

An Interview With Karl Luntta

By Anne Malcolm

AM: Did the focal racist events aimed towards the Dubois family in *Know It by Heart* stem from actual events that you witnessed or experienced?

KL: I grew up in the 1960s, a time when civil rights movements were central in American culture and politics. I knew who the Freedom Riders were, I knew what the Ku Klux Klan was, and I understood the symbolism of a burning cross. However, there were no blacks in my neighborhood or life, and none of the restrooms in my New England towns said "Colored Only." I never personally witnessed acts of racism until I went to Africa in my 20s. In America, what I'd read about racial conflict always took place far away, most often in the south, and the genesis of this story came from a simple question: what if a black family moved into a mostly liberal, mostly Democrat, mostly tolerant, but wholly white New England neighborhood?

AM: This story deals with some serious issues. Why did you decide to deal with them from the point of view of Dub, an adolescent?

KL: Often, I think, the young can assess a problem with a certain clarity that many adults have lost. It's not that children are able to put an issue in the perspective of experience, or of a long life lived, but they're able to break it down to its simplest elements and know it for what it is. Kids are perfect messengers that way. Dub is at an age where he is just beginning to know pain and ignorance and the ugliness of the world, and through his point of view I found I developed some clarity as well. It served me well in the story.

(cont. on pg. 3)

LITTLE STONES AT MY WINDOW

for roberto and adelaida

Once in a while
joy throws little stones at my
window
it wants to let me know that it's
waiting for me
but today I'm calm
I'd almost say even-tempered
I'm going to keep anxiety locked
up
and then lie flat on my back
which is an elegant and
comfortable position
for receiving and believing news
who knows where I'll be next
or when my story will be taken
into account
who knows what advice I still
might come up with
and what easy way out I'll take not
to follow it

don't worry I won't gamble with
an eviction
I won't tattoo remembering with
forgetting
there are many things left to say
and suppress
and many grapes left to fill our
mouths

don't worry I'm convinced
joy doesn't need to throw any
more little stones
I'll open the window
I'll open the window.

—Mario Benedetti

from *Little Stones at My Window*
translated by Charles Hatfield
ISBN 1-880684-90-X / \$19.95

Curbstone Releases 2002 Sor Juana Prize Winner

"*No One Will See Me Cry* is one of the most beautiful and perturbing novels ever written in Mexico."

—Carlos Fuentes

Curbstone Press is proud to announce the release of the English translation of *No One Will See Me Cry*, a vividly-imagined historical novel from one of Mexico's rising literary stars, Cristina Rivera-Garza (translated by Andrew Hurley).

In the observation ward of the General Insane Asylum La Castañeda, Joaquín Buitrago, asylum photographer, takes a photo of an incoming female patient, Matilda Burgos, a patient he is convinced is a former prostitute he knew many years ago. His obsessive need to confirm her identity leads him to explore the clinic's records, and her tragic history. Joaquín and Matilda begin to tell each other fragmented stories of a past they almost shared.

Set in 1921, *No One Will See Me Cry* is at once an overview of one of the most turbulent times in Mexican history, a love story, and a meditation on the ways in which medical and popular language defined insanity.

Based on extensive research in medical files from the era, this historical novel avoids focusing on the great events of revolutionary Mexico and instead brilliantly portrays those living on the fringes of reason.

The Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz Prize was initiated in 1993 by the Guadalajara International Book Fair, the Guadalajara School of Writers, and the French publisher Indigo/Coté-Femmes. Sor Juana was the first major

(cont. on pg. 4)



Curbstone INK.

This newsletter was prepared with the help of the following:

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From the Publishers' Desk

We're reminded of Sam Goldwyn's quip, "If I were in this business only for the business, I wouldn't be in this business." Because of the recession, literary book sales have taken a battering and donations have been down. A number of independent presses have gone under in the past few years, but we want to assure you that by cutting back expenses and working hard to expand our donor base, Curbstone has maintained financial stability and has a number of exciting new books in the pipeline for you.

We have been particularly moved by the number of people of modest income who answered our call to give whatever they could to support the Press. These donations were great help in narrowing the funding gap during these difficult times. We are extremely grateful to the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, The National Endowment for the Arts, and the Lannan Foundation for major grants that made our work possible. And we also thank United Way for funding that supports our local school programs.

