Jimmy Santiago Baca

Contemporary Authors Online, 2011 Updated: May 13, 2011

Born: January 05, 1952 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, United States
Other Names: Baca, Jose Santiago; Baca, Jimmy
Nationality: American
Occupation: Poet

WRITINGS:

POETRY

- Jimmy Santiago Baca (chapbook), Rock Bottom (Santa Barbara, CA), 1978.
- Swords of Darkness, Mango Publications (San Jose, CA), 1981.
- Poems Taken from My Yard, Timberline (Fulton, MO), 1986.
- In the Way of the Sun, Grove Press (New York, NY), 1997.
- C-Train (Dream Boy’s Story): And, Thirteen Mexicans, Grove Press (New York, NY), 2002.
- Rita and Julia, San Diego City Works Press (San Diego, CA), 2008.
- Poemas Selectos = Selected Poems, New Directions (New York, NY), 2009.

OTHER

- Los tres hijos de Julia (play; title means ”The Three Sons of Julia”; also see below), first produced at Los Angeles Theatre Center, spring, 1991.
- (With Steven Henry Madoff, Cormac McCarthy, and James Drake) James Drake (nonfiction), University of Texas Press (Austin, TX), 2008.


Stories from the Edge, Heinemann (Portsmouth, NH), 2010.


National Endowment for the Arts Literary Fellowship, 1986; Ludwig Vogelstien award in poetry, 1987; Pushcart Prize, 1988; American Book Award for poetry, Before Columbus Foundation, 1988, for Martin and Meditations on the South Valley; Wallace Stevens Endowed Chair, Yale University, 1989; Berkeley Regents Chair, University of California--Berkeley, 1990; International Hispanic Heritage Award, 1990; Southwest Book Award, 1993; Endowed Hulbert Chair, Colorado College, 1995; Champion Poetry Bout, Taos, NM, 1996-97; Humanitarian Award, Albuquerque, NM, 1997; Discover New Writers, Barnes & Noble Booksellers, and International Prize, both 2001, both for A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet; Cornelius P. Turner Award, 2006; Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010. University of New Mexico, honorary Ph.D., 2003.

Born January 5, 1952, in Santa Fe, NM; married; wife's name Beatrice (a therapist); children: five. Education: University of New Mexico, B.A., 1984. Addresses: Home: Albuquerque, NM. E-mail: baca@swcp.com.

"Sidelights"

Jimmy Santiago Baca, an ex-convict and drug addict who taught himself to read while in prison, is a highly acclaimed poet who won the prestigious American Book Award in 1988. Admired for his use of rich imagery and lyrical language, Baca, unlike a growing number of "prison writers" who inject their works with rage and desolation, writes poems dealing with spiritual rebirth and triumph over tragedy. "You really don't have time to be angry," Baca explained to Beth Ann Krier in the Los Angeles Times. "If you compare a life to daytime photography, my life has been more like nighttime photography. My life as a background has had darkness; the only way to survive the darkness is to have my soul flash. I'm too busy trying to capture the aspects of myself in the dark."

According to A. Gabriel Melendez in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Baca "has come to the forefront as one of the most widely read and recognized Chicano poets working today. Not the least of
Baca's contribution to Chicano literature has been to widen the critical attention directed by mainstream critics and publishers toward his own work and that of other Chicano writers." The critic continued: "Baca's poetry is to a large degree infused with elements drawn from his experiences, and the reader is struck by the recurrent themes of transformation, metamorphosis, and self-actualization that have accompanied the poet's own trajectory as an individual and a writer."

Of Chicano and Apache Indian descent, Baca lived with his grandmother after his parents divorced and abandoned him at the age of two. By the time he was five, Baca was living in a New Mexico orphanage, his father dead of alcoholism and his mother involved with a second husband who would one day murder her. Fleeing the orphanage as often as he could to hide in the barrio or live with relatives, Baca was eventually reduced to a life on the street. He soon abused drugs and alcohol and, by age twenty-one, was convicted of drug possession (a crime, he later told Krier, he did not commit). Sentenced to serve several years in a maximum security prison in Arizona, Baca ultimately spent four years in isolation and received electric shock treatments for a combative nature. All told, he spent six years in jail.

