

# Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories

By Lorraine López

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By Tony Beckwith

The stories in this collection remind me of letters from a favorite relative. I mean the kind of letters we enjoy for their shrewd insights, their humor, and their uninhibited news about the family. In these eleven pieces the very relaxed and gifted Lorraine López writes about ordinary people—how they live, what they do to each other, and how they respond. The author's talent lies in her ability to see her characters exactly as they really are, and to describe them in such a way that they become visible and real to the reader as well.

Most of the stories are about Mexican-Americans, and the author is superb at evoking the language and general *ambiente* of Latino communities in California and New Mexico. In "Frostbite," for example, a grandfather faces some classic communication difficulties as he struggles to understand his children and their children. "A Tatting Man" is a curious, compelling account of the friendship that develops between a young woman who is between husbands and an old man whose wife has just died. Ms. López skillfully uses code switching (the spontaneous blend of two languages used by people who inhabit bilingual worlds) to convey the speech patterns of this population: "Qué restroom ni restroom." She also uses phonetics very effectively to create the sound of English spoken with a Spanish accent: "*Jefes titch pipple . . . how to cook . . . peek up tables . . . eberytheeng!*" Readers will surely appreciate the effervescent, gentle humor in these stories: "I felt so low, leaving church before Communion, that I decided to take myself over to the drugstore for a double scoop of chocolate chip ice cream."

Three of the stories evidently relate to a different phase of the author's experience, and in fact seem to belong in a different collection altogether. Here Ms. López has moved away from Southwestern Latino communities to an island in the Caribbean, then

to an African-American funeral in Georgia. Her eye is just as clear and her voice just as moving, but there is a sadder, bleaker undertone. She sounds somehow more detached, and eschews the easygoing warmth that makes the other stories so appealing.

The title piece is simply wonderful, a triumph of fine story-telling. Molly, a part-time Avon lady, negotiates a landscape crowded with insensitive siblings, an asthmatic cat, a possibly-Lebanese doctor, a host of bizarre barroom types, and the ghost of her beloved grandmother. Ms. López has perfect-pitch understanding of human failings yet her misfit protagonist, flawed and vulnerable herself, doesn't blame others for their unkind ways, and is never bitter or vindictive. There is a pleasingly centered, peaceful quality to the writing that makes me feel I'd welcome the author as a friend. And certainly as a correspondent.

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