



Francisco Jiménez

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Movie

Francisco Jiménez, interviewed in his studio in Santa Clara, California on May 25, 2002.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books are moving descriptions of growing up in a Mexican migrant worker family. How did you get your start writing about your childhood experiences?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: I wrote my first piece while I was a graduate student at Columbia University, a short story entitled, *Cajas de Carton*, which means “cardboard boxes.” I sent it off to a literary magazine in New York City, and it was published. The editor loved it and suggested that I should continue writing. I then thought maybe I should translate it into English. So I translated it into English and gave it the title, *The Circuit*. Then I sent that piece to the *Arizona Quarterly*. They published it and gave it the *Arizona Quarterly* award for the best short story. It was something that I never expected.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books show a high level of respect and admiration for schools, teachers and education. It appears that even as a child, you valued education. In the environment in which you grew up, how did you find the motivation to go to school?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: Basically, there are three reasons why I was motivated and wanted to go to school. And the first one is that the school environment was a lot nicer than the environment in which we lived. As I mentioned in *La Mariposa*, the wooden floors, the electric lights, the indoor plumbing, the toys — all of that was nice.

The second reason is that I wanted to learn. For some reason, I was always curious as a child, and my parents gave me the nickname of “Panchito,” which means someone who is constantly asking questions. And I would ask, “Why does the sun rise every day?” “Where does it go at night?” “Why doesn’t the moon fall?” They would say, “Oh, you are always asking questions.”

The third and probably most important reason (and I mentioned this in the story, *To Have and to Hold*), was I was looking for stability in our lives. I was looking for a place we could call our own — a place and a way of life that would be stable. And I found that stability in education. Because, whatever I learned in school, it was mine to have and to hold. And it didn’t matter how many times we moved, that knowledge — that learning — would go with me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Another element that comes through in your books is the strong family ties that you felt.

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: My family was very, very close. The reason we were very close is the love that we had for each other. And that is also part of our heritage in Mexican culture. Family comes first. And we emphasize the sense of family, the sense of community. Whatever we do as individuals in the family is to honor the rest of the members of the family. And, the idea of

individualism is counter to that idea of community. We grew up that way. We helped each other as much as we could and that to me has been extremely valuable.

Also, the poverty that surrounded us and the insecurity of not knowing where we were going to land the next time we moved brought us closer together — we leaned on each other.

Finally, the fact that we came to this country without documentation (we were always fearful of being caught by the immigration and being deported back to Mexico) also contributed in a strange way to our being protective of each other and helping each other.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was that fear of being caught like for you as a child?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: That fear was really draining for all of us emotionally. And as a child, I was told I had to be on the lookout and to be careful not to tell people I was born in Mexico. People would ask me, “Where are you from, because you have a thick accent,” and I had to lie. I felt bad about that.

It’s hard to explain the feeling, but you are always on guard, always not feeling comfortable around people who you didn’t know, because you were afraid you might slip and they would find out that you were here illegally, and they would turn you in.

My brother felt liberated by *The Circuit*, and so did I, because now it’s out in the open. I don’t have to live that lie anymore.

TEACHINGBOOKS: All of your books are autobiographical; do you write your books with a larger mission in mind?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: Very little has been written about the experience of growing up in a family of Mexican migrant workers, which is part of the American experience. So I thought that it would be important to write about it and include it in some kind of artistic form.

There have been sociological studies about migrant workers and, sometimes, you get newspaper articles that give you statistics. But I wanted to represent the sector of society artistically — put a face on it — so that it becomes much more humanistic.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In your opinion, has your writing had the impact you’ve wanted?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: I have received some confirmation from teachers and students that the books have made a difference in the way they think about the people that I write about — and about their own lives as well.

Some readers have expressed the feeling of liberation after reading one of my books. And some teachers have told me that when they read the book in class, the students who come from a migrant family background open up, and actually begin to talk about it, while before, they felt ashamed.

The impact is, if it’s in a book, and it’s being read in a school, it then gives these students courage and a sense of belonging. There’s the sense that it’s their story, and it’s okay to tell other people. That’s really rewarding for them, and it’s an affirmation of the value of their experiences.

