

THE MADNESS OF *Mamá Carlota*



Graciela Limón

"Limón's prose is self-assured and engrossing . . . deserves a large audience." —*The New York Times Book Review*

Praise for the work of Graciela Limón:

“Graciela Limón’s first novel, *In Search of Bernabé*, leaves the reader with that special hunger that can be created only by a newly discovered writer. Ms. Limón’s prose is self-assured and engrossing . . . deserves a large audience.”

—*The New York Times Book Review* on *In Search of Bernabé*

“Downright hypnotic.”

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“[This novel] should awaken the conscience and compassion that drive and haunt every reader . . . a novel of absolute stylistic and social integrity.”

—*Booklist* on *The Memories of Ana Calderón*

“She is as sure-footed in the terrain of compelling storytelling as her indigenous Mexican Indian characters are in their huaraches.”

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“In her absorbing, politically engaged work, Limón restores dignity and identity to the inhabitants of a violent land, sketching tangled landscapes where faces are constantly erased and swept into anonymity.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Erased Faces*

“Murder. Madness. Execution. Suicide . . . all of the plot workings of an exciting modern take on Euripides’ *Medea* and the Mexican legend of *La Llorona* . . . Limón hits all of the right notes.”

—*Los Angeles Times* on *Left Alive*

“A sort of *Canterbury Tales* . . . as [immigrant travelers] come together in sorrow, tragedy and impending death. Thoughtful reading for anyone who wants socially engaged fiction.”

—*Library Journal* on *The River Flows North*

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In loving memory of

Polly Robles

(1932-2011)

AND

Katie Grace

(1922-2009)

This novel is dedicated to the memory of two extraordinary women who have played a powerful role in my life:

To Polly, whose strength, sense of humor and honesty inspired me to be true to myself. It was Polly who had just enough time to read the first draft of this novel before passing, and who took the time, despite her ordeal, to call me to say that she was sorry that the read was over. She wanted more of it.

To Katie, whose great faith carried me through a period of crisis and profound sadness by helping me to see that everything in life has its purpose.

Here's to both of you remarkable women who will be forever in my life.

Acknowledgments

I'm particularly grateful to the administrators of Bouchout Castle, site of the sixty year confinement of Empress Carlota. The castle, located outside of Brussels, Belgium, is not open to the public but it was Dr. Paul Borremans, docent, who in the Spring of 2010 took time to give me a two-hour tour of its interior. His knowledge of every chamber and anteroom of the castle, including its medieval dungeon, was a huge inspiration. So, too, were his lively and detailed descriptions that brought to life the old empress as she must have walked the corridors of Bouchout Castle during her captivity. For his generosity and time, I sincerely thank Dr. Borremans.

I'm indebted to Diana González Lemere, my dear cousin, whose encouragement led to our trip to Brussels that didn't end until we reached Bouchout Castle.

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I'm also indebted to all my friends and family whose interest and enthusiasm for the novel was a true inspiration. I thank all of you most sincerely.

“Qué lejos estoy del suelo donde he nacido . . . ”
(Canción Mixteca)

It was a turbulent time. Mexico was again hit with war, shifting governments, foreign invasion and indescribable upheaval. It was a time of huge displacement and mass migrations of Mexico's countless tribes: Zapotecas, Mixtecas, Cora, Chontal—too many to here list.

The tale you are about to read tells of the sad and tragic Empress Carlota of Mexico who, although here fictionalized, was real. On the other hand, her beloved companions, the Chontal sisters, are my creation; every part of them is a figment of my imagination.

Although the sisters first appear in and around the sacred grounds of Cholula, they consider themselves part of the Chontal tribe, a people traditionally rooted in Oaxaca. Why do they appear so far from their land, as if out of nowhere? No one knows. Perhaps they are among the many of Mexico's indigenous children that are displaced and lost. What is known is, like Mexico itself, the sisters become an integral part of Empress Carlota's life, destined to walk by her side as her companions, even as that path leads them to a foreign world where, as the Mixteca song tells, they find themselves far from the land of their birth.

MEXICO

1852-1866

Chapter One

It began when i was a child, when the dream first came to me, when I dreamed of the empire. Then, on a certain day, the dream came to my doorstep. It took shape when I was a young woman at Miramar Castle where Maximilian and I resided. On that day the Mexican emissaries approached him to become emperor of their country. They came dressed in fine clothing. They were stiff, awkward men obviously made nervous by surroundings none of them had ever experienced. Nonetheless, it was they who came to offer us a Mexican empire.

In the beginning I feared the undertaking because I had doubts about Maximilian's weak nature, but then it became clear to me that those emissaries had brought the seduction of the empire for my taking, not his, that I had come face-to-face with my destiny. I was incapable of turning my back on that allure. What my enemies later called inordinate ambition was instead my dream, one that turned dark and fatal. It was the force that drove me. It was the aspiration that compelled me to embrace the illusory Mexican throne.