

## **“Challenges Give Meaning to Our Lives:” Francisco Jiménez and Social Justice**

Susan Carlile

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In conversation, as in his books, Francisco Jiménez inspires a deep sense of respect for the universality of the human experience. Jiménez, winner of the American Library Association Pura Belpré Honor Book Award (2001) and the Carnegie Foundation Outstanding U.S. Professor of the Year (2002), has dedicated his life to encouraging communication between people with a wide range of backgrounds. Jiménez is one of those rare individuals who is completely at home in many environments and recently commented in an extensive interview in July about his life and his works. His confident tranquility reveals a sharp-minded, gracious individual who has a deep compassion for people of every generation. Throughout his career as a teacher and administrator at Santa Clara University, as well as in his work as a literary scholar and fiction writer, his “hope and whole focus” has been to “promote the acceptance and appreciation of cultural differences.”

Jiménez’s journey has been full of obstacles, and he has found consolation in writing down his life story. His love for young people and his respect for the challenges of growing up inspired him to compile his stories into four award-winning books—*The Circuit: The Life of a Migrant Child* (University of New Mexico, 1997), *La Mariposa* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998), *The Christmas Gift/El Regalo de Navidad* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000) and *Breaking Through* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001)—which recount his experiences leaving his birthplace of San Pedro, Tlaquepaque, Mexico at the age of four and becoming a California migrant worker with an insatiable appetite for learning. The first line of *Breaking Through* strikingly illustrates the challenges of his early life, “I lived in constant fear for ten long years, from the time I was four until I was fourteen years old” (1). With the haunting possibility of deportation constantly on his mind, Jiménez could not have guessed that one day he would receive numerous

prestigious teaching and writing awards in the United States. Today he is a successful writer with many more stories to tell.

### THE WRITING LIFE

Jiménez did not begin writing creatively with the intention of exclusively appealing to children or young adults. He simply felt he had a story to tell. He had jotted down thoughts about his life while in college and at Columbia University as a graduate student. However, it was not until his graduate advisor encouraged him to put these thoughts into stories that he considered them for publication. Jiménez explains, “When I tried to capture the child’s voice, the emotions would come out in Spanish.” In 1972 he published two short stories in Spanish, “Muerte Fria”/ “Cold Death,” and “Un Aguinaldo”/ “The Christmas Gift” in *El Grito: Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought*. His widely successful “The Circuit” first appeared in 1973 in Spanish as “La Mudanza”/ “The Move” (later “Cajas de Carton”) for a New York literary journal. And in 1974 “Arado sin Buey”/ “Plough without an Ox” appeared in *The Bilingual Review*.

Jiménez’s first fictional success was his short story “The Circuit,” published in 1973 in the *Arizona Quarterly*, where it received the Best Short Fiction Award. In this story Jiménez recounts a life lived out of cardboard boxes, the title he gave the Spanish version, “Cajas de Carton.” Moving from one tent labor camp to the next, Francisco, the main character, describes the loneliness of never settling down. “ ‘Ya esora’ (Quitting time) [It]o yelled in his broken Spanish. Those were the words I waited for twelve hours a day, every day, seven days a week, week after week. And the thought of not hearing them again saddened me” (*The Circuit* 73). After moving to a labor camp in Fresno, California, Francisco finally feels a sense of place again. His sixth-grade teacher, “my best friend at school,” offered to teach him to play the trumpet and he raced home to tell his family the good news, “when I opened the door to our shack, I saw that everything we owned was neatly packed in cardboard boxes” (83). The pain of never settling down is poignant, yet Francisco learns to find something good about every situation. To Jiménez’s surprise this short story became a favorite in textbooks and anthologies and has been reprinted 121 times.

As much as Jiménez would have liked to return to fiction writing, he found himself beginning his life as a professor and, soon after, university administrator and did not have the time to pursue his love of telling stories for over twenty years. As “The Circuit” continued to receive such overwhelming attention, Jiménez realized that there was a significant popular interest in his experiences. Rudolfo Anaya, author of the award-winning novel *Bless Me*

*Ultima*, was also supportive of his desire to flesh out more of his childhood story. With a sabbatical from Santa Clara University in 1995, Jiménez went back to his successful short story and added eleven more to create the expertly woven collection *The Circuit*, which documents Jiménez's experience traveling with his family from Mexico into California. He explains in detail what happened when they reached *la frontera*: "We walked along the wire wall until Papá spotted a small hole underneath the fence. Papá got on his knees and, with his hands, made the opening larger. We all crawled through like snakes" and into the sometimes brutal realities of migrant labor camps.