Despite his hardship, Baca did not lose spirit. Rather, he became intellectually invigorated during his incarceration period, teaching himself to read and write. He later divulged to Krier: "[In prison], I saw all these Chicanos going out to the fields and being treated like animals. I was tired of being treated like an animal. I wanted to learn how to read and to write and to understand. ... I wanted to know how to function in this world. Why was I so ignorant and deprived? ... The only way of transcending was through language and understanding. Had I not found the language, I would have been a guerrilla in the mountains. It was language that saved [me]." Baca began writing poetry and, at the behest of a fellow inmate, sent his works to Mother Jones magazine. "I took a wild chance," he related to Krier, "I didn't even know how to put the stamp on the envelope and address it." His determination was rewarded when poet and professor Denise Levertov, then poetry editor of Mother Jones, printed Baca's poems in the periodical. Judging Baca a talented writer, Levertov began corresponding with the inmate and eventually found a publisher for his first book.

"The biographical file on Jimmy Santiago Baca might well be read as the working sketch or preliminary study for much of the autobiographical elements that infuse his poetry," noted Melendez. "Baca began to exercise a natural and gifted ability to arch his circumstance into metaphor and sling forth his poems as personal responses to the lived experience of his early years. ... Attuned to real-life circumstances, each of Baca's books represents a concrete step in the process of rebuilding his life from the point of nonexistence that he associates with the years spent in prison."

Baca's first major collection, Immigrants in Our Own Land: Poems, appeared in 1979. The poems, highlighting the splendor of human existence amidst the desolate surroundings of prison life, met with rave reviews. A Kliatt critic, for example, found Baca's works "astonishingly beautiful" for their "celebration of the human spirit in extreme situations."

Writing in the American Book Review, Ron Arias commended the poet's skill and versatility: "At times [Baca] can be terse, narrowly focused, directly to the point. ... Other times he can resemble an exuberant Walt Whitman in the long-lined rhythm and sweep of his emotions--expansive, wordy, even conversational." The critic concluded that Baca "is a freshly aggressive poet of many abilities. ... His is
a gifted, young vision, and judging from this collection, I get the feeling he is just warming up. I look forward to more.” Melendez observed that the publication of Immigrants in Our Own Land "established Baca’s potential as a serious and prolific new voice on the poetry scene."

Baca produced another work, the ten-poem collection What’s Happening, in 1982. While less well-received than his first effort, the book garnered praise for its subject matter concerning both the Chicano and prison experience.

Michael Hogan, writing in the American Book Review, found Baca’s focus on racial oppression, exploitation of laborers, and the horrors of state-run penitentiaries "powerful"; yet he also agreed with other reviewers, deciding that the poems showed a "tendency toward looseness and the prosaic. ... There is entirely too much telling and too little showing." Hogan, however, praised some of the poems' "wry humor" and "disarming ingenuousness," reflecting that Baca "is a gifted poet and has a natural lyricism in the best of his work." The reviewer declared: "One hopes to see the promise of his first book realized ... in a future, better-crafted volume."

Baca’s next work, 1987’s Martin and Meditations on the South Valley, met with outstanding success, earning the American Book Award for poetry. A semi-autobiographical work that critics termed a novel in verse, the book chronicles the life of Martin, an orphaned "detribalized" Apache who sojourns across the United States in search of permanence and meaning in his life. Intended to convey the sometimes traumatic Chicano experience in America, Martin and Meditations on the South Valley details the protagonist’s sense of abandonment and displacement. "Your departure uprooted me mother," writes Baca in the book, "Hallowed core of a child / your absence whittled down / to a broken doll / in a barn loft. The small burned area of memory, / where your face is supposed to be, / moons' rings pass through / in broken chain of events / in my dreams." Although enduring emotional pain, the narrator, by book's end, finds spiritual comfort. "With Martin and Meditations on the South Valley," Melendez suggested that "Baca brings to closure that phase of his poetry that deals with loss, dejection, a searching for identity, and a sense of belonging. ... Absent are the self-destructive tendencies that typified Baca’s earlier years of searching and wandering. In contrast, Martin's senses and aspirations are attuned to keeping the solemn pact he has made with life."

Critics found much to praise in Martin and Meditations on the South Valley. While several recognized the work as a forceful sociological and cultural document, Liam Rector in the Hudson Review also deemed the poetry volume “a page-turner.” Rector explained: "It's ... a powerful orchestration and revision of a narrative and lyrical admixture ... with an utterly compelling dramatic form.” Commending Baca’s descriptions, drawn with "great telescopic accuracy and poignance," the reviewer called Martin and Meditations on the South Valley "a book of great complicity, maturity, and finally responsibility. ... It is a contemporary hero tale."

