Elena Poniatowska
Princess of Mexican Letters

She was born in France in 1932. Her full name is Hélène Elizabeth Louise Amélie Paula Dolores Poniatowska Amor, and she is the daughter of Prince Jean Joseph Evremond Sperry Poniatowski, a direct descendant of King Stanislaus II Poniatowski of Poland, and Paula Amor Escandón, a Mexican citizen of French ancestry. In 1941, Paula fled World War II with her daughters and took refuge in Mexico. Elena Poniatowska inherited the title of princess of Poland—something that matters very little to her, and, which in addition to spending very little time with her European family, has earned her the sobriquet “The Red Princess.”

Elena, known for her unpretentious personality, critical spirit and enormous sensitivity to social issues, is the author of a large body of literary work. In it, she particularly gives voice to the people most ignored by society: the poor, the displaced, the young, opponents of the regime, women who are not part of government power circles, and children, among others.

She has been awarded honorary doctoral degrees by institutions of higher learning in Mexico and abroad, like the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (1979); the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (1980); New York’s New School of Social Research (1994); Florida Atlantic University (1995); the Autonomous Metropolitan University (2000); New York’s Manhattanville College and the UNAM (2001); and, most recently, the Autonomous University of Puebla (2002). In 2007, the Mexico City government’s Ministry of Culture established the Elena Poniatowska Interamerican Prize for the Novel. She has also been given many other prestigious awards, among which are the 1970 Mazatlán Prize for her book Hasta no verte Jesús mío (published in English as Here’s to You, Jesus!); the 1970 Xavier Villarrutia Prize for La noche de Tlatelolco (The Night of Tlatelolco, published in English as Massacre in Mexico)—a prize she rejected to emphasize her position about the events of October 2, 1968; the 1978 National Prize for Journalism, making her the first woman to receive it; the 1992 Mazatlán Prize for Tinísima; the 2001 Alfaguara Prize for a Novel for La piel del cielo (The Skin of the Sky); the 2002 National Prize for Science and the Arts (in the field of linguistics and literature); the 2004 Columbia University María Moors Cabot Award; and the 2007 Rómulo Gallegos International Prize for the Novel for her book El tren pasa primero (The Train Goes By First).

Among her most outstanding works are the following:

**Novels and short stories:** Lilus Kikus (short stories, 1954); Hasta no verte Jesús mío (novel, 1969); De noche vienes (novel, 1979); La piel del cielo (novel, 2001); Triapalera (short stories, 2003); and El tren pasa primero (novel, 2006).

**Chronicles:** Palabras cruzadas. Crónicas (1961); Fuerte es el silencio (1980); Amanecer en el Zócalo. Los 50 días que confrontaron a México (2007).

**Testimonios:** La noche de Tlatelolco. Testimonios de historia oral (1970); Gaby Brimmer (1979); Nada, nadie. Las voces del temblor (1988).

**Essays:** ¡Ay vida, no me mereces! Carlos Fuentes, Rosario Castellanos, Juan Rulfo, la literatura de la onda (1985).

**Interviews:** Todo México I-VII (interviews done between 1991 and 2002).

**Biographies:** Tinísima (1992); Octavio Paz, las palabras del árbol (1998); Juan Soriano. Niño de mil años (2000); Mariana Yampolsky y la buganvilia (2001).

Her books have been translated into English and French. Published in English are the following:

- Lilus Kikus and Other Stories, with drawings by Leonora Carrington (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

Recently, Poniatowska, who has worked in almost all the genres of literature, surprised her readers with the magnificent volume of poetry Rondas de la niña mala (Nursery Rhymes of a Bad Little Girl) (2008), which she talks about at length with Claire Joysmith in this issue of Voices of Mexico. A woman of her time, Elena Poniatowska offers all those interested in dialoguing with her, her Face Book page at http://www.facebook.com/pages/Elena-Poniatowska/28038002741.

**NOTES** 1 This book was made into a film titled Gaby: A True Story by Mexican director Luis Mandoki in 1987.