being, really. When their game of prisoners takes an unexpected and awful turn, it is Joe the *cholo* who acts bravely and attempts to save Chuy. But it is also Joe the *cholo* who gets blamed for what happened. So appearances can be deceiving, but all-too-often we make judgments about a person's real character by how they look. Growing up in Ysleta, in the barrio that is still called Barraca, I knew plenty of good characters who might at first glance look menacing and dangerous. If you didn't talk to them, if you didn't try to understand them, then you might lose out on some good, honest friendships.

In conclusion, I want to focus again on a few of the main points I have tried to make when answering the question: Why should Latinos write their own stories? We should write these stories, first and foremost, to celebrate our culture and to communicate our culture to others. I have received mail from as far away as Brazil and Egypt from readers who have found my stories on the Internet. They tell me that they have better understood the Mexican-American culture of Ysleta and El Paso. How distinctive it is. How truly multicultural it is. These readers have also told me that they can understand some of the struggles that we face and how we uniquely contribute to what an *Americano* really is. Others have pointed out how they are also seeking answers to these universal questions of self-identity and self-worth, answers to questions about the loneliness of old age and what makes up a family. So as writers of these stories about our *frontera*, we should have that first duty of explaining who we are, in our own words. We should not let others define who we are. We should define ourselves.

I think a great, underlying part of defining ourselves through our stories is having the confidence to do so. I believe we have reached a point where those of us who belong to this culture of *la frontera* in Ysleta and El Paso are not content to sit back and watch others tell us who we are. We know who we are, and we ourselves can tell others about what we love and

what we fear and what we hate and what can save us. I believe our community has developed that confidence to step forward and start taking responsibility for the many images that are projected in the name of Ysleta and El Paso. And I said confidence, not arrogance. This confidence means we know we can tell our own stories now, and it also means we accept the burden of this responsibility. It means we keep an open mind. It means we accept the many varied voices of our people. I am simply one of those voices, and I know that.

So in answering my question at the beginning, we should tell our stories so that we define ourselves. The second part of my answer to that question is that we should tell our stories to challenge ourselves. It is easy to sit back and appreciate how unique we are. It is much harder to ask what we should be, and why. We should celebrate our multicultural heritage, but then we should be confident enough about ourselves to ask critical questions about this selfsame heritage. It is not a mark of disrespect or irreverence or cultural betrayal to ask these questions. It is a mark of our cultural strength that we can improve ourselves through criticism.

When I was at Ysleta High School, I wrote for the school newspaper, the *Pow Wow*, and I was a pain in the ass. I had been writing these critical articles about how a certain important student organization, which shall remain nameless, was being run in a shoddy manner. It was simply the truth, and I thought that by writing about it I would get this organization to shape up. Well, soon after my newspaper stories appeared in the *Pow Wow*, the faculty advisor of this organization, who shall also remain nameless, stopped me in the hallway, his face contorted with anger, and yelled: “Sergio, who do you think you are! You should act more like a student! Just wait until I talk to your advisors!” Of course, to their great credit, Pearl Crouch and Josefina Kinard, my journalism advisors at the *Pow Wow*, never told me to change a word in my news stories. They knew I was right. The facts were on my side. Later, another teacher, who was friendlier to me, said: “Sergio, you give them hell. You keep giving them hell even if they yell at you. Show them that a *Mexicano* can beat them with his mind!” I have never forgotten these words. And I will never forget them.

Discussion questions for *Crossing Borders: Personal Essays* (Arte Público Press: 2011, ISBN: 0-8165-1961-7), by Sergio Troncoso.

<http://sergiotroncoso.com/borders/questions/index.htm>

In “Why Should Latinos Write Their Own Stories?” the author argues that Latinos should write stories to define themselves, but also to challenge themselves. Think about what these dual reasons imply: believing in yourself and bolstering your confidence through self-definition; yet also questioning that definition, and so changing it for the better. Why do you think the author has set up this tension between these two reasons for Latinos writing their stories?

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