

El Bronx Remembered: A Novella and Other Stories (1975)

Nicholasa Mohr (1935-)

Nicholasa Mohr is one of the most outstanding Puerto Rican authors in the United States. She was born in Spanish Harlem in 1935 of Puerto Rican immigrants. Her fiction, sometimes based on first hand information from her own experience, usually narrates the common life of Puerto Rican immigrants in New York Barrios. *El Bronx Remembered* (1975), Nicholasa Mohr's second literary work, follows *NILDA* in time gathering eleven short stories and a novella dealing with post-war years and a period of great migration from Puerto Rico. As in other works by Mohr like *Nilda* or *In Nueva York*, the northern Barrio is again the predominant space. Nicholasa Mohr explores experience of Puerto Ricans as they struggle to adjust to their new cultural and social situation in the northern barrios, their cultural clashes, daily problems and poor conditions. In every story there are some elements which help describe the sense of community among Puerto Ricans and the different strategies they develop to survive negative circumstances and problems of cultural adjustment and interethnic conflict. Each story adds a different human quality to the somber landscape of the Bronx where there is racism and injustice but where the community is not always characterized by violence and drugs but where solidarity and human relationships can also be explored.

In "A very special pet," a family keeps a live chicken in their house to have fresh eggs every day. The story presents the disorientation of a family of ten members after arriving in the United States in a very bad economic situation. They keep dreaming of going back to the island but the family situation gets worse and Graciela, the mother, decides to sacrifice the chicken to feed the children. However, the children, who consider Joncrofo more a pet than a simple chicken, convince her not to do it and

she finally tries to make it come to life again. For them the chicken has become a symbol of that heritage left behind, of those dreams about going back to Puerto Rico and killing the chicken would have meant killing their dreams. "Shoes for Hector" tells the story of a young boy from a poor family who is given a pair of orange shoes for his graduation by his uncle but he is too embarrassed to wear them. In the end he wears them because he has no other shoes and hopes that nobody notices them. After the graduation party he promises to spend her graduation money in a new pair of shoes to avoid any more embarrassing situations. Other stories where the negative environment characterizes daily life among Puerto Ricans are "A New Window Display" about a young boy who dies after suffering an illness which gets worse because of the northern weather and "Once Upon a Time," about two girls who discover a young boy from a Hispanic gang dead on a roof. "Mr Mendelson" is a positive story about successful interethnic relations as it tells the story of a Jewish old man living alone among Hispanic people. Mr Mendelson spends every Sunday with the Suarez family but when he is taken to a residential hotel and they come to visit a nurse thinks they are delivery people. This shows a lack of understanding about interethnic relations and the fact that they had become a second family for him overcoming ethnic difference and distance.

The novella, "Herman and Alice" tells the story of two people looking struggling for love and understanding. Alice is a girl who gets pregnant and whose insensitive mother tells her to keep helping in the house since she is the oldest in the family. Her mother rejects her because in some way her daughter has not been able to break the chain of unwanted pregnancies and a life of sacrifice. Alice has to help clean the house and take care of her brothers and sisters as always and she feels tired and depressed. Alice falls in love with Herman, a middle-aged man who lives in the same apartment building and who helps her during her pregnancy and they end up getting

married. However, they finally break up, Herman goes back to Puerto Rico, she returns to her old boyfriend and she ends up getting pregnant again. This is a story of characters trapped in their own tragedies and circumstances searching for another person to love who saves their existence.

Mohr's style in *El Bronx Remembered* is clear and concise and her realist narration helps describe the atmosphere and situation of Puerto Ricans living in the Bronx. Her story-telling is direct and accessible especially to young readers (National Book Award for Children's Literature finalist in 1976). In this collection Mohr explores important aspects for the Puerto Rican community of the time such as adjusting to the new environment and culture, the development of a new identity which is increasingly tied to North American ways, changing gender roles in the new situation and social and ethnic conflicts. In the story "Uncle Claudio," the clash between cultures provokes Uncle Claudio's return to the island where he can "get respect." He can't understand young people's behaviour and he "lives in another time" and "he is dreaming instead of facing life" (139). The distance between Puerto Ricans from the island and U.S. Puerto Ricans becomes more visible through this collection of stories where Mohr also tries to make readers understand the deep changes and problems this community has to face after immigration and settlement in northern barrios.

Works Cited

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Further Reading

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