

Award-winner's novel reminds of tragic history

Mario T. García | Nov. 17, 2011 NCR Today

On Oct. 27, Demetria Mart'nez, longtime writer for the *National Catholic Reporter* and accomplished poet, novelist, essayist and short-story writer, received the prestigious Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature by the University of California, Santa Barbara.

This award is given annually to a writer of Chicano/Latino literature who has achieved a national and international reputation. It is named after Professor Luis Leal, one of the early champions of Chicano literature in the United States who taught at UC Santa Barbara for many years.

Mart'nez is certainly very deserving of the award. Her most noted work is her novel *Mother Tongue [1]*, which deals with the migration of Central American political refugees in the 1980s because of the civil wars in countries such as El Salvador. It also concerns the role of the Sanctuary Movement in attempting to assist these refugees.

The novel, though ostensibly a love story between José Luis, a Salvadoran refugee, and Mary or Mar'a, a Mexican-American involved with the Sanctuary Movement, is in fact a historical reminder of this period in U.S. history where a callous Ronald Reagan administration refused to accept these Central American refugees as legitimate political refugees. To do so would affect U.S. relations with its client states in Central America to which the U.S. was providing military arms and training to then be used against the people of those countries.

Moreover, Central America represented an imperial economic preserve for U.S.-based corporations exploiting the material resources of that region. Of course, all of this was justified in Cold War terms and the need to battle international Communism. As long as dictatorships or military juntas in Central America and in other places in Latin America professed to be anti-Communist, then they represented U.S. allies. Even President Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s said of Anastasio Somoza, the longtime dictator of Nicaragua: "He may be a son-of-a-bitch, but he's our son-of-a-bitch."

Demetria Mart'nez reminds us of this sorry and tragic history and how we need to continue to struggle to match historic stated American principles of democracy and freedom to the reality of U.S. actions in the past and, unfortunately, still in the present where economic and imperial interests override these principles.

The same goes for our domestic conditions as emphasized by the Occupy Wall Street manifestations whereby we ideologically preach the American Dream at the same time that the rich get richer, the middle class gets smaller and weaker, and the poor get even poorer.

Demetr'a Mart'nez is the kind of voice and social conscience that we continue to need as we engage in the struggle over the meaning of America.

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Links:

[1] http://www.amazon.com/Mother-Tongue-Demetria-Martinez/dp/0345416562/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1321542291&sr=8-2