

PROFILE

PERSEVERING WITH HOPE:  
FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ

Deanna Day

Profile

Many teachers have a top ten list of their favorite children's books to share with students. *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* (1997) by Francisco Jiménez is part of my top ten list. This book has touched my life and has helped many of my students from fourth graders to graduate students understand the plight of farm workers and the inevitable struggles of these families. Francisco Jiménez is the creator of several children's books—two chapter books including *The Circuit* (1997) and *Breaking Through* (2001) and two picture books, *La Mariposa* (1998) and *The Christmas Gift/El Regalo de Navidad* (2000). Francisco portrays immigrants' experiences of crossing the border into America and their trials and hardships. The books suggest that with strength, perseverance, and hard work, there is hope.

Much of Francisco Jiménez's early life is shared in his autobiographical short stories in *The Circuit*. His family lived in rural Jalisco, Mexico, where they were extremely poor and life was difficult. When Francisco was four years old, his family immigrated to California for more economic and educational opportunities. Their lives continued to be challenging as migrant farm workers, harvesting crops and moving frequently. Thus began the cycle of moving from crop to crop—the circuit.

*The Circuit* ends traumatically as Francisco is about to recite the Declaration of Independence from memory when he is suddenly removed from class. Readers wonder what has happened to the family after they were turned into *la migra*, "the police," and deported back to Mexico. Francisco explains that they never found out who reported them to the border patrol. They were deported in 1957, when there was an economic crisis in the United States and the government instigated Operation Wet Back to deport people who were in the country illegally. Francisco's family was caught during that period of time and deported to Mexico for several weeks until they had the appropriate papers to return legally.

Francisco's life has consistently been different from other authors and has taken unique directions. Typically a book is published in hardcover first and then released in paperback. It was just the opposite with *The Circuit*. The University of Mexico Press published it in softcover before Houghton-Mifflin bought the hardcover rights. Works by Francisco Jiménez have received numerous literary awards including the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Fiction, the Américas Award, a Pura Belpré Honor Book Award, Parents' Choice Award, and a Tomás Rivera Mexican American Book Award.

When I asked Francisco if he was a risk taker, he replied that although he doesn't see himself that way, his father and mother took a risk by leaving their homeland in hopes of finding a better life for their family without

knowing English or having formal education. He concluded, "They took big risks coming to this country; unless you take those risks, you might not realize your dreams. Our hope was that by taking risks, we would better our lives, and our family's lives, and improve the lives of those around us by contributing to the improvement of our society." Francisco and his siblings received many benefits through his parents taking this risk.

During Francisco's early years, he learned some important values from his parents. He attributes his work ethic and stamina for physical labor to his father:

"He set the example for hard work. Even while he suffered from severe back problems, he worked constantly until his back completely gave out. During the time we worked in the fields, my father always worried about making ends meet. He insisted that if we continued to work hard, we would avoid hunger." Francisco remembers his father saying, "If you work hard and are respectful, you will succeed in life." From his mother Francisco learned to have faith, hope, and to never give up. "No matter how difficult our lives were, she often



told us that we must believe that things would work out. I continue to admire and learn from her. She has taught me optimism, generosity, and a love for people."

Francisco believes that his father's and mother's attitudes about life helped him to deal positively with discrimination during childhood and as an adult. He remembers other students calling him spic, greaser, or tamale wrapper when he was growing up. "Rather than think of myself as a victim, I believe that the one who is racist or has the prejudice is the one who is the victim. The person who is racist suffers tremendously from his or her own racism. Racism is like a cancer that consumes the racist from the inside. This understanding doesn't completely alleviate the hurt that one feels when one is discriminated against, but it does help."

