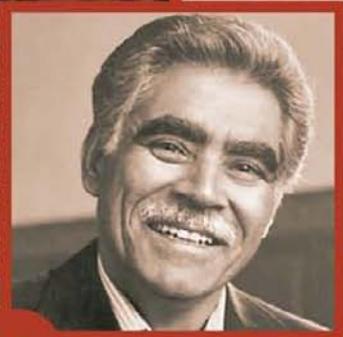


LATINO WRITERS AND JOURNALISTS



JAMIE MARTINEZ WOOD



A TO Z OF LATINO AMERICANS

LATINO WRITERS AND JOURNALISTS

JAMIE MARTINEZ WOOD

 **Facts On File**
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Latino Writers and Journalists

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INTRODUCTION

Colonial Latin America

Latino literature incorporates a multitude of ethnicities and sensibilities that spans at least two centuries. The definition and beginning of Latino literature is debated by scholars, writers, and literary critics. A Latino has either been born or has had ancestors born in any Latin country, a country in which Spanish or Portuguese is the dominant language. Some view the memoirs and written records of the early explorers of the mid-1500s to be the precursor to Latino letters. Others state Latino literature began with the establishment of the United States in the region where the author resided.

There is little biographical information known about the few who composed literature of the exploration and colonization era between 1542 and 1800. During this time Mexicans and Spaniards established colonial rule in New Spain, part of which is now the American Southwest and South. Many of these Mexican and Spanish soldiers who colonized this area for Spain requested and received large land grants upon retirement from duties, which they turned into ranchos. For much of this time, the Crown strictly prohibited printing and publishing among its colonial dependents. Only letters submitted to government officials in Spain or Mexico that reported on military or secular progress were permitted. For example, in 1785 Mexican governor Felipe de Neve wrote and delivered the Code of Conduct, a manifesto establishing proper treatment of California Indians due to the fact that an estimated 90 percent of the Native

population in Los Angeles, California, had been decimated by violence and disease since the Spanish arrived in 1769. These types of documents and an occasional journal on the flora and fauna of the new region or indigenous customs were written, but few survive. Therefore, oral storytelling began a rich tradition as the forerunner and foundation of Latino literature.

Political Foundation of Latino Literature

Political unrest in Mexico and the Caribbean as well as racist clashes between Latinos and Anglo Americans would prove to be the muse to much of Latino literature. In the early 19th century, insurgents began to rebel against the colonial dominance Spain held over the Caribbean islands of Puerto Rico and Cuba and in Mexico. Outspoken writers such as José Martí were exiled from their homelands and sought political refuge in the United States. Capitalizing on the freedom of speech policy in America, Cuban and Puerto Rican nationalists established newspapers to voice their opinions and call for cultural and political independence for their compatriots. Concurrently, Hispanics living in the northern regions of New Spain had established communities strong enough to support commerce among themselves. The first Spanish-language newspaper, *El Misisipi*, was published in 1808; *El Mexicano* followed in 1809. Both papers were founded in New Orleans, Louisiana. Similar papers appeared in Florida, Texas, Philadelphia, and New York. In 1821, Mexico freed

itself from Spanish rule, New Spain was ceded to Mexico, and the dissemination of information began to blossom. The first Spanish-language printing press was established in 1834.

In time, the journalists and writers contributing to these papers demanded equal rights, implored their readers to preserve their Spanish language and Hispanic culture, and gave an alternate view of contemporary issues, often contesting the opinions held by English-language papers. Given the fact that local newspapers were sometimes the only Spanish-language printed material available to Latinos, the papers provided a forum for establishing solidarity.

During the course of the 19th century, Anglo Americans embarked upon an imperialistic expansion to claim the lands from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Under this policy, known as Manifest Destiny, Americans clashed with Mexicans and Spaniards living in northern Mexico. Texas and portions of New Mexico were annexed to the United States in 1845. The following year, Texas Rangers committed atrocious crimes against Latinos, all in the name of establishing peace for Anglo Americans. The conflicts culminated in the U.S.-Mexican War. When the United States won the war in 1848, Mexico was forced to cede one-third of its country to America. In this way, California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado became U.S. territory. Although the Rio Grande partially serves as the U.S.-Mexican border, the dividing line between the two countries often intersects major U.S. and Mexican cities, thereby ensuring international commerce and transnational customs, which have created an inevitable border culture. Writing about border culture became and still is quite popular.

