

HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES



On March 12, 2015, author Helena María Viramontes talked to a crowd of over 300 in the University Theater at CSULB. Earlier that day, she had worked with a small group of about twenty Creative Writing students in a workshop setting, attended a reception in her honor, and sat for an interview with students. Summarizing her advice for young writers, Viramontes said: “The four things young writers need to do is sit down and do the work; never write for money or publication; read as much as you can; and have a lot of patience.”

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Viramontes, a Chicana and American author, has had a huge influence not only in the world of Chican@ writing, but in the world of writing in general. She is the author of two novels, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1994) and *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), and a collection of short stories, *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985). All of her works have received praise from critics and are taught in classrooms nationwide. Viramontes continues to write today while teaching English at Cornell University.

Here at CSULB, Viramontes read from her three major publications as well as work in progress before answering ques-

tions from students. She explained that her inspiration comes from everywhere, from the people she meets and the places she goes. However, she is still most influenced by East Los Angeles, where she grew up and where most of her stories take place. Viramontes also talked about her drive for social justice and why she chooses to put it into her writing: “When I travel throughout the world doing these kind of gigs, one of the things I have to say that astonishes me is that we’re in 2015 and people think of our [ethnic and Chican@] literature as marginalized, so can you imagine what they think of us as people! Those are the things I try to connect and get to talking about.”



Viramontes described an experience at Washington and Lee University: “One of the students got up and said, ‘What do you think about the lack of diversity as you can see in this hall? What do you think about the lack of diversity?’ And I turned the question back to him and I said, ‘No, the question is what do you think about the lack of diversity?’ I said, ‘Do you think this hall here really encapsulates the world? You’re not living in the world you think you live in. If you think you’re being prepared by this education, by this institution to be a citizen of the world, I’ll tell you right now you’re not. And that is your argument for demanding diversity both in faculty and in student body. For you. Because it’s essential that you know that there’s diversity out there.’”

In the Q&A after her talk, Viramontes went into depth about some of her well-known characters and gave anecdotes about how they were created. When asked about her personal writing process, she responded: “Since I only have so many hours in a day, and since I work and teach full time, I have to take time off to write. And so what I do is I clear everything out when I get to my computer. Go through emails, clear out notifications, anything that can be a distraction. And then I just sit there and write. I like

to do what Toni Morrison says and be in the company of my own mind. I refocus, I refresh my imagination. I do these writing exercises. I sit with my slips of paper and my phrases and my sentences and see if anything pops out to me. I am a slow writer, and I have a capacity for curiosity.”

Viramontes’s talk, which was organized by Drs. Araceli Esparza, Dennis López (both English), Maythee Rojas (Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies), Anna Sandoval, and Griselda Suarez (both Chicano and Latino Studies), was clearly met with excitement from the audience. Students left the event beaming from ear to ear, explaining that Viramontes was the reason they write. Others stated that her novels got them through difficult times, and some were even brought to tears just meeting her because of how much her work meant to them.

At the close of the evening, the organizers announced the inauguration of a new annual lecture series that will bring in US ethnic writers to CSULB. The event will be known as the Helena María Viramontes Lecture Series.



From left to right: Michelle Seales, Dr. Araceli Esparza, Dr. Anna Sandoval, Dr. Helena María Viramontes, Dr. Maythee Rojas, Dr. Dennis López, Casandra Hernández Ríos, and Griselda Suarez.

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