

## GRACIELA LIMÓN

LIMÓN: Good morning, everyone. *Buenos días*. I am so happy and so privileged to be here with you. Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I'm a Chicana, I'm a Mexican American. I am the daughter of immigrants from Mexico. My mother was from Jalisco. Maybe some of you have roots there. My father was from the state of Sonora, Mexico. They came young to Los Angeles, East Los Angeles...

Nicolás Kanellos: Graciela Limón, among all the authors of Hispanic background in the United States, has a very, very special place. She is one of the very few authors who has a sense of history and has a global vision. Many authors really write out of their own circumstances and can document and create, or recreate, the emotional stages of their development through their literature—through their fiction, through their poetry. However, Graciela comes to it from another angle. Having been a teacher, having been a historian, she connects the past with the present.

LIMÓN: Think of the history of our wonderful continent of all of America, from the top part—from Alaska all the way down to land's end in Chile. This land was inhabited by great civilizations, great societies, of which so much of it has disappeared. But, you know, I get sad when I think of how the natives, the natural flowers of our land, have not only disappeared, but are being treated so badly, so abused. And this moves me, this touches me, and that's where this novel, "Erased Faces," comes from.

KANELLOS: If I were a high school teacher dealing with "Erased Faces," some of the opportunities that I would take advantage of, for instance, are the link to indigenous cultures. Go into what it is like to be an indigenous person from Chiapas. Go into the whole history of development of relations between Europe and the Americas and how that has remained a very, very strong issue in southern Mexico.

LIMÓN: "Erased Faces" is based on the big revolution, insurrection, really, of the indigenous peoples down in southern Mexico, in Chiapas, the state of Chiapas. Chiapas is very beautiful. It's very tropical. It's a huge jungle, la candona. Now, you've read, some of the chapters that you read, you saw the description there. I stayed there for a month, because you have to smell, you have to see, you have to hear wherever you're at. That's the type of writer I am. I'll tell you the truth—I don't even take notes. I don't have a tape recorder with me. I don't have a video camera with me. I just look and listen and keep very still and try to meditate and ponder everything that I experience.

Now, let me give some timing here. This happens, what you have just read, in through about 1993. Okay? Then early, January 1st, as a matter of fact, of '94 the war breaks out. That only lasts 10 days. The real war just is a very short war. The novel ends in 1998, which is five years later. So, you can imagine that a great deal happens in between insofar as the two women are concerned. So, okay, I'd love to hear from you. I was wondering, at the beginning of where we read, when Juana and Adriana, they connected, what were you aiming for at that point? I think your question is a very deep one and a very profound one that it makes me stop to think as to where I was aiming. The characters—here we have two women with something deeply in common. One from Los Angeles, Adriana, she is an orphan. She has deep suffering. She is searching—this is what she's doing. Juana, the same thing...

KANELLOS: She links up someone from the inner city in Los Angeles with a struggling Indian peasant woman in Chiapas, two lives that are completely separate. And she's able to unite their feelings, their passion, and their struggles through this book.

LIMÓN: Once, when I was writing that chapter that you read, when I was in the process of writing, I knew that I had hit on something very good. And I just let it go. I just let it, let it continue to evolve and develop as it would, and it did. When she fell in the story, when she stumbled and she messed up her face and she thought about it, like before, like her first fight, was it fighting for women to have a chance to make their own choices? Or something else? 'Cause she says she wanted to go at war again.

LIMÓN: You know, that time that her father trips her in the marketplace, Juana Galván, she's only about 14 years old at the time. It's so shocking to her. The cut, the bruises, is not anywhere as powerful as the knowledge that the same thing that happened to her sisters is going to happen to her. The same thing that happened to all the other women, all the other mujeres, is going to happen to her. So she is utterly shocked. And it's at that time that she begins to put things together that takes years to evolve into the moment where she makes up her mind that this is the last time this is going to happen. So, that moment that you're talking about and those thoughts that you have are very important to Juana because it's the beginning. It really doesn't make her—turn her into a woman right there, but it is the beginning. She turns that corner. And she travels that slow path of sadness and abuse and everything else that's leading her all the time towards being the rebel, the personal, private rebel that she turns out to be.

STUDENT: Is the part in the story about her father giving her away for like money and donkeys and stuff true?

LIMÓN: Yes, it is true. Of course, the incident of Juana with the mule, being bartered off for a mule, came from my imagination, but based on truth.

KANELLOS: I was really struck by, especially how the young men related to her work and the questions that they asked. Graciela poses very challenging questions about male and female gender roles and how, especially in Chiapas, women are oppressed by the patriarchal system, by their families, by particular males, et cetera. And rather than take on a defensive role, these young people were really drawn in to find out why.

LIMÓN: The women participants of this uprising of the Chiapas, of the Zapatistas, they got together and they put together real declarations and manifestations as to their own slavery, really. Being married off or hitched off to somebody else without their consent whenever a father or an older brother decided or decides, not having a voice in education, in health, in any of the vital aspects to anybody's life.

STUDENT: It's not really a question; it's just a comment. When I was reading your book, I also thought about like right now what's going on in Afghanistan, how the men don't treat the women right.

LIMÓN: Specifically about the women, look at how much in common that has with Juana's beginning. And, see, Juana is what we call a prototype. She's a model of what I discovered and saw and experienced down there. The women, as we speak, right now—this is not last century—right now, young girls 12 and 13 are being bartered off for a handful of pesos, a mule, a donkey, whatever. And this, of course, is a huge injustice to any human being. And this is one of the reasons why that huge rebellion. The women have a big invested voice in saying, "Look, we're human beings." But your connection is very well done. But you know what? We have to think and let your thoughts go even further. In what other ways is this happening? Look around yourself and say, "Is this happening with anybody I know?"

KANELLOS: One of the main tones that we get through her work is this tone of commitment and struggle of women and how they see things and how they're faced with all of these epochal challenges—whether that be gender roles or that be the conquest and elimination of culture and identity, whether that be racial relations. She's very interested in women in society and women's perspectives.

STUDENT: Why did you decide—or I don't know if it was you or your publisher—to pick the title "Erased Faces"?

LIMÓN: The title comes directly from the fact that the Zapatistas wear these ski masks. And I was inspired by some words that Subcomandante Marcos said, that they come, the insurrectionists come with erased faces, or with their faces erased. So that really inspired me. What a great honor it's been. You were just wonderful. You have no idea what this does for a writer to have someone like you read and wonder and question and think. I hope that in this group that I'm looking at today, we're going to have some great writers coming right out of this group.