Based on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), persons living and working on lands granted by either Spanish or Mexican governments had to prove the legitimacy of their land claims. While the rancheros attempted to make sense of the foreign laws, Americans from the East and Midwest flooded into the new American lands,

particularly California and Texas, to squat on the lands in litigation. Most rancheros lost their cases, resulting in dispossession and poverty. Little written information survived, with the exception of the novels of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, which were not published until the later 1800s. The squatters were not as interested in New Mexico or Arizona. The Latinos of these regions maintained their land, wealth, and sense of self. Through newspapers and small presses they published folklore, character sketches, essays, memoirs, and biographies celebrating their Mexican heritage. Those who descended directly from Spanish predecessors claimed higher breeding than their Anglo-American counterparts. This high self-opinion served as a foundation for the majority of early Hispanic writers, such as Miguel A. Otero, Fray Angélico Chávez, Ruiz de Burton, and Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert. Writers of this era often idealized a romantic version of Hispanic life prior to the arrival of Anglo Americans.

By the late 1800s, some of the more successful newspapers grew into publishing houses. During this time, the frequent revolts besieging Mexico began to take their toll. Porfirio Díaz became the Mexican president in 1876, promising to reestablish the former greatness of Mexico. He instead began a dictatorship marred by extreme violence and oppression. Mexicans fled to the southern and southwestern United States in droves to avoid the wrath of Díaz and his military force, known as the Rurales. Insurgents such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata rose to fight Díaz, and thus began the Mexican Revolution in 1910, although the violence and waves of immigration to the United States continued until 1920.

Native, Exile, and Immigrant Experiences

At this point Latino literature began to truly establish itself and form three distinguishable types of expression as defined by Nicolás Kanellos in *Herencia* (2004): native, exile, and immigrant. Natives, Hispanics who lived in northern New Spain before it became the United States,

such as Eusebio Chacón and Jovita Idar, wrote in a variety of genres calling for cultural and civil rights and the preservation of cultural traditions. The exiles were political dissidents such, as Félix Varela, who particularly originated from Cuba and Puerto Rico and wrote about their hopes for political and cultural independence. Lastly, the immigrants published works that spoke in large part to the establishment of identity, whether that meant the process of melding the Hispanic and American cultures or resisting Americanization. Jesús Colón was the major forerunner on this front, addressing the issues and ideologies of the working class. Another immigration factor came about during the depression, when scores of Mexican Americans were repatriated to Mexico regardless of whether they held U.S. citizenship. During this time, writers such as Américo Paredes and Jovita González wrote about their Hispanic experience but found little success while alive. It was not until after Paredes's death that his greatest works found publication.

The mid-1900s were rife with political upheaval in the United States and abroad. In 1953, the United States launched Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico, which industrialized a formerly agricultural economy. The result was unemployment for many and the largest migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States. A vast majority of Puerto Ricans immigrated to New York's Lower East Side, falling into a city suffused with racism based in large part on skin color. Piri Thomas and Nicholasa Mohr penned some of the first works to describe the racism and inequality they experienced. A few years later, Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba. His dictatorship resulted in violence for those opposed to him, a break with former congenial ties with the United States, and a wave of Cubans leaving their homeland for major U.S. cities such as Miami, Chicago, and New York. Dominican Republicans fled their dictators at about the same time. Women from these Caribbean islands, such as Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Esmeralda Santiago, and Cristina García,

in particular, wrote about their coming-of-age caught between Hispanic and Anglo-American cultures.

Civil Movement and Identification

Inspired by the Civil Rights movement of African Americans, Latinos began to demand their civil rights with more vehemence than ever before. As a forerunner to the Chicano movement, César Chávez unionized the Latino field-workers in 1965 in an event known as the Delano Grape Strike. Luis Valdez created plays to energize the people and the Chicano movement. *Chicano* refers to a political Mexican American. Poets read their works at political rallies, elevating their status to something akin to celebrity. Not only did poets demand equality, they also conveyed imagery of the mythic land of Aztlán, a place of belonging and beauty. The works of Lorna Dee Cervantes, Alurista, and Abelardo Delgado stand out. However, it was Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales's poem "I Am Joaquín" that carried the furthest trajectory. These grassroots efforts trickled into the world of academia and with the leadership of Jorge Huerta and Tomás Rivera, among others, eventually established fields of study in literature and history on the contributions of Latinos in universities throughout the nation and the world.

At the height of the Chicano movement, lone Latino investigative journalist Rubén Salazar worked tirelessly to ensure Latino issues were covered in periodicals. On August 29, 1970, Chicanos held a peaceful march to protest the Vietnam War and demand equality. Salazar was killed in what was known as the Chicano Moratorium. Frank del Olmo rose to take his place at the *Los Angeles Times*. Salazar and del Olmo became role models for other Latino journalists, many of whom have won Pulitzer Prizes. The shooting of Salazar further incited Chicanos in their quest and fueled the fire for Chicano novelists such as Tomás Rivera, Rudolfo Anaya, Sandra Cisneros, and Rolando Hinojosa, who began to see publication by major houses and receive literary awards in the early 1970s.

