



Helena Maria Viramontes

“

I dunno— responds Champ, shrugging her shoulders that way she always does when she is listening to something else, her own heart-beat, what Gregorio said on the phone yesterday, shrugs her shoulders when Miss Smith says OFELIA, answer my question. She is too busy thinking of things people otherwise dismiss like parentheses, but sticks to her like gum, like a hole on a shirt, like a tattoo, and sometimes she wishes she weren't born with such adhesiveness.

— “Miss Clairol”

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1954
- * Chicana poet, short story writer, and screenplay author
- * Wrote *The Moths and Other Stories*

Biography

Helena Maria Viramontes was born in East Los Angeles, California, on February 26, 1954. She attended Immaculate Heart College, majoring in English Literature, and received her B.A. in 1975. It was in college that she began writing, first poetry and then fiction. Her stories were soon published and recognized. In 1977, she won first prize in a literary contest sponsored by *Statement* magazine for her story “Requiem for the Poor.” She also won the *Statement* prize the following year for her story “The Broken Web,” and in 1979 was awarded the fiction prize in the University of California at Irvine Chicano Literary Contest for the short story “Birthday.”

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Biography continued

In 1981, Viramontes enrolled in a Masters of Fine Arts Creative Writing Program at UC-Irvine, which she recently completed. In 1983, two of her stories were published in the anthology *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas*, and another story appeared in *Women of Her World*, an anthology published in 1985. She also received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship to attend a workshop given by Gabriel Garcia Marquez at the Sundance Institute. Viramontes has collaborated with Maria Herrera Sobel on two anthologies, *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Creative Frontiers in American Literature* (1988), and *Chicana Writers: On Word and Film* (1993). Also in 1993, Viramontes wrote *Paris Rats in E.L.A.*, a screenplay that has been produced by the American Film Institute.

Helena Maria Viramontes has received critical acclaim for her short stories for their masterful depictions of Chicano culture. She mainly writes about people she has known since childhood, especially family and friends. With regard to her parents' influence on her writing, the author states: "If my mother showed all that is good in being female, my father showed all that is bad in being male." Viramontes focuses on the struggles and sufferings of Chicana women with their households, their culture, and their society.

The short story "Growing," which is included in her work *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), illustrates how a young women's coming-of-age separates her from the rest of the family. In one scene, when Naomi asks her father why he suddenly becomes distanced from her, he says, "tu eres mujer," you are a woman. Viramontes ultimately wishes to portray how women, in particular Chicana women, are discriminated against merely because of their sex.

Another powerful novel is titled *Under the Feet of Jesus*, which is about a young California migrant worker's dream of becoming a geologist. Estrella is thirteen when she arrives in her new temporary home with her younger siblings, her mother Petra, and the man who is not her father, Perfecto. Estrella's ebullient spirit is painfully contrasted with Petra's coping, mid-thirties fatigue.

This California is not the legendary destination of blissful contemplation, but rather the landscape one drives over and hikes across to get to the next job. When Viramontes describes Estrella's family trying to cross a highway, the immediacy of the narrative moment is striking, and the images of their hard labor are extraordinary. Viramontes has dedicated this novel to her parents, who met while picking cotton, and to the memory of Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers.

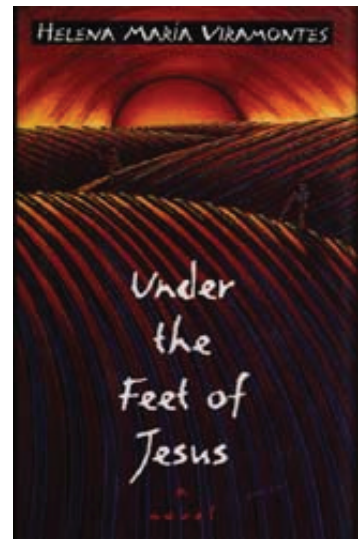


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Biography continued

Viramontes' stories, in essence, communicate the overwhelming trials and tribulations that Chicana mothers, wives, and daughters face. They utilize stream-of-consciousness narrative, magic as literary symbols, and multiple narrators to depict the thoughts and emotions of these beautiful and haunted women. Still other issues portrayed in her works include politics, religion, and sexuality. Her influences include Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morrison.

The author is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Cornell University. In addition, her latest novel, *Their Dogs Came with Them*, published in 1996, is about the brutality of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Not only is Viramontes expanding her writing, but she is involved with the MTU Writing Center Latino Read-In, where she is a consultant. She has also counseled Chicano students at Cornell's Summer College.



Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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