

CROSSING BORDERS

PERSONAL ESSAYS



SERGIO TRONCOSO

Advance praise for *Crossing Borders*:

“Sergio Troncoso takes us on his journey from El Paso to New York, from child to husband, and student to father. He describes the solitary struggle of the writer, and the social and political hurdles overcome. Troncoso understands that in emerging from his chrysalis, he can never go back—nor does he want to. But the lesson is clear: You give something up to gain something else. As they say in the *mercado* in Chihuahua, ‘What will you take for it?’ Troncoso paid quite a lot, and it is worth our while to witness this journey from native son to the bloody birth of a public intellectual.”

—Kathleen Alcalá, author of *The Desert Remembers My Name*

“Border-crossings is a metaphor for the experience of Hispanic-American professionals traversing America’s ‘borders’ on their way to making a better life for self, family and country. Troncoso’s use of short stories, as if entries in a personal diary, captures important life-impacting times along his journey from the barrio through elite higher education to a life as a caring father and husband even while continuing to navigate the nearly always invisible barriers of exclusion. Readers interested in modern day acculturation will want to read and reflect on this rare opportunity to crawl into the mind of a talented, Latino author who writes about a common Latino professional’s story, and draw from his openness lessons intended to make us all better people.”

—Frank Alvarez, President and CEO
of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund

Praise for the work of Sergio Troncoso:

“Typical themes of love, death, coming-of-age and family life drive the narratives, but the El Paso setting lends them cultural depth. A series of tales about older men and women explores their vulnerability, loneliness and faith in God as they near death, while other stories concentrate on young adults caught in the cultural gap between their Mexican heritage and American lives. These stories are richly satisfying.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Last Tortillas and Other Stories*

“Single handedly redefines the Chicano novel and the literary thriller.”

—*The El Paso Times* on *The Nature of Truth*

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For Aaron and Isaac

Acknowledgements

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PUBLICATIONS FOR first publishing my essays. “Fresh Challah” and “Crossing Borders” originally appeared in *Hadassah Magazine*; “Latinos Find an American on the Border of Acceptance” and “Terror and Humanity” appeared in *Newsday*; “The Father is in the Details” in the *Westchester Review*; “Apostate of my Literary Family” in *Pembroke Magazine*; “A Day Without Ideas” and “Trapped” in *T-Zero Quarterly*; “A Third Culture: Literature and Migration” in *Literal Magazine: Latin American Voices*; and “This Wicked Patch of Dust” in *The Packinghouse Review*. Blog entries from Chico Lingo have been reprinted in *Newspaper Tree* and *The News* from Mexico City.

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Crossing Borders

IN MY LIFE, I HAVE CROSSED MANY GEOGRAPHICAL, LINGUISTIC, cultural and even religious borders to the point where I often ask myself where do I belong, who am I really and who am I becoming.

I grew up dirt poor on the Mexican-American border of El Paso, Texas, and went to Harvard and Yale. Although I was raised a Catholic by my Mexican parents, I now attend services for High Holy Days on Manhattan's Upper West Side with my wife and two boys, Aaron and Isaac. Yes, I am a traveler between cultures and religions, but I do know who I am. The question that often burns in my mind, however, is why these border crossings are not attempted by more people. They should be.

I understand it is perilous to cross to the other side, whatever that "other" side is. You traverse into a no-man's land. You leave your "home" and possibly risk alienating those who stayed behind. I have been asked by many Latino writers and friends if I am now Jewish. I know often there is an undercur-

rent of surprise and even anger, at least by the most weak- or fearful-minded, when I proudly tell them about my wife, Laura, and my children. I was at a Latino book festival recently, at a restaurant with four writers. We were discussing the links and differences between Judaism and Christianity, a discussion I had prompted. I turned to a poet, who had been quiet for most of the evening, and pointed out that the artist on her T-shirt, Frida Kahlo, was half Jewish and half Mexican-Catholic. The poet, a proud Mexicana, seemed stunned at first, and then looked at her T-shirt as if she were looking at it for the first time. Yes, I said, we create pure beginnings to simplify things, maybe to build our self-esteem, but in reality we are interrelated, *mestizo*, in more ways than we can imagine.

The other peril to crossing borders is that you might not be accepted by your new family and friends. Laura and I met in college, and after seven years together, when we announced we were getting married, let us just say I did not get a heroic welcome at her parents' kitchen table. But I never gave up. Laura's aunts and uncles, brother and sister, took me in almost immediately. But I think it took another 10 years before Laura's father and especially her mother accepted me wholeheartedly. During that time, our two wonderful boys had been born, and we had survived a serious personal trial. In many ways, that horrible trial not only opened up old wounds, but also finally allowed them to heal forever. I was dedicated to Laura, and to our children. Laura's parents understood that is what mattered most of all.

In this personal history of crossing borders, I have often admired Ruth and her dedication to Naomi. Ruth, a Moabite, married Naomi's son, who soon died. When Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, she urged Ruth to go back to her home and the gods of her people, but Ruth refused. "Do not ask me to leave you," Ruth said, "Wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people,

and your God will be my God. Only death will part us.” Through hard work and perseverance, Ruth eventually found her place in a new land. The greatest king of the Israelites, David, came from a long line of ancestors beginning with Ruth. So, indeed, there are no pure beginnings, only survival, perseverance, dedication and reaching out to the “other” side.