When I get that kind of positive reaction, I feel very energized, honored and inspired to continue writing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did writing *The Circuit* influence the books that followed?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: For me, the short story, *The Circuit*, really captures everything I value in my own family and all the values I grew up with. So the other stories are pretty much elaborations of what you find in it. I wrote it thinking that perhaps that would be the only story that I would ever write. But, it was so well received, I was encouraged to continue writing. *The Circuit* is probably the most important story that I have ever written.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You took two stories from *The Circuit* and made them into picture books.

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: I recast two stories from *The Circuit* as picture books. *La Mariposa* came from the story called “Inside Out.” “La Mariposa” means “the butterfly.” In that book, I describe the experience of going to school, not knowing a word of English, and the frustrations I felt and my attempts to learn to read and to learn English. There is an English version and a Spanish version of that book. I tell the story of *La Mariposa* from the third-person point of view, which is different than *The Circuit*, where it’s the first person point of view.

The other story I made into a picture book is *The Christmas Story*, and that one is published in bilingual form, in English and Spanish. In it, I relate the importance of the true spirit of Christmas, which is really something that I feel our society has lost.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It sounds as though the butterfly image is very important to you — as a metaphor for life — can you talk more about that?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: Yes, the butterfly is important to me and I’ve always been fascinated by butterflies, even when I was a child and we were working in the fields. I used to see them fly and I would admire their agility, their beauty. And I would wonder how they were formed. So I talk about that in *La Mariposa* and my fascination with butterflies. And, as I got older, I continued to think about butterflies as a metaphor for our lives.

In *Breaking Through*, for example, I use a quote from Thomas Mann that says, “There’s only one problem in the world, how does one break through, how does one get into the open and become a butterfly.”

To me, a child and a young adult are ready to become butterflies, ready to open up. They have all this potential in them that by working, and by our helping them as educators, they can break open and become butterflies — develop all the potential that they have inside of them, with all their beauty.

When I say “educators,” I don’t mean just teachers. Everyone in our society, every grown-up is an educator. We all teach younger children and young adults by modeling behavior, by the things we say, by the way we treat them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Some English versions your books contain Spanish terms, which helps maintain the Mexican culture in the books. Was there another reason why you included them?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: In *The Circuit* and in *La Mariposa*, I left in some Spanish terms because I think it’s important for children to be exposed to another language at an early age. And I found out from teachers who use *La Mariposa* and *The Circuit* that it brings students in the classroom closer together.

I'm told that when they read *The Circuit*, and ask the Spanish-speaking students, "What does that mean?" the children who have never said anything in class are very proud to say, "This is what it means in English." So now they're contributing to the discussion in class, and it really has opened up some of the children who would normally not have opened up as readily.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was it like living in a Mexican culture at home, and going to high school in an English-speaking, Americanized culture?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: They were hard years, working as a custodian for almost forty hours a week while I was going to school, then trying to negotiate two cultures. The culture in high school was all in English, and at home it was all in Spanish with very traditional Mexican values that sometimes were not in harmony with American values.

For example, some of the things my classmates did — the relationships they had, their behavior — I thought was disrespectful, based on what I had experienced at home. So as a teenager, I had to decide what I should keep from each of the two cultures — because, in my Mexican culture and home, there were certain things that were not very positive either.

That's what I hoped I portray in *Breaking Through*, the difficulty of negotiating, navigating between two different cultures. Along the way, I sometimes blended the two, taking the best from both of them and trying to have both sides share and learn from one another.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You mentioned working almost full time while in high school. Was that to help support your family?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: Yes, we all worked to contribute to the family's income. When a classmate would find out that I was working, they would say, "Why don't you buy yourself a fancy car?" And I never told them. My brother and I gave our paychecks to my father, and he would give us some money when we went to the dances or whatever.

Some of my classmates would get jobs mowing the lawn, or part-time jobs, and basically that was their money. It was hard for me to understand that. Why would they keep the money they were earning? Why didn't they give it to their family? But it never occurred to me to ever keep any of the money I earned. Because whatever I earned was not mine, it was the family's. That I include in *Breaking Through*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your writing process.

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: I worked on that first book, *The Circuit*, every single day. I started very early in the morning, right after breakfast. And I would sit at the computer and then it would take me awhile to capture the emotions I felt as a child. So I would sit there and contemplate. And once I was able to capture the emotions and the feelings of what I was reflecting on and remembering, then I would start to write. Then it would flow.

Sometimes it was very painful, because I would actually get emotional as I was writing. Then I would take a break for lunch and then I would come back and start writing again. Sometimes, the emotions would be so strong that I would continue working till midnight.