Teachers were a strong influence in Francisco's development. He speaks fondly of his sixth-grade teacher who valued his Mexican cultural background and native language. This teacher helped him learn English during their lunch hour. He writes about Mr. Lema, "my best friend at school," in *The Circuit*. Miss Bell, his sophomore English teacher, was also highly influential. She introduced him to literature and the art of writing. After turning in a composition about his brother, Jose Francisco, who almost died, she told him that if he was able to overcome these difficult experiences and continued to work as hard as he had been working, he would succeed. These statements made a difference in Francisco's self-confidence. Miss Bell also introduced him to one of the first literary works to which he could relate, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

At one point, Francisco thought about becoming a dentist, helping people who didn't have health insurance, because his father had terrible teeth and lost them when he was fairly young. But Francisco was destined to be a teacher. In *Breaking Through*, he describes the day when his high school counselor asked him what he wanted to do with his life and he replied that he wanted to be a teacher, thinking of all the positive influences he had from his own teachers. His counselor remarked, "Well then, you have to go to college."

Francisco received several scholarships to attend Santa Clara University, where he discovered that his migrant experiences were both an obstacle and a blessing. On the

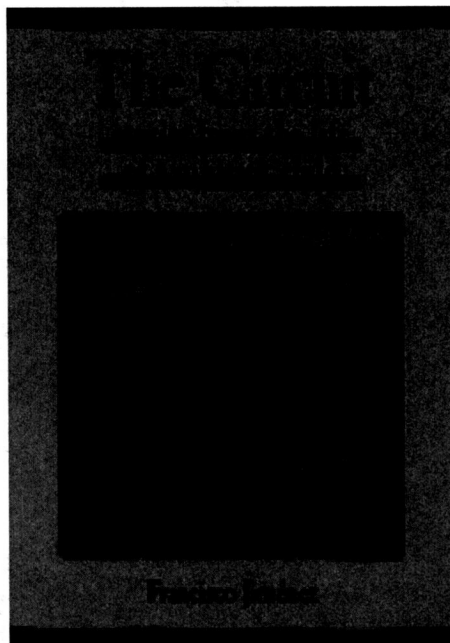
one hand, he did not have the social, economic, and educational privileges that most of his classmates enjoyed. He also still felt uncomfortable with the English language and somewhat out of place since there was little ethnic diversity at his university. On the other hand, his experiences were a blessing because he knew that attending college was a privilege and an opportunity, so that he should not give up. And so, feeling guilty about being in college, living in a nice dormitory, and having three meals a day while his family still struggled economically in Santa Maria, California, Francisco worked several jobs—one in a language lab, another

tutoring Spanish at a local high school, and finally as a research assistant—so he could provide money to help his family.

Upon graduating with a bachelor's degree in Spanish and history, he received a graduate fellowship to attend Columbia University to become a college professor. In New York City, he found himself in an environment that was a total contrast from his childhood. Living in Manhattan in the late 1960s, there were different noises, cold winters, the bustle of impersonal people, all of which caused him to feel tremendous loneliness. His parents didn't have a telephone, so it was difficult to communicate with them. During this period of time, he began to take notes and jot down

his feelings about his past, a way of trying not to forget where he came from and to keep in touch with his family. He also walked the streets of Harlem where he saw beauty, sadness, and suffering in the neighborhoods. "I began to write about what I felt, especially the compassion I felt for the people who were living in poverty in the inner city, which I had experienced living in rural areas. Thinking about these stories of my past gave me encouragement to continue in graduate school."

When his thesis advisor, Andres Iduarte, a Mexican professor and writer, found out that Francisco was writing, he asked to read his stories. Iduarte encouraged him to continue writing and commented that he had talent. The first short story Francisco wrote was "Cajas de Cartón" (1973), which was published in a Spanish-language literary magazine. It was also published in English under the title "The Circuit." Because this short piece was well received, Francisco thought that he should continue documenting his experiences.



After graduate school in 1973, Francisco returned to Santa Clara University to teach undergraduate upper division courses in language, Latin American literature, and Mexican literature. Later he moved into administration, teaching only half-time until he took up administration full-time as Associate Academic Vice President, which left him little time to write the stories of his past. In 1994, he applied for and received a sabbatical, which enabled him to complete the remaining ten short stories included in *The Circuit*.