Nowhere did Latino literature investigate the bilingual and bicultural existence more than in border cities. Authors and writers from these regions, such as Alicia de Alba Gaspar, Denise Chávez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Carmen Tafolla, and Jose Antonio Burciaga, validated the experience of living in two worlds simultaneously. They helped to authenticate the combination of both English and Spanish in their works and the amalgam of being Hispanic while living in the United States.

In 1972, Kanellos founded the *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, a literary magazine dedicated to publishing the works of Latinos. The following year Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero created the Nuyorican Poet's Café, a cultural center for artists to share their work. Nuyoricans, New York

Puerto Ricans, had finally established a forum to speak to their concerns in their unapologetic street style. Poetry slams, a precursor to rap, grew in popularity, as did the works of Tato Laveria, Pedro Pietri, and Victor Hernandez Cruz. During the 1980s and 1990s, Latinos such as Gary Soto and Helena Maria Viramontes built on the success of the Chicano and Nuyorican movements. The late 1990s witnessed an explosion of Latino literature. Contemporary writers such as Virgil Suárez, Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, Isabel Allende, and Junot Diaz draw on their Latino heritage to inform their works while showing their talents in touching on universal themes. Latino literature will continue to evolve and contribute to world literature for years to come.

A

Acosta, Oscar Zeta **(Oscar Acosta)**

(1935-) *novelist, autobiographer, activist*

Known for his charisma, intensity, and valor, Oscar Zeta Acosta is a provocative writer, lawyer, and activist who fought on the front lines of the Chicano movement when Mexican Americans worked for equality beginning in the mid-1960s.

Oscar Acosta was born in El Paso, Texas. Sources show varying dates; however, most references list Acosta's birth date as April 8, 1935. His family moved to the San Joaquin Valley near Modesto, California, while Oscar was still young. When his father was drafted during World War II, Oscar assumed much responsibility for his family. His later work suggests that he felt a keen sense of isolation and suspicion as a child. He was a bright student known for his brazen boldness and obsessive tendencies. He began to have problems with alcohol in high school, eventually developing ulcers that would bother him throughout his life.

Upon graduating high school, Acosta enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. During a tour of service in Latin America, he converted to Protestantism, eventually becoming a Baptist missionary in a leper colony in Panama. He eventually denounced Christianity. After four years in the military, Acosta was honorably discharged. He returned to northern California, where he enrolled in Modesto Junior College. In 1956, he married Betty Daves; they divorced in 1963. Acosta then took creative

writing courses at San Francisco State University. Upon graduation, he attended San Francisco Law School, passing the bar exam in 1966. Acosta's first position as a lawyer involved working for the Oakland Legal Aid Society, an antipoverty agency.

In the late 1960s, he moved to East Los Angeles and joined the Chicano movement. He was married to Socorro Aguiniga from 1969 to 1971. Acosta's charisma and pure strength became a dominant force in courthouses as well as on the streets where racist battles were fought. He represented RODOLFO GONZALES, Saint Basil 21, and other protest groups and prominent activists. His short story "Perla Is a Pig" serves as an example of how being excluded from society and prejudged does not allow one the right to condemn another. As a result of this awareness, Acosta adopted *Zeta* as part of his name as a resolute confirmation of his Chicano roots and identity. The story was published in 1974 in both *Con Safos*, a Chicano political magazine, and *Voices of Aztlán*. Unfortunately, according to many critics, his humanitarian approach did not include defending or honoring women.

Acosta gained a widespread notoriety, reaching the attention of America's mainstream population when Hunter S. Thompson immortalized him in his book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971). Thompson reveals in the book, which the *New York Times* called the "Best Book of the Dope Decade," his exploits with Acosta in Las Vegas,

Nevada, through his fictional dealings with Dr. Gonzo, a character based on Acosta.

Acosta released *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), in which he used biotherapy to unravel the mysteries and obsessions that plagued him. His characters have been noted as closely resembling people who play major roles in his life, including Thompson. Again highly autobiographical in nature, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973) follows a main character who, like Acosta, is a lawyer defending the suppressed, marginalized members of society. The novel even includes an incident that strongly parallels the shooting of RUBÉN SALAZAR. This book ends on a hopeless note, in which Chicanos have not reached unity, and in fact many have assimilated into the dominant white culture.

Acosta traveled to Mexico in 1974. In May 1974, he called his son Marco from Mazatlán, Sinaloa, Mexico, and was never heard from again. Critics, family, and friends, including Thompson, presume he is dead. The cause of his death and/or disappearance is pure speculation but varies from drug overdose to murder and even includes the possibility of a nervous breakdown and decision to stay in Mexico.

