



The Meaning of Consuelo

A Novel

by Judith Ortiz Cofer

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A NOTE TO TEACHERS



By what standard should we learn to define ourselves? Should we look to our family? Our society? Our culture? Our passions? *The Meaning of Consuelo* is a vivid depiction of one girl's journey towards self-definition in the context of all these contributing factors. Consuelo Signe's story, or *cuento*, unfolds in Puerto Rico during the 1950s. She is *la niña seria* (the serious girl) and the oldest child of her family. Even at a very young age, Consuelo is expected to handle a great deal of responsibility with respect to her sister, Mili, who is considered creative and unpredictable.

As the reader watches Consuelo grow from childhood to adolescence, it becomes clear that her guardianship of her sister is a very serious burden. Mili's erratic behavior begins to unravel into a mental illness that the family cannot understand. When her family's *tragedia* becomes more than her mother can bear, Consuelo becomes the caretaker for her mother as well. In her new role as a woman in her extended family, Consuelo begins to recognize not only the importance of the strength that family can provide, but also the power of her individual choices.

Consuelo's passage into adulthood is marked by several other difficult themes: homosexuality, poverty, admiration, rejection, and the Americanization of Puerto Rico. The reader learns of Consuelo's first struggles with her own sexuality and of her painful experiences as an outcast among her peers. Her father's enthusiasm for modernity and her cousin Patricio's example of independence become the threads by which she is able to weave a future for herself, alone, in the United States. America symbolizes a place where bleak cities mesh with big opportunities. It is there that Consuelo sees a clean slate for her future without the constraints of

COMMENTS ABOUT THE MEANING OF CONSUELO

Puerto Rican tradition or family responsibility. Young as she is, Consuelo takes a great deal of experience and an instinct for survival into an uncertain yet promising future.

“A bittersweet tale of the price one pays to re-invent the story handed down by one’s *antepasados* and *familia*. Consuelo is both herself and every *mujer*, and her story her own and that of her island, torn between self-discovery and safety.”
—Julia Alvarez, author of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

“Judith Ortiz Cofer opens for us a window of understanding into the riches of Puerto Rican culture. Her brave, gritty narrator, Consuelo, herself poised on the brink of departure, is the perfect tour guide through this compelling, deeply honest novel about the pain of family secrets and the inevitability of change.”
—Pam Houston, author of *Cowboys Are My Weakness*

CLOSE READING QUESTIONS

1. What does *el fulano* or *la fulana* mean? Who is an example of this?
2. What do the girls’ names symbolize about their personalities?
3. Where does Consuelo’s father work?
4. What did Consuelo’s *abuelo* do when he was younger? What was he called? (p. 25)
5. Consuelo’s female relatives treat her differently when she becomes a *mujer*. What differences do you notice in their treatment on Consuelo.
6. How did Patricio and Consuelo stay in touch after he moved? Why did they have to be secretive about their correspondence?
7. What symptoms does Mili show that concern everyone?
8. What does Mili do at her *abuela*’s house that causes everyone to panic? (p. 90)
9. What advice does Abuela give to Angelica about Mili?
10. Why does Wilhelm like going to Josey’s?
11. What advice does Doña Sereno give to Angelica? Why does Angelica need to turn to Doña Sereno when she has many other women to turn to?
12. What is Señorita Velez’s goal for her students? How do her desires to teach them more outside the classroom influence her students?
13. Who is Mama Isadora? And how does she influence the women in the Signe family?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

