

The flowering of writer Marc Zimmerman and his border stories

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by Antonio Zavala

Writer and professor emeritus Marc Zimmerman has led a life that could easily be the envy of many. He has travelled widely in Europe, Mexico and Central America, has had a successful career as a professor and critic and now, in his sunset years, he has bloomed into a prolific author who has penned and published five books in the span of three years, an amazing feat by any standard when you consider most authors write a book every two or three years.

So what drives Zimmerman? Mostly time. He is 79 years-old and feels he still has a lot to say and has stories to tell based on experiences accumulated during a lifetime.

His latest book is *Sandino on the Border*, published this year by Floricanto Press, and it consists of a collection of stories that crisscross the borders between the United States, Mexico and Nicaragua.

The new book tells the story of Ben, Helena, their son David and Helena's son by a former marriage, Dino. The action is a tug of war between the characters who try to hold on to a semblance of family life despite the many challenges they encounter.

For example, Helena tries to rescue her son Dino, who is taken to Nicaragua by his father and ex-husband Rolando. And in the meantime, Helena and Ben are at odds with each other as she decides to pursue her education at a university rather than become an average housewife as Ben pursues his career.

The stories are told in different voices, not by a single narrator, so we learn from and empathize with each character as they, in their own voice, tell us their stories.

One story that is in the category of the best that literature can offer is called "Mela". This story, as written, rises to the category of art.

Mela, short for Carmela, is Helena's sister, she is the black sheep of the family, she lives in Nicaragua. And has a son, Raimundo, out of wedlock. She eventually goes to live first in Mexico City, then to Ensenada, Baja California, and later on to Los Angeles.

Raimundo, now grown, goes from job to job barely surviving. Soon his wife leaves him and it is up to Mela to work, sacrifice herself and take care of her grandchildren. I won't spoil the ending for you but this story shows Zimmerman has an eye for the tragic and dramatic also.

The book is illustrated by Carlos Berberena de la Rocha, a Nicaraguan artist based in Chicago.

Zimmerman's prior book, which Floricanto Press published this year also, is called *The Short of It All: Dreams and Scenes of Memoir Fiction*.

This book is a retelling in the form of short stories of the writer's fears, dreams and memories from his childhood to his adult life. It goes through the complexity of relationships, fears that haunt him and dreams that keep recurring in his life.

Before that, the hard-working author published in 2017 *The Italian Daze*, both in an English and in an Italian version.

This book deals with scenes, memories and situations from a first marriage to an Italian woman. It recounts travels through Europe and through Mexico.

In 2017 the writer also published, with Floricanto Press, *Lines on the Border*, a book about working, living and loving life in the San Diego-Tijuana border area. The protagonist is a Jewish American who pursues his academic career.

The main character works and studies on the American side but eventually goes on to explore how life is lived on the other side. He eventually marries a Nicaraguan woman.

In 2016, the writer published, through his company La Casa Books, a collection of short stories titled *Martin and Marvin*. This book was reviewed here in *El BeiMan* when it first came out so I won't go into detail about this book.

Suffice to say that some of the stories take place in Chicago and as well as in other places, including Italy.

For the record Zimmerman is best known as professor emeritus of Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) as well as a former professor of Spanish and World Cultures at the Department of Modern and Classical Languages at the University of Houston, in Texas.

He is also a former coordinator of the Rafael Cintron Latino Cultural Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and is well known in academic and Latino literary circles across the country after teaching and lecturing in several universities.

Above else he has been a constant supporter of Latino and Chicano Literature with published articles in many venues.

In 2004 he returned to what he loves best, writing, and published in that year *The Store of Stories*, his first book.

During an online interview I took the opportunity to ask the writer some questions in order to learn more about him and his work.

Where were you born?

Newark, New Jersey, Beth Israel Hospital, like Philip Roth and I believe Amir Baraka (LeRoy Jones). You can't keep my New Jersey/NY Jewish roots out of anything I write, Buti left that world behind at 19, moving to California and living more and more in relation to the Italian American, Afro-American and above all the Mexican and Latin American/ Chicano and Latino worlds around me.

What is memoir fiction? And is this the genre you work best in?

Memoir fiction is fiction based on memories but pulled in the direction of fiction by the force of fictional, thematic and aesthetic concerns. Memoirs are fictions really. Who can remember exactly what happened? Memoir fiction is more honest—we inevitably vary from what happened even as we try to portray "the real." Of course, I also record what I dream and then twist the dreams into fiction as well, as

in the case of one of my best stories, “The Sculpture”, which appears first in *Martin and Marvin*, and then again as one of the several dream-based fictions in *The Short of it All: Dreams and Scenes of Memoir Fiction*. In a sense my goal has been similar to that of Karl Ove Knausgård who has detailed his life in six dense volumes. But unlike Knausgård, I feel the need to shape things into stories, to find closure and give them form. Harder for me to write a novel, but I try to write novel-like fiction/memoir collections that achieve the kind of overall unity and are almost, if not quite, novels.

Why did you wait until a few years ago to start your writing career in earnest?

Well, I never stopped writing fiction completely. I hold a B.A. and M.A. in creative writing, mainly playwriting. But the complications of my life made it hard for me to write. And my first published collection, *Stores of Winter*, features the six best stories of my first 60-plus years. But when I wrote the final story, *The Uninvited*, I knew that even late in life I still had the juice to write, even though I knew I'd have to put in long hours to retool my work. I knew I had only so many years, and I decided to try to leave as complete a fictional record of my experience as time allowed.

I actually stopped last year, deciding to edit what I'd written and try to get it out before it was too late. I dread the thought that I'll leave so much of my life on my computer without getting out. But I want to emphasize that this is not a fully narcissistic project. I always try to project events bigger than me, often focused on others who are not me—credible wonderful people I've met and have become close with too, as well as people who have hurt me and others. Of course, the biggest part of my life has been my movement from my Jewish-American background, to a concern with African American and then, above all, Latin American and Latino experience. I have so much more to edit and so much more to get out (including my 30 plus years of Puerto Rican experience, but also including my Italian/Italian American and Mexican experience, so primary in what I'm living now. Among my yet to appear volumes are ones about my Jewish childhood and adolescence, the complete stories of my three marriages, a collection and probably two of stories about my academic life.

Did you postpone writing your stories in lieu of holding a 9 to 5 job/career and now that you have more free time you are finally writing your stories and books?

OF course, the fact that I retired as professor has given me considerable time but there are also the psychological problems that kept me blocked for years. I still have all kinds of psychological, family and personal problems, but I've finally had the time and focus to put my work into literary form without experiencing so much pain and trauma.

What is your writing routine like? Where do you write and during what time of the day or night?

I write best now in the morning when I have more energy and more silence in the house. At a certain point, life takes over and the day slips away. If I fail to write in the morning, I suffer during the day and try to compensate later. But as time advances, I need more time to do less, and I'm usually too tired at night to write well.

What advice would you give young writers? To not waste time and write each day?

Start early and refuse to give it up, be ready to sacrifice much without knowing if any one will ever recognize your work. Read all you can of past and contemporary fiction. But don't just read fiction as many writers do. Keep one more foot or more in the world but try to look at them in depth. Try to link

the personal with the general, the local with the national and international. Get an agent and editor as soon as you can. if you wait as I did, it's hard. No agent wants to take up the work of an old man who may die before producing the one book that might bring interest in all he's written before.

Antonio Zavala is a journalist and a writer and the author of *Pale Yellow Moon*, a fiction collection of 15 short stories. He has an upcoming book in Spanish titled *Memorias de Pilsen* which is a non-fiction narrative of the struggles in Pilsen in the 70s and 80s.