

Uriel Quesada (Costa Rica)

Why I write what I write, and how I write it

The title of this panel refers to three related topics. It is not only about the craft of literature (how I write what I write) and the reasons to devote days, months, and years to reflecting on certain topics and making art out of that reflection. From my point of view there is a question that explains and summarizes both theme and craft: why you write, why you consider yourself a writer.

After so many years in the *business* you may answer that central question in a very simple although circular way. I write because I am a writer, and I am a writer because I write. In my personal case, I could also be considered a statistician. I have a diploma and transcripts to prove it. I worked fourteen years in social and financial research, and made good money (something that does not happen with literature). But I am no longer a statistician, and please do not call me one. On the other hand I am a writer, even when I don't write. And let me tell you that it happened in the past: eleven years ago I suffered a serious depression and wrote almost nothing for three years. Then I left my country and moved to an unexpected place to start over, the New Mexican desert. It was a very difficult period; I started almost from scratch with both my life and my own identity as a writer, looking for something that I did not know was there. After several attempts I felt comfortable with my writing again. Then I finished a short-story collection and novella, and have continued writing until now.

I learned something important from that experience: being a writer is more than publishing or even writing at all. It is something that you simply know. But beyond the certainty you have to live in a world in which literature is at the core. You think, read, dream and act as a writer. Literature must be everything, and in cases like mine you know that sooner or later the power of literature will make you write again. In Latin America there is not such a thing as writer's block. If you do not write it is because it is not the right time, or maybe you have nothing else to say. One of our most beloved authors, Juan Rulfo, published only two books of fiction in his entire lifetime. He spent forty years talking about the next project, a novel called *La cordillera (Mountain Range)*. It never came out; it probably never existed. Nonetheless Rulfo is one of the most influential storytellers of our times.

I am a writer because I need books. I love collecting books, and of course, reading many of them. I love fiction too. I am always curious about the craft of fiction: concepts such as structure, language, plot and character. But first I need to be delighted by the story. Reading is always a matter of pleasure. A story must be engaging and meaningful. It could be fun, but not shallow. A good story never plays it safe. It takes risks in terms of theme and language. Following Jorge Luis Borges, a story is no more than a linguistic device, something that does not exist until the writer makes it come to life. A good story means a challenge for both the writer and the reader. The former has to seduce the latter, which is rule number one. He/she must create the most perfect linguistic device to capture the reader's attention. But a good reader is also very important. I am talking about a person who finds pleasure in the challenge of finding the hidden story.

I am a writer of fiction, and prefer the short story format; the shorter a story, the better it is. I believe that this *format* is not as limited as some people (especially novelists) think. The challenges, I insist, are different. You can tell the story of a lifetime in just a few lines. You can fully develop a character with just basic information. You can create several plots as long as they converge towards a common ending. But on top of everything, the short story is the art of silence. To write a good story never tell more than necessary, never underestimate the reader's capacity to create. You should always be aware that the reader knows. The XXI Century reader participates along with the writer in giving the story a meaning, putting together all the pieces and breaking the silence.

Now you know that I prefer short stories to novels. But, as a regular human being, I have contradictions. In fact, I have written a novella and a novel. Before Hurricane Katrina, I was working on the manuscript of another novel. However, I don't consider myself a novelist. I am a short story writer who happens to write novels.

My first books, *The Day of the Earthquakes* (1985) and *The Twilight of Innocence* (1990) are short story collections. Both deal with the theme of identity or alternative identities. Some critics said that they were about Latin American identity, but such a purpose was never in my mind. At a distance, those collections are about the search for a meaning in life. Actually, the eighties was a very difficult decade for Latin America. Economists, historians and sociologists know it as the lost decade. It was a period of intense political conflict in the Isthmus, a period of long and bloody wars in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. It was the time of very harsh American intervention in the area, which cost thousands of lives and corrupted our societies, especially our governments.