14. María Sereno finds the perfect job for him/herself. Where is it?
 15. How does Consuelo's *Abuelo* see Americans? What does he call them?
 16. What happened to Señorita Velez that makes her different from many other women Consuelo comes in contact with?
 17. Who does Consuelo call the *chameleon* and why?
 18. What is the goal for Consuelo's aunts and *Abuela* after *la tragedia*?
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1. The narrator often refers to customs, ideas, or products that she deems American. How do American ideals and objects influence Consuelo's life?
 2. What is the significance of *el fulano* or *la fulana* in the Puerto Rican culture and how does this influence Consuelo's perception of certain people in her life?
 3. Ancestors carry a heavy weight in the lives of the characters. What benefits do you think looking to deceased relatives for guidance has? What downfalls are there to this solution?
 4. Consuelo notes that homes and neighborhoods in Puerto Rico differ from those in the mainland United States. What is that difference and how does it affect social and familial relations?
 5. What does Patricio's work with the flowers reveal about his character and how does the idea of changing nature effect Consuelo?
 6. What does Consuelo learn from her visit to *La Perla*? (p. 162) How does this change the way she looks at people?
 7. How do you think the *tragedia* will impact Consuelo in the years to come?
 8. How does the use of Spanish or English at different times in the novel influence the understanding of a character?
 9. What role does language play in this novel?
 10. What is the significance of the term *la gente decente*? What characteristics must one possess to belong to *la gente decente*?
 11. Pick one character that embraces Americanization and one that is against it. Then describe a specific issue that these two characters disagree on.

ALSO OF INTEREST

Other works by Judith Ortiz Cofer:

Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer
Sleeping with One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival
The Year of Our Revolution: Selected and New Prose and Poetry
An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio
The Latin Deli
Silent Dancing: Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood
The Line of the Sun
Reaching for the Mainland and Selected New Poems
Terms of Survival
Call Me María

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AUTHOR'S WEBSITE

Visit Cofer's website which includes biographies, interviews and her curriculum vitae.

<http://www.english.uga.edu/~jcofer/home.html>

AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH ORTIZ COFER



From <http://www.english.uga.edu/~jcofer/gordoninterview.html>

An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer

by Stephanie Gordon

from the *AWP Chronicle* October/November 1997 issue, p. 1-9

Judith Ortiz Cofer was born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, in 1952, and immigrated with her family to the U.S. in 1954. She is the author of the novel *The Line of the Sun*, *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*—a collection of essays and poetry—and two books of poetry, *Reaching for the Mainland* and *Terms of Survival*. Her work has appeared in *Glamour*, *The Georgia Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and other journals. She has been anthologized in *The Best American Essays*, *The Norton Book of Women's Lives*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and the *O. Henry Prize Stories*. She has been awarded a PEN/Martha Albrand Special Citation in nonfiction for *Silent Dancing*, The Anisfield Wolf Book Award for *The Latin Deli*, and her work has been selected for the Syndicated Fiction Project. She has received fellowships from the NEA and the Witter Bynner Foundation for poetry. She is the Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia. Her most recent book is *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* (Orchard Books 1995. Penguin USA 1996).

Gordon: You are a natural story teller. Even your poems have a strong narrative element to them. When did you realize that you liked to tell stories?

Cofer: The women in my family were wonderful story tellers who infected me at a very early age with the desire to tell stories. I used to try to impress my father, who was hard to impress, by telling him stories. In my poem called “The Changeling” I write about the way I used to pretend to be a boy and a warrior; then I’d tell my father war stories that he liked better than any girl stories. It was at that early stage that I realized I could gain power and attention in this way, and I became hooked on it. After writing nothing but poetry for eight years, I found myself involved in a longer story, one that needed a different format, but I wasn’t able to give it the time the genre required. So I put it away but came back to it at the urging of my friend, Betty Jean Craige, who read a chapter and became interested in the characters. I realized that if I wanted to be a story teller that I had to be patient, because sometimes the story takes many years to tell. My writing life is punctuated by the occasional urge to tell a story, and it can come at any time. I am just fulfilling a basic urge I had as a child.

Gordon: In your book of nonfiction, *Silent Dancing*, you tell in the essay “Casa” of your grandmother’s mesmerizing ability to tell stories. Also, in “More Room” you call her home *la casa de Mama* and say it is the place of your origin, the stage for your memories and dreams of island life. Clearly your grandmother had a major influence over you.

