

Graciela Martínez-Zalce*

A Mexican-Canadian Writer in Canada

Interview with Silvia Moreno-García



I first learned about Silvia Moreno-García's work thanks to Canada Reads, the enormous famed reading club sponsored by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) that was launched at the beginning of this century. Once a year, five books are chosen and —during a week of public discussions— they are *championed* by five well-known figures in Anglo-Canadian public life that are neither academics nor professional literary critics.

The theme for the 2023 competition was “One Book to Shift Your Perspective,” for which *Mexican Gothic*, by Silvia Moreno-García, was chosen as a finalist. In the discussion of the virtual community of the Canada Reads Facebook wall, it caught my attention that the first question that jumped out in the conversations of the readers was: “What is Canadian about this book?” Many claimed that the genre (romance, horror) was not to their taste (starting with a disdain for popular literature). However, there were also readings that questioned these prejudices, discovering a subtext of criticism of foreign colonization and extractivism that has characterized mining companies (most likely, without knowing that this is one of the nodal themes in Canadian studies research in Mexico today).

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Although I enjoyed the reading and decided to delve deeper into the author's work (given that migration from Mexico to Canada has been one of the focuses of my research), I must say that the books of her prolific production that I have most enjoyed are set in Mexico City in the late twentieth century. My preference is probably related to the identification of both spaces and the influence of popular music and cinema in our development as youths, but also in its proximity to mystery and noir. And, as we give voice to the author herself, I wanted to share some of my favorite novels, read in their original English versions (which is strange given that they are immersed in familiar spaces and full of local culinary references, news and cultural references) and many are available in Spanish translations. My favorites are: *Signal to Noise* (2015), her first novel, a story of adolescence, of growing up, about the importance of music and friendship in the lives of the characters and of the magic that can break down and fix the existence of those who turn to it; *Untamed Shore* (2020), another story of growth and death, of expectations and betrayals, of cultural confrontation between the inhabitants of Baja California (the author's native state) and the tourists who populate it, with a young protagonist who decides to step out of the good girl stereotype; *Velvet Was the Night* (2021), a recreation of the political violence in the seventies and related disappearances of youths that delves into the mysteries and dangers of Mexico City after dark; and *Silver Nitrate* (2023), literally about the magic of cinema.

Graciela Martínez-Zalce: What made you decide to move from Mexicali to Canada?

Silvia Moreno-García: I originally came to do graduate studies in journalism; and my husband and I stayed here. I arrived on a student visa and then we eventually got a permanent resident visa. We have been living in Canada for twenty years.

GM-Z: Why did you choose British Columbia? Was it because of the academic programs?

SM-G: I was interested in two places: one was Ontario and the other was British Columbia. I chose the shorter, one-year program at Langara College, rather than a two-year master's degree. I didn't want something theoretical; I wanted something practical, something that was —as

they say here— *hands on*. Another factor that influenced me to live in British Columbia was the climate, which is much nicer than the rest of the country. Also, my French is not very good, so it had to be an English-speaking place to ease communication.

GM-Z: How did you shift from journalism to literature? Even though, they're both writing; but in different forms.

SM-G: I graduated when newspapers began to close due to the Internet displacing traditional media —mainly the print media— all over the world. When I realized how difficult it was to get a job —even some of the working journalists I knew were being fired from their jobs— I decided to focus on communication. I studied for another diploma —this time in marketing— and in my free time I wrote, which is what I had been doing since I was a teenager. In 2006, I published my first stories in online fantasy and science fiction magazines. I was paid ten dollars for my first story, and I gradually began to earn a little more. To date, I have published about eighty stories. My most prolific period was before I started writing novels.

GM-Z: Can you make a living from writing novels?

SM-G: Yes, but it depends on different factors, including where you live. I have friends who make a full-time living from art: some comic book artists or novelists or visual artists who live in smaller cities, where housing prices don't compare to Vancouver —where it's impossible for many of us to own a home.

It also depends on where you are in your career. If you have a catalog of several novels it's easier because they are generating income; it depends on how prolific you are.

GM-Z: I've been monitoring Canada Reads for the last four years and I think it's great that everyone is invited, no matter who you are, whether you've studied literature or not, whether you're a retired person or a young person with no university studies; what's interesting is the variety of people who are invited to read and discuss the selected novels. This program has been running for almost 24 years and I think it's an excellent initiative, because in the beginning they only chose very canonical authors, like Michael Ondaatje, but now they include young authors like you, trying to show ethnic diversity and different literary genres. Tell us about your process when your novel *Mexican Gothic* was chosen.