The story continues in the San Joaquin Valley, where he found life a constant challenge as he and his family "did the circuit" from farm to farm, trying to eke out a meager living picking strawberries, grapes, carrots, lettuce and cotton under the hot California sun. Like the original short story, this collection won high praise. It received many prestigious awards, including the Boston Globe-Horn Award for Fiction, the California Library Association's 10<sup>th</sup> annual John and Patricia Beatty Award, and The Americas Award for Children and Young Adult Literature. It has also been published in Chinese (1999) and Japanese (2004). However, even more impressive has been the sale of *The Circuit*, which reach 100,000 in both soft and hardcover in 2003.

Writing *The Circuit* was challenging. "As I was writing, I would read parts to my children and my wife, but I didn't show it to anyone else until it was completely done. I had to rely on creativity to fill in the gaps where I couldn't remember details, since it's further back in time. I did do a lot of research, and I went to the San Joaquin Valley and visited some of the places where I knew we lived. Some of the labor camps were still there, but others no longer existed. All of those visual things brought back memories and emotions that I incorporated into the book. I also talked to my mother and Roberto. They were both extremely helpful, especially for the first story, 'Under the Wire.' I had some of the pictures that are reproduced in the back of *Breaking Through*, like the one that was taken in Tent City, Santa Maria. Most of the pictures were taken more or less at the same time, but I don't know who took them or how we ended up getting them. However, I am glad my family collected them and I wish I had more. I had to rely more on emotional memory to write this first book."

The biggest challenge for Jiménez was telling the story from the point of view of a child. "This may sound a little bit strange; but the Spanish dramatist, Federico Garcia Lorca, explains how every adult has a child in him and that we have to maintain the child in us—his innocence and his creativity—to look at the world and appreciate it. I think I have been able to maintain the child inside of me. Sometime my kids will even say, 'Dad, you are just a big kid!' I love children. I am able to empathize with them, especially those who suffer poverty or discrimination. I visit

migrant families who are in literacy programs— through the P.E.N Foundation—and I think my experiences help me feel more compassion for children. And hopefully that connection—the child inside of me—helped me capture the voice of the child in *The Circuit*.”

Jiménez decided to publish *The Circuit* in English because he thought he would get a wider readership. He explains, “That was important to me because the stories that I write are the experiences of many families in the past and in the present. I wanted readers to have some insight into the migrant experience.” However, Jiménez does keep some Spanish words and phrases and uses the context to give the meaning to non-Spanish speakers. The stories were clearly in his head in Spanish as well, “When Houghton Mifflin asked me to translate it into Spanish it was very easy.”

Two of the tales in *The Circuit* became children’s stories. *La Mariposa* (The Butterfly) (1998) recounts Jiménez’s first grade year, during which he was not allowed to speak Spanish. Jiménez inserts Spanish dialogue into his story to give an English speaking reader the sense of the tension Francisco feels between his Spanish and American worlds. “He tried to pay attention because he wanted to understand. But by the end of the day he got very tired of hearing Miss Scalapino talk because the sounds still made no sense to him. He got a bad headache, and that night, when he went to bed, he heard her voice in his head.” (9) Francisco’s struggle is symbolized by a caterpillar, which sits in a jar next to his desk and which he regularly feeds. Over the course of the semester its transformation into a butterfly is a source of hope for him. *La Mariposa* won the Parents’ Choice Recommended Award, was named a Smithsonian Notable Book for Children and was chosen for the Americas Commended List.

Jiménez also won numerous awards for his bilingual children’s book, *The Christmas Gift/El Regalo de Navidad*, including the Cuffie Award from *Publisher’s Weekly* for “Best treatment of a Social Issue.” In this story Jiménez documents through the main character, Panchito, his family’s difficult life in a labor camp in Corcoran, where they have to look for fruits and vegetables in the trash and cut off the rotten parts. However, their life is not nearly as bad as that of the young couple who are expecting a baby and come to their door asking for help. The weight of poverty is tangible in this story, yet the family overcomes this with their strong sense of community.

