

**Detective Fiction and the Creative Process:
Rolando Hinojosa**

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Rolando Hinojosa's production as a writer is well known to Chicano literature scholars and to those who enjoy reading well-written, enlightening and interesting fiction. The author, a native of Mercedes, Texas, grew up speaking Spanish as a small child and later mastered the English language. He writes equally well in both languages, and his recurrent characters, whom we meet as adolescents in his first book, *Estampas del Valle* (1973), also speak Spanish in this initial installment, but gradually change to English as they enter the English speaking world of advanced education and work in the following volumes. In subsequent works, therefore, they speak both languages, and in the most recent ones they function primarily in English, for example in *Ask a Policeman*.

In all of the works of this continuing series, Hinojosa presents a panorama of life in south Texas where he grew up. To accomplish this he creates the mythical county of Belken, containing various cities and border towns, and populates it with many characters both of Mexican descent and Anglos. He has given his readers several important characters, among them the unforgettable Viola Barragán, as well as two of the major male characters, Jehú Malacara and Rafa Buenrostro.

Among his many novels, the author has written two detective stories, *Partners in Crime*, published in 1985, and *Ask a Policeman*, published in 1998. To be sure, the two main characters continue to be the ones we met as adolescents in his first book, but now they are all grown up. Jehú is a banker, Rafa a policeman, though he is also a lawyer.

After being intrigued by the detective novels, I determined to find out how and why Rolando Hinojosa decided to venture into this genre. The writer graciously agreed to be interviewed on March 17, 2002, with a subsequent follow-up on October 7, 2002.

In the interview that follows he discusses why he chose the detective genre, authors and texts that have influenced him, how art reflects life, and his perspective on conflicts between high and low culture.

MIDdS What inspired you to write detective stories?

RH. First of all, I wanted to write in many different novelistic genres: the fragmentary, the epistolary, narrative verse, and so on. This, combined with the changing economy of the Valley, led me to use the detective novel.

The Valley, as any border area, has long been the scene for smuggling. In the last twenty years, however, what is smuggled is no longer the usual: auto and truck parts, tractors, radios, television sets, and the like. Drugs, in all forms, have taken over as preferred smuggled items.

With this in mind, I decided to write my first linear novel, *Partners in Crime*, to show how the Valley has changed because of its false economy; false, because the money can't be invested in regular fashion and thus must be laundered before it surfaces again.

Also, violence has escalated on both sides of the Rio Grande because of the drug trade which, in part, has led to the breakup of some old families.

The Series also had to reflect what the Valley had and has gone through from the Thirties to the present.

I believe that *Partners* is the first Mexican American detective story, and this goes with what I said at the beginning about my own plans to use as many forms of the novel as possible.

MIDdS Is there any mystery writer (or writers) that you admire or that has influenced you? And if so, in what ways?

RH I've read detective stories since I was a child. I remember reading Erle Stanley Gardner who also used the pseudonym A. A. Fair, and, perhaps, other pseudonyms.

I also read Mignon Eberhardt, Ellery Queen, and then I moved on to Hammett and Chandler, John Dickson Carr who also used the name Carter Dickson, and many others. It was for enjoyment, of course, and I still do, but then I also read to see how and what was being done.

I was given the names of Nicolas Freeling and the Swedish couple, Per Wahloo and Maj Sjowall, during a lecture tour in Panama and Mexico City. The latter write procedurals and that is what I used in *Partners* and in *Policeman*.

In the fifties I had read some Mickey Spillane but found them dull after the second or third book since violence was the principal theme of his work. I also read some Ngaio Marsh, an Australian, and two English writers, Dorothy Sayers and Manning Coles. This sounds like namedropping, but I also read many of the Holmes short stories. Lately, since I'd read them, I added E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case*, and Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. I'd not heard of Victor L. Whitechurch until I saw a reference to him in some periodical.

When I decided to write *Partners* and thus show an additional side of Buenrostro's, all I had read, and not only the detective works I was familiar with, came into play.

MIDdS Did you do any research on the genre before you started your first detective novel, or on the actual crime scene, and if so, where?