In a small corner of his home, Francisco has a desk with a computer. His writing routine consists of getting up very early in the morning, eating quick meals, and writing all day, sometimes into the night. He explained that as he was writing his first book, "I had to relive many painful experiences. I emotionally got caught up in my writing, and that kept me awake at night. Often I would break down with some of the stories like "Inside Out" where I tell about the experience I had going to school, not knowing a word of English, flunking first grade, and feeling the frustration of trying to understand the teacher. I felt alienated and disconnected."

Francisco keeps a small notepad by his nightstand. When he wakes up in the middle of the night, he often has new ideas or ways to rephrase parts of a book and writes these notes quickly, so he will remember them and hopefully fall back to sleep.

Francisco uses an approach that he refers to as the "Seven R's" strategy to help him through the different writing stages. The first R is *research*. Before writing, he researches his family's history by interviewing his family, reviewing documents, and visiting the many different places his family lived. The next step is *recall*. Gathering all of these materials helps Francisco recall many experiences, emotions, and impressions. The third phase is to *recover* from these recollections other memories that he has forgotten with the passage of time. He finds that one recollection leads to another, as he recovers the past. The fourth R is to *reflect*, which Francisco thinks is the most important phase. As he reflects on experiences from the past, he gains a deeper sense of purpose and meaning. Next he *re-creates* from the memories and reflections to

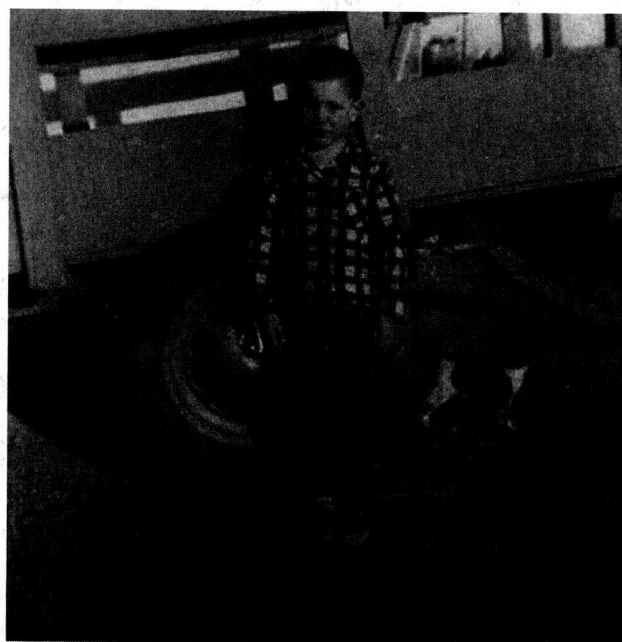
discover a story. Francisco notes that he sees his books as re-creations because he can't remember all of the details of his past. He believes that 90% of the material in his books is factual and 10% is fictional. The sixth R is *rewrite*, where in the process of re-creating, he rewrites many, many drafts. While he was writing *The Circuit* and *Breaking Through*, he went through at least nine different drafts. The final R is *reward*. After finishing a piece, there is the reward of self-discovery, understanding one's self much better, and knowing one's purpose in society. The real reward is the finished product.

Writing *The Circuit* was more difficult than writing *Breaking Through*, because Francisco says the

experiences took place when his family spoke Spanish. He had to translate his stories from Spanish into English as he was writing. "My goal was to express the emotions that I felt, going through memorable experiences I had as a child." When he translated *The Circuit* into Spanish for the Spanish edition, it was very easy because the dialogue flowed smoothly. It was easier to write *Breaking Through*, because the setting took place in high school where English was dominant. When he translated the text into Spanish, he recalled the

exact words that his father said, especially when he reprimanded his children.

