An Interview with
María Amparo Escandón
about *Esperanza's Box of Saints*

The water took every altar and offering
all the way to the ocean. Plastic flowers, wreaths,
ex-votos, photographs of children
showing their brand new teeth, a thick black
braid tied with a pink bow.
Some people claim they've seen novena candles
still lit, floating on the waves at night like tiny
boats, up and down, up and down,
thousands of kilometers away.

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Q. You have been asked before why you chose to write about a mother who loses her daughter. Is there a personal connection with this subject?

A. Every writer always has personal connections with the topics we write about. For me, writing is such a luxury that I must choose my themes very carefully. I wouldn't want to invest months and years working on something that doesn't mean much to me. Every time I'm about to begin a new work, I search deep inside and dig out my innermost fears, wants, or needs, and I write about that. Call it exorcism, call it therapy, or simply call it honest writing: I believe it's the strongest, the most powerful kind. In *Esperanza's Box of Saints* I explored the terrible fear I've had of losing my daughter: what if she gets abducted, what if she goes missing, what if she dies and I can't confirm her death? How could I deal with this loss? How would I reach closure? This is a very personal topic, yet I've found as the book was translated into different languages that it's a feeling I share with millions of mothers out there. The fear and the pain are universal, human feelings that anyone can relate to.

Q. *Esperanza's Box of Saints* is considered a literary phenomenon. The book has been translated into more than twenty languages around the world. It is read in more than eighty-six countries. There is a movie based on it, *Santitos*, which won awards at fourteen international film festivals. How did this change your life?

A. Imagine going from anonymity, to a certain—modest—prominence in just a few weeks. It's not an easy process; you need to adapt quickly to the new status without losing yourself, always keeping in mind that it's only a status, and a temporary one at that. All my life I wrote for fun and I still do, never thinking I would get my work published. I'd write short stories, photocopy them, and share them with my friends. I was working full time at Acento, an ad agency that my ex-husband and I founded in 1983 and sold in 2009. I had two small kids and was running my household. Writing had been a hobby until then. When *Esperanza* first got published by Simon & Schuster and when the film was released, I stepped down from my Creative Director position at the agency, hired someone to take my place, and went on book tours and to festivals, conferences, and presentations. First, I sent Esperanza on the road, and then she sent me. People said to me: "Wow, instant success! The doors just opened for you!" The truth is I've been ringing this bell for thirty years.

Q. Some critics consider *Esperanza's Box of Saints* to be part of the magic realism genre. You have called it magical reality. Can you explain the difference as you see it?

A. Magic realism is a beloved and long-established genre, mostly among Latin American authors, but with affinities in other parts of the world. It deals with stories in which extraordinary events happen in daily life that the characters perceive in a matter-of-fact way. These characters—and readers too—buy the events at face value, no questions asked. There is a widespread use of symbolism, preternatural occurrences, and a sense of fatalism, among other characteristics that you can find listed in many books and academic papers on the subject. This is a genre with fuzzy edges when it comes to its definition, so it's best to know what it's not. It is not fantasy literature, like *The Lord of the Rings*. You won't see hobbits or elves in a magic realism story. In fantasy, writers create imaginary worlds with their own set of rules, characters based on nonexistent beings, faraway planets, and alternative realities. In magic realism, writers use the real world—at least the one we know—but inexplicable things happen in it. And no one really feels compelled to try to explain them. I call magical reality my subtle departure from magic realism for lack of a more accurate term: I describe inexplicable incidents from the real world that can actually happen. To illustrate the point, here's an example of the difference: in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the blood of Úrsula Iguarán›s son travels across town to notify her of his murder. Although blood does exist, it does not have a will of its own. This would not happen in the real world. In *Esperanza's Box of Saints*, on the other hand, Esperanza witnesses an apparition in her oven window in which Saint Jude tells her that her daughter is not dead and instructs her to find her. This event may be improbable, but not impossible. Millions of people have claimed to have visions of saints, virgins, and dead ancestors. Factual minds question apparitions, but cannot prove their nonexistence. That's what I mean by magical reality, but in truth I may be splitting hairs here.

Q. Let's talk about Esperanza. Why did you give her such personality?

A. My characters are usually composites of people I know, including myself. But I don't plan for it. When Esperanza began taking shape on the page, I was surprised to see some of my own personality traits emerge because we come from very different backgrounds. Esperanza is a simple woman, with little formal education, who lives in a sleepy Mexican village. I am a college graduate, a city girl who has traveled the world. I have a much broader outlook than she does. I think Esperanza has two things in her favor, which she's not aware of: first, she has amazing spunk; when she puts her mind to something, she will go for it and do whatever it takes to accomplish it. She also has a great naïveté:

she does not foresee all the dangers and possibilities of her plan; she just believes she will be fine and moves forward. Those two elements shield her and guide her through her ordeal. But what gives her strength? It's the power of faith. She is unstoppable because she believes in her story, the interpretation of what Saint Jude has revealed to her in his apparitions. Her faith is not contemplative: it is actionable. Others, like the priest, or her *comadre*, use their faith like a blanket: for Esperanza, her faith gives her wings.

