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## An Interview with Ana Castillo

AARP Segunda Juventud Online sits down with Ana Castillo in her very first interview about her new book, *The Guardians*.

BY CARLOS J. QUEIROS  
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Acclaimed author Ana Castillo's new book *The Guardians* will be available June 31, 2007. She answers our questions on layers of meaning, borders, the American Dream, and getting better with age.

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**Q:** How would you describe *The Guardians* to those who are unfamiliar with your work?

**A:** My work—which includes novels, poetry, and nonfiction—isn't easy to put in a box or describe in 25 words or less. What we can find is some consistency in my characters, who are almost exclusively Latino, and a sensitivity to the political times and needs of Latinos in this country. In *The Guardians* I didn't start out thinking, "Let me write something that's a hot-button issue right now." But because I was residing along the United States-Mexican border, it just seemed like natural subject matter for me. The book is about the violence along the border, immigration issues, and migration issues specific to Mexicans and Americans.

**Q:** *The Guardians* is an apt title with many levels of interpretation. Can you explain the title's resonance throughout the novel?

**A:** The first reason for the title was visceral. It just came to me during the opening of the story when our main character Regina is reflecting on the mountains that she can see from her window, and she talks about them like they are great spirits. So those are my first guardians. In terms of the other layers, I'll let the readers decide for themselves. But what I would say is it can be interpreted as, sometimes in the process of protecting one thing, you expose something else to danger. So I started seeing that as a natural title for what I saw being played out along the border.

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**Q: Along those lines, the dedication of the book reads: “To all working for a world without borders and to all who dare to cross them.” How did this centralizing idea of borders become such a force in your novel?**

**A:** I had started to make my home along the U.S.-Mexican border, and every day during the warm and hot seasons I saw workers recruited and brought out to work in the fields. It was in my mind as a potential story to tell. It’s natural for me to empathize with the underdog because of my own background. My parents were factory workers, so I’m sensitive to the issues of the people who don’t get full representation in this country.

**Q: In your view, what is the current state of the American Dream?**

**A:** I was teaching in Chicago last year on May 1 when we had the big protest, and something like 700,000 people were outside by noon. They were not just Mexican, Latino, or undocumented people. Chicago, like all of this country, is filled with immigrants. These people are hoping for a piece of the pie, a slice of the American Dream. As it stands, people basically are looking for a way to survive, to have a better life, to take care of their families. That’s basically what everybody is hoping for to one degree or another—you can’t hold that against anyone.

**Q: The main character Regina is a smart, independent, 50-plus widowed virgin. How did you arrive at her character?**

**A:** Sometimes I get so many voices in my head I don’t know where they come from initially, and when they start talking the challenge is to find out who they are and what’s their story. Regina came to me one morning unpremeditated when I was looking at those same mountains. The question for novelists and fiction writers is: “Is it autobiographical, is this you?” And indeed, she in part is me. I am 50-plus, but I am also a part of [all the other characters in the novel]. That’s the real trick, all those people are parts of me, but they’re also a part of a mass consciousness, and that’s what becomes the secret of the success of the story—that so many people can relate to it.

**Q: With Regina’s character you also explore a love-after-50 theme through her relationship with Miguel. What was the origin of this exploration?**

**A:** That’s where I was separating myself quite a bit from her. Throughout most of my work, the women are very sassy, very sexual, very daring, and very social. This woman is almost socially inept. A lot happens to women after 50. Not 40, not 30, but after 50 the world begins to look at us with different eyes because of the “change.” Early on, she thinks Miguel is making fun of her when she’s talking, even though he’s probably admiring her and is attracted to her. Unfortunately, women over 50 do not get a fair shake. And now, because we have so many baby boomers and our world leaders are in this age bracket, we begin to see there is a value that was not recognized in this country for some time. At 50, a woman can indeed start her life: my character is going to have a life after this book that she never had before.

**Q: You’ve been writing for 30 years. How has age affected your writing?**

**A:** Like everything else, with practice, you hope you're getting better. I have a confidence in what I'm doing with my craft, whereas before it might come out well or it might not. The wisdom, they say, kicks in at 50. As my character Regina says, "That it's going to be alright" happens if you've been on a good track in your life. You reach this place where you can finally relax because you've earned your self-confidence and know all your experiences have not been for nothing. If you have lived the best you can, your life reflects that. That gives me—not just in my writing but also in my life—the authority to have strong opinions because my life reflects what I believe in and what I've been able to do.

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