

A Love Story Beginning in Spanish: Poems by Judith Ortiz Cofer

Judith Ortiz Cofer

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This poet's literary past is impressive. Her books have been nominated for the Pulitzer, an ALA Best Book of the Year Award, and the first Pura Belpré medal by REFORMA, the Spanish-language arm of the ALA. Ortiz Cofer crosses genres, writing memoir, essay, poems, novels, short stories, and young adult fiction. Currently, she holds the Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia. This marks her third full volume of poetry, and, arguably, her most accomplished.

Throughout these poems, Ortiz Cofer focuses on language and its acquisition, a process part rebellion, part love. The poet's composite-self travels with her parents from their home in Puerto Rico to the United States, where her father is in the Navy, a career that saps his soul but allows him to provide for his family. Though vibrant, her mother speaks little English, forcing the young woman of the poems to understand early that language is power. In "A Theory of Chaos: Octubre 1962," it is the power to ask for medicine in a foreign tongue ("I carried the coded message / to make language from pure need.").

Largely narrative, these poems also explore literary precursors, which for the poet feel egalitarian. When a woman is called "to carve all the truth / she finds on single grains of rice" she turns to myriad of sources, calling for ever bigger grains that might contain "Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' / Parts of *To The Lighthouse* / Some of the Psalms / All of the Song of Solomon / 'Satisfaction' by the Rolling Stones." Language and its wisdom might be found anywhere.

For Ortiz Cofer, language slides constantly, slipping out of what seemed a firm definition. Language becomes Spanish and English, yes, but also image, gesture, myth, fairy tale, tradition. All of these form languages by which the author chooses to speak. When she adopts the voice of Penelope, it is to imagine a language just inside the literature itself, the language of the forgotten woman. Even Penelope in the poems urges Odysseus not to name his love, fearing the power of his longing might carry the words to the jealous gods.

To support this love of language, Ortiz Cofer intertwines Spanish with English to create a two-toned sound, the mellifluous Spanish with the harder-toned English. She intersperses the found poem, the language of someone else, with her own understanding through the ordering of the poem and her own linguistic additions. Repetition is used to suggest ways in which the language might be reconsidered, adding texture and richness to the poems.

Together, these poems enact their understanding of language, showing an intense attention to structure, sound, and sense. They provide novice poetry readers with an entrance and seasoned readers with a delight. (August 18, 2009)

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