SM-G: They call you and tell you what is going to happen just a couple of days before announcing that you have been chosen; and since it is organized by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), you have to participate in a lot of promotional activities, such as interviews for radio and other digital platforms. The interesting thing is that each book has a *champion*—a person who represents the book and defends it in this live contest, but the *champions* are also the face of the book and do a lot of promotion in Toronto.

GM-Z: How does the selection affect the sales of your novel?

SM-G: There's no doubt that nominated books sell more—especially the winner, since it gets the most attention in the end. Bookstores are very interested in promoting the event and selling their books. There are many titles that would not normally receive much attention, but begin to have visibility from the event and then become part of the literary and cultural conversation. In my case, the interesting thing is that people hardly knew me here. In the United States—especially in places like Los Angeles, San Antonio, and New York—I would say that I already had a market in these places. But it wasn't the case in Canada.

GM-Z: What did it mean to you personally?

SM-G: I thought I would never be chosen for Canada Reads because of the genre of the books I write. But *Mexican Gothic* ended up on the list. In my case, it reinforced a perennial question that I ask myself: Who or what are you? Are you Canadian or are you Mexican? And the answer is that I'm both at the same time. Other books that have made the shortlist have led me to reflect on what the Canadian experience is, or what nationality means.

Traditionally, we thought that books representing the Canadian literary canon had to be set in Ontario—in a cold, snowy climate—and had to be about man's struggle with nature. However, people are starting to ask themselves: Don't Alberta, or British Columbia exist? And if I live in a city where there are no bears, then where is man and nature? Or if I'm a woman, and perhaps indigenous or an immigrant—as in my case—What does it mean to be Canadian? This is why more and more literature is being written by immigrants or people who are not originally from Canada.

“By sharing literary or artistic productions, more voices, opinions and realities are heard. And that helps combat stereotypes about both Mexico and Canada.”

GM-Z: What was the reaction from the public?

SM-G: I think the interesting thing about being part of Canada Reads is precisely the discussion it generates; there are confused people who question why a book is called *Mexican Gothic*, and who the author is—Is she Canadian or Mexican?—and whether the book seems Mexican or Canadian. It generates an interesting controversy.

Mexican Gothic is a little different from my other novels, and for some people it isn't Mexican enough. I can understand that, because there are people who have never visited Mexico and don't know anything about it; they think you get real tacos at Taco Bell, and they feel they can decide what is Mexican and what is not. In a similar way, there were discussions regarding what is Canadian and what is not. So I think it was an interesting experience, because of the questions it creates about whether I belong or not to the Canadian canon and what it means. On the one hand, it's about theoretical discussions, but on the other hand, there's the practical experience when you walk into a bookstore and there's your book regardless of whether you belong or not.

GM-Z: Sure, and the important thing is that it encourages discussion, for me—for example, on Facebook—what I love is that there are discussions between people who don't even know each other but it seems that we're in a book club, and we discuss books that you probably wouldn't be familiar with if it were not for these spaces. Because as Gabriel Zaid says, with so many books being published, it's impossible to follow all the genres, or all the authors.

In your relationship with Mexico, I believe as a reader, your books are relatable not only because of the quality of the writing, but also because of the subject matter and where the characters are situated. In the case of *Signal to Noise* and *Untamed Shore*, I loved them because of how you present two very different places in Mexico. I like that you don't try to translate words that are untranslatable: a *concha* is a *concha* and not *sweet bread*. I also like that

your editor respects that you don't put Spanish words in italics. I like that in your books.

I would also like to ask if in addition to these very obvious scriptural links with Mexico—because of the same position you take on certain things, because the Mexico of *Signal to Noise* is not the same as the Mexico of *Velvet Was The Night* or that of *Silver Nitrate*—Which is more magical? Are those literary ties that you create with Mexico, or do you build contact in other ways? For example, would you like to be invited to Hispanic Heritage Week activities? Would you like Mexican readers to invite you to give talks and be more widely disseminated in Mexico?

SMG: Surely, although I understand that there are geographical limitations. I once organized an event in Seattle with the Mexican Consulate and a local library, and as soon as it was over I got on the train and in four hours I was back, and it is also more economical. On the other hand, traveling to Mexico is a bit more complicated because it's farther away, and in general Mexican publishers do not have as many resources as English-language publishers to organize such events. And it's not as common in Mexico to do certain things, such as presenting a book online or at a book club as it is in the United States or Canada.