Cofer: She was a powerful person in our family. She died three years ago and left an incredible vacuum that no one will ever be able to fill. She belonged to a generation of women who did not need political rhetoric to establish themselves as matriarchs and liberated women. She had eight children and a husband who was a poet, which was a source of irritation for her, because even though he was a house

builder and painter by trade, he used every available moment to write his poems. I learned my love for poetry from Papa—which is an interesting reversal in a macho culture. He taught me gentleness, with words, and she taught me strength of character. Part of Mama’s power came from her ability to transform the world with words. She was not a woman of letters. She had very little formal education, but she could silence an entire room when she said “Tengo un cuento” (“I have a story to tell”). And we would all sit around like children, and listen to her transform any ordinary thing or person into an archetype. The first poem I had published in a national journal, the *Prairie Schooner*, was “The Woman Who Left at the Altar.” That came straight from Mama’s technique of telling a story, claiming it was the absolute truth, the *la verdad*, but changing it every time to suit the occasion and the audience. She was teaching us that reality is relative, that we change it through our own interpretation. She couldn’t have said it that way because she’s no literary critic, but I absorbed her technique. And I learned that was art. Art is taking the ordinary and trying to give it enough levels so that it becomes universal. I make people laugh when I say that my unschooled grandmother and Virginia Woolf were two of my literary ancestors. As different as they were they shared one thing: They knew that the word was empowering in a way that nothing else was.

Gordon: In the preface to *Silent Dancing* you say that in writing the *ensayos* (essays of a life) in the book that you faced the possibility that the past is mainly a creation of the imagination. And you tell of Woolf’s influence over you, how she realized the way one had to rely on a combination of memory, imagination, and emotion that may or may not be the exact truth, but more poetic truth.

Cofer: I wanted to establish that, because after I wrote *The Line of the Sun*, people kept asking “Is it autobiographical? How much of it is true?” I didn’t know how much I had dragged out of my unconscious, how much I had created, or how much I had truly remembered. I decided to write these *ensayos*, which is Spanish for rehearsal or practice. I was rehearsing, using language as a trigger to lead me back to what Virginia Woolf calls moments of being, which are a combination of memory and imagination. But they are still what changed you—how you remember something happening and whether it’s actual, a verifiable fact, or a combination of those two things, memory and imagination. So the actual event is not as important as the memory of it, to me. It may be to a historian, and I probably shock people when I say that. But the place of poetry is what interests me. So I decided to write these creative nonfiction pieces by that theory, aiming toward a complete picture. Not featuring myself as a central character, but with myself as a witness, to try to make them something more than just pure remembrance, pure memory. When I tested the factuality of my memories by asking relatives to confirm an event where they had been present, I discovered that if there were five different relatives present, five different stories would emerge. Their version of the truth had to do with the person’s gender, her emotional situation at the time, age, even with the political situation...so that my mother remembered a story differently from me because perhaps she was 25 years old, or because she was missing my father. Definitely my brother remembers things differently because he was in the boy’s world when I was in the girl’s world. So I felt completely justified in telling my story. If anyone objected I assured them that it wasn’t my intent to defame them or warp the truth, but to give my rendition of it. My intent was poetic rather than genealogical.

Gordon: When I read through your books, I was struck by how many essays you have written. I see a lot of interest now in the personal essay or creative nonfic-

tion. Are there distinctions between these two terms?

