



Gary Soto

TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth Author Interview

Gary Soto, interviewed in his Berkeley, California studio, on August 29, 2007.

TEACHINGBOOKS: If someone who doesn't know you asks what you do for a living, what do you say?

GARY SOTO: I answer, "I'm retired." Usually, the person will nod his head and say, "Lucky fellow." I never mention that I'm a writer, unless it's clearly in a situation where people assume I must act like a poet and writer, meaning sort of witty or dotty, depending upon the moment. Yesterday, in fact, while I was warming up for a game of tennis, someone asked "What do you do?" I sent the ball over the net and answered in a winded way, "Oh, not a whole lot." I like to go incognito and play up the retired image. I get into movies for half the price playing retired.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When did you begin to describe yourself as a poet?

GARY SOTO: I was twenty-one, a senior at Fresno State, and hung out with other poets who were not ashamed, worried or conceited in proclaiming themselves poets. It seemed natural. We were writing poetry and so, by a logical conclusion, we were poets. We even acted like poets, a little off-the-wall. Plus sometimes very moody, as if we had swallowed a storm cloud.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Were you writing and/or reading poems when you were a boy?

GARY SOTO: No, I didn't write when I was a child, though in high school I kept a journal of my daily thoughts. I recall that journal—it was striped like a candy cane and, I suppose, had a lot of sweet words inside it. However, I did read while I was in elementary school, but which titles I don't recall. I then stopped reading for the longest time—shame on me—and didn't pick up this wonderful activity again until I was in high school. Then it was Hemingway, Steinbeck, Edgar Lee Masters, Robert Frost, etc.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you share what it means to you to be a poet for children?

GARY SOTO: It means handling words and images in an interesting way. All of us use words daily, unless of course we are the silent type. Everyday we say simple things like, "Gee, look at this tan of mine." Or: "I feel sort of sad." But say you wrote something like: "Our faces were the color of pennies," *and* "Our souls are broken like jars." The language becomes interesting and perks up our spirits and imagination. This is what poetry means—language that surprises and keeps us on our toes.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your poems are rarely in rhyme and meter.

GARY SOTO: How true. I depend upon rhythm, not rhyme and meter, for a poetry cadence that will attract the musically conscious reader. Young readers—and older ones—should look for strong images. Images can be so satisfying and breathtaking.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The subjects of your poems feel so realistic. How do you do this?

GARY SOTO: By interest and training, I'm what they refer to as an Imagist. I try to appeal to the sense of seeing—and sometimes hearing, as in the cadence of a poem—as I believe that poems should convey a realism, even if that realism is a fiction. I find that poems that depend on easy description are often sloppily written.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I'm curious how you, as a poet, reflect on the common assignment of memorizing poems. Do you memorize your own poems?

GARY SOTO: Poems written in rhyme and meter can be easily memorized, even longish poems. However, because I write in free verse, my lines are probably more difficult to take in, to absorb, to memorize. But I'm not seeking any students to memorize my poetry—heck, I don't even know my poems. I'm hoping for a sentiment that will linger in the reader's mind. Sentiment, or feeling, is so important to the reader. One of my most popular poems is "Oranges," which is about first love. Very few have memorized this poem, but they *do* remember the feeling. In some regards, this is a memorization, that is, the feeling one takes away from a poem after reading it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Poems and short stories are sometimes seen as more accessible than novels because they are shorter. Is that your perception?

GARY SOTO: I would say that novels are more accessible than poetry and short stories. With novels you have a narrative—story, in other words—and with poetry and short stories you have to work for the *meaning*. In fact, there's a classic complaint that poems are obscure; sometimes this is true, and it's the fault of the poet. Other times it's the laziness of the reader and his or her willingness to *try* to understand a poem's meaning. Some smart person said that poetry is an act of attention. How true—"an act of attention." It's the same with short stories. Of course, short stories are narratives, but the endings sometimes can be elusive, almost tricky. Let's use the word subtle here. Short stories often end with subtleties that require the reader to reflect.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you share a bit about *Baseball in April*, one of your most popular books?

GARY SOTO: This was a book that almost didn't get published. It went around to different publishers, who liked what they read but were mystified that it featured Mexican American characters and, in turn, was a book composed of short stories (literary history tells us that most publishers avoid short stories because they aren't commercial enough). At the time (1987-88), I was an essayist and poet, and *Baseball in April* was the first venture into writing for young people. Finally, it was accepted by Harcourt Inc., published, and went on to make a lot of young people

(and parents and teachers) happy. I think what caught people off guard was its realism when most readers were looking for fantasy. It also featured a real place—Fresno, my hometown. Children’s literature usually invents these places that are not real. But not me! Fresno is all over my work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your novel *Off and Running* touches on political activism and the election process. Were you conscious of writing such a positive book about activist children?