Many times, the recognition I've had specifically in Mexico has been precisely because of the bilateral relationship between Canada and Mexico; for doing something related to the embassy or the consulate, and I can tell you that here they do know me and I have participated in several events. But if I'm in the streets of Mexico and go to any bookstore, nobody knows who I am. It's a strange relationship because—let's say that nobody is a prophet in their own land—I am not as well-known in Mexico as I am in Canada or the United States. It would be interesting if they discovered that I exist as a real entity and see that I'm not a fictitious being. But I don't know if it will ever happen, because I don't know the literary production and academic interests, and I don't know what the inputs are in Mexico, compared to other countries. In the United States and Canada there has been a growing interest in the last ten or twenty years in what is known as genre literature. I have written a lot of literature of this type, for example: graphic novels, horror, science fiction, or fantasy. It used to be of little academic interest, but in the last two decades—and especially in the last ten years—there is much more literary writing in universities where courses are given on topics such as gothic in modern

literature and related seminars, and other things such as popular culture and literature.

In Mexico, we are still at a stage where genre literature is not considered interesting, and as a result literary production hasn't moved in that direction. So, it's more difficult for them to pay attention to me because I write that kind of stuff. Maybe the trend will change in the future.

GM-Z: In addition to your literary ties, do you still have regular contact with Mexico?

SMG: Yes, relatively speaking, because I still have family there. Last year I went to Mexicali, where I'm from originally, and this year I was at the San Miguel de Allende Festival and in Mexico City. I always try to go back, although I can't go as often as I'd like. I also try to read and keep up with what's going on. It's easier to do now than it was 20 years ago because of the Internet. Also, with e-books it's easier to acquire certain titles.

GM-Z: Any final words?

SMG: I think that with recent technologies such as the Internet, digital books, and other forms of online communication such as Facebook—where you can have a [virtual] book club—there are a lot of interesting, new possibilities for cultural exchange between our nations. I think these technologies allow for a lot more dissemination opportunities and sharing certain aspects that can help us not only to share literary production, but also help us modify erroneous opinions about our nations. By sharing literary or artistic productions, more voices, opinions and realities are heard. And that helps combat stereotypes about both Mexico and Canada. For example, when I go to Mexico and talk to my friends, they ask me if everything is snow and white. And I actually live in a very multiethnic city. My youngest son speaks Chinese. And in my neighborhood I meet people who were originally from India, or who are third generation from Japan. This is a far cry from the world of WASP men that many have in mind.

The exchange of the variety of experiences that we have in the three countries of North America is very enriching in the long term because it allows us to see Mexicans, Canadians and Americans as people, instead of something that appears in economic treaties. We're more than a flag; we're people who live in neighboring countries. And I believe that this helps our relations to be better because, in the end, we're all part of North America. ■■■

Faride Amero*

Worth a Read

1. *Gods of Jade and Shadow* (2019)

An old-school novel, this is one of Silvia Moreno-García's first publishing successes. *Gods of Jade and Shadow* is a magical story that inserts the cosmogony of the Mayan people into a Mexico that is rocked by jazz, fiestas and the revolutionary movements of the 1920s. This is the adventure of Casiopea, a young Yucatecan girl entrusted with the task of helping the Mayan god of death to recover his throne and achieve the freedom she herself seeks, far from the mistreatment of her family.

2. *Mexican Gothic* (2020)

A contemporary classic, *Mexican Gothic* narrates the story of Noemí Taboada, a young woman from a wealthy indigenous family who must leave the comforts of the city to venture into a squalid Hidalgo town to rescue her cousin, the new wife of a mysterious English gentleman. Set in Mexico of the 1950s, this novel has been acclaimed worldwide for its fusion of nineteenth-century gothic tradition with Mexican culture, charged with a powerful decolonial discourse. This novel was selected as a finalist in the 2023 Canada Reads competition.

3. *Silver Nitrate* (2023)

A dark journey into the Mexico of the nineties, *Silver Nitrate* is a novel that delves into the horror film scene in Mexico City at the hands of Montserrat, a poorly-paid and misunderstood audio editor immersed in a macho society. However, her luck changes when she meets film director Abel Urueta. Between secret societies, rituals and the discovery of a cursed film that was thought to be lost, Montserrat realizes she should be careful about what she wishes for.

4. *The Seventh Veil of Salome* (2024)

Silvia Moreno-García's latest novel—published in August 2024—*The Seventh Veil of Salome* revives the golden age of Hollywood through Vera Larios, an unsuccessful Mexican actress who finally lands the leading role of Salome. However, Vera finds herself trapped in a world of betrayal, secrets and drama orchestrated by her rival, the long-forgotten actress Nancy Hartley.

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