Cofer: To me there are. That's why I tried to use the techniques of creative nonfiction when I wrote the pieces that appear in *Silent Dancing* and several of the pieces that are in *The Latin Deli*, too, such as "Advanced Biology." However, with "The Myth of the Latin Woman" and "Paterson Public Library," and a couple of other pieces where I'm more reportorial, I am really writing personal essays. When I write an essay such as "The Myth of the Latin Woman" and I'm talking about the misreading of cultural signals, it's quite different than reporting an event from the past and trying to share with my reader exactly what may have transpired 30 years ago in my mother's living room when I have no way of confirming the facts. The personal essay is a more formal genre, exploring a topic to share your knowledge with an intended audience. Creative nonfiction is a hybrid, a combination of fiction and nonfiction. Even though I write about an actual person, like my grandmother, and a real event, I can't go to any text and get the exact words or exact actions. So I take the liberty of a fiction writer and dramatize it to try to bring out what one does as a poet. My intent is that by putting together certain images and manipulating language something will emerge that is also the truth. So, you see, it is a little different in conception, a little different creative mode. And the tone is different, too.

Gordon: Did you move from the personal essay into creative nonfiction?

Cofer: No, I don't see my movements as a literary artist as linear. I did not give up poetry to write fiction. I did not give up fiction to write personal essays. I did not give up personal essays to write creative nonfiction. I write whatever the subject calls for. If I have a strong lyrical impulse, if I want to make something as compact and powerful as possible, then I know that the only medium is poetry. I like to quote Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." I consider the genres the slants. If I have a long story to tell, and I want to spend years on it, then I know I'm incubating a novel. If I have an argument to make, and I want to make it strong and immediate, then I know I'm heading for an essay. I didn't move from one to the other, but one does teach me the other. Spending eight years writing bad poems, then better poems, then occasionally a good poem taught me what powerful language was in a way that no other kind of education could have. Poetry is the ultimate discipline.

Gordon: You work in several genres, yet you consider yourself to be foremost a poet. Why?

Cofer: I would like to edit that statement, because poetry to me is so (excuse the word) sacred that I don't dare call myself a poet with a capital P. Shall we say that I consider myself an eternal student of the craft and art of poetry? Only a few people can die having this etched in stone: "This Was a Poet." I don't know many of them working now. Maybe a few whose work continually delights me with its beauty and power. I keep writing poems because they give me the permission to work with words in any way. On the days I write an acceptable poem I feel powerful in a way I don't when I've written anything else. I'll never give up writing poetry because I'm still hoping to write that one poem that will outlast me.

Gordon: When did you begin writing?

Cofer: I wish I could say I was ten years old. That's a dangerous question to ask a woman. I lost a friend recently, Adrienne Bond, who didn't start writing until she

was in her 50's. That doesn't mean that she didn't want to write; it was just that life did not allow her to. If I have to pinpoint a time, it was when I was working on my graduate degree. I was writing my thesis and working with powerful words. I started feeling a need that writing the thesis did not fulfill. I began writing down ideas for stories and poems, and wrote some poems that I hid. When you're a graduate student and are so immersed in the great works of literature, you think of any effort to emulate them as hubris. I finally showed my poems to a woman who knew poetry, and she said, "Do you know people are writing poems about ordinary things, not just about the Great Chain of Being? There are people who are actually writing about being a woman and a mother." She told me to send them out. I did send out a few and after many rejections one finally did get accepted. I was 28 when my first poem was accepted. So I'm not exactly a child prodigy. Since then I have devoted a portion of each day to writing. I have an essay in *The Latin Deli* called "Five A.M.," where I talk about the way I decided twenty years ago to set aside a time to write, the hours between five and seven A.M. That is the discipline I still follow. Not everything I produce at that ungodly hour can be retained, but at least that is my time. I call it a room of my own, because at that time I have the whole two hours to myself. It's the opposite of bohemianism, where you say you'll start writing as soon as that winged creature comes and taps you with her wand. The other version of that is that you'll start writing when your child goes to school. Or just fill in the blanks. When I needed to write and had a strong urge, I had a child, a husband, and a job. I didn't want any of it to disappear; I just wanted to find an opening in my busy life to write. I realized that window had to be constructed out of time no one else wanted, and I was out of energy by the time I got home at night. My solution was to get up two hours before my child. My first book of poetry and my novel *The Line of the Sun* were both written between the hours of five and seven A.M. My point is that writers must make difficult choices sometimes, in order to create. Why not give yourself a schedule to follow?