Critical response to the books in the media has been excellent. Our 2002 Mármol Prize Winner, Lorraine López, won the Independent Publisher Book Award and the Latino Book Award for *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories*. Sometimes, though, the most moving comments come from the general reader. One customer wrote about *Sorrow* by Claribel Alegría, "This slim volume is one of the most touching, sad and beautiful books I've ever read... I'll re-read this a hundred times...and I hope I find a love as deep."

The high school and middle school teachers we work with have encouraged us to provide more multicultural work for teenagers, and we are proud to announce a new collection of stories by Latino authors for young adults, *Once Upon a Cuento*, edited by Lyn Miller-Lachmann, Chief Editor of *Multicultural Review*.

Finally, we want to thank the Connecticut Center for the Book for presenting us with a Lifetime Achievement Award for Service to the Literary Community in December 2002.

We are always happy to hear from our readers. Please write or e-mail to us any comments or suggestions.

Sincerely,

Judith Doyle and Alexander Taylor

MISSION AT THE HELM:

Curbstone Press, a 501(c)(3) arts and education organization, was founded in 1975 in Willimantic, Connecticut. Throughout its history, the Press's Board and Co-Directors have nurtured Curbstone's focus on creative literature that invites readers to examine social issues, encourages a deeper understanding between cultures, and reflects a commitment to promoting human rights. Curbstone's mission weaves together two interdependent programs: 1) publishing creative literature that illuminates the issues of our time, and 2) bringing writers into U.S. communities to promote literacy, knowledge about many cultures, respect for human rights, and appreciation of good literature, among people of all ages.

Luntta Interview (cont. from page 1)

Racism is a multileveled and complex issue, but it's real and it's evil and that's pretty well all the children have to go on.

AM: Would you say that your voice as a writer comes through more in the young Dub, his father the journalist, or both?



KL: Both at times, and through other characters as well. Even through Doreen, the mother, who is a terrible mess. A writer's voice defines the text — it's what sets the story apart from every other piece of writing on the planet. It's a tall order, I know, but the best writers have that voice, or are ardently looking for it. A distinct writing voice is why bad Hemingway contests can exist, or why people are able to recognize a passage from

Kerouac without being told who wrote it.

In terms of the voices of the characters, I tried to have them speak in a way that is true to their evolution, and say and do things, however reprehensible they might be, that are also honest and true. Dub narrates this story, so I spent more time with him than anyone else, and I got to know him pretty well.

AM: The circus is a really interesting background for the story. How did you see the circus functioning in terms of theme, plot, and character?

KL: I'd like to say that the circus is an extended metaphor for the horrors of life without freedom and so on, but I'll let other people say that. The truth is I'm fascinated by circuses. I love the pomp, the bravado in the ring, the cheap costumes, the lunacy of someone riding a unicycle on a high wire and the lunacy of us being captivated by it. And of course the animals and the rides and the carnies. Everything about circuses is loud and swaggering, and it's just great fun to write about them. I was partially drawn to the circus backdrop because of where I grew up; Hartford has a place in circus history with its infamous 1944 big top fire and the mystery of the unidentified girl who died, Little Miss 1565.

Why are we so attracted to the circus? I think we're caught up in an ancient fantasy, one of the oldest forms of entertainment around. It's a spectacle that's been taking place in one way or another for centuries. In the story, I used the circus as a natural focal point for the summer, something to look forward to, and something that, in its denial, would be devastating to Dub. Some of the circus scenes in *Heart* were adapted from a short story I wrote years ago, called, oddly enough, "The Circus." In some ways I think the circus itself is one of the more interesting characters in the book.

AM: Do you feel your experience in the Peace Corps has influenced your writing?

KL: I would bet that everything that has happened in my life has influenced my writing, whether I know it or not. The Peace Corps, and Africa, certainly informed my writing by providing insight into the elements that make up different cultures, and living in a foreign place. I was a stranger in a strange land — even though I lived in Botswana for six years, that feeling never entirely left me.

I was quite often on the outside looking in, an observer and not much more, and that experience influenced my writing later on. I knew a writer there, a Mosotho man who'd been a political prisoner in South Africa when apartheid was at its most virulent. He was old when I met him, but in his youth he'd been taken by the South Africans and beaten until he was crippled. His face was a mess, and he lived in one of these one-room cement-block rows behind a complex of flats. He had one pair of pants and a pair of glasses that were wired up and tied with string. His prized possession was a portable typewriter, and with it he punched out book after book, most, if I remember, self-published, and all written in Sesotho, the language of Lesotho. He must have written a dozen novels, a tour de force, but I couldn't read a word of them. People in the Peace Corps office took care of him, brought him paper, gave him things. And he'd sit in his room in that hot box in the afternoon sun and bang out these books. He was quite mad and slightly dangerous, but this fetish he had about writing translated into a haunted courage. Without his writing, he would have died. After seeing his struggle, I had nothing to whine about.

