Gilb on the state of Texas literature — 12 years later
by Ann Friou

The Flowers

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Writer Dagoberto Gilb of Texas State’s creative writing faculty received the Texas Book Festival’s Bookend Award in November, honoring him for his lifetime of contributions to Texas literature.

He joins a list of other well-known writers whose literary contributions have helped to form Texas’ literary heritage: Sandra Cisneros, Larry L. King, T.R. Fehrenbach, Horton Foote, John Graves, A.C. Greene, Shelby Hearon, Elmer Kelton, Stanley Marcus, Cormac McCarthy, Américo Paredes, Louis Sachar, Edwin “Bud” Shrike and Bill Wittliff.

Gilb’s prize-winning body of work, produced over more than 25 years, includes two novels, three short-story collections, a volume of essays, an anthology and dozens of magazine articles and radio commentaries. All of his work — fiction and non-fiction — describes the lives of working-class Mexican-Americans like himself. Before joining the Texas State University creative writing faculty in 2001, Gilb had spent 16 years as a carpenter, building skyscrapers to support himself as a writer, and his gritty storytelling, which has been compared to that of Raymond Carver and Anton Chekov, is fueled by his full-lived personal experience. He has won top literary prizes such as the PEN/Hemingway Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He’s been a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and he’s attended a White House dinner as an award-winning author.

Gilb made a particularly important contribution to Texas letters in 2006 with the publication of his anthology of Texas Mexican literature, *Hecho en Tejas* (University of New Mexico Press). He had been asked by Texas State’s Southwestern Writers Collection to compile the anthology because no such compilation existed. Gilb’s resulting 522-page volume is considered a monumental achievement, comprehensive in its inclusion of more than 100 letters, songs, poems, stories, artworks and photos by Mexican-Americans, many of whom are well known. Beginning with Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca’s 16th-century account of his exploration of Texas, Gilb’s collection spans almost 500 years of Mexican-American literary history in Texas, bringing writers such as Américo Paredes, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith and Tomás Rivera — three writers to whom Gilb points as models for his own writing — together with poets and songwriters such as Angela de Hoyos, Tino Villanueva, Lydia Mendoza, Tish Hinojosa, Selena and Grupo Fantasma, and writers new to the literary scene such as Christine Granados, Erasmo Guerra and Tonantzín Canestaro-García. To Gilb, these artists comprise “all the voices that might form one story, one family’s history.”

Upon its publication in 2006, *Hecho en Tejas* was acclaimed as a groundbreaking historical accomplishment, and the Texas Legislature declared a day in February 2007 as *Hecho en Tejas* Day. Then, in November, Gilb received the Bookend Award from the Texas Book Festival. The award presentation, in the Texas Capitol’s House Chamber, was an ironic and fitting conclusion to events that Gilb had set in motion in the same chamber 12 years earlier.


His newfound acclaim drew him an invitation in 1995 to speak on a panel at the opening session of the first Texas Book Festival on the topic of “The State of Texas Literature.” Gilb recounts in an essay in his book *Gritos* (2003) that while other panelists discussed the history, landscape and rugged individualism that characterize Texas literature, his own comments took a different tack, and they didn’t go over well.

He pointed out that writers like himself — working-class Mexican-Americans — are nearly invisible in the Texas literary tradition, which, he said, has been dominated by “a triumvirate of white men” (Roy Bedichek, J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb, and more recently Larry McMurtry). He has strengthened this view over the years, lamenting that few American writers of Mexican descent are being taught in university literature courses. If Mexican-American work is good, he says, it is considered charming but unimportant, fascinating but foreign. He emphasizes the “absurdity” of dismissing the literature of a people who were in Texas before Anglos, who helped Texas to win its independence from Mexico and who will soon comprise...
the largest population group in Texas and the Southwest.

Gilb writes that his statement at the 1995 Texas Book Festival was made in the House Chamber to a "jury attached to coastered executive chairs" and to "a red velvet and polished horseshoe gallery for observers" and that "every face was very silently not smiling or winking." Afterward, friends who were embarrassed for him asked him if he had misunderstood what sort of presentation he was supposed to make.

If the audience was uncomfortable with Gilb's statements, his complaint was valid nevertheless. For hundreds of years Texas had supported a thriving Mexican-American literary tradition, and Gilb's belief that it deserved to be brought into the mainstream eventually led him to produce *Hecho en Tejas*, establishing the canon of Mexican-American literature in Texas.

“I am proud to have received the Bookend Award, but I see it more as a small payment in recognition of the virtually ignored Mexican-American community in Texas.”

Further, Gilb writes, even after all his years of struggle to get publishers to understand the Mexican-American experience as a profoundly American experience, “… people like me are unseen, patronized, so out of the portrait of American literature. It seems impossible that so many of the writers I have known — and yes, me, too — with a decent record of publications by usual standards, still fight a battle for acceptance.”