His picture books, *La Mariposa* and *The Christmas Gift/El Regalo de Navidad*, are based on stories from *The Circuit*. Francisco is pleased with Simon Silva's bold illustrations in *La Mariposa* because, "He also went through the migrant experience." This picture book shares Francisco's first exposure to school where he had a difficult time paying attention and understanding his teacher. Dreaming and caring for a caterpillar became his escape. In *The Christmas Gift*, Panchito dreamed of receiving a red ball for Christmas, but there was no work and no money for presents, and the true meaning of Christmas was learned. In a telephone conversation with illustrator Claire Cotts, she requested that Francisco read the text aloud to her so that she could hear his voice and resonance. Later she told him that she visited flea markets looking for people she imagined were like the ones in the story. Cotts



convinced the people she met to model for her as she painted the illustrations for the book.

When asked if he felt that he was revealing too much of his family's life in his books, Francisco replied, "What

### The Christmas Gift *El regalo de Navidad*



Francisco Jiménez ✱ Illustrated by Claire B. Cotts

helped me through this writing process was knowing that I was not just writing my family's history, but I was writing the experiences of many people who went through the same adjustments. Even though the writing was very personal for me, these are the life stories of many people from

the past and the present. The motivation for me to write is to give voice to the experiences of a large sector of our society that has been ignored or made invisible to the general public. Yet these families make wonderful contributions to our society through the work they do."

One of California's biggest industries is agriculture. Francisco points out that many people don't think about who does the work in the fields. He feels that it is very important to understand the value of the work that these individuals do, usually under very difficult conditions and for very low wages. Francisco's hope is that young people who read his books will think about who is responsible for putting food on their tables.

Francisco believes it is extremely valuable to document the Mexican American experience, knowing that when we read about the various experiences of ethnic groups in our multicultural society, we better understand who the United States is as a nation. He states, "These experiences are so important to record because they are part of the American experience. My hope is that by documenting these occurrences as part of American history, children who come from the Hispanic, Latino background will feel then that they are rooted in a larger picture. They're not isolated. They're not disconnected. Their experiences are valuable and are part of the larger picture that we call the American experience." For children who don't share the same experience, Francisco wants them to learn about others as these stories are part of our history and our shared human experience.

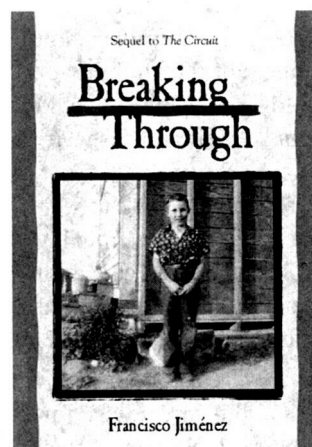
Reflecting again on teachers and teaching, Francisco often wonders what his life would have been like if he had not had the teachers who encouraged him. Dedicated to his teachers, *Breaking Through* refers to his ability to break through learning obstacles. He is sure he wouldn't be where he is today were it not for teachers like Mr. Lema,

Miss Bell, and Mr. Penny. He passionately states, "It's not because I'm a teacher myself, but because of what teachers have done for me and for many young people. Teachers are very powerful in determining the kind of society we will have in the future, because they are educating our future leaders, people who are going to be doing what needs to be done in our society to continue a democracy and autonomy that sustains every one." Francisco uses the metaphor of teachers helping students break out of cocoons to become fully developed as butterflies.

Teaching is a valued profession in the Jiménez family. Francisco has two brothers, one sister-in-law, two nephews, and two sons who are teachers. He is always curious when one of his college students declares a major and asks, "How did you decide to do that?" The majority of them say that they had a teacher, perhaps a wonderful English teacher or a Spanish teacher, who motivated them to major in that subject. He acknowledges that the "power of teachers is incredible. Many young students are still grappling with and struggling in many ways to figure out who they are and what they're going to do with their lives. Teachers can give them direction and a sense of worth to reinforce their identity." He believes that the students he is teaching are already on their way, because they are in college. "College teachers benefit from all of the hard work

that elementary, junior high, and high school teachers do, because they have offered the preparation for these students along the way. The influence that teachers have at each level is tremendous."