The success of Martin and Meditations on the South Valley brought international attention to the former prison inmate, who found himself in demand for teaching positions and poetry readings; he also enjoyed the publication of another book, Black Mesa Poems, in 1989. This new phase of life—including marriage and two children—finds voice in Black Mesa Poems, described by Melendez as Baca's
"ultimate and most complete recuperation and revindication of his barrio, of its Chicano, working-
class ethos, and of the life that he has formed around his South Valley home." The critic
continued: "Black Mesa Poems represents the culmination of a long process of recovery and
vindication through language and poetry. ... The book is underpinned by Baca's vision of a man
moving from violence to peace and from personal turmoil to spiritual harmony."

The poetry collection Healing Earthquakes: A Love Story in Poems draws on a technique of journaling
to record emotions and experiences. The poems collected are presented in the form of a journal, and
the result is "a veritable torrent of confessions and prayers, autobiography and reflection," according to
Donna Seaman in Booklist.

Discussing the themes in Healing Earthquakes, which include acceptance in a community, the loss of
family, and contradictions in romantic relationships, a Publishers Weekly reviewer considered the work
"a sprawling journal of epic proportions ... certainly a breakthrough book for Baca." Ilan Stavans,
writing in the Nation, found that "overall the work is stunning, the product of a poet in control of his
craft, one worth paying attention to."

Winter Poems along the Rio Grande contains personal, confessional poetry, much of which describes
the terrain along the Rio Grande. More optimistic than his earlier poetry, the thirty-nine poems
contained in Winter Poems along the Rio Grande focus on Baca's current life, and his future dreams.

Barbara Hoffert, in a Library Journal review, found that Baca's poetry in this collection "hooks you in
and leaves you breathless." Although a Publishers Weekly reviewer found many of the themes and
images included in the collection to be predictable, the critic assured that Baca's readers "will certainly
want to come along for his heartfelt exploration of the American Southwest."

Baca has also had some success with dramas: his play Los tres hijos de Julia was performed in Los
Angeles in 1991, and his film Bound by Honor, for which he cowrote the screenplay and produced,
was released by a Disney company in 1993. The latter work, a story of Chicano gang culture in East
Los Angeles, was rather controversial for its depiction of violence.

New York Times writer Vincent Canby, for one, said of Bound by Honor: "Though it's not the epic it
means to be, it is not a failure."

In 2001, Baca published a memoir of his childhood and his years in prison, as well as his
transformation from convict to poet, with A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet. Baca deals with
some unbelievable material, so much so that David Romo, writing for the Texas Observer, initially
reacted with disbelief. However, Romo concluded: "I don't think it's a 'journalistically accurate' account
of Baca's life, but so what? His memoir reaches for a deeper truth. It's a search for personal and
collective myths, a firsthand account that goes to the heart of an American reality that's often ignored."
Nedra C. Evers, writing in Library Journal, called the memoir an "unflinching account of his
incarceration, with its brutality and occasional benevolence," and considered the book "worth reading
from both a literary and a social perspective."

A Publishers Weekly critic felt that "readers may find Baca's poetry more dazzling than this prose
memoir," but acknowledged that "the content of his story is so interesting and his poetry simply shines." Booklist contributor Seaman stated: "Baca's harrowing story will stand among the world's most moving testimonies to the profound value of literature."

Baca's The Importance of a Piece of Paper, is a collection of short stories, one of which has the translated title of his earlier play, "The Three Sons of Julia." This debut collection of fiction was greeted enthusiastically by critics; a contributor to Kirkus Reviews called the included stories "vivid, horrific, visionary, disarmingly sentimental tales," and concluded: "Let's hope for a novel to follow soon." All eight stories in the book focus on Chicano culture in the Southwest and feature characters who come from underprivileged backgrounds striving to do more with their lives than merely survive. Though a Publishers Weekly reviewer felt that occasionally the prose is overly literary for the stories, the critic acknowledged: "Baca has the ability to convey much in few words, and his precise use of detail delivers small, startling truths."

Noting that although this is his first fiction collection, Janet St. John commented that "his short fiction seems like second nature," in a review for Booklist. "Baca has enriched the [short fiction] genre and exposed another facet of his multi-dimensional literary talent," praised Cecil Johnson in his Fort Worth Star-Telegram review. Tim Davis, reviewing the book for Kliatt, found The Importance of a Piece of Paper to be a "superb collection."