In *Breaking Through*, the sequel to *The Circuit*, Jiménez continues the story of his traumatic experience with immigration, which concludes with an immigrant visa and his return to the United States. Jiménez then recounts salient experiences throughout the next four years as he struggles to help support his family and also complete high school. As they face prejudice—both Francisco and his brother are rejected by girls because they are

Mexican—the Jiménez family finds a way to approach their difficult life with determination, benevolence, and hope. During these years, Francisco is happy to stay in Santa Maria, because he is able to attend the same school. His older brother, Roberto, finds a steady janitorial job, which alleviates the financial strain now that his father's back injury keeps him out of the fields. At Santa Maria High Francisco becomes a school leader and eventually student body president. He continues his ritual of memorizing material for school while he cleans offices early in the morning and late into the night. This book is most powerful in its representation of how others were essential in helping Francisco pursue an academic life. His counselors and teachers made him aware of college and helped him find scholarships; and with their help and the support of his family he was able to attend Santa Clara University.

*Breaking Through* has won twelve distinguished awards, including the Tomás Rivera Award. *Breaking Through* was slightly easier to write in English, “because the setting was mostly during the time I was in high school where I functioned mostly in English, except at home. When I translated it to Spanish the dialogue was especially easy, since I could hear my father, who never learned English. I also talked to Roberto, who shared a lot of information about his relationship with his girlfriends. I had much more material available to me, than I had for *The Circuit*. In the first chapter, when we got deported, I was able, through the Freedom of Information Act, to get all the documentation from that experience. I also went through yearbooks and school newspapers, and I had saved my report cards. But again, the biggest challenge was trying to keep the voice of the teenager. Oddly enough, I didn't show it to anyone, not even my children or my wife until it was completely done. Then I gave the manuscript to my wife, because I trust her and she is widely read. In fact, she's my harshest critic. When she read it, she said, 'It's really good.' So I decided to send it to my editor at Houghton Mifflin, Anne Rider, and she wrote back and said, 'It's a wonderful piece.' So I only had to make a few editorial changes.”

Jiménez admits that he has used many strategies as he tried to thoughtfully recount aspects of his life. He explains, “One of my writing strategies is to begin with a significant amount of reflective writing. I consider a specific event in my life and then ask myself, ‘What is it that I learned from this memorable experience?’ So in writing *The Circuit*, I put together the stories, keeping what I learned in mind. Then I related the experience not in terms of the type of reflection I might do as an adult, but rather as a child might think about the experience. My hope is that the way I write about the experience that I had as a child will lead an adult reader to the same reflection. I don't say, ‘Here's what I learned from this experience,’ but rather I lead the reader—whether adult or child—to my reflection simply by telling the story.”

Jiménez's writing reflects this resourcefulness in a sort of hopeful realism. In fact, none of his books end on a patently happy note. In *The Circuit* Francisco is practicing his memorized portion of the Declaration of Independence in his eighth-grade social studies class... "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," when an immigration officer appears at the classroom door and his teacher has to identify him.

In *Breaking Through* Jiménez feels a mixture of sadness, anger, and excitement as he leaves the labor camp outside Santa Maria for Santa Clara University, where he will attend college as a result of several scholarships. To get there he passes "several men and women picking strawberries on their knees and children playing near old, dusty cars parked at the edge of the field. I glanced at Papá, who winced [from back pain] as he napped" (191). Still he speeds ahead. "As we approached the Santa Maria Bridge, I remembered the pain I felt in my chest every time we crossed this bridge, at the end of every summer. But this time I felt excitement, not pain...After so many years, I was still moving" (193). It is this optimism, void of sentimentality, that makes his works so appealing.

Jiménez's children's books also acknowledge a complex world. *La Mariposa* ends in a truce, with Francisco offering the bully, Curtis, his prize-winning drawing. *The Christmas Gift/El Regalo de Navidad* closes with little Panchito's "deep breath" (27). He has not received the ball he so desperately hoped for, but he has learned about generosity and his parent's profound love. Instead of a happy ending, Jiménez offers a reality laced with an abiding sense that something better is on the horizon.