AM: You portray racism infringing on every part of life in Dub's East Hartford community: family, community, law, and friends. How do you think people have progressed from this state since the time the story was set? How much further do we have to go, as a people, to eliminate racism?

KL: I think racism is as old as humanity and might never go away. As long as people have egos and something to lose, they'll look for a way to put a group down, either institutionally or by custom. We've progressed quite a bit in relations since the 1960s, but I think a lot of today's racism has simply gone under-ground. The laws have been passed, affirmative action is in place, and many people of good will have risen to the task of righting the wrongs of previous years. But we haven't eliminated that gut-level, primal fear that breeds racism. Integration of course battles it.

People living together, in the same neighborhoods, from birth, are less likely to harbor the fears and stereotypes that breed racism. But is that going to happen? Not in my lifetime or for



(cont. on pg. 4)

many, many generations hence, but I have hope because that's all I can have.

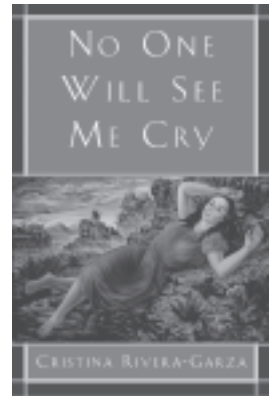
AM: Ideally, what impact would you like *Know It by Heart* to have on your readers?

KL: Ideally, I'd like them to recommend it to a friend who would go out and buy it. Really, though, when you think about the novels that have had the most impact on you, a pattern emerges — you're so involved you read it in one marathon sitting. You're dismayed when you realize you have only one chapter to go. You weep. You hear yourself talking out loud to characters. Three months later you're still thinking about a couple of the scenes. That's the sort of impact any writer would want. I know *Heart* won't change anything, but it's what I've got to offer right now and my fondest hope is that those reading it might see something of themselves in it.

\$15.95pa ISBN 1-880684-95-0 336pp FICTION

woman writer of Spanish America, and her poetry, theater, and journals constitute an important contribution to literary arts the world over. The primary objective of the prize is to bring attention to a woman writing in the Spanish language.

Cristina Rivera-Garza was born in Mexico and now divides her time between San Diego, where she is an associate professor of Mexican history, and Tijuana, where she heads the Creative Writing Program at the Centro Cultural Tijuana. Cristina Rivera-Garza has received six of the most prestigious literary awards in Latin America.



\$15.95pa ISBN 1-880684-91-8 HISTORICAL FICTION

Winners of the Mármol Prize Receive Critical Acclaim



Curbstone Press is proud to announce that Lorraine López's *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories*, winner of the 2002 Mármol Prize, has received two additional important literary awards. *Soy la Avon Lady* was the recipient of the 2003 Latino Book Award for Short Stories from the Latino Literary Hall of Fame, and the 2003 Independent Publishers Book Award for Multicultural Fiction.

In June, Judith Ortiz Cofer selected Mary Helen Lagasse's *The Fifth Sun* as the winner of the 2004 Mármol Prize, commenting, "Mary Helen Lagasse has woven a tapestry of many colors in her novel about Mercedes, the Mexican girl whose life is the red thread running through the intricate design of the early 20th century Mexican-American experience...Her journey is the hero's journey—the path to enlightenment." *The Fifth Sun* will be published in April 2004.



Mary Helen Lagasse

Praise for Carla Trujillo's *What Night Brings*

"I have been waiting for this one, and it was worth the wait."
—Dorothy Allison

"Trujillo works a kind of literary magic with her words and is already being compared to Harper Lee and Dorothy Allison... readers will cheer, laugh, and perhaps cry, all at the same time..."
—Xena A. Ryan, *Out Front Colorado*

"Carla Trujillo's *What Night Brings* puts one more wonderful Chicana novelist on the must-read list... *What Night Brings* is a page-turner that lingers long after the last page has been turned."
—Margaret Randall

