

Book Talk:



Nan Cuba, novelist and professor

Story and Photo by Jasmina Wellinghoff

Though she started her writing career as a journalist, Nan Cuba soon discovered that her real interest laid elsewhere. After earning an MFA in fiction from the Warren Wilson Program for Writers, she started publishing short stories, poetry and essays, a number of which have been included in prominent anthologies. She served as assistant editor of the Palo Alto Review, co-edited the anthology *Writers at the Lake* (Our Lady of the Lake University) and more recently served as editor of *Art at Our Doorstep: San Antonio Writers and Artists*, published by Trinity University Press in 2008. Since 2005, she has taught creative writing at OLLU, where she's currently an associate professor of English.

But Cuba's greatest legacy to San Antonio is the creation of Gemini Ink, the city's sole independent and nationally known literary center that she founded and led from its inception in 1992 until 2003. Still going strong after two decades of work, Gemini Ink has brought to town many literary luminaries, offered a huge array of classes for writers and the reading public, and sponsored writing workshops in community settings throughout the area.

This year, Cuba has reached another cherished goal – the publication of her first novel, *Body and Bread* (Engine Books), which examines the ramifications of a family member's suicide. The story is mostly told through the experiences of Sarah, the suicide victim's favorite sibling who is unable to fully engage with life even years after her brother Sam's tragic death. An anthropologist specializing in Mezoamerican cultures, Sarah studies Aztec and other Mexicha rituals and religion while dealing with her own family's past and present.

Cuba, who like Sarah lost a brother to suicide many years ago, followed Mark Twain's advice to "write what you know." And her narrative shows it. San Antonio Express-News reviewer Pam Johnston described *Body and Bread* as "a beautiful examination of family dynamics in the wake of suffering and the way grief continues to shape our lives far beyond the death of a loved one." The novel was included in Oprah Winfrey's O magazine's "15 Riveting Reads to Pick up in May 2013."

JW: I read someplace that this novel had been in

the making for 20 years. Could you explain?

NC: The book was not planned. It actually started with a story. I wrote a five-page story – it's the fish-gutting scene in the first chapter of the novel – and it was published in the Columbia University journal. Afterwards a friend of mine pointed out that my story was very similar to Katherine Anne Porter's story *The Grave*. My reaction was one of alarm. No writer wants to think that she doesn't have original material. I explained that I wasn't thinking of *The Grave* at all, but it touched a nerve because Porter's fiction has been influential in my work. I knew that I had read that story, and I reread it after that conversation with my friend. The parallels were troubling. It was also a brother-sister story with similar narrative elements. But the most troubling aspect was that the brother in Porter's story is named Paul and my brother who committed suicide was also named Paul. So that told me that that story was probably in my subconscious when I wrote my own short story, and it became apparent to me that without consciously planning it I had wanted to write about my brother. (*Later, advised by a professor in her MFA program to write autobiographical fiction, Cuba developed multiple stories about an East Texas family which eventually morphed into the present novel over a number of years.*)

JW: So, how did the collection of stories finally become *Body and Bread*?

NC: The year after I left Gemini Ink, I took the whole year (2004) off to find an agent and to develop the manuscript. I worked hard and found my agent, Esmond Harmsworth from the Zachary Shuster Harmsworth Literary Agency. He's stayed with me all these years. He asked me to revise the manuscript a couple of times, and his agency partner also critiqued it. He also paid three outside readers to read it and based on their feedback, I revised it at least one more time. Then we thought it was ready. However, the six big publishers that he sent the novel to all declined but the letters we got back were lovely, complimentary letters. Esmond said that the industry was shifting, and big houses were reluctant to take a chance on literary fiction from a first-time novelist. We then looked at smaller houses, and I eventually stumbled on Engine Books, and I am very grateful to this publisher. They only publish literary fiction, and they only take four



books a year. (Several more revisions followed before the book was released.)

JW: Could you address how the material shaped itself in your mind?

NC: I remember writing that first line of the first chapter, "Please help me say the unsayable: My first life ended when my brother Sam committed suicide." I wrote that about half-way through the process. What I said to myself was, this book is going to be a eulogy. And while I was writing it, I was thinking that if I were able to wrestle with Sam and Sarah's family and the motivations behind their behavior, it would in some way help me reconcile with the fact that my brother had made the same choice as Sam. Just like Sarah was trying to figure it out, I was trying to figure it out. But the odd thing is, now that I finished it, I no longer think that that's what the book is about. In its final form it's actually a testimony to the damage done to the family when a loved one commits suicide. Sarah is very damaged and trying so hard to heal herself. This book is her story.

