

• Meet the Author •

Francisco Jiménez

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).



Photo courtesy of www.scu.edu/fjimenez

Francisco Jiménez emigrated with his family from Mexico to California and as a child worked alongside his parents in the fields of California. He received his BA from Santa Clara University and an MA and Ph.D. in Latin American literature from Columbia University. Jiménez's autobiographical books *The Circuit* (*Cajas de cartón*, Spanish edition), *Breaking Through* (*Senderos fronterizos*, Spanish edition), *La Mariposa*, *The Christmas Gift*/*El regalo de Navidad* and *Reaching Out* (*Más allá de mí*, Spanish edition) have won national literary awards, including the Américas Book Award, the Pura Belpré Honor Book Award, the Tomás Rivera Book Award, the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award and the Carter C. Woodson Book Award. His books have been published in Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Italian and

Spanish, and his stories have been reprinted in over 100 textbooks and anthologies of literature.

He was selected the 2002 U.S. Professor of the Year by CASE and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He is currently the Fay Boyle Professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Santa Clara University.

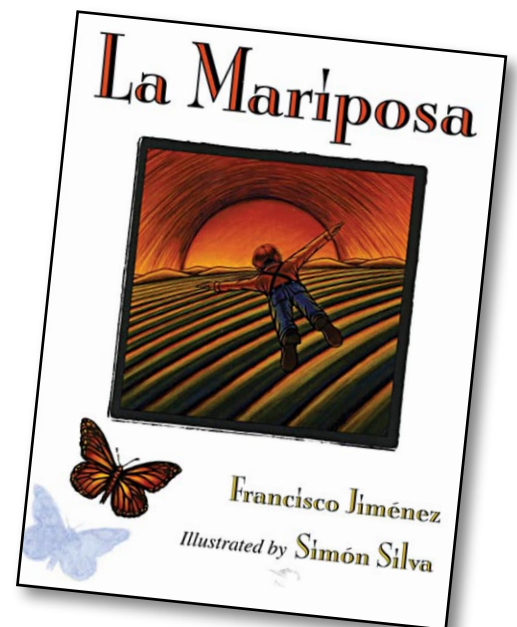
Please begin by telling us how biographical *La Mariposa* is and why you chose to write it as fiction rather than memoir.

FJ: *La Mariposa* is a semiautobiographical story based on an experience I had when I started first grade not knowing a word of English, an experience that is common to many non-English speaking children who currently enter our school system, especially here in California. The social, educational, and economic challenges I encountered then are similar to the difficulties many children go through today. I wanted children, especially migrant Latino children, to read or listen to a story to which they could relate.

Miss Scalapino is a complicated character. She appears gentle at first, but her subsequent insis-

tence on “English only” feels so harsh. Yet by the end of the story, she has softened in that regard. Is she based on a teacher whom you encountered when you were a migrant student?

FJ: Many years ago we were not allowed to speak Spanish in school. Miss Scalapino, my first grade teacher, simply adhered to the school's policy and insisted that we speak only English. In *La Mariposa*, the child is prohibited from speaking English, and when the teacher has Francisco open the jar and the butterfly emerges, Francisco says, “Qué hermosa,” in a low voice because he doesn't want the teacher to hear him



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speak Spanish. However, the teacher hears him and translates, saying, “How beautiful.” This is the only fictional scene in the book. I used my imagination and had the teacher react positively to what Francisco said in Spanish because I wanted to point out the importance of respecting and valuing children’s native language and culture while they are learning English and to show that children from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds can co-exist, learn from each other and, as a consequence, become enriched. At that moment, Miss Scalapino comes to realize the value of Francisco’s native language, which helps him to “break through.” Using the metaphor of the butterfly, both are transformed: The child becomes the teacher and the teacher becomes the student.

Many LibrarySparks readers teach in schools with large ELL populations. Will you reflect, for them, on ways to be especially effective teachers for English Language Learners?