Although in some ways he laments that he didn't have time earlier in his life to tell these stories, he acknowledges, "I don't think I would have had some of these reflections twenty or thirty years ago. I suppose as we get older, we get wiser; therefore, the reflections that I have now give a different meaning to the experience." His career has been rewarding, and he has come to understand that his work is particularly timely. "Now since *Breaking Through* has come out I am much more in tune with younger people and their reaction to the book. I get many, many letters and emails from young people, and their teachers—not only Mexican-Americans, but also Vietnamese-Americans and people from other ethnic groups. Their reaction to the book is really rewarding to me. They will say, 'This is my story,' or 'My parents went through this,' or 'I don't feel alone now knowing that somebody else has gone through the same experience.' Many people relate to the story "Inside Out"—going to school, not knowing a word of English, and then struggling to learn English. From *Breaking Through* many readers relate to the struggle of

trying to reconcile two cultures, a native culture and a new American one. I tried to blend the two as I was growing up, taking the best from each.”

College clearly fed Jiménez’s love for learning, and his academic success won him a fellowship to Columbia University, where he earned a Ph.D. in Latin American literature. He returned to his alma mater, Santa Clara University, where he became a full professor and later Associate Academic Vice President. Rather than drive him away from his roots, this trajectory fostered in him a deep gratitude. In fact, he believes that the person he is today is a direct result of the wisdom and sacrifices of his parents. “It’s a matter of respect,” he explains, “They gave me life and they taught me very important lessons. My father used to say that every person must be respected.” Jiménez has certainly lived a life that demonstrates the depth to which he has learned this important lesson. He wisely surmises, “A well-educated person can relate to all different kinds of people.”

Jiménez has not only applied a lucid understanding of the value of an attitude of respect to the people in his life, but also to his experiences. The popular Nietzsche quote, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger,” could easily be applied to his outlook on life. He sees the obstacles that have faced him as the very foundation for his present success. “I compare my situation to a man who is drowning. A man who is drowning uses the water, the very substance that threatens his life, to save himself. So I used poverty and those experiences that initially pulled me down to boost myself up. Whenever I felt discouraged, I would write about my childhood” (1998 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award acceptance speech).

Working on the sequel to *Breaking Through* is Jiménez’s next goal. This novel will begin with Francisco heading to college and will document his experiences at the university. “The incentive to write this is not just because people have urged me to do it, but because I realized that the experience of first generation college students, especially those of color, is very different from others. Students of color have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Still I think the experiences of first generation college students cut across different ethnic groups, and that’s really my motivation for writing the new book.”

Although he is just beginning to write, he realizes that the language of this book is going to be different, “because it’s written from the point of view of a college student. It’s going to be a little more sophisticated. I suppose that it would be more appealing to seniors in high school, although you never know. *The Circuit* is used in grammar school, high school, colleges, universities, and teacher education programs. My hope is that it does have a wide appeal. I have had some students and people in the audience when I make public presentations offer to give me

insights into my third book, because they are first generation college students. So, I think I am going to take them up on that offer because I think their insights will be very, very helpful.”

## THE TEACHING LIFE

Being an education advocate has clearly been the focus of Jiménez’s life:

I strongly believe that education is the best means for people to progress in life. It gives people many, many choices for the kind of life they want to live, and the kind of lifestyle they want to have. But more importantly I think—and it’s a cliché, but it’s true— a well-educated society maintains a rich democracy. When our society is not well educated, democracy suffers. The other reason that I strongly support public education is that it is the best means for people who come from poor economic backgrounds to escape poverty. The obstacles are greater, but at least the opportunities are there. Education helps to level the playing field. My biggest concern currently is that cutbacks to outreach programs and other cuts to programs that serve the poor are really hurting the educational opportunities of those who need the most help. They are short sighted.