Gordon: We've discussed your working in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Do you find one form easier to work with than the others?

Cofer: No, the blank page is the hard thing. It's not the form. Of course poetry is more demanding because every word has to be absolutely right. But doesn't that apply to all good writing?

Gordon: Not that many people write in more than one genre.

Cofer: True, but you write the poem, then revise it, then you revise it again. And like somebody said, finally you abandon it because you can't make it perfect. Nothing is easy if what you want is the transformation of art. If you're satisfied with reportage, you can write it in much less time. The novel has its own organic life; so does the poem. If you want a definite answer, then technically the poem is the hardest to write. But if you're talking about artistic enterprise, and you want what Coleridge called the best words in the best order, then it's all equally hard.

Gordon: I've heard you say that Americans like to specialize. Can you comment?

Cofer: I'm not North American, but that is not the reason I don't specialize. There is this tendency for specialization in the U.S. that puts pressure on people in all sorts of fields, not just writing. When I wrote *The Line of the Sun*, people simply assumed that I had given up poetry. In the U.S., if you look at a writers' directory, you'll see listings under "poets" and "writers." What is a poet if not a

writer? When you look at a Latin American directory you'll see Octavio Paz in the same listing as Carlos Fuentes, because both feel free to write in different areas. There are programs in the U.S. where the poets and fiction writers are required to attend different lectures, as if the poet didn't need to hear fiction. As if the novelist didn't need to hear poetry. I make my students go to all readings. And in defiance I never do a reading where I read only in one genre.

Gordon: As a Latina in Georgia, do you find this state and this part of the country receptive to your books?

Cofer: (laughs) I never think about it. Some people think that because I'm Puerto Rican I should be in a Puerto Rican community. I was for a while, but *el destino* brought me to Georgia. My books aren't used as extensively in classrooms here as they are in California and New York. But there is such a thing as a public for your work. Although I don't write only for the Latino community, I hope that whoever reads my stories won't be thinking "If only I were Puerto Rican, then this story would mean something to me." But I've never felt rejected by people in Georgia. I have been included in Georgia Writers' Conferences. I've been here long enough to be a Georgian by osmosis.

Gordon: Have any Southern writers influenced you?

Cofer: Yes. The Southern women writers were my first direct influence. I did not get much exposure to contemporary writers when I was getting my degrees. Then, anything written in the last twenty or thirty years was considered ephemera. I had a traditional education in English and American literature, but it wasn't until I took a course in Southern Literature and came across the work of Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty that explosions went off in my head. When I read O'Connor I thought "My God, this woman is taking ordinary events and people and transforming them into some of the most vivid characters and scenes I have ever encountered in literature." Southern writers spoke to me in a way that was closer to my literary idiom. The Southern writers were passionate in a way that I understood. There are more parallels for me in the Southern mind and landscape with my own Latino culture than with any other I have experienced. It has to do with the burden of history, of having been vanquished, which both Southerners and Latinos have experienced. Puerto Rico has never known independence since its pre-Columbian days. After the Spanish took over we were under Spanish rule until the late 1800's, then the U.S. decided they wanted the island as payment for war debts from Spain. Now the status is semi-colonial. I don't intend a point-by-point comparison to the South. It's just that the South was a conquered country after the Civil War. They have to live with the awful memory of the enslavement of people, which is part of Puerto Rico's Spanish history, too. When I read Faulkner I feel a shock of recognition; I understand both his guilt and his pride. The climate and nature of the South also seems more akin to me than people might think. They just think I'm a Puerto Rican in the South—what a strange concept. The Southern writers continue to be a source of delight to me. Cormac McCarthy, for example. He doesn't write to please anyone; he's free enough to wander in any direction, no matter how controversial. He does things that those of us who are bilingual don't even feel free to do, like write extensively in Spanish. Jim Grimsley, with *Winter Birds*, has taken the most difficult of subjects and elevated it. Judson Mitcham, who is a talented poet, just published his first novel, *The Sweet Everlasting*, which I predict is one of those books that will endure the test of time. My own colleague, Jim Kilgo, has written some lovely creative non-fiction. So has Julie Checkoway, the director of our writing program here at UGA.

