



LANCASTER SPEAKS

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NICHOLASA MOHR March 29 7:30 p.m. Lime Street YWCA

Creating From Life Experience

Nicholasa Mohr's celebration of the human condition

BY BEGOÑA TORAL ALEMAÑ

Nicholasa Mohr has been living in New York City's East Harlem since 2001, and she is currently writing a work of fiction based on her travels outside of the city. After many decades of absence, Mohr is gratified to be back to this northeastern part of the borough of Manhattan, also known as El Barrio or Spanish Harlem. It was in this Puerto Rican neighborhood, so frequently present in her work, where Mohr was born and spent her early childhood. Mohr, whose childhood memories are of New York and not of Puerto Rico, it seems, is having one of the most gratifying experiences of her life. Mohr said that, it is really special for her to feel that she is back in her native village. She is happy to once again witness daily the experience and vitality of the people of El Barrio, where the Latinos are not exclusively Puerto Ricans now (as when Mohr was a child), but also Mexicans. And, despite her fears that this working-class neighborhood may eventually disappear due to a possible gentrification of the area, as she mentions in her essay "Nuyorican Nostalgia," she is just excited to enjoy the "warmth" and "energy" of her Latino community for as long as it lasts. Mohr insists in the essay that it is the way in which the people of her community struggle to survive and prosper that keeps her motivated to write.

Mohr explores in her fiction her passion to create stories about people's ability to fail or succeed in society. Her characters are ordinary people who usually succeed in finding a place for themselves in a hostile environment, and stand out for the humanity with which they are so vividly depicted.

"The challenge to work and document events that unfold within my community, with its varied players, its complexities and ever-changing position, fires me on to work with a gusto that I could only feel when writing about what I really know and truly care about," affirms Mohr. Her inspiration comes from the people of her Latino community and others who are able to survive with dignity and overcome obstacles; something that, according to Mohr, must be celebrated. Mohr writes in a realistic prose about what she knows best — her life experiences and those of the Puerto Rican community in New York.

Her working-class family emigrated from Puerto Rico to New York City's El Barrio during the Great Depression in search of the American Dream — and as a Nuyorican (a term that refers to Puerto Ricans who were born or raised in New York), she grew up speaking both English and Spanish. Mohr, who distinguishes herself as a "daughter of the Puerto Rican Diaspora," writes in English, the tool that helped her struggle to survive and succeed in the dominant Anglo-American society. "Nicholasa Mohr is among the founding voices of Latino U.S. literature, and one of the first Puerto Rican women to publish fiction in English," the literary critic William Luis, author of *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States*, recently explained by email.

Regarded by the Puerto Rican writer Esmeralda Santiago as "*la madrina* [godmother] of Latina fiction," Mohr is one



Christopher Bell

Castita Villa Santurce Jardinera at 111th Street and Lexington Avenue created by residents of El Barrio.

of the most prolific Puerto Rican writers living in the United States. She is the author of novels such as *Nilda* (1973), *Felita* (1979) and *Going Home* (1986) and a memoir, *In My Own Words: Growing Up Inside the Sanctuary of my Imagination* (1994). She is also the author of numerous short stories like the collections *El Bronx Remembered* (1975), *In Nueva York* (1977), *Rituals of Survival* (1985), and *A Matter of Pride and Other Stories* (1997). In addition to her children's stories *The Magic Shell* (1995) and *Old Letivia and the Mountain of Sorrows* (1996), Mohr has also written plays, screenplays and essays.

She was formerly an art student in Mexico, and also in New York City, where she attended the Arts Student League, the Brooklyn Museum Art School, and the Pratt Institute of Technology. Mohr was a well-established fine artist before becoming a creative writer. At the suggestion of her art agent, she recounted her life experience as a Nuyorican woman by writing fifty pages of her childhood memories. But her agent was dissatisfied; he had expected a portrait of an exclusively negative ghetto life, with a strong emphasis on crime, rape, and drugs. After submitting her work to an editor at Harper and Row who asked her for a book jacket illustration, Mohr received a contract, and *Nilda* was finally published in 1973. The novel received the 1974 Jane Addams Children's Book Award as well as an Outstanding Book Award in Juvenile Fiction from the *New York Times Book Review* in 1973; in that same year it was also selected as Best Children's Book by the *School Library Journal*.

