

¡Ay Caramba!

Beach Flats author pens colorful telenovela

Authors - 2000
Nina Marie Martínez was 14 when her parents separated and she moved from Hollister to live with her dad in San Jose.

Up to that point, Martínez had only a scattering of Spanish words to connect her to her Mexican-American roots.

And as she watched her father renew his acquaintance with his heritage, she realized she didn't have the tools — the language — to reach out to the culture all around her.



CHRIS WATSON

Bookends

So she did what any self-respecting modern American teenager would do — she immersed herself in the language and the culture by watching Spanish-language television, dancing to Latin rock 'n' roll on the radio and losing herself in old Mexican movies.

It was the beginning of a transformation that would eventually take this bicultural American to the University of California and beyond — to a writing career.

On Thursday, Martínez will read from her debut novel, "¡Caramba! A Tale Told in Turns of the Card," at Bookshop Santa Cruz.

It's a wild ride of a novel that will remind many readers — with its rash of characters caught in high drama — of the oh-so-popular telenovela dramas on Spanish-language television.

But the story, Martínez said recently from the comfort of her Beach Flats home, was shaped first and foremost by Lotería, the bingo-like game popular in Mexico.

"I never played Lotería until I visited Mexico when I was an adult," Martínez said. But images from the cards, she said — La Sirena, El Diablito, La Muerte, La Bota, El Nopal, La Bandera and more — can be seen everywhere, even in Santa Cruz, on T-shirts, glassware and art.

She recalled an early introduction to the game.

"I saw a wonderful old Mexican movie, a typical shoot-em-up film from the late '30s, early '40s," Martínez said.

In the film, the bad guy kills the good guy's father and, in turn, all his brothers are gunned down until only he remains.

Then, the good guy challenges the bad guy to a friendly game of Lotería. And when the caller calls out the card for El Muerte, death, the good guy yells "Lotería" with the winning hand, pulls out his gun and shoots the bad guy.

In "¡Caramba!," Lotería cards not only bring structure to the chapters but the dichos — the sayings — on the cards offer some balancing folk wisdom to the

renew his acquaintance with his heritage, she realized she didn't have the tools — the language — to reach out to the culture all around her.

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Nina Marie Martínez, a Beach Flats resident, will read from her debut novel, "¡Caramba! A Tale Told in Turns of the Card," at Bookshop Santa Cruz on Thursday.

crazy melodramatic characters and situations.

"Shrimp who sleep will be swept away by the current" may not be a saying that speaks to everybody, but in Martínez's novel, it dovetails nicely with the meta-purpose of the book — to connect, in one place, as many cultural references as possible.

"It's important," Martínez said, "to find a way to connect with the religion, the culture and the language of your home."

"¡Caramba!" — with about six characters (and counting) in the town of Lava Landing — is also filled with music, romance, dance, a pistola or two, some drugs smuggled in tamales sold off a lunch truck, a Tupperware party, a witch, a transvestite beautician, gangs and ex-convicts, a rodeo, a yard sale, rape, incest, a psychic, a kilo of cocaine, love potions, guitar serenades, a dinner for ranch hands and day laborers and (my personal favorite) a dead guy trying to get out of Purgatory by bugging the living in their dreams.

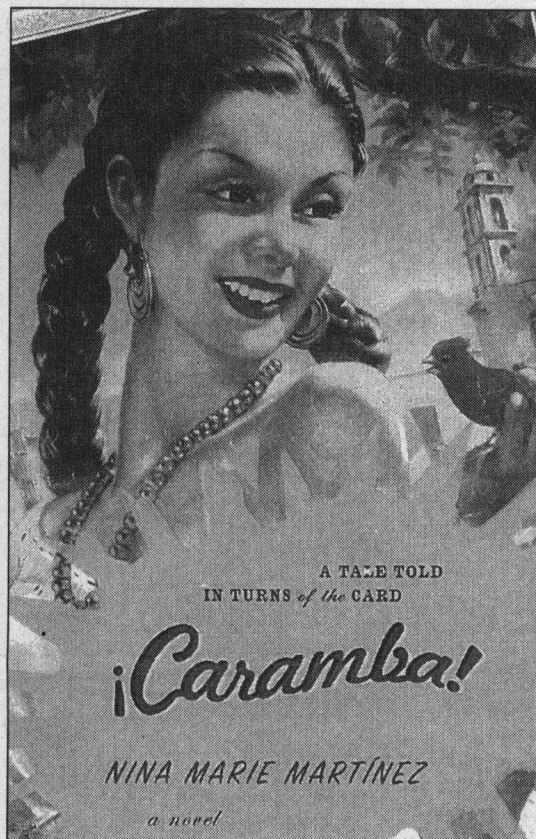
"People say my book is like a telenovela, and I think that it is, in the way the characters narrate their lives — very dramatically, very over-the-top, with secrets revealed," she said.

"But my novel is really more like a corrido — a musical genre that became popular during the Mexican revolution and tells a song about a man and his horse.

"Today, though, a corrido is more likely to be about a drug trafficker and his truck."

However you style it, "¡Caramba!" is pure adrenaline and lots of fun.

And Martínez hopes that the people she's writing about — the



immigrants, the families who pray together, the girls working in factories, those living on the fringe or making do with minimum wage jobs — will be attracted to the story and make it part of their culture as she's tried to make their culture part of her book.

A resident of Santa Cruz since 1995 when she came to study at UCSC, Martínez still makes ends meet the way she always has for herself and her 14-year-old daughter — she buys and sells vintage clothing.

If You Go

WHO: Nina Marie Martínez, "¡Caramba! A Tale Told in Turns of the Card."

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursday.

WHERE: Bookshop Santa Cruz, 1520 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz.

COST: Free.

Martínez structures her novel around Lotería, a bingo-like game popular in Mexico. The sayings on the cards offer some balancing folk wisdom to the crazy melodramatic characters and situations.

Contributed photo

And even if the intended reader of her novel is too busy watching reality TV or flipping through the ads in a magazine to read her book, Martínez has faith that her book will find a home.

Having it translated into Spanish and distributed in Spain and Mexico ought to help.

"The book will go out into the world and find its family," she said. "It will find its family."

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