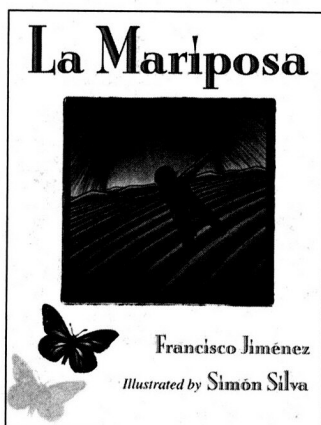
Francisco received the Carnegie Foundation Outstanding United States Professor of the Year in 2002. He humbly believes that the award really



belongs to his students because without them he would not be a teacher. "I cannot think of anything more valuable than being a teacher. It's a privilege for me to be a teacher, to be helping my students to learn while I am growing as a teacher. I also learn from my students."

When his college students ask him what it takes to be a good teacher, he responds, "The most important thing you need in order to be a successful teacher is to love your students. Love is in the broad sense. When you love your students, there's nothing you wouldn't do to help them succeed. If they make mistakes, you correct them with care and compassion. If you love your students, your students will respond."

What is next for this author? The sequel to *Breaking Through* will document his life experiences after graduating from high school. His motivation is to give voice to the experiences of many first-generation college students from immigrant families. He explains, "These students have very different experiences from other students whose parents or grandparents went to college. I will share how first-generation college students who come from poor economic backgrounds and different linguistic and cultural backgrounds do survive in college." His hope is that he will tell the story of many immigrant students who will say that this is *their* story, too. He has already begun his research for this book and is negotiating with his university for time to write.



As a frequent speaker in schools and libraries, Francisco tells students, "Education is your most important possession because you can lose all the material possessions you have—a house or a car can be lost. But what you can never lose is the education you have. That'll last forever." He explains further, "Education gives you many more choices of the kind of work you want to do and the kind of life you want to live. My parents didn't have an education, so their choices were limited, but their work was valuable. But if they had choices, they would have preferred to get jobs that were not such hard work, and to earn better salaries to enjoy more of life." Francisco adds, "Getting a good education gives us opportunities to get a job that gives us a better life materially, but more important, helps us to appreciate life more fully."

I was interested in Francisco's thoughts and advice for classroom teachers who have English language learners. He believes that teachers need to identify the talents of students, capitalize on those talents, and give students encouragement. "All children have different talents such as art, athletics, reading, or music. Teachers need to find out students' talents and give them positive feedback, which will give them self-worth. Once they feel good about themselves because they have a particular talent, they will want to work harder. Encouragement is to believe that every child is valuable, and that they can contribute, and that they can learn."

Francisco went on to reflect that teachers need to value the life experiences, cultures, and native languages of students who are learning English. Sometimes Francisco

hears teachers say to children, "If you don't study hard, you're going to end up flipping burgers." He cringes when he hears this because it's possible that some of the parents of those children are flipping burgers. These comments could hurt the relationship between the parents and the child. In contrast, Francisco believes teachers need to think of different ways to motivate children to pursue an education rather than to demean other people's work. He emphasizes, "All work is noble; we should treat each other with respect and kindness. Even though we may be different ethnically, culturally, or linguistically, these qualities enrich us all. We should respect each other as human beings." Francisco tells children, "You know what hard work is because you see your parents working so hard for your sake. Knowing what hard work is, then, you should apply hard work to your studies to honor your parents."

When Francisco has free time, he enjoys reading, listening to music, dancing, and traveling. Rock and roll and classical music are some of his favorites because, he says, "Music is the universal language." Since Latino culture holds the family in reverence, hard work honors and supports their survival. Reflecting on his life, Francisco considers his greatest life achievements as having a loving family, being a teacher, and his writing. "My books have made it possible for me to expand what I do in the classroom to a wider audience." Francisco's experiences create a rich, meaningful theme of passion for teaching, social justice, and an appreciation for cultural differences.

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For more information, see <http://www.scu.edu/fjimenez>

### Author Biography

Deanna Day teaches literacy courses at Washington State University.