"Trujillo's book remains expertly written right up to the very last page, juggling the terrible tragedies with sweet moments of affection, each balancing the other as only the best and worst of true life can achieve...This novel is an admirable introduction to Carla Trujillo, a writer to watch."
—*Hispanic Magazine*

"It is to be ardently hoped that this is only the first of a long list of books to come from Ms. Trujillo."
—*Dallas Morning News*



What We've Been Up To: a Report on 2002

In 2002, Curbstone published 7 books: George Evans' *The New World*, Jack Hirschman's *Art on the Line*, Wayne Karlin's *The Wished-for Country*, Lorraine López's *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories*, Marnie Mueller's *My Mother's Island*, *Six Vietnamese Poets* edited by Nguyen Ba Chung and Kevin Bowen, Steve Straight's *The Water Carrier*, and Daisy Zamora's *The Violent Foam*. Please visit our web site for more information on these books.

Curbstone arranged 118 events in Connecticut, primarily in public schools. The Press also ran a poetry course at the Center for Learning in Retirement in Mansfield and held a 2-day poetry festival for the community at Windham High School. During the summer, Curbstone sponsored a series of readings in the Julia de Burgos Park in Willimantic, where adults and children gathered in the early evening to hear readings by such



Ron Casanova with students at Weaver High School



Ernesto Cardenal with students at Windham High School



Claribel Alegría with students at Windham High School

poets as Jack Agüeros, Doug Anderson, Naomi Ayala and Tino Villanueva. A highlight of the year was a major Northeastern tour arranged for Claribel Alegría and Ernesto Cardenal, who were greeted with warm enthusiasm by audiences from New York City to Amherst, Massachusetts. The Press donated 1,425 books to school programs. Students were excited to get signed copies of authors' books for their personal libraries and were eagerly sharing them with family and friends.

We especially want to thank State Senator Don Williams for securing a Northeast Connecticut Arts Program grant that brought Naomi Ayala to Windham High and Windham Middle Schools, Doug Anderson to Killingly High School, Ernesto Cardenal and Claribel Alegría to Windham High School, Lorraine López to E.O. Smith High School, and Roberto Sosa to Windham Middle School. Special thanks also to State legislators Walter Pawelkiewicz and David Pudlin for their aid in securing an Office of Policy and Management grant to support Curbstone's Latino Literature series and visits by Latino authors to Connecticut schools and community centers.



Sandy Taylor and Judy Doyle receiving the CT Center for the Book's award for Lifetime Achievement, presented by Mary Etter (center)

Casting Off by Claribel Alegría, translated by Margaret Sayers Peden

“...Alegría’s strengths include recollection and reflection... Moments of insight, where a personal flash can be concretized for others...” *The New Mexican*

“Alegría invites us on a journey to encounter things old and new, good and bad... [this] bilingual collection embraces the turmoil of the unknown, the excitement of new possibilities, and the inevitability of evil in the world... If, as she writes in ‘Lluvia’ (‘Rain’), her memories reveal a ‘senseless world/ a voracious/ world-abys,’ she still finds a way to love it, ‘because forever, I have loved it/ without knowing why.’” —*Criticas*

The Wished-for Country by Wayne Karlin

“Karlin provides an insightful look at the genesis of a new nation as he weaves the many threads of the story together... the lives of three diverse men converge in colonial Maryland...”
—*The Historical Novels Review*

“*The Wished-for Country* is a book that leads readers into asking: What is the song that my life creates? What other songs do I hear? Song of water, wind, forest? Song of turtle, crow, heron? Songs of the forgotten, the usually invisible? What songs do I love and pass on?” —*Bay Weekly*

Karlin not only “present(s) the beginning of Maryland through the eyes of the winners, as usually told in the history books, but he also tells us the stories of the less privileged, the losers... The novel is engaging and flows nicely from one story to the next. The reader will come away with a deep appreciation of those who came before us and how they struggled to give us a ‘wished for country.’” —*Ann Arundel County Historical Society*

Know It By Heart by Karl Luntta

“Storytelling that makes abundant use of unforgettable characters, a compelling sweep of events, colorful dialogue, and a mind set that captures the essence of an era. Karl Luntta is a first-rate talent.” —Lary Bloom

“Atticus Finch would love this book, James Baldwin would love this book. Martin Luther King is reading it in Heaven... I love the way this book opens. The speaker, a young man named Dub Teed, has a strong voice that satisfies the reader throughout the entire event-filled book. He can be funny, and he’s tender-hearted, and he proves to be a wily foe for those bent on injustice.”