FJ: I include Spanish words in *La Mariposa* because I believe that the exposure to another language at an early age improves children’s disposition toward learning a second language. This helps to open children’s hearts and minds to cultural and linguistic differences. It prepares them to become educated for a more informed, compassionate and productive involvement in our increasingly diverse and global society. Furthermore, my use of Spanish in *La Mariposa*

has helped students form a stronger sense of community. Some teachers tell me that when English-only students come across Spanish words in my book, they ask Spanish-speaking students to translate. This is usually an exchange between these students that had not taken place before, re-enforcing the value of knowing a second language, of being bilingual, and making native Spanish speakers feel proud of what they know. This helps to create bridges of understanding.

Your dedication in *La Mariposa* reads: *To my teachers, whose faith in my ability and guidance helped me break the migrant circuit. Will you tell us more about those specific teachers and their support?*

FJ: I have the greatest respect, admiration and gratitude for teachers because without them I would not be where I am today. I had several wonderful teachers but two of them stand out: Mr. Lema and Miss Bell.

Mr. Lema was my sixth grade teacher. I enrolled in his class in the middle of November, after having missed ten weeks of school because I was helping my family pick grapes and cotton. I was far behind in my studies, but thanks to Mr. Lema, I was able to make considerable progress. He took an interest in me and helped me with reading and English grammar during our lunch hour. Although I did not speak English well and Mr. Lema did not know Spanish, we managed to communicate with each

other. He valued my Mexican cultural background and my native language while he taught me English. At times it was frustrating for both of us, but he never lost his patience with me. He never made me feel inadequate or inferior because of my poor English-language skills. For example, he created a unit on California geography and asked me to read the place names on the map because, as he said, “I know you’ll pronounce them correctly. I cannot.” This made me feel proud and a valued member of the class. He also offered to help me learn to play the trumpet, an instrument used in *corridos*, Mexican ballads, one of my favorite types of music. It was Mr. Lema’s caring and generosity that inspired me to become a teacher.

Miss Bell, my sophomore English teacher, was also highly influential. From her I learned to appreciate literature and the art of writing. She regularly assigned our class to write narrative accounts on personal experiences. Even though I was still struggling to express myself in English, I enjoyed writing about my migrant childhood. In one of my essays, she commented that the experiences I wrote about were very moving, and that my writing showed promise. She then had me read *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel was difficult for me, but I could not put it down. It was one of the first literary works to which I could relate. In the life of the Joad family, I saw my own story. For the first time, I realized that my story, as well as the story of other

Mexican migrant workers, was part of the American story. I understood the power of words to move hearts and minds, the power of literature to change lives. Miss Bell planted the seed in my mind to someday write about my family and the community of my childhood.

Please reflect on the differences between writing the collections of autobiographical stories for older students as you have done in the award-winning volumes *The Circuit*, *Breaking Through*, and *Reaching Out* and writing a picture book such as *La Mariposa*.

FJ: *La Mariposa* is a semiautobiographical children's story written from the third person point of view. I used the power of my imagination to create the fictional scene where the teacher affirms the child's native language. *The Circuit*, *Breaking Through* and *Reaching Out* are autobiographical novels narrated from the first person point of

view. In these works I also made use of my powers of imagination and invention to fill in small details that I have forgotten with the passage of time, but I do not invent or create fictional events.

The combined career of a professorship in Modern Languages and Literature and children's author is somewhat unusual. How do you balance the creative demands of both?

FJ: It's not easy. I have been able to write consistently only during sabbaticals. In addition, since 2005, Santa Clara University has generously given me one quarter off from teaching responsibilities every year to devote to writing, research, and public speaking.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

FJ: They can visit my website: www.scu.edu/fjimenez, which has biographical and bibliographical information as well as

study guides for my books.

I am also listed in: *Mexican American Biographies*, *Notable Latino Americans: A Biographical Dictionary*, *Authors and Artists for Young Adults* (Vol. 32), *Something About the Author* (Vol. 108), *Hispanic Writers*, (Vol.), *Biography Today* (Authors, Vol. 1), and *Ninth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*.

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of ten picture books, most recently The Great Dewey Hunt (UpstartBooks, 2009) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.

