

AARP Segunda Juventud

A bilingual magazine

welcome!

english

español

home

games

food **NEW**

presence

Rx drugs

social security

trends

health

finance

travel

sports

entertainment

contact us

reader services

AARP en español

AARP Puerto Rico

ADVERTISEMENT



entertainment

Web Exclusive. . .**Javier Sierra***An interview with the author of The Secret Supper*

BY CARLOS J. QUEIRÓS

February/March 2006

AARP Segunda Juventud Associate Editor Carlos J. Queirós interviewed Javier Sierra in November 2005 about the upcoming North American release of his latest book, *The Secret Supper (La cena secreta)*.

more

[read a review of the secret supper](#)

Q: Javier, how would you describe *La cena secreta* to those who are not familiar with your work?

A: I would describe it as a kind of atlas or guide to learn a new language. It's not only a novel, but a tool that teaches the reader how to interpret works of art from the past. In fact, I think if *La cena secreta* has any virtues, it's the virtue of giving us back the capacity to read art—a capacity we lost with the discovery of printing and with the literacy of our culture and civilization. In the 15th century, not everyone could read. Very few had access to books. Therefore, the formula they used in the past to convey information was through works of art; almost everyone could read art then, something that doesn't happen now.

Q: Our audience is bilingual Hispanics who are 50 and older. Have you noticed a difference in how various generations respond to your book?

A: Well, there are different approaches to the book, depending on the reader's age. I think that every good book has different levels of reading. To young people, it's a thriller, a book of action, of intrigue, of mysteries. It's kind of like a giant puzzle that they assemble piece by piece. And middle-aged people have discovered that the book tries to bring them closer to a significant aspect of religion. Deep inside, all the characters in *La cena secreta* fight to find their faith, their real faith. And I think it's very important for people of a certain age, or any age, to find their real faith.

Q: And do you have an ideal reader?

A: I think that the ideal reader of my books is the reader who feels curiosity and hasn't lost the capacity to be surprised. It's a reader who, even though he's an adult, retains a child's spirit; he keeps the

Find articles from current or past issues »



or search

94

Subscribe

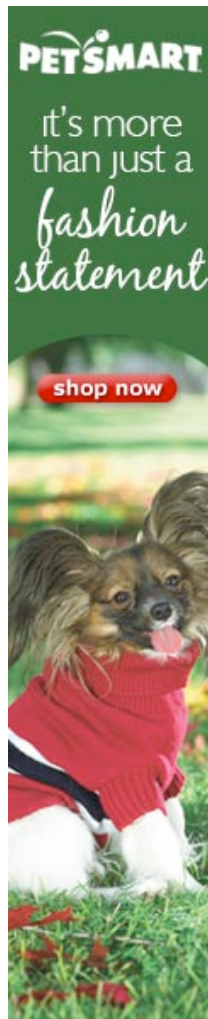
Sign up for the free AARP Segunda Juventud.org eNewsletter

Su email

Get the Magazine

Not an AARP member? [Join now](#) and start receiving AARP Segunda Juventud magazine at home, plus other great benefits. [Join now »](#)

Already an AARP member? [Click here](#) to start receiving AARP Segunda Juventud magazine in your home.



capacity to be amazed by the things he doesn't know. He's capable of opening his eyes very wide to understand more than what he's been taught. That is my ideal reader: the curious reader.

Q: Which authors have in some way influenced your work?

A: I feel I owe a big debt of gratitude to authors like Umberto Eco, the Italian writer and semiologist. He's a very intelligent person who in his novels introduces many cultural references and mysteries, but they're facts. They're facts, real things. And his books have enabled millions of people in the world to get closer to fragments of classical culture that otherwise would have remained inaccessible to a mass audience. I also admire the great creators of thrillers, of intrigue, of fiction. From Ken Follett with his work in *Pillars of the Earth* to other contemporary masters like Dan Brown. I discovered Dan Brown when I was about to finish writing *La cena secreta*.

Q: Have you met Dan Brown?

A: Yes, our meeting coincided with the final moments of my work on *La cena secreta*. And it was very curious, because I thought that *The Da Vinci Code* was going to be in competition with *La cena secreta*, but it wasn't like that because they're completely different. *The Da Vinci Code* is a contemporary thriller where Leonardo is a mere historical reference. *La cena secreta* is a thriller based in the 15th century when Leonardo is still alive. And I think that marks a very distinct difference between the books, even though both are action books. They're what English speakers call page-turners.

Q: Your book has been published in more than 30 countries. Have you read your book in another language?

A: Yes, I speak Italian and I read that translation. The truth is that it is a very satisfactory translation because, in some way, Italian was the real native language of the book. I mean, the book takes place in Italy; [I believe] the characters had to inevitably speak Italian, their original language. From Leonardo to the monks of the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie to the inquisitors, everyone in my novel originally had to speak Italian. I was very curious about that translation, and enjoyed it very much. I've also read, and almost studied, the English translation of the book. *The Secret Supper* was translated by Alberto Manguel, who is a distinct writer and intellectual. I had to collaborate with him in many instances to clarify certain aspects, to settle some of the details of the translation, and I'm very satisfied with the English translation of *La cena secreta*.

Q: And how long did it take Alberto Manguel to translate?

A: About six months of work. I must say that Alberto Manguel is a very meticulous person. And though he translates for Simon & Schuster, he lives in France and was fortunate enough to have in proximity elements that I mention in my novel and was able to verify them. It has been a very interesting collaboration.

Q: Why do you think books like yours and other historical thrillers are selling so well? What do you think is the universal appeal?

