



# Josephina Niggli

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*Once you have experienced the emotion of having a play produced, you are forever lost to the ordinary world.*

— Interview in Newsday (1998)

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## Quick Facts

- \* 1910-1983
- \* Latina poet, playwright, novelist, and educator
- \* *Mexican Village* is regarded as one of her most significant works

## Biography

Josephina Maria Niggli, one of the first Latina writers to have her work published by the U.S. presses, was born in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico on July 13, 1910. Her father Frederick Ferdinand Niggli, whose Swiss and Alsatian forebears immigrated to Texas in 1836, had moved to Mexico in 1893 and found a job as the manager of a cement plant in the village of Hidalgo. Josephina’s mother, Goldie (Morgan) Niggli, was a violinist of Irish, French and German descent.

As a child, Niggli’s life was greatly influenced by the turmoil of Mexican politics. After the assassination of Mexico’s president, Francisco Madero, in 1913, the then three-year-old Josephina was sent to San Antonio, Texas, with less than an hour’s notice. For the next seven years, Josephina and her family roamed around the southwestern United States, never really finding a home, until they moved back to Mexico in 1920. When the revolution of 1925 broke out, Josephina was sent back to San Antonio where she completed her high school education (most of which had taken place under the supervision of her mother) at Main Avenue High School.



This page was researched and submitted by: Joseph Henry Dvorkin.



# Josephina Niggli

## Biography continued

At the age of 15, Josephina Niggli began her post-secondary education at the College of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas. Although she majored in philosophy and minored in history, it is during her undergraduate experience that Niggli began to consider becoming a writer. This idea was supported by Dr. Roehl, who was head of the English department, and before Josephina graduated, she managed to take first and second prizes in the National Catholic College Poetry Contest, and second prize in the *Ladies' Home Journal* College Short Story Contest.

After completing her undergraduate studies in 1931, Niggli went on to study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. There, she studied playwriting, working with Samuel Selden, Professor Frederick H. Koch, Paul Green, and Betty Smith. In 1937, after writing a three-act play, *Singing Valley*, for her thesis, Josephina Niggli graduated from the University of North Carolina with a Master's degree in drama.

Niggli began her professional writing career when her poem "Tourist in a Mexican Town" was published in the *Denver Echo*. In 1931, a collection of her poems was published under the title *Mexican Silhouettes*. Throughout the rest of the decade, Niggli continued to gain popularity as more of her work was brought out as both individual texts - *The Red Velvet Goat* (1938) and *Sunday Costs Five Pesos* (1939) - and as parts of various anthologies - *The Carolina Play-Book* (March 1936), *The Best One-Act-Plays of 1938*, and *Contemporary One-Act Plays* (1938). In 1938 Josephina edited her own anthology, *Mexican Folk Plays*.

In 1945, Josephina Niggli published her most famous and influential piece of work, *Mexican Village*. This collection of ten related stories constituting a literary chronicle of Hidalgo, Mexico was the first literary work by a Mexican American to reach a general American audience. According to Joseph Henry Jackson of the *New York Herald Tribune*, the book was "a document . . . without a peer in its field . . . an utterly faithful, wholly convincing portrayal of Mexican village life as it is." According to *Current Biography*, Niggli's intent to convey the distinctiveness of Mexican-American culture along with her vivid depiction of the fundamental tensions in Mexican life -- the volatile interaction of Spanish and Indian cultures and the profound sense of history and traditionalism pulling against the influences of modern society -- distinguish *Mexican Village* as a major transitional work in the development of Mexican-American fiction.



# Josephina Niggli

## Biography continued

Following the success of *Mexican Village*, Niggli went on to publish *Pointers on Playwriting* later that year, and then *Pointers on Radio Writing* in 1946. In 1947 Niggli printed her first novel, *Step Down, Elder Brother*. It was over a decade later, in 1964, that Niggli published her next, and final, significant literary work, *Miracle for Mexico*.

Josephina Niggli taught radio script writing and production at the University of North Carolina from 1942 to 1944. In 1956 she joined the Western Carolina University faculty as a director of drama and journalism instructor, remaining there until her retirement in 1975. Throughout her career, Niggli received many notable honors, including two Rockefeller Fellowships in Playwriting (1936 and 1938), a National Theatre Counsel Fellowship, and the Mayflower Association of North Carolina's award for the best book written during the previous year by a North Carolinian (*Mexican Village*, 1946).

Josephina Niggli died in 1983 at the age of 73. As one of the most influential Mexican-American authors of the century, she will be remembered for the great understanding of Mexican tradition, life, and customs her writing displayed. Arguably one of the most important landmarks in Mexican-American literary history, her work pointed the way to contemporary Chicano literary sensibility.

## Selected Bibliography

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# Josephina Niggli

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