

Left Coast Crime El Paso
The Latino Sleuth – Life on the Border

The 15th annual Left Coast Crime conference was held in El Paso on the Tex-Mex border, and I was honored to be part of a panel that included Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Michele Martinez. If you've not yet heard of these writers, I'll give you two reasons why you should not worry – First, Michele's first mystery was just published by Harper Collins in mid-February and Alicia's book won't be out until the end of March. Second, I have no doubt that you'll be hearing much more about them in the near future. Manuel Ramos, author of the Luis Montez series including titles like **The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz** and **Blues for the Buffalo**, was not able to make the conference, but gave me answers via email.

As moderator, I asked some pretty basic questions before, during and after the panel. I started with the classic "Please, briefly describe your novel for the audience." Since, as I've said, you may not have heard of their books yet, I'll give you the synopsis treatment: Alicia's book **Desert Blood: The Juarez Murders** is based on the true crime cases of the almost four hundred women who have been murdered in the city of Juarez in Mexico, literally a stone's throw from El Paso. Whatever one may have heard about these cases (and shame on the American media for not making sure more people have heard the story) these women were not prostitutes, they were not loose women, not drug addicts or alcoholics. Even if they had been, they would not have earned the humiliation, the torture, the mutilation that befell them. They were, for the most part, factory workers. Simple.

Michele Martinez's book, **Most Wanted**, deals with the life of a young mother who happens to be a federal prosecutor in New York City. The particular case she's working involves the horrifying brutality of New York's drug gangs and mirrors some of the details from a case Michele (herself a former federal prosecutor from New York) worked. The witnesses prepared to testify against a drug lord are executed without pity, without regard to age or gender and, in the book, the prosecutor herself is the next target. As in real life, the violence is hair-raising and the stakes are exactly life and death.

Manuel Ramos's novels are numerous and sometimes classified as Chicano noir. They feature the often down, but never out lawyer Luis Montez, and, more recently, PI Danny Mora, the **Moony of Moony's Road to Hell**. The issues are sometimes such that would not often occur outside the Chicano community – the murder of a Chicano activist in one book, dealings with a smuggler of illegal immigrants in another.

Of my own books, the **Precinct Puerto Rico** series, I can say they are set in a fictional, very rural town in the central mountains of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean. When crime comes calling, Sheriff Luis Gonzalo and his deputies have the option of waiting for the big city detectives with crime scene specialists to arrive or going on the hunt for the murderer themselves. Of course, they choose to work the case every time.

The next question for the panel presented listeners with something of a dichotomy found in the American Latino crime novel. This is the issue of identity politics. "Does your novel deal with issues that could only be dealt with by a Latino or Latina protagonist?" (More or less.) For Alicia the answer was easy. The Juarez murders are true crimes. They are in a Latino setting by default. The protagonists are Latinas who have been drawn to work in American factories set up in Juarez through NAFTA. For Michele, the answer is a bit more complicated. Her Latina federal prosecutor is a reflection, somewhat, of herself, but could have been a federal prosecutor of any ethnic background.

But then "why write a Latina or Latino?" the moderator wants to know. "Why not pick someone of German descent? Or Asian?" There are good reasons: "Write what you know," is a response from both Alicia and Michele. Manuel Ramos is on the same page: "what I knew best was my own particular Latino environment." In my own case, when I first sat down to write, I had two possible scenarios – I could write about New York City where I was born and mostly raised and where I was living at the time, or I could write about Puerto Rico, where I was partly raised and where I have visited a couple dozen times and where I have a hundred family members (no joke, I've counted). I figured competing with all the crime novels that have been written about New York City would be foolish, so Puerto Rico it was. Once the locale was chosen, writing about a German or an Asian solving crimes might make for a good comedy, but not for a good mystery. Besides, I enjoy representing Puerto Ricans as much as they can be represented on a page.

Also, "Why not a Latino or Latina?" After all, if X percent of the American population are Latinos, maybe X percent of the mysteries set in America should be about Latinos (not to mention *written by* Latinos).

But then the question arises – more from me than from any natural progression of the discussion – is there even such a thing as a Latino? Here is what I understood from my interlocutors. Michele Martinez would like to make clear that there is a degree to which the "Latina" is a myth – as is recognized throughout the Latino community, the many ethnicities and nationalities that are collected under the title of Latina are each different from the others. Puerto Rican

(as in Michele's protagonist) or Mexican or Chilean or Cuban – Nuyorican, Chicana or hyphenated American or just American – they're all different. As different as they want to be. They have to be given that space as writers (and as characters) to decide what they want to be rather than having the labels placed on them from outside.

Manuel Ramos takes the issue a step further: "In the US today ["Latino"] primarily, but not only, means folks with links to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and now the Central American countries. A common question among these groups is 'identity' – just who in the hell are we? The variety of names that we call ourselves points out the pervasiveness of this question but the real issue is how do we fit into the North American scheme of things. Take Chicanos for example. We have been around since before the country known as the US existed in the Southwest and yet we are looked on as newcomers, immigrants, aliens. That can cause a mighty identity crisis and our literature reflects it."

For Alicia Gaspar de Alba, I think (this is my interpretation) the term Latino is a term that denotes a conflict, not always an internal one. Not so much "who are we?" as, repeated over and over again, "who are they?" There is a degree to which the definition of "Latino" includes "to be disenfranchised."

For myself, the term Latino may be one that is self-imposed or one that exists only in opposition – that is, what other Americans call a certain group. Luckily for me, however, having set my novels in Puerto Rico, a Spanish speaking territory of the United States, my characters don't much worry about the issue. Puerto Ricans living on the island generally don't worry about their identity. Though they are born citizens of the United States, they consider themselves Puerto Ricans before anything else. "Boricua" as SJ Rozan reminded me in El Paso, Puerto Rican shorthand for someone from the island of Borinquen, the Indian name for Puerto Rico.

One of the last questions the panel discussed was the injection of Latino culture into the novels the panelists have written. All authors use Spanish phrases, for instance, though except for the most common words like "Sí," and "Gracias," translations are provided in the text or made plain through the action. Manuel Ramos points out that "Tejano music was the starting place for my second novel, **The Ballad of Gato Guerrero**." For myself, I tend to use only a few phrases, and try to work in some proverbs – *refranes* as they're called. Otherwise, I put in references to the terrain, the tropical weather, and the local characters that every small town in Puerto Rico seems to have

What, then, have we learned about trends in Latino crime novel? I'm not quite smart enough to come up with anything really good to say on this score. Here's an observation that I think can't be disputed though – the Latino crime novel is here to stay. Manuel Ramos's first book **The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz** was nominated for an Edgar and recently optioned for a movie. Michele Martinez's **Most Wanted** is coming out in English, Spanish, hardcover, paperback, and audio; I think I heard it was even coming out in Large Print. Alicia Gaspar de Alba's book **Desert Blood** is coming out in hardcover, and the paperback deal has already been inked. Each of these novelists has received high praise from all sorts of reviewers. Even my **Precinct Puerto Rico** series has earned starred reviews from Kirkus and Library Journal. So maybe I can say that not only are Latino crime novels here to stay, but it's a good thing that they are.