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Online Extra . . . An Interview With Alberto Ríos

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The winner of the 2007 Arizona Literary Treasure Award sat down with AARP Segunda Juventud Online to discuss his ninth poetry collection, *The Theater of Night*, his relationship with his grandparents, and reconnecting with the Spanish language.

- Q: Congratulations on winning the Arizona Literary Treasure Award, which recognizes your contribution to the literary heritage of the state. You were born and raised in Nogales, Arizona, have lived all around the state, have taught English at Arizona State University for 25 years. How has a sense of place influenced your work and your identity as a writer?**
- A:** Place, to me, is what people stand on. People are more important, but they have to live somewhere, be somewhere, and make their lives somewhere. For me it's been the state, it's been the desert, it's been the landscape that is simply different from other places. The desert allows you room, and that room becomes the imagination.

Q: Where you grew up, Arizona shares a border with Sonora, Mexico. What was it like to grow up on that borderland?

A: It's in the news every day now, but for all the wrong reasons—reasons that are extrinsic, away from the actual border itself, that make a problem of that border. My upbringing was wonderful and I would not trade it for anything. It showed me how to look at everything in more than one way: different languages, different foods, different laws. The whole world was never simply one-dimensional. And for me as a writer—and later as a poet in particular—that was invaluable.

Q: When did you know you would grow to be a writer?

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A: I first started writing in about second grade, but it had nothing to do with putting pencil to paper. I was a good student, but I got in trouble for daydreaming—the terrible crime of childhood. That daydreaming, I know now, was the beginning of my writing. It was not just listening to what I was being taught, but I was doing something with it.

Q: You're 56 years old and have been writing for over 40 years. How would you say age has affected your writing?

A: An excellent question. In the beginning it was a wild horse ride without rules and without direction. And then in the middle years it became too studied and too structured—I knew too much for my own good. And now I think I'm finding a balance between the two, and that's a very exciting time for me.

Q: AARP Segunda Juventud's target audience is bilingual Hispanics [age 50 and over]. You write in English, but can you describe your relationship with the Spanish language?

A: As with so many people in my generation, basically the first thing we were told was, "You can't speak Spanish in the classroom." We'd raise our hands and say, "*Seguro que sí...* Of course we can speak Spanish, just listen." And the teacher would say, "That is not what I mean. You are not to speak Spanish in here, and if you do we are going to swat you." So we got hit for speaking Spanish in first grade, but no one should over-demonize that. I think people's hearts were in the right place, but they didn't realize we'd figure out a lot of things on our own. And that's where the trouble began. For instance, our parents told us to listen to your teacher. And in school, the first thing we were told was that we're going to get hit for speaking Spanish. So while nobody ever said this, even a first grader understands that this is your first equation: get hit for doing something bad, get hit for speaking Spanish, Spanish must be bad.

Q: I know you've said that by the time you were a junior in high school you could no longer speak Spanish. How did that happen and how did you relearn Spanish?

A: I wasn't different from my friends. Many in my generation couldn't speak Spanish by the time we reached high school. Well, you need to take that with a grain of salt: we didn't want to speak Spanish because we had learned well. Some people struggled with that for the rest of their lives. Later when I was starting college, I relearned the language, but not exactly. Spanish hadn't gone anywhere. What I had to do—and it was a very slow and difficult process—was relearn my attitude toward the language.

Q: That reminds me of your poem *Nani*. In this poem, you describe visits to your grandmother's house, where you would sit down to eat. But since you couldn't speak Spanish and she couldn't speak English, another language was formed. Can you explain what this language was?

A: When you look at just the face of it, you'd think we would've had a problem. But a grandmother and a grandson sitting down for lunch is not a problem, and we should resist anybody who tells us it is. What we ended up doing for ourselves was to evolve a third language that everybody will understand. It's very simple: she would cook, I would eat, and that is how we talked. That's the first language of a grandmother and a grandson anyway.

Q: How does your latest collection of poetry *The Theater of Night* fit into your work as a whole?

A: It's what I imagined is the love story of my great-grandparents Clemente and Ventura in northern Sonora and southern Arizona before there was any fence or any sense that there was even a divider there. The best way to ground it is in education. When you go to school, all your motion is backward, but you go to school to move forward in your life. How do we reconcile the two things? For me, the idea of going backward to my great-grandparents—and even farther down the road—is going to help me move forward.

Q: *The Theater of Night* opens with: "This book is in good and personal debt to Clemente and Ventura and all the rest of my extended family, in whom so many of my words find treasure, and to my hometown of Nogales." What is that good and personal debt?

A: They made me, they made me possible, and I'm indebted to them just intrinsically, just absolutely. Without them and without that story, I wouldn't have my story. Very specifically, it's because of them and where they moved to that I come to my point in my story as a human being. And that's the debt I owe them. I don't live very far from where they lived, I carry some of their names with me in my family, and all of that is worth remembering.

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