A: I think these kinds of books have a world impact right now for a very simple reason that goes beyond the actual fiction of the novel, and it's the following: I think that more and more, the citizens of the world believe less and less in the official versions of things. We've had a recent example with the invasion of Iraq and what has happened with the weapons of mass destruction, what they have told us, right? So, that's only the latest example. That is, people start to mistrust the official versions of things, also the official versions of history. And these types of novels, what they do is give the readers the capacity to think for themselves about what could have happened in the past. And it gives them other alternatives. I think that's why they're successful.

Q: Have your parents read all of your work?

A: Yes, yes. My parents have read all my books from the beginning. I published my first book in 1995 and dedicated it to them. I remember the dedication very well, because it was: "To my parents, for educating me in freedom." I think that was very nice, very interesting, because it's true that when I told my parents I wanted to be a writer, they held their heads and said, "Oh, that's a tough, difficult profession." But later on they saw that slowly I've been moving forward on this road and that I'm happy writing and doing what I like.

Q: And now you have a bestseller?

A: Sure, now a bestseller. And that has been, I think, very gratifying for them.

Q: What do your parents and grandparents think of your work?

A: Both of my parents liked *La cena secreta* a lot. I'm especially grateful to my father, who is not a regular reader and has read all of my books. It's very exciting when a non-regular reader, like my father, suddenly seems fascinated by the book and can't put it down, can't put it on the night table. That's very exciting. My mother is an avid reader. I have inherited her passion for books. And my mother devoured the book, practically in 30 hours. And she loved it. She loved the book, and we talk frequently about the minor details and doubts that come up from the book. My grandparents, unfortunately, haven't been able to read any of my books. My last surviving grandparent, my grandmother, passed away a month ago when she was 104 years old.

Q: Wow, 104 years old?

A: Yes, 104. It was a very sweet death; she simply went to sleep and died, surrounded by her family and having lived more than one century. I'm very proud of my grandmother. Even though she couldn't see well enough to read my books, she knew that I wrote.

Q: You have traveled to more than 20 countries. What has been your experience in the United States?

A: Fantastic. I always have a special place in my heart for the United States. My first novel, *The Blue Lady*, takes place partially in the United States—specifically in the Southwest, in New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas.

Q: You have written three nonfiction books concerning historical and scientific enigmas as well as four successful novels. Where would you suggest that someone new to your work begin? How are fiction and nonfiction different for you?

A: I think that if readers want to get close to my work for the first time, the best introduction is *La cena secreta* because they'll become familiar with my method of getting close to enigmas. And my way of getting close to the enigmas for literature is first to document the enigma clearly and then to resolve it with the tools of literature—something history or historians can't get to because they're missing proof. That's where I can get to with literature: resolve or propose a solution to the enigma.

It's like creating. Today we would call it creating a virtual stage in which to resolve a mystery. I have done it with *La cena secreta*. I did it with my previous novel *El secreto egipcio de Napoleón* (Napoleon's Egyptian Secret), which will also be translated into English soon. It's the story of how Napoleon conquered Egypt and how at the end of his stay in Egypt, in 1799, he spent one night inside the Great Pyramid. When he came out of the Great Pyramid—and this is a fact, this is historical [*Editor's note: this fact is disputed.*]*—*he came out with his face twisted, as if he had been very scared. When his men asked him what had happened to him, he responded with a sentence that was...let's say the light that enlightened my novel. He responded, "Even if I told you, you

wouldn't believe me." And that attitude of Napoleon of not wanting to tell what he saw or felt inside the Great Pyramid led me to write a novel that tries to explain what happened.

Q: The mystery?

A: Exactly, exactly. If someone wants to explore my nonfiction, I think the best book to start with is *En busca de la edad de oro* (In Search of the Golden Age). [It's] a book about the enigmas of ancient civilizations. I decided on that title because all great ancient cultures, from classical Greece to the Egypt of the pharaohs to India, talk about an ancient Golden Age, prior to ours, in which men developed mentally, spiritually, physically, and technologically much more than we have. Everyone talks about that vague ancestral memory, almost before the Flood. And the search for that Golden Age is what has taken me to many parts of the world to look for proof. This book has brief chapters dedicated to small enigmas that have overwhelmed me.

Q: What enigma do you plan to investigate next?

A: Right now I'm working on a project, maybe the most complex of all my projects. It has to do with the origin of the Kabbalah, the Jewish Kabbalah. The Kabbalah was born in Spain, not in Israel, in the 12th century, in the middle of the age of the construction of cathedrals. The first book about Kabbalah is called Zohar, the Book of Splendor, and it was written in León, in the north of Spain, while the gothic cathedral of León was under construction. And there are many gothic cathedrals during this period in Spain that have influences from the Kabbalah. This is extraordinary because of the influence of the Jews—who were a persecuted minority at that time in Spain—in the great temples of Christianity. That to me is extraordinary, so I'm investigating that subject.

Q: How long did it take you to write *La cena secreta*?

A: It was three years of work. Yes, especially traveling to Italy to document many aspects of Leonardo's life. My investigation began at Leonardo's crib and ended with his death. I started in Vinci, which is a small town in Tuscany near Florence, where Leonardo was born. That's why Leonardo is Leonardo da Vinci, because it's the town. And up to Amboise in France, where Leonardo is buried. I followed his living journey and collected all the possible information about this figure. Even though later on I focused on only three years of his life, what I did was investigate his life in depth, completely. And in some way, my investigation came to an end when in 2002, I arrived in Amboise and I left some flowers on Leonardo's tomb, as if to ask him for permission to talk about him, right?

Read a [review](#) of *The Secret Supper*.

[Return to Top](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Free Shipping		on all Toshiba notebooks when you buy online. ToshibaDirect.com	Shop now TOSHIBA Leading Innovation >>>
--------------------------	---	--	--

www.aarp.org | [contact us](#) | [privacy policy](#)
copyright 2007, AARP. All rights reserved.