I'm also excited that Kevin Young, an award-winning poet, has recently joined our faculty. I'm not in a wasteland here in Georgia. Other writers who have influenced me are Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, and Alice Walker. My reading has always been very eclectic, similar to the reading I assign in the classroom, which is from anthologies representative of voices as varied as the U.S. itself, from Garrett Hongo to Joy Harjo, W.S. Merwin, Phil Levine, and my teachers William Matthews and Ellen Bryant Voigt, who is not only one of the best poets in America, but one of the most dynamic teachers I have ever met. Also Linda Pastan and Hilma Worlitzer, who were my mentors. Larry Brown, too—his work has the same stimulating effect on me as Flannery O'Connor's. It wasn't until after I completed graduate school, started writing, and had been in the field for a while, and also not until after Gabriel Garcia Marquez won the Nobel Prize, that the so-called Latin American "boom" happened. Then people began translating the works of Spanish writers, like Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz, Manuel Puig, and others. I suddenly realized that these people had been out there and I'd had no access to them. Then I joined the present group of Latino/a writers, which is mostly writers in their forties and early fifties. I did not have any models from my native language and generation, so I can't say that they influenced me. I had to invent myself as a Puerto Rican writer.

Gordon: *The Latin Deli* is unusual because it is mixed genre. How did it come into being?

Cofer: You know that you have reached a place of maturity when you recognize the need to put things together in a holistic way. Even though I didn't intend to write a multi-genre book, for some time I knew there were things that concerned me, things I'll always write about. So after a certain time I set out all these pieces I'd done for the previous five years. I saw that they could be put together like a collage...which publishers don't like because books are supposed to have their own little niche in a bookstore. If it's multi-genre then where does the book go? I'm not a best-selling author so it didn't matter where they put the book. It was going to sell the same number of copies. The University of Georgia Press published it and now Norton, in paperback. People seem to like being able to read a poem after reading a prose piece, because the poems say something, even indirectly, about the prose.

Gordon: Was it difficult to get the book published?

Cofer: Yes. It had always been difficult for me to get my books published because I'm not writing mass marketable books. *The Line of the Sun* made its rounds in New York, and finally I was told that Puerto Ricans don't read. I thought that was a foolish thing for the publisher to assume. But also, I didn't write it for just Puerto Ricans to read. If the publisher had been wise he would have known that people write out of their experiences, to share mainly with people who need to know what it's like to be different. Once again the University of Georgia Press picked it up. The only drawback to a university publisher is that you don't get the exposure, the marketing, and public accessibility to your books that you would with a big publishing house in New York. On the other hand UGA Press keeps my books in print; no one at the press is worried over whether I made enough money for them this year, and they take an interest in the books themselves.

Gordon: Much of your work explores the concept of the Latino/a as "other" in American society. And in your essay "May He Be Bilingual," you make a distinction between adapting and assimilating into American culture, saying that "assim-

ilation” means loss of native culture. Can you comment?

Cofer: Some people try mightily to forget who they are and where they came from, and those people seem a little lost to me. It’s important for the artist to retain some hold on her original self even if it is painful or unattractive. Even if it would be better to forget. How can you inject passion and purpose into your work if it has no roots? I have come to terms with my Puerto Rican background. These experiences have shaped me indelibly. Now I’m an academic at a Southern university, but this does not supersede or bury the self that allowed me to become what I am now. I wanted to record those experiences and share them because they are the main truth I know...what it is like being a Puerto Rican growing up in another culture. Like Stanley Kunitz said “Tradition is not a cistem full of toads; it’s a life-giving fountain.” Even the negative things in my Puerto Rican background provide me with thought I inject into my work. Why do people behave so differently? Why do words have such an impact in one culture and not in another? Without being bilingual and bicultural I wouldn’t know these things. So I have no need to assimilate; if I assimilate then I’m rejecting all this wonderful material for the sake of ease in life. I’d rather adapt.