Q. What is Esperanza's underlying motive when embarking on her quest?

A. Women have different social roles, almost always in relation to someone else. If you are a woman, you're a daughter, a mother, a sister, or a wife. In Esperanza's case she has lost her parents, so she's not a daughter anymore. She's not a wife either, since her husband has died. Now her only child is dead or missing, so Esperanza is suddenly nobody. When she sets out to look for Blanca, her search goes way beyond—even though she may not know it—deep into her own identity as a woman. As she goes from brothel to brothel experiencing terrible fear and disgust, using her wits to get out of having sex with customers, and figuring out her saint's messages, she slowly discovers who she really is, who she is becoming, the woman who was never allowed to be because she had always been expected to be someone else's someone. When she finally finds herself, when she asks her saints to hold off on giving her conflicting signals, she feels empowered and she is ready to have a new relationship, but this time on her own terms and with a man who will honor them.

Q. This is an interesting point about which there seems to be an inconsistency between the movie and the novel. Is this correct?

A. You are exactly right: in the book she's not a prostitute, while in the film she becomes one. The film's director, Alejandro Springall, and I had our biggest debates about precisely this issue: I wanted Esperanza to go through the swamp and come out clean. Alejandro thought that it would make the movie more dramatic if Esperanza actually became a hooker. Over the years, as I thought about our discussions, I realized that our divergent points of view were explained by the masculine view of women in Mexico: for a Mexican man, women are either saints or demons, virgins or prostitutes, their own mother or "the other women." I wanted Esperanza to be a departure from that amazingly constraining and demeaning dichotomy: Esperanza is a free and yet pure woman, who sails through the worst possible environments and comes away unsullied, precisely because she is pure. Interestingly, self-righteous people would deny prostitutes, or women they deem to be their equivalent, access to religion. Whores don't deserve to be a part of the religious community. The question is: who are those prostitutes' customers? Well, they would be precisely those self-righteous, churchgoing men, wouldn't they?

Q. Now let's get into the subject of religion, a big topic in your novel. How does *Esperanza's Box of Saints* challenge traditional practices of Catholicism?

A. I never felt I was challenging the traditional practices of Catholicism. In the Mexican culture, those depicted in my book *are* the traditional practices of Catholicism. The beliefs and practices of Mexican Catholics are very much in line with how Esperanza is portrayed. First, Mexicans tend to have an intimate, familiar, relationship with the saints, the Virgin, and Jesus Christ, and we are accustomed to calling on them instead of God. We only bother God with the really big issues. This might date back to our pre-Columbian polytheist religion in which we had many gods with specific talents and jobs: the god of maize and produce, the god of fertility, the god of artists, the god of healing, the god of rain, the god of war, and so on. It was easy for us to become monotheists and believe in one god when we could still have all these little gods on the side, the saints and virgins, that is, to whom we could call on for favors and petitions in their own specialty just as we did with our previous religion's players: the patron saint of animals, of lost causes, of sickness, etc. And since they're not as high in the heavenly hierarchy, we're not shy when we ask them to intercede for us. I addressed this thought at Notre Dame University Virgin of Guadalupe Conference and I was surprised to see that it seemed to resonate among scholars, but in truth it's just a thought. There are highly knowledgeable academics that can give you a much better explanation. Secondly, the way Father Salvador is depicted in the book is not far off the way it is with priests in the Mexican reality. Sometimes priests are not just the confessors and spiritual guides, but they also get involved in the family life. Psychotherapists are not as popular in Mexico as they are in the US, so the local priest satisfies the need people have to voice their behavior so they can understand it, accept it, or modify it. In many instances, this role gives the priest a position of power in the community. He knows everything about everyone. Thirdly, the apparition of Saint Jude in the oven window is Esperanza's much-needed earthly connection to Heaven. We need physical evidence of God's existence to comprehend such complex, metaphysical thoughts, and miracles serve that purpose. So, to answer your question, I did not challenge the traditional practices of Catholic religion, at least the way we practice it in Mexico.

Q. Did you think about the most famous Catholic miracle in the Americas, the Virgin of Guadalupe, when you wrote your novel?

A. I don't even have to think about this miracle to be inspired by it. It's so ingrained in my mind that it's as much a part of me as my language. The miracle of Juan Diego and the Virgin of Guadalupe is grounded in the need for magic and divination in the spiritual life of people. You have to have a connection with the metaphysical and it has to be a physical one because otherwise, it is another world and it is disconnected from you. Once there is access to the metaphysical world it becomes real. That is why I believe it is essential, at least in the Catholic faith, to have apparitions. Esperanza needed to hear from her beloved saint what she wanted to hear: "Blanca is not dead." She'd rather consider the worst of all options short of death, the option of her girl suffering horribly, kidnapped, being forced into child prostitution, because that meant for Esperanza that there was still hope to recover her. Once confirmed dead, there was nothing she could do. There would be no novel.

