

An Interview with  
**Lorraine M. López**  
author of



**homicide  
survivors  
picnic**  
and other  
stories

Interview by  
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*Did you start writing this collection with a theme or with a single story that inspired you to write the rest?*

Originally, the collection was titled “Human Services,” and I intended to produce stories for it that would shift the focus from the performance of ethnicity that essentializes cultural experience onto the human drama that unfolds when people assume the role of savior or hero in extending aid to others. One question or problem I was interested in exploring is this: How does one keep the charitable spirit alive when one’s efforts are so often defeated. My characters are at the post-idealistic stages of their careers, their dream of improving others’ lives has dwindled, yet they persist, and this is what I admire about them. When a friend encouraged me to re-title the work, *Homicide Survivors Picnic*, I began to appreciate my characters more as survivors, those who confront overwhelming disappointment, even the loss of loved ones, and yet they marshal the strength not only to endure, but to continue trying to help others and to keep hoping for more.

*Several of your stories are told from an educator’s point of view. Did you find your own perspective as an educator informing such stories as “Women Speak” and “This Gifting”?*

Absolutely! When I write fiction, I braid three strands: my imagination, my experience, and my aesthetic that has been shaped by the literature I read and love. As

an educator, I found it irresistible to create characters who shared that profession, and beyond doubt, my experiences informed this characterization.

*Are there any characters that you disliked? Characters that you personally struggled to embrace, but wrote about because you felt you needed to tell their story?*

It doesn’t work too well for me to write about characters I dislike or for whom I have contempt. That dislike and contempt leeches through the story to the reader. It is as if I expect the reader to care about a character I don’t care for at all and that doesn’t make too much sense. That being said, I can’t say I would enjoy going on a vacation with Beto in “Human Services,” but I never struggled to embrace him or write about him. He was begging for it, so to speak. Now that I have written that character, I have more empathy for him. I see that he is vulnerable and more complex than I had originally supposed. Writing engages the imagination, and if one imagines fully, there is no way to evade compassion, even for characters one does not want to take to Palm Springs.

*Is there a way in which you hope your work will inspire your readers?*

I can’t say I have given this much thought, but if some of my readers are aspiring writers, I hope this work will encourage them to work with the wonderful short

story form. This is how I was inspired to write, by reading stories that provoked me to jump in and join the conversation.

*What inspires you? Are there any authors, books or characters that you frequently draw inspiration from?*

Of course, there are many authors and books that inspire me. I'm inspired by Latino literature, books by Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Cristina Garcia, Junot Diaz, and my mentor and great friend, Judith Ortiz Cofer. I am also inspired by British and mainstream American literature, authors such as Barbara Pym, Ruth Rendell, Flannery O'Connor, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Francine Prose, George Saunders, and many, many others. There are certain books that I reread at least once a year, learning something new each time I revisit these narratives. These books and authors inspire and educate me. I know I would not be the writer I am without them.

*Your collection interlocks characters of different ages, sexes, cultures, and financial circumstances. How do you get into the psyche of so many different voices?*

Imagination enables me to conjure these characters and their voices. I start out by noticing someone who catches my attention and then I begin to wonder, *What if...* Before long a character emerges for me, detail by detail.

*Your collection has many Latino characters, and they all interact with characters from other backgrounds. Did you intend this bicultural or multicultural dimension of the book from the start, and do you think Latino writers face any special challenges in writing about Latino characters and culture for today's varied literary audiences?*

This is a complicated question, and I thank you for asking it. For me, I did not set out to do more than explore characters beyond their cultural definition. As mentioned, I wanted to avoid that performance of identity that essentializes cultural experience. I am not interested in providing the usual themes, characters, and props that many associate with Latino literature. These do not characterize my experience as a Latina, so why should I artificially simulate such things to validate stereotypical notions? I can think of no reason to do this, except to gratify expectations of others.

The thing is, though, that I write for myself, and I write the kind of books and stories that I like best. And I am not out to give anyone (including myself) what he or she might be expecting. In speaking to other Latino writers, I find that we similarly resist gratifying expectations that our characters perform in culturally expected ways, say, rolling tortillas, bopping around the barrio, or gathering wisdom from a sweet abuela. More and more, Latino literature is evolving away from such stereotypes, and becoming more interesting and challenging in the process.

In fact, Blas Falconer and I have recently compiled a collection of personal essays on this topic titled *The Other Latino*. In this collection, various poets and prose writers discuss some of the obstacles they have confronted in creating their art, from being pigeon-holed for particular markets to being told their characters strike others as “just human beings and not really

ethnic types.” I don't think a one of our authors mentions setting out to write bicultural or multicultural work. I know I don't.

*Your collection starts and ends with the childless character of Lydia and her clever niece Rosanne. Why did you choose*

*to repeat these two characters? Are there plans to revisit any of your characters in this collection? What is your next project?*

You have tapped into characters that are very close to me, and you have rightly sensed that I am not ready to let them go. I am considering a longer work featuring Lydia, Matt, and Roxanne, who is actually Lydia's cousin's child, so technically not her niece, though she calls Lydia “Auntie.” I am thinking of at least another story with these characters, but possibly a novella or a novel with them.

My next project will be a linked-story work, though, a hybrid between a novel and short story collection. My model for this project is Anton Chekhov's short story, “The Darling,” but I intend to invert my work, so that it deconstructs Chekhov's piece. Usually, I don't like to discuss projects before I develop them because it can cost me my curiosity in the work, so that is all I will say for now about that.

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—Lorraine M. López