I would go to bed and I couldn't sleep because all the things that I was thinking about and writing about kept coming to me. So, I decided then to keep a little notepad on my dresser, and when things would come to me, I would jot notes down and they would help me the following day to continue writing. So it was a catharsis in a sense.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Would you share an example of a cathartic writing experience?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: Every December, I would get would get very sad and my kids would say, “Dad, you know, you should be happy, this is Christmastime.” And my wife would say the same thing. And I could never understand why I would get sad every December.

I finally discovered why when I started writing *The Christmas Gift*. As I began to think about it and write about it, it dawned on me that the reason why I would get so sad every December was because of that experience — not getting the kind of things that we wanted for Christmas. One of the things that I always wanted was a little ball of my own. Every Christmas, I would hope for a Christmas ball. And one Christmas, I thought this was going to be it, I’m going to get my ball.

As it worked out, I didn’t. We ended up getting a little bag of candy. And then my mother, who was watching me as I opened the bag of candy, was teary. I mean, she was crying too. And so I thought about it and I realized that the real gift was her love for me. It was painful for her not to be able to give me what I wanted. And so I realized that it wasn’t really the value of the gift, but the gift of love I got from my mom.

And so ever since writing the story, I enjoy Christmas a lot. And I dedicated *The Christmas Gift* to my mother. When I gave her the book, I said, “This is the gift, your gift, and the gift that you gave me many years ago and continue to give me, which is the gift of love.” That was really a nice thing to happen to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: As a professor of language and literature, you must have specific views on the way books are written. Do you have specific steps that go into your writing of a book?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: With *The Circuit*, I went through what I call the “five Rs” in writing the stories. The first “R” is Research. I interviewed my parents, my brother and some other family members. And then I looked through family documents and some family pictures that I used in the books. I also found some school records that were very helpful to me. And I visited the little towns and places where we had lived in migrant labor camps in the San Joaquin Valley in California, and that was very helpful.

All these things brought a lot of the memories to me. And I listened to the music that I listened to as a child, and all the emotions came. I also visited museums to see if I could find information about that period in which we lived in those migrant labor camps. Unfortunately, there wasn’t any at all, nor in the archived newspapers.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What kinds of information were you hoping to find in the museums and newspapers?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: There’s a story in *The Circuit* called, “Miracle in Tent City,” in which one of my brothers gets very ill. I figured out the year that happened and I went to the Santa Maria library and looked through all the newspapers that were published that year to see if there was an epidemic in the labor camp. You see, the Santa Barbara Board of Health had closed the migrant labor camp, the tent city, because of this epidemic. So I figured there had to be something written about it. There was nothing.

I was very disappointed, but became even more convinced that I should write the book — especially that story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are the other “Rs”?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: The second “R” is Recall. As I reviewed all the material, I began to recall things that I experienced as a child. And as I recalled some of those experiences, I began to remember other things, and one thing led to another.

The third “R” is Reflect. And that’s probably one of the most important parts in the writing — to reflect on those experiences. I asked myself, “What did those experiences teach me as a child?” I asked myself what I learned from them as a child, not as an adult, because I wanted to maintain the child’s point of view.

In the reflection, I made a series of discoveries of who I was and what my place was in our society. There was a sense of clarity about why I went through that life experience. And that clarity for me was that I was to write about it. And my discovery of self and my place in society, and my responsibility now as a teacher in trying to help other younger people to become educated was all very clear to me.

And then the next “R” is “Write,” or to at least begin the process of writing. (I know it starts with a W, but I cheated.) I looked at all the different, meaningful experiences and decided which of those experiences were the most meaningful. Then I created a story around each one of those experiences.

And then the fifth R is “Re-write.” For each story I wrote, I went through many, many drafts.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your life changed when you came to America. What in your opinion is the lure of the “American dream”?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: For me, the beauty of that ideal, of that American dream, is when you see all different immigrant groups that make up our society, from all different parts of the world, coming together, living together, working together, helping each other. If our country has the potential and the hope of showing the rest of the world that different peoples from different cultures, speaking different languages, with different customs, can live together in harmony and in peace and learn from each other, then we have a lot to offer to the rest of the world.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How is that perspective reflected in your writing?

FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ: In my writing, my hope is that I’m contributing to literature, in general, but also to the curriculum. By that I mean that we are living in this society that is multicultural. It’s important for us to learn about the different cultures that make up our society, to appreciate and to value all the different cultures that make up our society. And the books that we read in school and the history that we study should reflect the diversity that exists in our society.

Books by Francisco Jiménez

- SENDEROS FRONTERIZOS, Houghton Mifflin, 2002
- CAJAS DE CARTÓN: RELATOS DE LA VIDA PEREGRINA DE UN NIÑO CAMPASINO, Houghton Mifflin, 2002
- BREAKING THROUGH, Houghton Mifflin, 2001

- CHRISTMAS GIFT, THE / EL REGALO DE NAVIDAD (illustrated by Claire B. Cotts), Houghton Mifflin, 2000
- LA MARIPOSA (in both English and Spanish versions; illustrated by Simón Silva), Houghton Mifflin, 1998
- CIRCUIT, THE: STORIES FROM THE LIFE OF A MIGRANT CHILD, The University of New Mexico Press, 1997
- POVERTY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES (Editor), Bilingual Review/Press, 1987
- HISPANICS IN THE UNITED STATES: AN ANTHOLOGY OF CREATIVE LITERATURE, VOL. 2 (co-edited with Gary D. Keller), Bilingual Review/Press, 1982
- MOSAICO DE LA VIDA: PROSA CHICANA, CUBANA Y PUERTORRIQUEÑA. Harcourt Inc., 1981
- HISPANICS IN THE UNITED STATES: AN ANTHOLOGY OF CREATIVE LITERATURE (co-edited with Gary D. Keller), Bilingual Review/Press, 1980
- IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF CHICANO LITERATURE, THE (Editor), Bilingual Review/Press, 1979
- INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL FOR SPANISH HERE AND NOW (co-written with Gary Keller and Nancy Sebastiani), Harcourt Inc., 1978
- SPANISH HERE AND NOW (Co-written with Gary Keller and Nancy Sebastiani), Harcourt Inc., 1978
- ¡VIVA LA LENGUA! (Co-written with Gary Keller), Harcourt Inc., 1975

Selected Published Articles by Francisco Jiménez:

- "The Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Acceptance Speech." *The Horn Book Magazine*, January/February 1999
- "Children's Literature: Bridges of Cultural Understanding." *Inside Borders*, September, 1998
- "Spotlight on Autobiographical Reflections." *Staff Development Guide for Middle School Teachers* (edited by James Flood), Macmillan/McGraw Hill, 1997
- "El Volador: The Tree of Life." *Dragonfly* April, 1996
- "Forward," *Voices From the Fields* (written by Beth Atkin), Little, Brown and Company, 1993
- "The American Culture Curriculum Must Be Redefined," *El Observador*, August 16, 1989
- "American Culture is Ethnic." *San Jose Mercury News*. February 16, 1989

Selected Short Stories by Francisco Jiménez, noting first publications of many of his stories:

- "To Have and to Hold." *Gencoe Literature Library* (edited by Patricia Beatty), Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 2001
- "A Break Through." *The Santa Clara Review*, Spring/Summer 2001
- "Cotton Sack: A Short Story." *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, October 19, 1997
- "Learning the Game." *RiverSedge*, Fall, 1995
- "Moving Still." *California History*, Fall, 1995
- "The Migrants." *Multicultural Reading Series* (edited by Vivienne Hidges), Education Design, Inc., 1992
- "El regalo de Alma." *Journal of the Association of Mexican American Educators*, 1988–89
- "Cajas de cartón." *The Bilingual Review*, January–August, 1977
- "Something to Share." *Stand Tall*, (edited by Judith Adams), Macmillan Publishing Company, 1975
- "Arado sin buey." *The Bilingual Review*, September–December, 1974
- "The Story Behind the Story." *Purpose in Literature*

- "The Circuit." *Arizona Quarterly*, Autumn, 1973. (Received the 22nd Arizona Quarterly Annual Award in 1973 for Best Short Story.)
- "La mudanza." *Mensaje: Revista de Cultura y Arte*, July, 1973
- "Christmas Gift." English translation of "Un aguinaldo," *El Grito*, 1972
- "Un aguinaldo." *El Grito*, 1972
- "Cold Death." English translation of "Muerte fría." *El Grito*, 1972
- "Muerte fría." *El Grito: Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought*, Quinto Sol Publications, 1972

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