

**Interview of Victor Martinez**  
**National Book Award**  
November 7, 1996  
*Transcript*

*Elizabeth Farnsworth converses with first time novelist and National Book Award winner Victor Martinez.*

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: The writer is Victor Martinez. His novel is *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*. Last night it won the National Book Award for young people's fiction. The son of migrant laborers, Victor Martinez grew up in Fresno, California, in a family of 12 children. *Parrot in the Oven* tells a series of stories about Manny Hernandez, a 14-year-old Mexican-American boy coping with adolescence and poverty in the midst of a family whose resilience will probably be his salvation but whose problems also make his life very hard. Thank you for being with us, Mr. Martinez. And, congratulations!

VICTOR MARTINEZ, Author, *Parrot in the Oven*. (New York City) Thank you.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: How did you come to write this novel?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: I just decided one day--I was a poet originally--and I just decided one day to start writing fiction.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: It's very hard to get a publisher for a first novelist. Did you have trouble?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Well, uh, I had a lot of trouble. Uh-at first I--I didn't think about getting a large publisher. I thought about getting a small one, but, you know, my wife had struggled with me so much that-that she said-go start at a big publisher and work your way down. And that's what I did. I made a deal with her, and we went that way.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And you got a big publisher.

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Yeah, yeah. Harper-Collins.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Were you a boy like Manny? Is this an autobiographical--are these stories autobiographical?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Well, the stories, themselves, some of them happened to me. Others happened to my brothers or sisters--they told me about them. And, uh, the events, themselves, aren't--aren't necessarily true in terms of it being true, but the sentiment of the character is--is very much how I felt at-at that age--14, 15, 16, around there.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Was it hard to do? It's so--it's so completely from this character's point of view and so much, it seemed to me so true to a 14-year-old. Nothing was in there, I thought, that a 14-year-old wouldn't think. Was that difficult?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Uh, actually, I was very surprised at how -how well that--that time in my life, I had really remembered so much about it. I mean, I--I remembered how I felt when I fell in love and when

I fell out of love, when--you know, I remembered how I felt inside. And I was able to translate that into the language.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Would you read something for us?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: I sure would um-"I don't know how long I lay there not thinking anything, watching the clothes flutter under the cool breeze. I saw one of my sister Margo's dresses hanging above me on the clothesline, a flower print, with fluffy shoulders and gardenia patterns stitched on the bottom hem. I saw my brother Nardo's white shirt that he used when he was a busboy with ghosts of smudges on it. Whenever he sprouted beyond his size, Mom trimmed his clothes and passed them down to me. Then I began thinking about a lot of things. I thought about this girl in school, Maria, how she sat behind me in class, and I could feel her breath on my neck, smelling of caramel candy. The way her hair was soft around her ears made my stomach landslide with a strange, delirious emotion. For a long time, I remember I couldn't touch anything without feeling a little current of mystery traveling inside it. All my thoughts were coming forward one by one. I thought about how my mother kept cleaning the house, shifting dirt from one place to another. Maybe she thought she could get the house so spanking shiny that some day it'd disappear in one great sparkle, and she'd be free."

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: There's a lot of your poetry in this book, isn't there?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Oh, yeah. It's a transition from me writing poetry to, to starting to write fiction.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Did you feel like a poet when you were writing it?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Oh, yeah, definitely, definitely. As a poet, you're very internal. You think inside yourself. So at first, it was very difficult, because I think when you write fiction, you have to really think about what's happening around you. So at first I had a lot of difficulty, I mean, actually looking at people and understanding the events and occurrences and stories.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Tell me when you decided to be a writer. You grew up in a family. You were a--you worked in the fields, yourself. How did you come to be a writer?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Well, I used to always read, and I always read. I read a lot but I never really saw myself as a writer. Uh, when I first went to college, um, you know, I was one of those students that sat in the back of the class. I wasn't that high of an achiever. But took--I started taking some poetry classes and apparently the teachers liked them, and they said, you know, you have some talent on this, you should do this--and I think that was the first time in my life someone had ever said something positive about me--you have talent--that's something. And from there on in I just--I seized onto poetry and just kept writing it.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: But it hasn't been easy. Your life has been tough. It's not easy for a poet to make a living wage, is it?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: It's impossible. You have to either be a teacher--or do something else--and I--I really didn't want to teach. I'm an irascible person, and I thought the educational system would--would chuck me out pretty soon, you know, so, uh, it's impossible. That's why I started writing fiction actually.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And you wrote this fiction but the recent years have been pretty hard, right? Tell us about the night before you heard you were a nominee for the National Book Award as opposed to the next day. Was it a big surprise, and was your life pretty tough right before that?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Yeah. The last five years have been just a series of--of occurrences--I mean, every day I woke up and I wanted to quit writing. The night before they--Neil Baldwin from the National Book Award called me, I went to a poetry reading, and there were like six people there. Three of them were my friends. Three were staff members, and I just--I read to them, you know, with all the passion I had inside me, and there, that, my poetry warranted that. So I went home, and I stayed up till like 4 in the morning, really considering quitting, and then I woke up the next morning and got this wonderful news.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And what happens next? I know the award brings \$10,000, which is more than, at least I read, you made--you made last year.

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Yeah.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: So you have that, and then what happens next?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: I keep writing. I just kind of want to get home and get back behind my desk and--and keep on writing.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: You want to write another novel?

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Yes, I'm working on a novel, another novel right now.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: What's this one about?

VICTORMARTINEZ: It's about when I first moved to San Francisco and I kind of lived out in the streets. I was struggling with a bunch of other artists--artists, poets, and you know, we're all trying to get somewhere with our art, and I thought I'd write about that.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Well, Victor Martinez, thank you so much. And congratulations, again.

VICTOR MARTINEZ: Thank you. Thank you, Elizabeth.

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