RH I don't understand what either writers or critics mean by research. Does it mean one goes to a police station or to a crime scene or talk to policemen on or off the job? If so, the answer is "No."

A lifetime of reading and paying attention to what one reads, or to what one sees on serious television programs is research enough. I watched programs such as *Law and Order* during its first two years, however I stopped watching because they became somewhat repetitive in themes and style. I also enjoyed black and white detective films because they were subtler than those of today, where cars blow up, etc. One is a writer in the same way that an actor is an actor: one acts and pretends to be the character. In my case, I write.

Lately, I've read two books written by policemen on homicide, which is the basis for most detective novels, and although there is a thirty-year stretch between the two books, there's not much difference. Martin Beck wrote one from Sweden, the other by Van der Valk from Holland. A carefully worded paragraph or two will usually convince the reader one knows what one is writing about.

DNA and other methods have come into play now, but there's always the danger of wearing one's knowledge on one's sleeve. I look at my detectives as people and my object is to present them as such, that is, they may be well mannered and polite, or surly and uncommunicative. What that does, of course, is to round out their characterization. If that works well, the reader accepts the detective as a person.

MIDdS When did you decide that Rafa Buenrostro, whom we met when he was a child in your first book, would be a policeman and the central figure of your mystery novels?

RH I think I mentioned he was a lieutenant of detectives in a letter Jehú writes to Rafe Buenrostro in the English version of *Dear Rafe*. I can't remember why I did so then, but the idea must've been in hatching for some time while I thought of the changes in the Valley.

As I said, I had decided to use various forms of the novel, and since I had not heard of any detective stories written by Mexican Americans, I thought it would be a good idea to do so. Now, as you may know, there are several writers who focus on that genre.

MIDdS What inspired you to create the character of Lu Cetina, the most important policewoman in your recent novel? Why did you place her on the Mexican side of the border as the law enforcement boss of a large area in northern Mexico?

RH The two major border cities in the Lower Rio Grande Valley are Matamoros and Reynosa, both in the state of Tamaulipas. Due to the corruption in that part of northern Mexico, there were shake-ups in the Federal police forces of both cities. In one of them, a woman became the head of the Federal police. Well, I had written *Policeman* earlier than that appointment and that meant that fiction was ahead of reality at the time.

Mexican women, stereotypes aside since these are usually leveled at the working classes, have been politically active for some time. In the PRI, obviously, since it was

in national power for over seventy years. And I am talking about senators or members of the Lower House as well as in judgeships. This is continuing with the new administration.

They remain a minority, but they do so in this country as well. When Lee Gómez Solís betrayed the Beeline County Homicide Squad and was forced from office and then went into hiding--which, incidentally, coincided with similar events in Matadors-- I thought it a good idea to have a woman as chief. Events, as I said earlier, stepped in and made my fiction a reality.

She's a federal attorney and served in various positions in Mexico City. When Gómez Solís is replaced, she is then put in his place. She's not a policewoman, but an administrator and a bright one. She cleans up the department, as much as she can, increases the pay of the federal police, relies on advice from a thirty-five year veteran who is up for retirement, and is not unwilling to ask for help from the detectives across the river. In brief, an intelligent, practical police chief who is learning through hands on experience.

When Buenrostro questions the two assassins, Lu Cetina is present; since she is an attorney and experienced in asking questions, she, like Buenrostro, is piecing the evidence together. She's also very much present at the end when one of the remaining twins is captured. Other scenes show her to be an able bureaucrat who knows how to do and to manage things.

I was born on the border and dated girls from across the river when I was young. This may be called research, if you wish, but it gave me insights for my future work as a writer. Although this was not the reason I dated them; we went to dances, to nightclubs, to parties, and so on.

MIDdS How do you go about constructing your plot around the crime scene?

RH I don't work with plots or with outlines. An idea appears, I decide to follow it, and then it's up to me to rewrite and to edit as much as I can. The secret to writing is that lifetime of reading I mentioned, but the key is to read one's work carefully and edit it ruthlessly. When asked about writing, I say that it's always best not to fall in love with one's words.

Some writers work with outlines, and I tried it with *Partners*, but it bogged me down. I couldn't adhere to what I had set down. New characters arose from somewhere, and I went with them and developed them as I was writing.