Q. Talk a little about Esperanza's altar building.

A. The fact that she builds the altars wherever she goes and collects all these figurines and statues reflects what I call "*el culto al bulto*," which means the worship of the actual figurine. Not what the figurine represents, but the actual little plaster or wooden statue. This practice must also come from pre-Columbian times, although Catholics in Europe were doing the same in those days. No wonder Catholicism fit us like a glove. People take the statuettes to church to get blessed. If the figurine breaks, they never throw it away. I believe that it is a way to bring the metaphysical into the physical world in order to accept it and make it real, because otherwise religion would be too ethereal. People in Mexico have real, life-threatening problems—drug wars, earthquakes, street violence, kidnappings, deadly viral outbreaks—and they need to believe in real, higher powers that they can touch and see, not just metaphysical comfort.

Q. One of the most beautiful passages of your novel is when Esperanza comes upon a mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe in East LA. How is religion mobile for Esperanza?

A. When you drive around East Los Angeles, you see a lot of murals depicting the Virgin of Guadalupe on storefronts and walls. This makes me think about what we bring into this country when we immigrate. We can't bring a moving van with all our belongings. We leave everything behind, even our children and our wives. Because most of us, or our ancestors, have immigrated illegally, many times under very dangerous circumstances, we have crossed over light and swift, carrying only our most valuable weapon of defense: our Swiss

Army knife of religion, if you will, with an array of saints to use accordingly, like tools, when the specific need arises. Religion is weightless carry-on luggage ideal for desert crossing, cannot be stolen by border muggers, or lost in the Colorado River; it's a very powerful shield in times of danger or despair, great for travel. It's also what ties us to our origin, to where we come from, the familiar element that will feed the deep-rootedness to our land. When Esperanza crosses the border to the United States with her box of saints, she carries the same internal box that immigrants bring with them on their journey.

Q. Is there tension between official and popular religious practices and do you offer a social critique of both?

A. When I went to the archdiocese of Mexico to give a lecture, I knew I was going to be asked this question. So, I thought a lot about it and came to the conclusion that there are two ways to view faith: you have the popular faith and you have the educated faith. The latter is more challenging, because the more you know about something the more you can see its complexities and inconsistencies. On the other hand, it seems easier to believe in God if you ask yourself fewer questions. A religious scholar might be more skeptical about religion than someone like Esperanza. The Catholic religion of Mexico is very permissive in terms of these practices. For instance, in the 1970s in Oaxaca, Maria Sabina was not just a woman performing mass, but she also offered hallucinogenic mushrooms to her congregation. In many places across Mexico people drift away from the official practices: they worship Juan Soldado (the illegal migrants' saint), Malverde (the drug dealers' saint), or the Niño Fidencio: none of them recognized by the Catholic Church, but necessarily tolerated. So, I don't think that I depict the tension between official and popular religious practices: what I describe is the actual coexistence of both.

Q. Would you say that Esperanza's character reaffirms the politicization of motherhood? Does she revolutionize motherhood?

A. Motherhood is a genetic privilege, not a political stand. And although there have been waves of politicization throughout history (always with underlying agendas), Esperanza is not part of one. Esperanza can't be political about motherhood because she isn't even conscious of it. Just as she doesn't question her beliefs, she doesn't think twice about her sense of motherhood, and you can't revolutionize any established concept if you don't challenge it. She's not thinking, "I'm going to show everyone what a mother should be." When you are political you have very strong beliefs and you want others to share these strong beliefs with you. Esperanza is on a personal, intimate quest: she does have strong beliefs but she doesn't care if anybody else shares them with her. Her quest is not so much about motherhood, but about womanhood.

She already was the supermom, so she did not need to prove anything in this regard. But regarding her womanhood, this is where she transforms herself at the end of her story.

Q. Is Esperanza saved in the end by her own daughter? Or did you intend for Angel Justiciero to be the fairy-tale knight—the wrestler—who comes in and rescues her?

A. Neither, actually: In the end she saves herself. She needs to lose Blanca to grow into the woman that was latent inside of her, undeveloped. She has to go through the ordeal to emerge as the complete woman she is when she meets the wrestler. Only after this growth she is ready to approach him at the arena, to accept his invitation, and to have an egalitarian relationship where there is reciprocity and not servitude. The presence of any fairy-tale knight in any love story is an indicator of an asymmetrical relationship, not like Esperanza and Angel's. Some feminist readers accused me of having the Angel of Justice scooping her up and saving her. I replied: "No way. She walks away from him." It is not like she clung on to his wings. It's only after she realizes she can't have him *and* look for her daughter all at once that she chooses to leave him. She ultimately stays on course, searching for her daughter, in spite of the temptation of love.

Q. Will there be a sequel?

A. Life goes on. Thankfully fiction can stop at the last page. I have written Esperanza's story as a short story, as a screenplay, and as a novel both in English and Spanish. I am yet to write the musical, the soap opera, the sequel, the prequel, the remake, the TV series, and the videogame. I don't think it's going to happen. I've moved on to write other stories, created many other characters, like Libertad in *González & Daughter Trucking Co*. and Oscar and Keila Alvarado in *LA Weather*, my latest novel, which is coming out in 2021.

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WRITER.