Acosta's work bears importance in Chicano letters based on the level to which people use identification with ethnicity to define who they are as individuals. In the case of those who claim allegiance to people of a minority, the effect can result in a recurrence of victimhood and unworthiness. Acosta's roller coaster, insatiable hunt for acceptance in life from others and through his writings points to the need to bridge alliances rather than to focus on what separates ethnicities and people. An evaluation of Acosta's life and work, including his love and aptitude for the seemingly divergent modes of thinking of math and creative writing, supports the theory that struggling to seek the meaning of life and identity through mental delin- eation contains far less value and benefit to human beings than recognizing and honoring relationships can offer.

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Adame, Leonard

(1947-) poet, educator

Leonard Adame creates poetry that speaks to the crux of human relationships. He uses Mexican-American themes to connect his readers to universal impulses held by all peoples, regardless of race, creed, or social status.

Leonard Adame was born on September 2, 1947, in Fresno, California. His father, Trinidad Concepción Adame, Jr., was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, and his mother, Jessie Contreras Adame, is Mexican American, born in Colton, California. Leonard's grandmother provided the consistency he needed when he entered the foreign world of English and Anglo-American customs at Jane Addams Elementary. In school, his Spanish language "sank into linguistic quick sand," Adame recalled in a 2006 interview, but at home, "every morning was the same: she [his grandmother] was up before anyone, the coffee boiling and the eggs popping in the lard-glazed frying pan, her hands patting and shaping tortillas, her hands moving as fast as hummingbird wings, or so it seemed." When he was not working in his father's restaurant, Adame spent hours devouring comic books and other periodicals at the local drugstore. His love of reading led him to John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and others. Music also played a major influence in his life. His grandfather played the mandolin and guitar, and his uncles were professional musicians. Adame married Lupe Diaz in 1968, and the couple have two children.

Adame attended California State University–Fresno in the early 1970s. While at the university Adame met the future Pulitzer Prize winner Philip Levine. Levine inspired the group known as the Fresno School of Poetry, which included Adame, GARY SOTO, LUIS OMAR SALINAS, and Ernesto Trejo. Levine convinced Adame that his Mexican experience was important and that it should be an integral part of his poetry. Adame says of his mentor, “He is a true oracle, a man of great insight, compassion, expertise, and encouragement.” Adame followed Levine’s advice, and his poetry saw publication in various periodicals throughout the 1970s, including *Entrance: 4 Chicano Poets* (1975) and *Cantos pa’ la memoria* (Songs for memory) (1979). During the 1970s, Adame worked in a variety of jobs, including teaching, social work, and playing in a band. Adame earned a B.A. in English in 1981, and an M.A. in English with an emphasis in creative writing in 1986.

Adame began his teaching career at California State University–Fresno in 1972. He has also held positions at Fresno City College and Kings River Community College. He is currently a full-time faculty member at Butte Community College. Adame has contributed his writings to various anthologies and periodicals. He creates images that combine tangible everyday items and chores with sublime lyricism. Additionally, his poetry establishes compassion for the plight and disillusionment of the immigrant experience.

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Agosín, Marjorie

(1955–) poet, memoirist, short story writer, essayist, activist, educator

Marjorie Agosín has established herself as a prominent figure in Latino letters, as well as a humanitarian with prestigious awards such as a Good Neighbor Award (1988) and the National Mujer Award (2004). Her poetry has earned her the Letras de Oro prize (1995) and the Latino Literature Prize (1995).

The daughter of Moisés and Frida (Halpern) Agosín, Agosín was born in Bethesda, Maryland, on June 15, 1955. When she was three months old, the family moved to Santiago, Chile, her parents’ homeland. Even as a young child, Marjorie felt a strong kinship with fellow writers. The Latin-American literary culture was an extension of her family; established writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and María Luisa Bombal were her pen and ink grandparents. At the age of seven, Marjorie met the renowned poet Pablo Neruda. They shared a brief conversation that proved to be a pivotal moment for the budding writer and poet.

Agosín’s writings are characterized by a humanitarian theme and a strong faith in life, family, and the wonders of nature. Agosín attributes much of this hope and conviction to her Jewish upbringing. She was regaled with stories of her Jewish ancestors who overcame obstacles through their inner strength and faith. The peace that arose from their courage wove its way into Agosín’s nature, outlook on life, and writings. She found that writing restored and fortified her sense of faith. Agosín stated in a 2005 interview that “this kind of faith is not defined or restricted to religion, but wells up from the faith in possibilities, dreams, nature, and the planet.” Through her connections to Latin-American culture, including its writers such as Neruda, and the grit of those who faced the Holocaust, she forged an identity. This identity served as a starting point, a window from which she could look out at the world and find her connection to the whole of humanity.