Jiménez’s interest in public education came to the attention of California Governor Jerry Brown, who appointed him to the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing in 1976, where he volunteered for the next ten years, serving as Chair from 1977-1979. Jiménez explains, “I am not in Teacher Education, but [Brown] believed that you really needed someone from outside to look critically at the whole issue of Teacher Credentialing. Of course, it took me a long time to understand what was really going on. And eventually I understood. I hope I made some contribution.”

Like his books, Jiménez’s outlook concerning an equal education for all children remains realistically hopeful. He explains:



During the time I was appointed to the Commission, the Chacon Bill in bilingual education was passed. So I was involved in the discussion about what the standards should be for certifying bilingual teachers. That was exciting. I was frustrated when California eliminated bilingual education—the criticisms against immigrants is discouraging—but I strongly feel we can't lose hope. I think overall cultural and human understanding between the United States and Mexico has improved. In the recent years, I have felt discouraged; but overall I think it has improved, especially in education. I think teachers are better prepared than they were many, many years ago to appreciate and be sensitive to cultural differences. I think our society as a whole is much more receptive to cultural and linguistic differences than they were many years ago. As I mentioned in *The Circuit*, many years ago we were not allowed to speak in a language other than English in school, and often we were punished if we did. Hopefully that doesn't happen now. I am fairly confident that it doesn't happen in California. Perhaps in some parts of the country students may still be punished for speaking Spanish. However, because of the diversity that exists in California, we are ahead of other parts of the country in terms of accepting and appreciating cultural differences. My hope, and my whole focus, is to try to promote that acceptance and appreciation. If we succeed in California, we might serve as a model for the rest of the country. It's always been a struggle, but the struggle is worth it. Rather than being discouraged completely and give up, we should meet those challenges with hope and courage. Those are the challenges that give meaning to our lives.

This belief that struggling for what we believe in is what makes life worth living permeates all the projects to which Jiménez dedicates himself. In 1985 he proposed and became the director of the Institute for Poverty and Conscience at Santa Clara. He explains, "This was when the economy was really bad in the 80's. We lived in San Jose, and there were many people who were homeless, which is still the case today. I hoped to draw attention to the plight of the poor and to identify the causes of poverty and offer possible solutions. We had panel discussions and keynote speakers. We invited Cesar Chavez, Julian Bond, Frances Moore Lappe, Michael Harrington and others. Some courses that came out of that Institute are still being offered at Santa Clara on a regular basis. The Institute was very rewarding and got a lot of attention, especially in the Bay Area. *The San Jose Mercury News* had articles about it and I hope it made a difference in the conscience of our communities and in the minds of those who are

empowered to make changes.” Jiménez published the proceedings of this institute, *Poverty and Social Justice: Critical Perspectives* (1987), with the Bilingual Press.

As Director of Ethnic Studies, Jiménez has tried over his career at Santa Clara to incorporate Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies scholarship throughout the curriculum. “Once you do that then every student who goes through four years of college learns about it...it’s like breathing air. It’s natural. If we are successful, and I hope we will be in the future, we won’t need those separations anymore. But until that happens, I think those emphases are necessary. Our goal is to incorporate ourselves into the rest of the university curriculum, so that the Ethnic Studies Department won’t be necessary. That’s the ideal.”

Jiménez’s passion for education is even more apparent when he talks about his own teaching:

Being in the classroom gives me energy. It’s wonderful to be helping young people developing their talents and to see them getting engaged and wrestling with the subject matter. That’s very exciting to me. I didn’t get that being up in the Administration Building. To be an effective teacher, I need to put myself in my students’ shoes...to reflect on my own teaching through their eyes. So I tell them that the success of my classes depends as much on me as it does on you—and perhaps more on you. I remind them that I too am a student. I strongly believe that I learn from them. They have different experiences that they bring to discussions that profoundly enrich me as a teacher. I try to create a comfortable, respectful environment where I don’t necessarily become the center or the focus of my class, rather I become part of the class. So far it has worked well. Students have responded positively to our journey together. I tell them how blessed I feel to be a teacher and to have the privilege of learning from them and helping them to learn. And I get paid for it!

Encouraging students to talk to their parents and learn about their own family history, is also one of Jiménez’s goals as a teacher, “because it roots them and gives them a sense of being, a sense of who they are. They become more appreciative of where they are as a result of the sacrifices that their ancestors made when they first came here. After all, we are a country made up mostly of immigrants.”