Imagination has always played a vital role in recapturing Mohr's early childhood experiences. About her first book, *Nilda*, Mohr stated in an essay that "although much of this story comes from the realms of my imagination, nonetheless, like so many writers' first books, it contains a great deal of

autobiographical material." Always looking for intriguing stories to create, Mohr is also looking for answers, trying to get, by means of her imagination, at the "truth." *Nilda* is an exceptional account of a young Puerto Rican girl growing up in El Barrio in the 1940s. Writing in a simple but powerful language, Mohr explores with honesty and compassion the way in which the female protagonist must confront conflicts such as poverty, racism, xenophobia, and sexuality. Nilda, who, like Mohr, is the child of a poor Puerto Rican migrant family, realizes that Puerto Rican people like her are called "spicks" by the establishment that is meant to care for them. Mohr depicts here how Puerto Ricans, who were made American citizens with the Jones Act in 1917,

are discriminated against by repressive authority figures (such as the police, teachers and social workers) who often considered them "strangers." As Mohr reminds us in one of her essays, the time between the 1940s and 1950s was a period of massive migration of poor Puerto Ricans to the United States in search of a better life. It was also a time in which the children of migrant Puerto Ricans were "encouraged" to deny the Puerto Rican culture and the language of their parents; to be successful meant to accept the European values that were part of the dominant Anglo-American culture. In *Nilda* we also find that the Castilian accent is imposed on the Puerto Rican children by a Spanish teacher.

Mohr also shows us how the power of imagination and the creative talent of a gifted young Latina can help her escape a hostile environment. With her drawings, Nilda, the alter ego of Mohr, discovers "a world of magic." Nilda's mother, like Mohr's own mother, is a strong woman who encourages her daughter to continue developing her drawing skills and teaches Nilda the values of self-esteem and self-autonomy in order to succeed in a male-dominated Hispanic culture.

In many of her works, Mohr has recreated the life of working-class Puerto Ricans in another Puerto Rican neighborhood. The Bronx, where she was raised and attended grammar school after World War II, forms the background in the collection of short stories *El Bronx Remembered*, a National Book Award finalist. If *Nilda* pays respect to the children of El Barrio, this work is dedicated to the author's mother who shared with Mohr her "magic gift of storytelling," an intrinsic element of Puerto Rican culture. Mohr grew up listening to traditional folktales about the land of her parents as well as stories about the adult experiences in New York City. They were entertaining stories that helped her and others

forget their own difficulties. Mohr greatly owes her passion for reading and for creating stories to this early exposure to oral literature.

As a young girl Mohr was an avid reader. “Reading has always been something that has filled my life, that has made my life richer and happier,” she said. In addition to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, which had a tremendous influence on her, Mohr admits being “struck” by the talent of American authors such as Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, Willa Cather, Eudora Welty, and Lillian Hellman. She also admires the work of John Steinbeck and Richard Wright. The great Puerto Rican writer Julia de Burgos, a strong and independent woman who had to face cultural and racial prejudices both in Puerto Rico and in the United States, is among the Spanish-American writers whose work Mohr deeply admires and respects.

Mohr writes for children and adults, and, as a feminist writer, has also written very particularly for women. In *Rituals of Survival: a Woman’s Portfolio* Mohr describes the lives of six Latinas and how they manage to survive, many of them facing the oppressive realities of their abusive husbands. *A Matter of Pride and Other Stories* pays homage to the female spirit. The protagonists learn the value of self-love and self-sovereignty in order to thrive. Mohr defines her feminism as a “natural thing,” an attitude toward life, the way we live and behave; a feeling we can acquire and know as a child. “I think that my feminism is a natural outgrowth of my curiosity, of my interest, of my need to be out of the world, of my need to be creative, and be in the game, as an artist and as a writer.”