GARY SOTO: No, not really. In my mind this novel features a spunky girl named Miata and her sidekick, Ana, plus two happy-go-lucky boys Rudy and Alex. It’s in some ways a girl vs. boy novel, and comic, of course. It’s about school politics, or, perhaps, a popularity contest. In the adult world, we have politics and usually a stodgy group of candidates speaking the most vapid clichés imaginable, and we’re supposed to like them because they prop up smiles. But the smiles in *Off and Running* are real. Here we have real kids seeking positions that will offer classmates more ice cream. Even as an adult, I would side with more ice cream.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The life of farmers and laborers appear to be very important to you, often appearing in your writing. You’re also the Young People Ambassador for California Rural Legal Assistance and the United Farm Workers of America, and wrote an inspiration biography of Cesar Chavez. Can you please share your feelings about this topic?

GARY SOTO: Cesar Chavez, the great labor leader, evoked a great spirit for change, and his call for the cause—*la causa*—is difficult to fathom unless you were present during the labor strife of the 1960s and 1970s. If you were Mexican American, you felt his presence and rooted for farm laborers up and down the San Joaquin Valley. His chant of *Sí se puede/You can do it* became something that I lived by. I’m a writer who overcame a lot of obstacles—including prejudice—in order to become a writer. I think my best YA novel is *Jesse* that portrays two young men, both part-time farm workers. It’s something I think of daily, that is, farm workers and the people who advocate for them, including José Padilla of California Rural Legal Assistance and Arturo Rodriguez, the president of the United Farm Workers of America. They are giant souls. I encourage young people to view the film *A Fight in the Fields* and to register for information on farm workers by going to www.ufw.org.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What inspired you to write the Chato books [*Chato’s Kitchen*, *Chato & the Party Animals*, and *Chato Goes Cruisin*]?

GARY SOTO: I love Chato, that low-riding *ese vato* cat from East Los Angeles! I forget what inspired me, but I’ve done these three books, plus another that didn’t get published. But the cat lives. He has nine lives and hasn’t used up one yet! It would make me immensely happy if Chato could become a cartoon character. Heck, I would sit in my pajamas on Saturday to watch him kick around *el barrio*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In almost all of your books and writings you employ Spanish words and phrases among the English, and include a glossary of Spanish words at the end. Why do you do this?

GARY SOTO: Often my characters—a Jesus, a Hector, a Gloria—will be bilingual, or if not bilingual at least know enough Spanish to throw words and phrases into conversation. As a writer, I’m trying to capture the voice of my characters, who sometimes will speak in Spanglish. I’ll give you an example: “Hay te watcho,” is poor academic Spanish but clearly understandable to those who know street Spanish. You can translate this simple sentence as “Better watch out.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Too Many Tamales* is so often used in schools. Tell us about it.

GARY SOTO: After I wrote *Baseball in April* and *Taking Sides*, my agent suggested that I write a picture book. I had to ask her, “What’s a picture book?” She explained, and off I went writing a little story about a girl fascinated by her mother’s wedding ring. It’s not unusual for girls—and boys—to wear things that belong to their parents. They like the idea of “dressing up” or pretending to be older. How many have seen a boy wearing his father’s shoes, or a girl’s mouth smeared with a mother’s lipstick? But in the story I wanted the complication of little Maria losing the ring, or thinking she’s lost the ring. I think this one of the fears of all children, that is, losing something—anything!

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your typical workday.

GARY SOTO: If I’m writing a novel, I begin just after a breakfast of Wheaties (as I will need strength). I work from about 8:30 until noon, and then a couple of hours after lunch. Usually I’m drained by 3:30 and have to go outside to get a breath of fresh air. Writing is exhausting, even though it doesn’t appear that I’m doing a whole lot: just sitting in a chair, typing, staring at a screen.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

GARY SOTO: I seldom have what folks call “writer’s block.” I’m always working on a book, or if not a book, then random poems and stories.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you please share a bit about the writing process?

GARY SOTO: If it’s a poem, I will share it immediately with my wife, Carolyn, who will mark it up. Later I will send it to my poet friend, Christopher Buckley, for a final opinion. He’s pretty brutal and won’t tolerate bad writing. If it’s prose, I will share it first with Carolyn and then later my friend José Novoa. No one works alone. Everyone has an editor, and I have mine.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students when you speak with them?

GARY SOTO: Even though I have some stature in the world (a poet! a writer!), I tell students that I’m not unlike them, that my own childhood was filled with baseball, kickball, playground antics. Yes, I tell them, I was no good at spelling, was haunted by a bully named Frankie T., fell in and out of love, loved lunch, loved dinner, ate candy bars by the fistful, got into fights (lost most of them), and loved to read despite no family encouragement to read. I want young people to make the best

decisions for their lives, so I'll say to some, "Hey, don't mess up." They know what I'm talking about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

GARY SOTO: I tell them on the sly," "Stay strong." Teachers work so hard and give so much of themselves that I sit in awe of them. I know I couldn't do what they do. They have to work with the policy of "No Child Left Behind," and from what I gather with speaking with them, they are not very happy with all this testing. Granted, we should have standards, but I've assessed from speaking with hundred of teachers that standards should be local, not national.