As the political tension in Chile mounted, Agosín's parents moved back to the United States in 1969, where her father accepted a professorship in biochemistry at the University of Georgia. Agosín remained in Chile with her maternal grandparents to complete her education. She joined her parents in 1971. During the 1970s, Agosín enjoyed a period of study and contemplation. Her identification with her Latin-American roots remained strong even during her self-imposed exile from Chile. She majored in philosophy at the University of Georgia, graduating in 1976. She married John Wiggins in 1977, with whom she would have two children, Joseph Daniel and Sonia Helene. She earned a Ph.D. in Latin-American literature from Indiana University–Bloomington in 1982. Her dissertation was on Chilean writer María Luisa Bombal.

The 1980s marked the beginning of a long and lustrous career as a writer for Agosín. Her first love in writing is poetry, in which she has a profound ability to elucidate the shared connection with all living beings. Agosín writes in Spanish, although her work is often translated into English or appears as a bilingual edition. She has been published in the United States, Spain, Chile, and Costa Rica. Agosín's collections of poetry include *Conchali* (1980), *Hogueras* (1986, published as *Hogueras/Bonfires*, 1990), *Zones of Pain* (1988), *Generous Journey: A Celebration of Foods from the World* (1991), *Toward the Splendid City* (1994), *Noche estrellada*, (1996, published as *Starry Night: Poems*, also in 1996), *An Absence of Shadows* (1998), *The Angel of Memory* (2001), *At the Threshold of Memory: New & Selected Poems* (2003), and *Poems for Josefina* (2004).

Bilingual editions of her poetry include *Brujas y algo más/Witches and Other Things* (1984), *Mujeres de humo/Women of Smoke* (1987), *La literatura y los derechos humanos: Aproximaciones, lecturas y encuentros/Literature and Human Rights: Approaches, Lectures, and Meetings* (1989), *Círculos de locura: Madres de la Plaza de Mayo/Circles of Madness: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1992), *Sargazo/Sargasso: Poems* (1993), *Dear Anne Frank*

(1994 and 1998), and *Lluvia en el desierto/Rain in the Desert: Poems* (1999).

Agosín writes in Spanish to maintain connection to her Latin-American roots and the values and ways of life that most inspire her. In addition to this connection, Agosín delves deep into the heart of her Jewish ancestors and the trials they faced. In 1982, she accepted a position at Wellesley College, where she continues to instruct courses in Latin-American literature and Spanish. In this vein, she has been able to introduce the varied works of Latin-American writers to a widespread audience. She has edited or contributed to more than 40 books. Her tireless efforts to spotlight the works of Latin-American writers, particularly women writers, have earned her much acclaim and respect.

Agosín dives into the experiences of the oppressed and calls forth the light to chase away the shadows of tyranny and cruelty. She has expanded her writing skills beyond poetry and editing to memoirs, short stories, nonfiction, and essays. Writings from these varied genres include *La felicidad, cuarto propio* (1991, published as *Happiness: Stories* in 1993); *Sagrada memoria: Reminiscencias de una niña judía en Chile* (1994, published as *A Cross and a Star: Memoirs of a Jewish Girl in Chile* in 1995); *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile, 1974–1994*, photographs by Emma Sepulveda and Ted Polubbaum (1996); *Ashes of Revolt: Essays on Human Rights*, (1996); *Women in Disguise: Stories* (1996); *Las chicas desobedientes* (1997); *Council of the Fairies* (1997); *A Necklace of Words: Stories by Mexican Women* (1997); *Mujeres melodiosas*, translated as *Melodious Women* (1997); *Always from Somewhere Else: A Memoir of My Chilean Jewish Father* (1998); *An Absence of Shadows* (1998); *Las palabras de Miriam* (1999); *Uncertain Travelers: Conversations with Jewish Women Immigrants to America* (1999); and *The Alphabet in My Hands: A Writing Life* (2000).

Agosín has made significant contributions to the Latino communities both in the United States

and in Latin America. Her ability to deal frankly with suffering and share the humanity she finds hidden within is a rare gift. She stated in a 2005 interview that “by allowing the silence to enter the spirit from that vortex, peace can be found within. With this peace, compassion and strength arise to fight injustice.” Her weapons are not satirical or mean-spirited lyrics but an ever vigilant voice that illuminates the connection and universal needs that speak to the heart of all humanity.

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Alarcón, Francisco X. (Francisco Xavier Alarcón)

(1954–) poet, essayist, short story writer, children’s book writer, educator

Francisco X. Alarcón’s short and powerful verses shatter rigid perceptions and prejudices about the disenfranchised members of society. His work is celebrated in the United States, as well as in Latin America.