The eighties meant the end of the utopian-society projects in Latin America. Those dreams of a better future died in Nicaragua. The Sandinista guerrillas needed almost fifty years to defeat the Somoza regime; but their own internal conflicts, inexperience in governmental issues and corruption led the country to an unprecedented crisis in only ten years. The eighties was also the decade of AIDS. In Central America, as well as the rest of the continent, AIDS was more than a serious public health problem. AIDS unveiled the profound social and religious prejudices against gays and lesbians. In Costa Rica, for instance, the governmental response to the epidemic was based on a policy of harassment and discrimination. Several people ended up in jail because they were gays or lesbians. No wonder many of us suffered an identity crisis, or at least were trying to figure out our roles in such a complicated time.

On the other hand, the nineties was a period of exhaustion. The Costa Rica where I grew up started to change dramatically. Overnight the welfare state became a public enemy, and new political forces began to promote radical transformations of the governmental apparatus. The relation between state and society was no longer the same. The country was ready to become a capitalist paradise, full of luxury cars, exclusive malls and beautiful gated communities. At the same time poverty could be seen everywhere; over the years the public school system received less and less support from the government, the public health system started to compete with other more appealing options... My narrative becomes more personal, more centered in a sense of failure. I wrote about homosexuality, about the tricks and policies of memory. I also reflected on the present situation of my generation: Did we really lose everything? Did we do enough to defend our ideals? The nineties was the decade

of peace in Central America. Peace came along with oblivion. Once again, the Isthmus was nothing but the back yard of the U.S. Within such a context, the question of identity changed. I tried to explore it in a short-story collection called *Long Live Desire* (1996) and in the novella *Canary's Song* (1999).

It is too soon to talk about the new millennium, still a baby at age five. Maybe more than ever this is the time of migrations. We can live almost anywhere and not necessarily belong to a specific place. Many of the old ways of thinking about nation and nationalism have suffered their own identity crisis. At least that is what free trade agreements have been promoting. This is the time of the city-state: just take a look at what is going on in Barcelona, Mexico City, or Monterey. In the near future, countries will invade each other not for the control of oil reserves but water reserves.

Last year I published another short story collection, *Far, Far Away*. This book is different from my previous work in many ways. It is the product of a long journey to countries such as Cuba, England, Spain, and of course the U.S. It is a book about becoming a citizen of nowhere, not even the country you were born in; in brief, it is a book about otherness. This November, my new novel *The Cat Inside* is coming out in Costa Rica. This book could be described as a story about *the closet* and schizophrenia, about social double standards and their effects over gays. In many ways, it is also a personal account of my relationship with my father.

Now I am exploring other narratives forms. Hurricane Katrina took me to Iowa City, and I feel the need to write about the disaster. I am talking about The South, the destruction of a cultural heritage, the connection between the Gulf Coast and the Caribbean... During the past few weeks, I have been writing about my losses, about that unique world that is falling apart in New Orleans. But I do not want to say the same things you may read in the paper. I am more interested in the personal, intimate account of the events. I want a book full of different voices, as many as possible. Besides an experience in the South, all those voices have something in common: they speak Spanish, and represent the *brown* community. I am working on a narrative that is much closer to testimonial literature than fiction; I am talking about a chronicle in the Latin American sense.

In brief, I am still writing because I have stories to tell. I have fears, doubts, few hopes, and even less certainties, and all of them are important elements of my writing. The world does not make sense for me, but my stories let me recover at least a sense of peace. I would say that my characters don't have identity problems, not any longer. Their situation is more complicated, though: they don't understand why they cannot be who they are. For this reason, in most cases my characters decide to travel. They leave their homes, their *perfect* lives, for a search. They look for a utopian place to fit in. They visit countries, or simply get lost on the road. They take drugs and drink. They try to find an answer in lovers or in strangers met in a bar. They may even go insane only to find that madness is not that different from normalcy.

I am just a human being who happens to write. I don't pretend to change the world. Literature cannot do that, but at least it gives us the possibility of dreaming and fantasizing about a much better future. I am a writer simply because I am a dreamer.