Writings by Gary Soto (at the time of this interview in 2007):

Poetry for Children & Teens:

- PARTLY CLOUDY: POEMS OF LOVE AND LONGING, Harcourt Inc., 2009
- FIRE IN MY HANDS, A, Expanded Edition, Harcourt Inc., 2006
- WORLDS APART, G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2005
- FEARLESS FERNIE, G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2002
- CANTO FAMILIAR, Harcourt Inc., 1997
- NEIGHBORHOOD ODES, Harcourt Inc., 1992
- FIRE IN MY HANDS, A, Scholastic Press, 1991

Fiction for Children & Teens:

- FACTS OF LIFE: STORIES, Harcourt Inc., 2008
- MERCY ON THESE TEENAGE CHIMPS, Harcourt Inc., 2007
- ACCIDENTAL LOVE, Harcourt Inc., 2006
- MY LITTLE CAR/MI CARRITO, G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2006
- CHATO GOES CRUISIN', (illustrated by Susan Guevava), G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2005
- HELP WANTED, Harcourt Inc., 2005
- MARISOL, Pleasant Company Publications, 2005
- THE AFTERLIFE, Harcourt Inc., 2003
- IF THE SHOE FITS, (illustrated by Terry Widener), G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2002
- CHATO AND THE PARTY ANIMALS, (illustrated by Susan Guevava), G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2000
- BIG BUSHY MUSTACHE , Knopf / Random House Inc., 1998
- BURIED ONIONS, Harcourt Inc., 1998
- SNAPSHOTS FROM THE WEDDING, (illustrated by Stephanie Garcia), G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1997
- OLD MAN AND HIS DOOR, (Illustrated by Joe Cepeda), G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1996
- BOYS AT WORK, Delacorte Press / Random House Inc., 1995

- CHATO'S KITCHEN, (illustrated by Susan Guevava), G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1995
- OFF AND RUNNING, (illustrated by Eric Velasquez), Delacorte Press / Random House Inc., 1995
- SUMMER ON WHEELS, Scholastic Press, 1995
- CRAZY WEEKEND, Scholastic Press, 1994
- JESSE, Harcourt Inc., 1994
- LOCAL NEWS, Harcourt Inc., 1993
- POOL PARTY, THE, Delacorte Press / Random House Inc., 1993
- TOO MANY TAMALES, (illustrated by Ed Martinez), G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1993
- SKIRT, THE, Delacorte Press / Random House Inc., 1992
- PACIFIC CROSSING, Harcourt Inc., 1991
- TAKING SIDES, Harcourt Inc., 1991
- BASEBALL IN APRIL, Harcourt Inc., 1990

Biographies for Children & Teens:

- CESAR CHAVEZ: A HERO FOR EVERYONE, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2003
- JESSIE DE LA CRUZ: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A UNITED FARM WORKER, Persea Books, 2000

Poetry for Adults:

- SIMPLE PLAN, A, Chronicle Books, 2007
- ONE KIND OF FAITH, Chronicle Books, 2003
- A NATURAL MAN, Chronicle Books, 1999
- JUNIOR COLLEGE, Chronicle Books, 1997
- NEW AND SELECTED POEMS, Chronicle Books, 1995
- HOME COURSE IN RELIGION, Chronicle Books, 1991
- WHO WILL KNOW US?, Chronicle Books, 1990
- BLACK HAIR, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985
- WHERE SPARROWS WORK HARD , University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981
- TALE OF SUNLIGHT, THE, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978
- ELEMENTS OF SAN JOAQUIN, THE, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977

Essays for Adults:

- EFFECTS OF KNUT HAMSUN ON A FRESNO BOY, THE, Persea Books, 2000
- SMALL FACES, Dell / Random House Inc., 1993
- LIVING UP THE STREET, Dell / Random House Inc., 1992
- SUMMER LIFE, A, University Press of New England, 1990
- CALIFORNIA CHILDHOOD, editor, Creative Arts Books, 1988
- LESSER EVILS, Arte Publico Press, 1988

Fiction for Adults:

- AMNESIA IN A REPUBLICAN COUNTY, University of New Mexico Press, 2003
- POETRY LOVER, University of New Mexico Press, 2001
- NICKEL AND DIME, University of New Mexico Press, 2000

- PIECES OF THE HEART: NEW CHICANO SHORT FICTION [editor], Chronicle Books, 1993

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