Mohr’s fiction is above all a response to her desire to redeem her Puerto Rican community, which, as she discovered early in her life, had been either silenced or distorted in North American history. When Mohr began her career as a visual artist and then as a writer, she admits that she had to look to her own community in search of “role models that symbolized strength,” as she wrote in an essay. All the Puerto Rican migrant women who, like her own mother, left Puerto Rico and arrived in the mainland “driven out by poverty, ill-equipped with little education and no knowledge of English,” and who had to struggle to raise families by themselves in an alien American society, became Mohr’s heroes.

The power of Mohr’s stories comes through the universal themes with which we can identify, reinforcing Mohr’s belief that we are all from the same human family, no matter what our ethnicity. “Those who aren’t Latinos will identify and learn about the culture. We all connect because nobody has a monopoly on tragedy or on love, or disaster. We are not different from each other in terms of feelings, ambitions, meanness, horror. It’s a human condition and the details that I apply in my work are the details that I’m familiar with,” she said. As a survivor herself, as well as a successful visual artist and creative writer, Mohr has become a role model for many, especially for women. Through her talent and imagination she has given a voice to the Puerto Rican community that she has come to represent.

Mohr in front of a community mural.



Christopher Bell

Late November, 1941

Nilda looked at the big round clock on the wall facing the rows of benches in the large rectangular waiting room. They had left the apartment early that morning, taking the bus downtown to be at the Welfare Department by nine a.m., and it was now a quarter past eleven. The hands on the clock looked so still, as if they were never going to move on to the next number. She concentrated on the red second hand that jumped sporadically from black dot to black dot until it finally reached a number. Shutting her eyes, Nilda would open them quickly, hoping to catch the red second hand in action. At the beginning, she had lost almost every time, but after a while she was able to catch the second hand just as it landed on a dot. She began to figure out just how long it took the second hand to reach the next number, thereby causing the large black hand to move ever so slightly. The game was beginning to bore her and she lost interest. She leaned against her mother, who was shifting her weight from side to side, trying to find a more comfortable position on the hard bench.

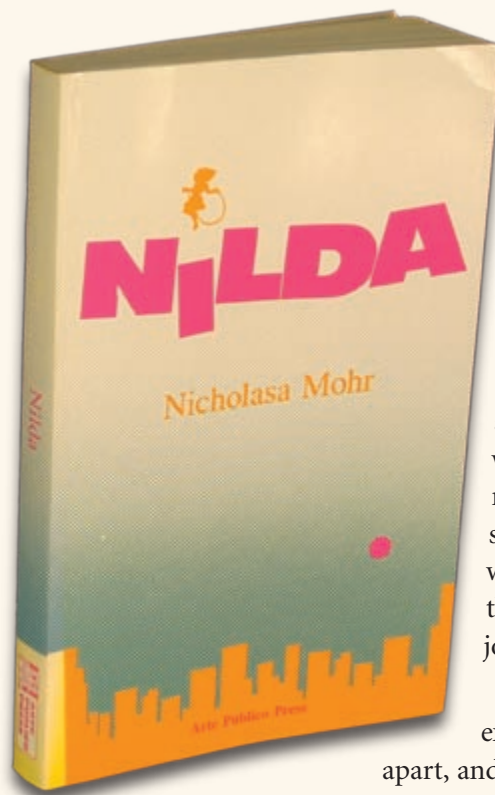
“Mami,” Nilda whispered, nudging her mother, “I’m tired. How much longer we gonna be?”

“Be still, Nilda,” her mother answered quietly.

“I’m thirsty. Can I get another drink of water?” “You been up to get water at least five times. Just be still; they’ll call us soon. Everybody here is also waiting. You are not the only one that’s tired, you know.” Her voice was almost a whisper, but Nilda knew she was annoyed. Nilda hated to come to places like this where she felt she had to wait forever. It’s always the same, she thought, wait, wait, wait! She remembered the long wait they’d had at the clinic last time. It was over five hours.