#### TEACHING AS WRITING/WRITING AS TEACHING

Productive classroom exchange is important to Jiménez and he describes his purpose for writing as being an extension of this dialogue. “Through my writing I hope to give readers insight into the lives of migrant farm

worker families and their children, whose backbreaking labor picking fruits and vegetables puts food on our tables. Their courage, their hopes and dreams for a better life for their children and their children's children, give meaning to the American dream. Their story is the American story" (1998 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award acceptance speech).

Jiménez believes that his experiences as a migrant laborer with big dreams for the future served a very important purpose in his life. The frustrations of poverty and the loneliness of trying to access a different world gave him the impetus to write. "Sometimes when I make public presentations students will ask me if there is anything in my life that I would change. And I tell them, as strange as it may sound, I would not. The experiences I had as a child, my teaching, my writing, my vision, they all inform everything I do as an adult. So for me to wish that I had had a different life would be like saying, 'I am not comfortable with who I am because of those experiences.' I really believe that we go through experiences for a purpose. My experiences enable me to voice the experiences of many children and young adults who went through, or are going through, similar experiences."

Reminding his students of the value of learning about the perspectives of others is a primary focus in Jiménez's teaching. "I tell students that even though they may not have gone through similar difficulties—and hopefully they haven't—the fact is a large sector of our society, many who had been responsible for the development of our agriculture and the economy of our nation, have. Their stories are part of American history. So if we are going to understand who we are as a society, then we need to understand and appreciate each other's contributions. Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans, African-Americans, Native Americans and so many others have experienced discrimination, have struggled to develop themselves and have also contributed to society. Their stories are important to document because they are part of the American experience."

These stories make up the fabric of our society, and for Jiménez there is nothing more important than facilitating the communication that will create understanding and appreciation among all people in American society, "Some writers will say that they don't have any political agenda. They say that they write simply because they need to write. I admire that. But that's not why I write. I write purposefully and I have in mind why writing is important to me. It's the same reason that I enjoy teaching. My hope is that through my teaching, writing, and my public speaking, I can serve as a bridge for cultural understanding. I am not motivated to do "esoteric" scholarship even though I value it. I'd rather do scholarship or writing that might make a difference in our society."

Jiménez often teaches his literature courses from an historical perspective and was attracted to more “esoteric ” scholarship, which is likely to involve a significant amount of time studying archival material. When he was writing his dissertation on the Mexican historical novel he was given access to the personal archives of Victoriano Salado Alvarez, a prolific historical novelist, short story writer and journalist who is from the same state of Jalisco as Jiménez. In 1974 he published *Los Episodios Nacionales de Victoriano Salado Alvarez*. Since then Jiménez has helped to organize Alvarez’s papers and the Alvarez family has given him some of the journalist’s letters, one of which was signed by Porfilio Diaz, President of Mexico for 35 years. “All of this material is very valuable, and I think it should be accessible to the general public.” However, Jiménez is more inclined to keep his focus on more pressing social issues. “It is very important for me to promote multi-cultural education, to help students be sensitive to and appreciative of different cultures that make up our ethnically diverse society. This is crucial if they are going to function well and live harmoniously. For me creative writing, the work that I do as a teacher, and even the work that I do as an administrator all have the same focus. They are not disconnected. All of this work excites me.”

#### USING OBSTACLES AS BUILDING BLOCKS

As a writer, Jiménez sees himself in the tradition of other Latin American writers. “That’s why I majored in Latin American Literature. One of the characteristics of Latin American literature is that it has a strong theme of social justice. And I think that carries over into a lot of literature written by Latinos and other ethnic groups. They come from a culture that has not been totally accepted or appreciated or has not been treated justly. That backdrop fuels one’s vision for what one wants for the future... for what one wants for our children and our children’s children. I realize that I am generalizing, but I see that that is the case with many U.S. Latino writers, like Rudolfo Anaya and Sandra Cisneros. Anaya was the one who suggested that I send the manuscript to the University of New Mexico. I admire Sandra Cisneros too. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza says that she writes for her community. She voices the community from which she comes. Sabine R. Ulibarrí who has now passed away, is another writer who has documented the life of what he calls ‘Hispanic societies’ in New Mexico. His goal was to preserve the traditions that existed for centuries, from settlers from Spain. He is not as well known, but he wrote a collection of stories titled *Tierra Amarilla: Stories of New Mexico*, the region in New Mexico that he was from.”