Francisco Xavier Alarcón was born on February 21, 1954, in Wilmington, California, son of Jesús Pastor and Consuelo (Vargas) Alarcón. During his childhood, Francisco spent periods of time living with his parents just outside of Los Angeles; with his grandfather, a full-blooded Tarascan Indian in the mountains of Michoacán, Mexico; and with other relatives in Guadalajara, Mexico. While in Mexico, Alarcón had the pleasure of hearing generations-old stories, as well as his

grandfather’s tales of fighting alongside the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa. The Mexican Revolution, which occurred from 1910 to 1920, was a violent time when the common people sought to establish order. Living biculturally had a profound effect on Alarcón in both his patterns of thinking and the way he crafted words.

As a young adult Alarcón returned to Los Angeles with \$5 in his pocket and a dream of becoming a writer and recording the stories he had been told. Alarcón earned his high school diploma at Cambria Adult School in Los Angeles. He studied one year at East Los Angeles College, then transferred to California State University–Long Beach, where he earned his B.A. in Spanish and history in 1977. Shortly thereafter, he obtained a graduate fellowship and enrolled at Stanford University, where he studied contemporary Latin-American literature. Alarcón wrote poetry while in college, joined literary circles in the San Francisco Bay area, and gave poetry readings. He found a forum to explore his mestizo roots and Latin-American solidarity when he joined the coordinating staff of *El Tecolote*, a Bay area monthly bilingual newspaper.

In 1981, Alarcón won the Rubén Darío Latin-American Poetry Prize from Casa Nicaragua in San Francisco. This award had a domino effect, with more recognition around the Bay area, more poetry readings, and eventually a Fulbright Fellowship in Mexico City. Alarcón was introduced to the best-known Mexican poets, members of the intellectual elite, and literary greats in Havana, Cuba. He became involved in theater and served as a visiting researcher at the Colegio de México. He gained notoriety from his readings, eventually appearing as a television guest on the daily literary program *Noche a Noche* (Night to night) in Mexico City. The turning point in his life, both socially and personally, came when Alarcón met Elías Nandino, one of “Los Contemporáneos” (The Contemporaries). The Contemporaries were a literary and intellectual avant-garde group of the late 1920s, which also included Octavio Paz, Carlos Pellicer, Celestino Gorostiza, and Salvador

Novo. Nandino greatly impressed Alarcón with his stand to be openly gay in his work and life.

Inspired and encouraged by Nandino, Alarcón wrote with a deeper honesty in his poems as well as his short stories and essays. He won second prize in the Palabra Nueva (New Word) University of Texas–El Paso literary contest in 1983 for his short story “Las repatriaciones de noviembre” (The repatriations of November), and he won a first prize in poetry from the Tenth Chicano Literary Contest of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of California–Irvine. These awards and his “showmanlike” poetry readings established Alarcón as one of the most exciting and influential young Chicano writers of the decade.

In 1984, as Alarcón was enjoying a peak in his career, a young boy was found sexually molested and murdered in San Francisco. Since Alarcón’s car matched the description of a car abandoned at the scene of the crime, the police targeted him and mercilessly slandered him through print and broadcast media. His neighborhood rallied around him. Eventually the real killer was found, but not before the experience had had a deep impact upon Alarcón’s life.

The following year, Alarcón released his first book, *Tattoos* (1985), in which the poet explores community, his roots, and his political convictions with clipped, piercing words. Later that same year, Alarcón collaborated with Rodrigo Reyes and Juan Pablo Gutiérrez to publish *Ya vas, Carnal (Right on, Brother)*. Alarcón then released *Quake Poems* (1989) in response to an earthquake that devastated Santa Cruz, California, where he was living and serving as a lecturer at California State University–Santa Cruz. *Body in Flames/ Cuerpo en llamas* is divided into five parts and deals directly with sexuality, sensuality, and the explosive joy of living as a self-expressed soul. Alarcón followed with *Loma prieta* (1990), *De amor oscuro/Of Dark Love* (1991), *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation* (1992), *No Golden Gate for Us* (1993), and *From the Other Side of Night/ Del otro lado de la noche: New and Selected Poems* (2002).

In the late 1990s, Alarcón wrote bilingual poetry for children. With widespread success he released *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems* (1997), *From the Bellybutton of the Moon and Other Summer Poems* (1998), *Angels Ride Bikes and Other Fall Poems*, (1999), and *Iguanas in the Snow and Other Winter Poems* (2001). Inspired by children, Alarcón has translated many children’s books into Spanish. He has edited several textbooks for teaching Spanish in college and high school, including *Mundo 21* (1995; World 21), *Pasaporte Mundo 21* (1997; World passport 21), *Tu Mundo* (1997; Your world), and *Nuestro Mundo* (2000; Our world).

Alarcón has won several awards including the Josephine Miles Literary Award, PEN Oakland, American Book Award, Before Columbus Foundation, and Pura Belpre Honor Award for Poetry. He has appeared in a number of anthologies, literary journals, and magazines. Alarcón currently teaches at the University of California–Davis, where he also serves as director for the Spanish for Native Speakers Program.