—Margaret Suzumowski, *Returned Peace Corps Volunteers Newsletter*

“Dub’s first-person narrative rings true, fast and funny, as well as deeply hurt. There’s also a compelling mystery about who’s behind the violence, with tension that mounts to the end.”

—*Booklist*

Curbstone Press received a 3-year grant from Lannan Foundation in the amount of \$150,000 to support the publication and distribution of literary translations. BOA Editions and Graywolf Press were also chosen to take part in this new opportunity. Each press will publish two new works of translation each year for the next three years. Through these grants, Lannan Foundation aims to introduce important international writers and increase the number of translations published in the United States. *Mil gracias* to Patrick Lannan and the Lannan Foundation for supporting translation in these critical times when it is more important than ever that people of the world listen to and understand each other. The first three Curbstone books in this series are on bookstore shelves now— *Love After War*, a collection of contemporary Vietnamese fiction edited by Wayne Karlin and Ho Anh Thai, *No One Will See Me Cry* by Cristina Rivera-Garza (see pg. 4), and *Rattlesnake*, a novel by the renowned Guatemalan author Arturo Arias.

New Film on Guatemala

Precarious Peace: God and Guatemala explores the Guatemalan peace process, past and present, and the complicated role religion plays in that drama. This video focuses first on the civil war that lasted for over 30 years, seen through the eyes of a Mayan family in the rural highlands. It also deals with today’s more insidious levels of violence, in economic, racial, and religious marginalization. Over a dozen denominations and faith groups are represented in this ecumenical project.

Precarious Peace may be ordered from two distributors: Vision Video: 1-800-523-0226 (Reference item #4701) www.visionvideo.com; and the Maryknolls: 1-800-227-8523 (Reference item #138) www.maryknollmall.org. The price is \$24.95 plus shipping. *Precarious Peace*, written and produced by Shirley and Rudy Nelson and co-directed in Guatemala by Dennis Smith, is based on the book, *Recovering Memory: Guatemalan Churches and the Challenge of Peacemaking*, by Paul Jeffrey.

Recommended from Other Presses

INSURGENT IMAGES: The Agitprop Murals of Mike Alewitz by Paul Buhle & Mike Alewitz, (Monthly Review Press) • *The Oath: A Surgeon Under Fire* by Khassan Baiev (Walker) • *This Wild Silence* by Lucy Jane Bledsoe (Alyson Books) • *Work Done Right* by David Dominguez (University of Arizona Press) • *Indiana, Indiana* by Laird Hunt (Coffee House) • *At Work: the Art of California Labor* edited by Mark Dean Johnson (California Historical Society Press & Heyday Books) • *Border of a Dream: Selected Poems* by Antonio Machado, translated by Willis Barnstone (Copper Canyon) • *An Execution in the Family: One Son’s Journey* by Robert Meeropol (St. Martin’s Press) • *Haydée Santamaría* edited by Bessy MacLean (Rebel Lives Series, Ocean Press) • *Walking the Choctaw Road* by Tim Tingle (Cinco Puntos Press)

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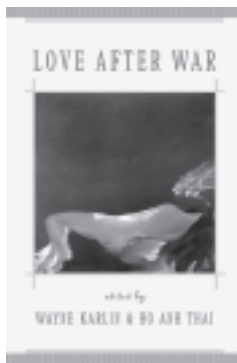
NEW & RECENT TITLES



Once Upon a Cuento, stories for young adults written by Latina/o writers, is edited by Lyn Miller-Lachman (editor of the *Multicultural Review*). This is a collection of short stories written by well-known and emerging Latina/o

authors. The seventeen stories, written for young people grade five and up, explore issues of heritage and history, identity, and the challenges of moving to a new country, often living in lower-income families, and struggling to learn a new language and culture. The stories in *Once Upon a Cuento* will be important to both Anglo kids (to better understand Latino culture) and to Latino kids (who desire stories about their own culture and who will benefit from positive role models). This collection fulfills a critical need for more multicultural material for young people of all backgrounds.

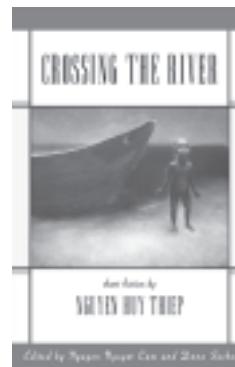
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