“Stop leaning on me, Nilda; you are not a baby. Ya basta! Sit up and be still!” This time her mother had turned to look at her and she knew she had better be still.

The only good thing is that I don’t have to go to school, she thought. Her mother would give her an excuse note tomorrow, so she did not have to worry.



Nilda looked around the large room again; each long row of benches was filled with people sitting silently. There were no other children her age. Now and then someone new came in from the outside, walked up to the front desk and handed the clerk a card, then sat down on a bench, joining the silent group.

She looked at the grey-green walls: except for two posters, placed a few feet apart, and the big round clock, the walls were bare.

She began to study the posters again; she knew them almost by heart. They were full of instructions. The one nearest Nilda had a lifelike drawing of a young, smiling white woman, showing how well she was dressed when she went to look for employment. The reader was carefully informed about proper clothing, using this figure as the perfect model. Her brown hat sat on her short brown hair. Her smiling face had been scrubbed clean, her white teeth brushed, and she wore very little makeup. Her brown suit was clean and her skirt was just about six inches below the knee. She carried a brown handbag, wore clean gloves and nicely polished shoes as she strolled along a tree-lined street, confident about her interview. She sure looks happy, thought Nilda. She must be a teacher or something like that.

The second poster was a large faded color photograph of a proper breakfast. The photograph showed fresh oranges, cereal, milk, a bowl of sugar, a plate of bacon and eggs, toast with butter and jelly. The reader was warned that it was not good to leave the house without having had such a breakfast first. Looking at the food, Nilda began to remember that she was hungry. She had eaten her usual breakfast of coffee with boiled milk, sugar, and a roll. It seemed to her that she had eaten a long, long time ago, and her stomach annoyed her when she looked at the bacon and eggs. I hope they call us soon, she said to herself.

The lady clerk at the front desk looked up and read a name aloud from a card. “Mrs. Lydia Ramírez,” she called out.

“Come on,” her mother said as she stood up and walked past the benches full of waiting people. Nilda followed her up to the front.

The lady clerk pointed and said, “Into the next room.

You will see Miss Heinz.” She then handed her mother a card. Nilda walked with her mother into another large room lined with rows of desks. A woman, seated at a desk across the room, raised her arm and waved to them.

“Over here, please.” They walked quickly up to the woman and waited. The social worker, without lifting her head, pointed to the empty chair at the side of her desk. Her mother sat down. The woman continued to write something on a form sheet. Nilda stood next to her mother and looked down at the social worker as she went on writing. Her head was bent over and Nilda could see that her hair was very white and fine, with tiny waves and ringlets neatly arranged under a thin grey hair net. The tiny grey hairpins, which were carefully placed to hold each little lump of ringlets together, were barely visible. Her pink scalp shone through the sparse hair. Nilda had never seen such a brilliant pink scalp before. I wonder what would happen if I touched her head, she thought; maybe it would burn my finger. Finally, after a while, the woman lifted her head, nodded, and, still holding the pencil she had been writing with, asked, “Mrs. Lydia Ramírez?” Before her

mother could answer, the social worker turned to Nilda and said, “My name is Miss Heinz. Does your mother understand or speak English?” Nilda turned to her mother with a look of confusion.

“I speak English,” her mother replied quickly. “Maybe not so good, but I manage to get by all right.”

“Let me have your card, please,” Miss Heinz said, holding out her hand. Nilda’s mother bent forward and gave Miss Heinz the card she had been holding. “Well, that’s a help. At least you can speak English. But then,” pointing to Nilda she continued, “why is she here? Why isn’t she in school? This is a school day, isn’t it?”

Nilda could see her mother turning red. Her mother never liked to go to these places alone; she always brought Nilda with her. Ever since Nilda could remember, she had always tagged along with her mother.

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