JW: How old were you and how old was your brother when he killed himself?

NC: My brother was 26 and I was 23. It was more than 40 years ago. It's not that I am conscious of grieving all the time but in my subconscious I must have needed to do what I did. And I'll tell you this: while writing the book and fully understanding that my brother Paul was the inspiration for it, I worried about what people would think about that. (Will they be saying), are you using your brother's tragedy in some way to your advantage? And what would your parents and other siblings think? How ethical is this? I really wrestled with these questions. But this is what I finally realized. Forty years after Paul died I get to talk about him. I get to say his name and talk about who he was and celebrate his life. He would have loved that! I can't tell you how many people told me with tears in their eyes that they had experienced a similar tragedy and thanked me for writing this book.

JW: You brought a lot of complexity and layers to the writing and incorporated a great deal of ancient Mesoamerican cultural practices throughout the narrative. It's obvious that you did a lot of research

in this area. I guess it's not an accident that Sarah is an anthropologist specializing in Mexicha history and mythology. There are lots of references to ritualistic sacrifice with an implication of renewal and rebirth. Do you see a parallel to Sarah's story?

NC: I absolutely do. All of that is in Sarah's mind. She has hallucinations when she is frightened or under stress, and she retreats into the Mezoamerican culture because that's where she's the most comfortable. That's her profession. She can escape from her feelings of guilt and thinking about Sam and what's going on with her family. But she also undergoes a change reminiscent of Mexicha's ritualistic ceremonies. In one scene, she visits a tunnel at a bottom of a pyramid in Mexico that was said to be the center of the earth. She starts feeling disoriented, and while there she gets the sense that Sam's spirit has become part of her. She even pledges to him that she would live for both of them. That ritual is important in understanding her psychology, her need to carry Sam's spirit with her. There's a rebirth of him into her.

But at the end of the story, the goddess Tlahzolteotl, who is the one who "eats the guilt" and forgives you when you confess to her, steps in. Sarah imagines herself talking to the goddess, and she finally frees herself of the guilt. In my mind she will be free of the hallucinations, she will be free of the responsibility of carrying Sam with her, and there's a rebirth for her.

JW: Are you currently busy with readings and doing publicity for *Body and Bread*?

NC: I believe in the book, and I feel obligated and responsible to do whatever I can to share it with others and to see to it that it gets the life that it deserves. I enjoy the interaction with readers. This is what I tell book groups who invite me to speak to them. I compare talking about my book to the experience I had when my daughter Julia was getting ready to go into preschool. The teacher invited me in and asked me to tell her about Julia. I said, "You mean, I get to talk about my child! And you really want to listen?" That's how I feel when people ask me to talk about my book. For 20 years I was in a room by myself (laughs). This is new to me.

JW: On another topic: You are the founder of Gemini Ink, which is still going strong after 20 years. Has the organization fulfilled your hopes for it?

NC: It wasn't an official nonprofit until 1996, but Marilyn (Croman) and I started it in '92 with the readers' theater shows. Then we started classes in '94. I am delighted that we still have it, and I am grateful to everyone who has worked to sustain it. It's a large organization now and a huge commitment. I am extremely grateful to Rose (Catacalos, Cuba's successor at the helm of Gemini Ink). Her legacy is the development of the Writers in Communities program, and I appreciate that. I knew it needed to be developed when I left, and she did it. And the program is thriving. And Sheila (Black, the new director) is fabulous. She is primarily an artist but she also knows exactly what to do to run a nonprofit. Her commitment right now is to focus on the University Without Walls (classes for writers), and she has already made a huge headway. She wants to bring back the mentor program, too. I am just thrilled. I want to help her in any way possible if she would let me.

JW: Now that the story that has been part of you for so long has been told, what are your future literary plans?

NC: I have already started my second novel; it will be something funny and fun, not easy comedy, more like a tragicomedy. My title is *He Didn't Kill Anybody but Mom*. As a journalist I interviewed a serial killer so the book is inspired by that experience although the killer himself is a minor character. All the other people around him are kind of extreme individuals, to the point of absurdity. I expect it to be a comment on our criminal justice system. I plan to take the fall semester off and then return to teaching for the spring semester and then retire from full-time teaching altogether to devote myself to writing.

Cuba's comments have been edited slightly for space and clarity.