

THE NOT SO SIMPLE OF *STREET OF TOO MANY STORIES* By Denise Chávez

By Roberta Hurtado

A street seems like a simple thing. A road. Some houses. People living in those houses, and maybe an animal or two. The people grow old, move or pass away, and new people fill the houses. Simple.

But no, as Denise Chávez's new novel *Street of Too Many Stories* reminds us, not so simple. For that road is a history, one dating back to the founding of it by construction and by natural events. It records those moments in the ruts and gullies of its edges, in the divots and fractures that turn to holes. The houses are homes of memories, good and bad. Filled with spirits that dance and watch and remember the years as they pass through. Recording the people we were, the laughter and tears we have, and the echoes of futures yet to unfold. The pets that function as lifelines to the world outside and beyond us, and even more to the worlds of compassion and humanity within us. And, with the passage of time, these walls and the street fill with new faces and new memories that get washed clean by rains, whispered to by winds, and made new again by the sunset.

Street of Too Many Stories tells the tale of one such street in Encantada, New Mexico. The novel opens with the symbol for rain and continues with this symbol to begin every chapter. And thus, with this beginning and tracing throughout the novel with the memory of water that once upon a time carved itself through the landscape, it records the history of human occupation that rerouted waterways, survived droughts, and participated in fashioning a neighborhood that the novel notes weren't "poor" but absolutely "wasn't a rich neighborhood either" (74-75). Just as water gives and takes away life, so too does this street remember such movement through time.

Chávez's novel focuses on four families who inhabit this street, families with children and partners who at times love each other and wound each other in equal measures. It asks, in the telling of the stories that the street keeps, what tales do we carry with us, acting upon them and harkening back to them and which do we let go of and allow the winds to carry for us? It questions, are the people who live around us responsible for us or are they merely bystanders in a passage

through time? For characters such as Linda, who is certain that neighbors can hear her father abusing her at night (56), the question of "how could one small street have been the place of so much suffering?" demands to be answered (29).

Yet, as Chávez's fictional Encantada Street reminds us, there is also balance to this pain. Characters such as Raymundo, "Mundo," remember living in Encantada before moving away and coming back. Indeed, these memories—especially connected to his dog Pasajero—mark a moment in time when he was allowed to be a loving, thoughtful child before being forced into the role of a "man" who does not cry (7-8). And, sadly with this, Mundo's experience of abuse while away from Encantada indeed make him a man whose own daughter struggles to find the humanity in (8-9, 80). Yet, his return to Encantada Street, and even time with his wife whom he eventually divorces, reminds

him that there can and did exist people who knew the good in him even as they knew the bad (81).

A street might just be a street. But it is never so simple as one word. As the novel winds to a close, and brings forth a remembering of how:

the spirits swayed and leapt and laughed and carried on. The men that had been men

the women that had been women the dogs the cats all of them. Travelers. Pasajeros. They danced inside their homes or ventured into the street and moved on to visit other places, other spirits. They could do as they wished. Whatever they wished. Or they could say where they were. They had that choice. (153)

And what a choice. Fraught with possibility and opportunity. A new world and new realm carved out and into the tales to be told and shared.

Chávez's latest novel, published by the San Antonio based *Conocimientos Press*, offers a world of spirits dancing, winds gossiping, rains shaping and shifting, and glimpses into the stories of a small street too big to contain in the simple notion of "street."