Jiménez's career has been dedicated to incorporating different ethnic literatures into the canon of literature associated with the United States, which is often referred to as "American literature."

"In 1974 I proposed an ongoing discussion group at the MLA on Chicano literature, with the idea of helping integrate Mexican-American literature in American literature. But when I proposed it, they placed it as part of Latin American literature. That was an uphill battle. I purposely invited Luis Leal, a Mexican literary critic who also has done a lot work on Chicano literature, to deliver a paper in the first session. I also invited Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, and José Antonio Villareal, who wrote *Pocho* (1959), which is considered one of the first Mexican-American novels published by a mainstream publisher; and Joseph Summers, a Latin American literary critic who had done a lot of work on Mexican literature. I titled the panel 'The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature,' and Joseph Summers said, 'Francisco, I don't know if you want me on this panel because I am not Chicano.' I said, 'I am asking you to serve because you are a well-known literary critic. It would be silly for anyone to say that I cannot read Argentinean literature and write critical articles because I am not Argentinean.' He said, 'Well, not everyone thinks that way.' I said, 'Well, we have to be the models and break this narrow view.' Our goal was to try to get Mexican-American literature into the American canon so it would be recognized and valued. We also believed that professors who are not Mexican-American did a wonderful job of teaching these works. Eventually our ideas took hold and now Mexican-American literature, African-American literature, and so many others, are taught in English Departments.

The challenge was not only in trying to get Mexican-American literature to be widely accepted in universities, but it was also very difficult for Mexican-American writers to get published. As co-founder and co-editor of the *Bilingual Review*, later the Bilingual Press, Jiménez played a major role in publishing high quality Mexican-American literature. "My effort was to make Mexican and Latino literature accessible as widely as possible, to give some kind of direction to writers. A lot of material that was being published then was excellent, but some was not really of high quality. Mexican American/Chicano critics were sometimes reluctant to be critical of material that was not of high quality because it had been written by Mexican Americans. I felt that as literary critics we had to be honest, so that we were helpful to writers and to people who read the material. Our goal was to promote and give access to talented Latino writers who had trouble being accepted by mainstream publishers. These

writers feared that there was no one interested in reading Mexican-American literature or that the number of people who would be interested was fairly small. So from a commercial point of view their writing would not be accepted. I thought that if we encouraged writers to continue writing and disseminated high quality works by Latinos, eventually we would break this barrier that Latino writers were encountering. Rudolfo Anaya and others ended up publishing their work with Quinto Sol Press, which came out of Berkeley, because the mainstream publishers were not interested. Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*, if I am not mistaken, was turned down by mainstream publishers. However, once it did very well, then they picked it up and now it's being published by a mainstream publisher."

Jiménez continues to be dedicated to the distribution of the works of high-quality Latino writers. He presently serves on the editorial board of The Bilingual Press and is the west coast editor. In the last ten years many more Latin American writers have become popular in the mainstream. Jiménez lists many popular Latino writers who have published works that appeal to children and young adults. "Gary Soto's work on Fresno, California, captures fairly well the community of Fresno, not just the rural but the urban. Francisco Alarcon, at UC Davis. Juan Filipe Herrera, at Fresno State. You know we are all academics. There are very few of us, who have the means and the time to devote entirely to writing. Pamela Muñoz Ryan, who wrote *Esperanza Rising*, has been able to write full time. I kind of envy that. It 's wonderful that Latino writing is being recognized as being part of the American canon. I can say with confidence that many writers from different ethnic groups are producing wonderful books for young adults."

Jiménez has found himself at an exciting moment in literary history. Rather than feeling alienated as a result of his personal confrontations with racism and poverty, Jiménez has embraced his experiences and used them for the benefit of his students, readers, and community. He has created a rich, meaningful life—one steeped in service and in art...a life he considers "full of great rewards."

### **Further Reading**

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