Gordon: Issues move from one pole to another in your work. You write about the social problems an immigrant to the U.S. faces, such as that of ethnic stereotyping, to the private issues one struggles with, such as having a father who wants to rear a traditional Puerto Rican *senorita* on the mainland. One of your critics called you openly ideological. Do you consider yourself as such?

Cofer: I am not a political writer in that I never take an issue and write a story about it. The people in my stories deal with political issues but only in accordance with the needs of their personal lives. My politics are imbedded in my work as part of the human experience. A story like “American History,” which is in *The Latin Deli*, takes place on the day Kennedy was shot. The girl in the story wants to feel the right way about the president’s death, but she’s in love and she can’t help thinking about this boy. Yet she is faced at the end of the story with a political situation. The mother of the boy she loves rejects her because she’s Puerto Rican. The story doesn’t end with a speech on prejudice but with the heartbreak of a girl still unable to comprehend that it all comes together and affects her life: the death of a president, life in America, prejudice, the plight of the immigrant. The politics are background noise. The world we live in is selfishly a stage for each one of us; we’re mainly concerned about whom we love, money, or whether we are good parents to our children, not who is going to win the nomination for the Republican candidacy. Yet all of these things come together as part of the script for our lives.

Gordon: Would you comment on your philosophy of teaching?

Cofer: I use my classes to further my own education. To teach writing is to educate yourself first, then you pass on whatever you have learned as an offering to your students. I cannot teach them, really, to be writers; all I can do is give them some short cuts I have reamed. A creative writing class can serve as a forum for the exchange of ideas. I constantly ask my students what they’ve read that has affected them. I selfishly use every seminar I teach as a way to try new things. If I assign a class a poem, I try to find time to write a poem, too. And I put together a new reading list each quarter. Certain books are standard for me, like Janet Burroway’s excellent *Writing Fiction*, but I’m also supplementing with new books all the time. Then I always put a big reading reserve list in the library. The lower

the class level, the more books I assign, so that the 380 students, who haven't had a lot of exposure to contemporary writings, will have more reading than the graduate students who have read so much. I put on reserve books representing everything from gay literature to African American writing to Latino writing. I tell my students that this is not to create ghettos, but to show them that we all respond to a particular voice more strongly than others. My philosophy of teaching is to use techniques, exercises, and books that have worked for me, pass them on to the students, acquire their thoughts on it, add to it, and pass it on to a new group. If you're teaching women poets since 1950, you can't be that flexible. You have to get a reading list and stay within the boundaries. But in teaching writing there is not one way, one model, or one voice for everyone, so I make it a buffet. But the discipline comes in the actual writing. I let them wander through the stacks in the library but they have to bring in an effort every week. The second point, after exposing people to new materials, is to create new work. They must dedicate real time to the task of creating.

Gordon: As a member of the creative writing program at UGA, how would you address the criticism writing programs often receive for producing, some say, capable but uninspired writers?

Cofer: (laughs) We cannot be held responsible for creating boring people. If our students are either uninspired writers or their work undistinguished, we can neither take credit nor blame for having graduated them in spite of their problems. Writing is not something that can really be taught. You can take someone who may not have written much but you see a spark of originality and creativity in them, and you encourage them. Also, you might have students who are convinced that they are writers, but they don't have the spark. Yet they plod away, take the exams, and make it through—well, are we to tell them they can't graduate because they are uninspired? I feel lucky if I get two or three students in a class of fifteen or eighteen that are really talented. The others will produce work that pleases them but will never get published. Publishing is so hard anyway that we don't have to worry that much about really bad stuff getting into print (or do we?). Any program should feel very lucky to produce one or two students in their graduating classes who go on to write books and become recognized. And the others, I can say without a doubt, leave my classes knowing a lot more about literature and what makes effective writing. Great writers are produced by nature; I'm here to polish the good writers and to turn mediocre writers into competent writers.