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Alcalá, Kathleen

(1954–) novelist, folklorist, anthologist, playwright

Best known for her trilogy on 19th-century Mexico, Kathleen Alcalá has received several awards and honors, including the Western States Book Award, Governor’s Writers Award, Pacific Northwest Bookseller’s Award, and Washington State Book Award.

Kathleen Alcalá was born on August 29, 1954, the youngest child of Lydia Narro, from Durango, Durango, Mexico, and David Alcalá, from San Julián, Jalisco, Mexico. She attended a two-room schoolhouse in rural Devore Heights, California, for kindergarten and first grade. The family then moved to San Bernardino, California, where she went to Eliot Elementary School. As a child, she wanted to play the flute and be an artist. She was a bright nonconformist, testing off the charts on IQ and aptitude tests. Mythology and science fiction literature drew Kathleen's attention as a child. Her favorite books were *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* by Robert Heinlein because one of the main characters is a girl and *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle. However, she did not fit any notion that educators had at that time of the good or promising student, so she spent a fair amount of time in the principal's office in elementary school.

Alcalá's aunt, Rosa Fe Narro Arrien, a world-traveled missionary and writer, greatly influenced Alcalá. Narro Arrien showered her love on Kathleen and her sisters and taught them that there was a bigger world than the one they knew. Later Kathleen attended Arrowview Junior High and wanted to be an anthropologist. She tutored other children, acting as a teacher's assistant to a class of "otherly abled" learners.

Alcalá's mother was from a large family, while her father was an only child. Kathleen grew up visiting her mother's many brothers' and sisters' families in Monterey Park and East Los Angeles. The stories told at family gatherings helped to shape the stories she would later write. Additionally, every summer Kathleen visited her aunt, uncle, and their five children in Chihuahua, Mexico. The experiences in Mexico provided a dual, almost binocular vision from both sides of the border. Alcalá felt that "we belonged to both sides, or rather, both sides belonged to us," as expressed in a 2005 interview with the author.

Alcalá attended San Bernardino High School, where tensions ran high. Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and RUBÉN SALAZAR were all assassinated about this time.

Race riots broke out consistently. As Mexicans who lived in a town that practiced real estate redlining, her family held a very precarious place in society. Alcalá's father, a junior high school teacher and one of the few Mexican Americans around with a white-collar job, was also a Methodist minister raising his children as pacifists. Alcalá's parents belonged to the Fellowship for Reconciliation, a group that advocated nonviolence, even during the Vietnam War. Former students came to the house to be counseled about their draft status by Alcalá's father. Juxtaposed to the freedom to choose a political stance, Alcalá's mother, a piano teacher, was very obsessed with proper behavior. Alcalá remembered in a 2005 interview, "[T]here was no sexual revolution in our house. I think I came of age right at the dividing line ending the 1960s."

Alcalá attended Stanford University from 1972 to 1976, where she wrote for the *Stanford Daily*. She came across *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, which reminded Alcalá of her family stories. At the same time, a fellow student gave Alcalá an anthology called *The New Journalism*, with an essay by Joan Didion, which introduced Alcalá to the notion that others had similar family experiences and proved to be a source of inspiration for her own writing.

Alcalá obtained a B.A. in human language (linguistics) in 1976. Three years later, she married Wayne Roth. Alcalá worked in Democratic politics and public broadcasting and as a consultant to nonprofit groups. But in each case, her contributions always revolved around writing. She received her M.A. in English from the University of Washington in 1985. In 1989, Alcalá gave birth to a son she and Roth named Benjamin. Alcalá founded a magazine to represent voices of diversity called *The Raven Chronicles* with Phil Red Eagle and Phoebe Bosché in 1991. *The Raven Chronicles* sponsors readings and events and has an active Web site with different content from that of the magazine.

Alcalá released her first book, *Mrs. Vargas and the Dead Naturalist*, in 1992. This collection



Novelist Kathleen Alcalá cofounded *The Raven Chronicles*, a magazine dedicated to diversity. (Jerry Bauer)

of 14 short stories is based on those tales told by her aunts and uncles, their lives and attitudes, and the mode of storytelling. “People call it magic realism, but that is just how people told family history,” commented Alcalá in a 2005 interview.

In 1997, Alcalá debuted her first novel, *Spirits of the Ordinary: A Tale of Casas Grandes*, which grew out of the last story in her previous book. Set in 1870s Mexico, the novel relates the story of Zacarias, who abandons his family and Jewish faith to pan for gold. He witnesses a massacre that brings him back to his ancestral religion. Skillfully Alcalá weaves mystery into ordinary events through Estela, Zacarias’s bereft wife, and her journey to find strength and independence.