“I really don’t understand,” he told *Hillviews*, “why we don’t want to understand each other. After all, we live surrounded by Mexican culture. It’s in our food, our architecture, our clothing, our language — it is within us and it is inevitable.”

Gilb’s interest in raising awareness about the contributions of Mexican-Americans is consistent with how he sees himself, not as an ethnic writer but as an American writer seeking his place in the American canon. Gilb’s fictional characters, whose depictions have been called “pitch perfect” by critics, represent the experience of blue-collar men and women of varying ethnicities — Mexican-Americans from Southern California, Mexicans from Mexico, blacks from Watts, Anglos from Oklahoma, immigrants from Poland, and so on. They live in cities such as El Paso and Los Angeles and struggle to make ends meet as drivers of beer and delivery trucks; as butchers and clerks; as construction workers, plumbers, repairmen, secretaries, busboys, mechanics, taxi drivers and girlfriends of drug dealers. Gilb’s characters are built on his familiarity with straddling Anglo and Mexican-American culture and from his firsthand knowledge of the uncertainties, demands, conflicts, desires, failures and rewards that working-class people experience in their everyday lives.

Gilb is consistent in expressing the tension that results from misunderstandings between different groups of people. In his essay “Dream Comes True” (*Gritos*), he writes about the culture clash he experienced in winning his first literary prize in 1984 — the James D. Phelan Award, given by the San Francisco Foundation to promising young California writers.

When he won the award, he was building a high-rise in Los Angeles, living paycheck to paycheck and writing when he could. He recounts his hopefulness that, despite the
more than 100 rejections he’s received from editors, the prize portends his future success as a published writer. But the prize, which provides Gilb with his first entrée to the elite social and intellectual environment of the literary world, also causes him to feel disoriented and uncomfortable. At the award ceremony, he feels self-conscious about his cheap clothes. A Mexican waiter calls attention to Gilb’s racial difference by speaking to him in Spanish. His hostess insults him by insisting that Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flat* — whose Mexican characters are dissolute pleasure-seekers — is the country’s best writing about Mexican-Americans. Gilb realizes with resignation that his economic background and ethnicity create a barrier between him and the literary world he is glimpsing, and he knows that he will return after the ceremony to his impoverished life of construction work.

For more than 15 years after receiving the Phelan award, Gilb continued working construction and struggling to write. The publication of some short stories in 1982 in *The Threepenny Review* had given Gilb his first national exposure and won him the Phelan Award, but it didn’t win him a publishing contract. Then, the publication of his short story collection *The Magic of Blood* (1993), which won the PEN/Hemingway Foundation Award for best first fiction, brought him to the attention of Morgan Entrekin, the publisher of Grove Press who published most of Gilb’s subsequent books.

At last November’s Texas Book Festival, Entrekin presented Gilb with the Bookend Award, saying that he first encountered Gilb’s work in the stories collected in *The Magic of Blood*.

“It was a revelation,” Entrekin said. “The authority of his voice, the precision of his craft, the beauty of the writing and the compassion for his characters and their lives — you knew that you were in the presence of a real writer, one destined to win prizes and to be read for many years to come. I immediately made an offer for the paperback rights for *The Magic of Blood* and for his first novel, *The Last Known Residence of Mickey Acuña*.

“Dagoberto has won praise for his portrayal of the lives of working-class people,” Entrekin continued, “particularly Chicano, in Texas and the Southwest and southern California. But like any great writer, his fiction transcends a specific class or place or ethnic group to offer truths about the way we all live. I’m honored to be his publisher.”

The transcendent nature of Gilb’s writing was brought home to Texas State recently when Gilb read publicly from his latest novel, *The Flowers* (2008). He read a passage in which the main character, a Mexican-American teenager named Sonny Bravo, narrates an attack on him by his mother’s drunk boyfriend. In the scene, Sonny progresses from vague awareness of a knock at the door to startled realization that the drunk boyfriend is going to kick the door down, to terror mixed with anger and hatred when he is attacked and injured by the big man. Gilb gave precise impersonations of his characters as he read the scene, switching easily between the lilting, barrio-accented English of a Mexican-American youth and the surly threats of a drunk redneck.

Following the reading, a woman in the audience told Gilb that she had grown up among people whose voices sounded like those in Gilb’s stories, but that, until she had read Gilb’s work, she had never encountered those voices in literature.

“She gets what I’m trying to do,” Gilb said, adding, “We’re looking at a new time, not too far in the future, when the social structure will reflect the ethnic mix of the community. It’s already happening in some places: I do readings at colleges where the mixture of faces looks like the one in the neighborhood where I grew up. It’s thrilling; it’s a relief.”

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