Gordon: A news magazine this year contained an article on the growing market for ethnic writing. I've heard this boom in ethnic writing being called a trend, something that would die down as soon as the next trend came along. How do you feel about this, since you just told me that you've always had a hard time getting published?

Cofer: Everything new is seen as a trend. When I was in graduate school, everyone was talking about the Jewish writers. Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Isaac Singer. My professors were skeptical that their work possessed the qualities that would stand the test of time. But the Jewish writers didn't go away, and the best among them are now part of the canon. A student recently told me that she wanted to incorporate the works of some Latino/a and multicultural writers into her dissertation, and a colleague told her not to because it was just a fad. This is either wishful thinking or a false analogy between what is a movement in literature and the real meaning of fad. I mean, the Macarena is a fad. I started writing long

before it was fashionable or profitable to be an ethnic writer. My own overnight “success” has taken twenty years to achieve. I’m not producing a product to be used this year, then cast out. Ethnic writing isn’t any more of a fad than Southern writing or Jewish writing. Yes, the dust will settle. Multiculturalism won’t always be a topic of conversation or politics. But the writers who deserve to stay in the classroom, on the reading lists, and in print, will stay and the others will be sifted out. That’s the normal process of literature. In the 1930s some of the great literary figures were members of the Algonquin Table, and only three or four of them came down to us. Many who thought they’d be immortal are dust.

Gordon: Can you tell me about the award you recently received in Austin, Texas?

Cofer: This award has pleased me immensely. I just went with my daughter to the national REFORMA conference. This organization, which is a group of librarians across the country who provide services to the Spanish-speaking community, read five years’ worth of children’s and young adult literature written by Latinos/as. Something like 25,000 books for children were published during this time, and only thirty or forty of them were written by Latinos and also published by reputable presses. My book of short stories, *An Island Like You* (NY: Orchard Books, 1995), will be given a medal that’s called the Pura Belpre Children’s Book Award. It’s given in recognition of the first Latina librarian in New York City, who happened to be a Puerto Rican, a children’s librarian, and a translator of folk tales. I won for fiction, and Susan Guevara won for illustration. My books hardly ever get into the bookstores; they’re published by small presses or university publishers who don’t have a big promotion budget. This award will place *An Island Like You* in the libraries and make it accessible to large numbers of people. Not only to boost sales, which I wouldn’t mind, but to have it in front of the public so that people will read it. As an educator I have pride in the fact that this award is a seal of approval, that this organization is saying that this book is good enough for the children of America, that my vision is one they want to share.

Gordon: You mentioned earlier that you’d been working on a novel for three years. Can you comment on it?

Cofer: I’ve just printed out another draft of it. It’s similar to my other books in that it takes place both on the island and on the mainland. It’s different in that the narrator is not a young person. Coincidentally, the protagonist is a librarian, but I wrote this novel before receiving the REFORMA award. It has to do with my interest in language, how we respond to it, how everything is a translation. I don’t just mean from one language to another. I’m talking about the language children speak to each other, that women speak to one another that changes when a man walks in the room. I have a character, a schizophrenic little girl, who invents her own language. I have another character, the narrator’s cousin, who is homosexual. He has to create a world for himself, and the two of them have to develop a language to communicate in. The novel contains three or four of my obsessions recast with new characters and in a new light. Writing is a process of self-discovery, especially writing a novel in which you invest three, four, or five years of your life. Every time you write you discover two things: what you know, and what you don’t know. Then it starts to become what you don’t know, and what you don’t know. And what you need to know, what you need to research, what you need to think about. It’s a thoughtful process, like intense psychological analysis. Painful, too. I’m always exhausted when I have a book-length project. As soon as I’m finished with this novel, I’m going to spend some time writing poems in order to restore myself.