MIDdS How is writing these works different from writing your other works?

RH The obvious answer would be that detective stories are different, and they are, but writing is writing: there's a plot or a theme, and minor plots, the background must be developed and it must be convincing, and the characters and their age, their speech, and their social circumstances must always be taken into account.

Since the other works in the Series usually have open endings, and somehow include a mystery, that worked well in the detective novels. For one example, you remember

that in *Mi querido Rafa* and *Dear Rafe*, the novels end with Jehú's disappearance. There is then, a quest as The Writer interviews people for the reasons of Jehú's leaving the job in the bank.

Detectives work the same way; they have to separate the many disparate remarks given them as they search for the truth of the matter at hand.

In *Servants* (*The Useless Servants*, 1993), for another example, Buenrostro, for the most part, has no idea where he is in Korea; he came up with an old map, but that told him nothing.

More importantly, he learned more about himself; matters which had been a mystery or unexplored territory since he had not had to face death and serious decisions.

If one reads Dickens, say, there is usually a secret to be revealed and the reader then goes on a quest along with the character much like the reader of detective stories, whether the novels are thrillers, or suspense, or procedurals.

MIDdS How do you feel about being placed in the category of Latino Detective Writers?

RH Classification of any sort is something that I leave to publishers and literary critics. I'm a writer, and I choose to write what I choose to write. Readers can then choose to read what they wish.

There are good writers of detective stories and there are poor ones; it's the same with other writers of fiction. The detective novel is designated as a minor genre. The detective, however, is taught in many universities. Some in the academy are rather snobbish about this, and some are not. Some writers rail at being labeled and others don't care.

As for me, I'm writing a series that presents a part of the world that had not been written about. Many of the characters carry surnames, which were not common in New England and elsewhere east of the Mississippi. I did not stop to think if people would like the writing or not; had I, I think this would have dented what I wanted to say.

As for the term Latino, we, once again, find ourselves being designated by usage imposed by the majority population. From Mexican to Latin American to Spanish-speaking American to Mexican American to Hispanic and now Latino. The latter term was voted on by the board of directors of the Chandler people in Los Angeles when deciding what term to use in their newspapers when referring to Spanish speaking citizens and non-citizens living in this country.

Do I care? No. What others call me is of little interest and moment. We are Americans, after all. If our fellow citizens use those terms, let them. In the long run, what one says matters little. On the other hand, what one writes is what one leaves behind, and that does matter.

MIDdS Sometimes in the academic world, fellow academics frown upon literary works of popular culture, such as detective novels. For example, I believe Amanda Cross is the pen name of a famous academician who has taught, at Columbia. Do

you get comments from colleagues that might reflect this conflict between high and low culture?

RH High and low culture are bothersome designations. I know that Bach and Beethoven, say, are considered high culture. As for Brahms, some do not consider him to be on the same level as the other two. What's one to do with this? Nothing; a waste of time.

Are Mozart's works to be broken up between the serious and his comic works? Which is high and which is low?

Is it easier to write an operetta than an opera? Labeling high and low culture is usually a matter of trying to place oneself above the mob. A useless preoccupation, I should think.

Many Italian operas used nineteenth century Spain's dramas as a basis. Where, then, does that put Spain's Golden Age dramas? Is nineteenth century Spanish drama of superior quality? No.

What's in now may not be in later. What was in then may not be in now, and so on. I, not unlike most people, have preferences, and these include what is designated high culture as well as low culture.

Since I choose not to use labels, I go my way and will enjoy Mozart and Irving Berlin, and Agustín Lara and María Grever as well as the work of Ernesto Lecuona.

Why the variance? It depends how I feel on certain days. I can't be up for so-called high culture all the time any more than I can listen to so-called low culture in music day after day.

So, Joyce is high culture, but how many of our friends read and have read and studied *Ulysses* au fond? Do I read his short works as well? Yes. Do I enjoy his outrageous puns? Yes, as much as I enjoy reading Pynchon. But, as in everything else, up to a point.

I think the Chinese are right when they speak of the middle way.

MIDdS: Thank you so much for your time.