

Tafolla's short stories Carry a Distinctive Ring of Truth

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"The Holy Tortilla and a Pot of Beans" by Carmen Tafolla (Wings Press, \$16 paperback).

Over the years, Carmen Tafolla has cultivated a reputation as a folklorist of the Chicano-Mexicano community, very much in the tradition of Zora Neale Hurston, whose writings also captured the range of regional speech patterns and the everyday lives of working class people. With the release of "The Holy Tortilla and a Pot of Beans" (Wings Press, \$16 paperback), Tafolla solidifies that role, proving that she has maintained a perceptive hand over the pulse of San Antonio.

Gesturing toward the realm of allegory and fable, the opening quartet of stories demands that the reader suspend disbelief, which is done rather easily with Tafolla's distinctive prose -- a combination of colloquial language and small-town wisdom that exudes honesty and authenticity. When complaints reach the Chicano county judge about the cult growing around the so-called "Holy Tortilla," the vato takes it in stride and says, "Just relax, ese! Things'll work out." And about the ironically named La Santísima María Pilar, the queen of mean, know this: "People that scary are no fun to talk about. No fun at all. It's too scary cause they might show up again. And stay. For good. Unlike the devil, who only shows up once in a while but lives someplace else."

Tafolla doesn't shy away from the politics of history and race, which allows the narratives to resonate beyond the immediate San Antonio landscape. The story "El Mojado No Existe," for example, takes place in 1928 at a ranch that employs a Mexican laborer whose murder is effectively silenced because of his undocumented status.

"Whispers from the Dirt" goes even farther back, to 1836, when Tejas, in the republic of México, became the newly declared Republic of Texas. And in terms of who can lay claim to the land, the elderly Tejana in "Inheritance" says it best when she declares: "It's ours because we're in it. With our dreams and with our deaths and with everything that grows from it. This dirt -- this dirt is full of us."

Three of Tafolla's outstanding stories pay close attention to the struggles of gender: "Invisible," "The Stuff to Scream With," and "Federico and Elfiría" feature three mujeres who claim the power to act despite a sexist environment that makes any woman feel "so 'not there' that one day she would surely go up in an unnoticed wisp of smoke, disappearing altogether."

Few of the stories, no matter how serious the subject matter, are written without Tafolla's trademark use of humor, and some elicit more than a simple chuckle, like "I Just Can't Bear It," about a recently widowed woman who mistakenly walks into the wrong funeral, and "How I Got into Big Trouble and the Mistakes I Made," which starts off with a knee-slapper: "Mistake #1: First, I fell in love with my priest. That was enough right there, but then I made Mistake #2." Nine more mistakes follow.

Few writers can achieve such richly-textured stories like Carmen Tafolla can. Her work continues to teach and entertain. The love and respect for the people she writes about fills every sentence with "an emotion that leaves its shadow there."

"The Holy Tortilla and a Pot of Beans" is storytelling at its best.

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