Her second novel, *The Flower in the Skull*, is based on the story of Opata, Alcalá’s great-grandmother, who was born in Rayón, Sonora. Released in 1999, this book reveals the intricacies of culture, self-identity, and assimilation through the lives of three generations of women. Alcalá entwines magic with everyday life by exploring the inexplicable connection to one’s land and faith.

Treasures in Heaven, her third novel, released in 2002, is based on the feminist movement in Mexico of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, before the Mexican Revolution. The Mexican Revolution was a period from approximately 1910 to 1920 rife with terror, violence, and corruption as the people attempted to assert a stronger political voice and more control. Estela, a character in *Spirits of the Ordinary*, is the main protagonist in this book. Self-described as a writer of “counter-narratives to official history,” Alcalá reveals throughout her trilogy how the larger movements and shifts of history change individual lives. She examines society on the level of the individual and unravels how each character fits into the whole. Research and writing have also proved a means of self-discovery. Alcalá discovered that her family was not an anomaly as she had once believed but that there are other Mexican Protestant Jews. Alcalá stated in a 2005 interview, “[W]riters have an innate need to ‘relive’ experience through narrative. That is how we understand the world around us, by showing the threads that connect seemingly disparate incidents.”

In 2003, Alcalá cowrote a play based on her novel *Spirits of the Ordinary*, which was produced at the Miracle Theatre of Portland, Oregon. Her work has appeared in *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Raven Chronicles*, *Re-Markings*, and *The Pacific Northwest Writers Association Anthology*. Alcalá has served as a visiting professor at the University of New Mexico and taught at writing conferences throughout the nation. Her students and readers provide great inspiration. Alcalá reflected in a 2005 interview, “I have discovered that each person who reads one of my books is actually reading

a different book, based on their own experiences. So it is very gratifying to provide narratives that alter the way people see the world, or that bring out their own experiences that they thought were isolated.”

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Alegría, Fernando

(1918–2005) *novelist, poet, essayist, educator*

Fernando Alegría was considered one of the pre-eminent Chilean writers living in the United States. Born in Santiago, Chile, on September 26 (some reports say September 18), 1918, Fernando Alegría was the son of Santiago Alegría Toro, a businessman, and Julia Alfaro. Fernando was a voracious reader as a child, who especially enjoyed the poetry of Pablo Neruda. Both his mother and grandmother encouraged his writing and his attendance at the country's best schools. By the time he was in high school, Santiago's daily newspaper had published several of Alegría's writings. He studied Spanish and philosophy at the University of Chile, later accepting a position as professor at the university.

In 1938, Alegría published *Recabarren*, a biography of a Chilean labor movement leader. Alegría became an activist for the peace movement and traveled to New York to attend an international conference for the Youth for Peace. Political unrest in his homeland forced him to stay in the United

States. He enrolled in Bowling Green State University, earning a master's degree in literature in 1941.

In 1943, Alegría married Carmen Letona Meléndez, with whom he would have four children: Carmen, Daniel, Andrés, and Isabel. The couple moved to California so Alegría could pursue his doctorate at the University of California–Berkeley. He supported his family teaching Spanish and Portuguese at Berkeley from 1947 to 1967, later teaching the same subjects at Stanford University from 1967 to 1987.

During the course of his professorship at Berkeley, Alegría had a tremendous impact introducing Spanish literature to English readers and vice versa. He translated and promoted Spanish-language literature in the United States, publishing several books of short stories and poems, juvenile fiction, and novels. These include *Ideas estéticas de la poesía moderna* (1939; Esthetic ideas of modern poetry), *Leyenda de la ciudad perdida* (1942; Legend of the lost city), *Lautaro: Joven libertador de Arauco* (1943; Lautaro: Young liberator of Arauco), *Ensayo sobre cinco temas de Tomás Mann* (1949; Essay on five themes of Thomas Mann), *Camaleón* (1951; Chameleon), *La poesía chilena: Orígenes y desarrollo del siglo XVI al XIX* (1954; Chilean poetry: Origins and development from the 16th to 19th century), *Walt Whitman en hispanoamerica* (1954; Walt Whitman in Latin America), *El poeta que se volvió gusano, cuadernos americanos* (1956; The poet who became a worm, American notebooks), *Caballo de copas* (1957; Queen of hearts), *Breve historia de la novela hispanoamericana* (1959, A brief history of the Latin American novel, with later revised editions), *El cataclismo* (1960; The catastrophe), *Las noches del cazador* (1961; The nights of the hunter), *Las fronteras del realismo: Literatura chilena del siglo XX* (1962, 1967; The borders of realism: 20th century Chilean literature), *Mañana los guerreros* (1964; translation by Carlos Lozano published as *The Maypole Warriors* in 1993), *Viva Chile M!* (1965; Long live Chile!), *Genio y figura de Gabriela Mistral* (1966; Genius and form of Gabriela Mistral),