A Glass of Water, Baca's first novel, addresses such themes as immigration, family, and persistence. Told from several points of view, this epic family saga portrays Casmiro, a Mexican-American immigrant who must raise his sons alone after his wife is murdered. Growing up without their mother, Lorenzo and Vito both search for vengeance against the unknown killer who forever altered their lives. Although the action is not presented in chronological order, it stretches from 1984 to the late 2000s, following the brothers' wildly different lives. Yet, at its heart, the novel is "about the whole immigration issue and about the families and what happens to the families once they get here," Baca told Bridget Huber in a Mission Local Web site interview. Baca added: "On the national news they were showing a guy who was going to be put in jail for not obeying a judge's orders. He was leaving bottles of water for the migrants because a lot of them through the years have died from dehydration. And the reason I wrote [ A Glass of Water] was because of all of the corpses being dragged out of the desert."

This inspiration for long-form fiction provides "an auspicious beginning for one who has already found success in poetry, memoirs, and short stories," noted Lawrence Olszewski in Library Journal. Several critics also commented on Baca's diction, noting that, like many poets who have written novels, the prose is exquisite. "In lyrical bursts of language and fragments of scenes, and in naturalistic narrative sequences that flow gracefully for a short while, [Baca] tells the story of a contemporary Mexican family," Dallas Morning News contributor Alan Cheuse pointed out. Seaman, again writing in Booklist, felt that "the intense drama, raging physicality, molten emotions, and righteous social indictment ... make this such a tumultuous fable." However, a Kirkus Reviews contributor panned the "prose that never earns believability, empathy or a hold on the reader's attention." The critic then went on to call A Glass of Water "a potentially interesting story sabotaged by lack of discipline." Despite this rare criticism, America's Intelligence Wire reviewer Aurelio Sanchez stated that "the simplicity of the story shows that we are all alike, wanting the same things, dreaming the same dream." He added: "As might be expected from a poet, the imagery is striking, the prose lyrical."
While Baca continues to write poetry and teach and lecture at colleges, he also works with people in the inner city who face the same persecution he faced as an abandoned teenager. He is the founder of a nonprofit grassroots cooperative for inner-city youth called Black Mesa Enterprises. He runs a creative writing workshop with steelworkers, and the product of that class is an anthology called *The Heat*. When Barbara Stahura in the *Progressive* asked him if the reason he works with gang members, convicts, and illiterate adults is because of his own empowerment through language, he responded: "Damn right. Right into the barrios and the projects and the poor white areas. They have such a reverence for language. They can't believe the language can carry so much power, and once they get hold of that, they begin to unteach what they were taught about who they are. If they were taught to be racist or violent, language has this amazing ability to unteach all that, and make them question it. It gives them back their power toward regaining their humanity. That's why I do it."

Despite his impressive accomplishments, Baca claims to maintain the humble attitude he first fostered while in prison. Proclaiming to Krier that producing poetry still "comes down to my act of sitting down in my little room and writing what's in my heart," Baca elaborated: "I have been hailed by some of the most severe critics in the country. It doesn't mean anything. ... I just try to stay within the rules of the earth, within the boundaries of dignity. I don't do anything for money. ... I live on a day-to-day basis. ... In prison, I didn't know if I was going to be alive from day to day." An essayist for the *Dictionary of Hispanic Biography*, concluded: "Though Baca's poems speak to the experiences of people in the American Southwest, particularly the Chicano Mestizo people, his poems strike a universal chord; the quest of one individual for identity and meaning." When asked by Stahura what inspires him to write poetry, Baca responded: "What inspires you to breathe? If you want to live, you breathe."

### Further Readings

**FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**BOOKS**
- *Dictionary of Hispanic Biography*, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1996.

**PERIODICALS**
- *America's Intelligence Wire*, September 27, 2009, Aurelio Sanchez, review of *A Glass of Water*.

- *Prairie Schooner*, winter, 2002, Marcus Cafagna, review of *Set This Book on Fire!*, pp. 175-177.

**ONLINE**

- *Mission Local*, http://missionlocal.org/ (December 10, 2009), Bridget Huber, author interview.
- *Texas Observer Online* (Austin, TX), http://www.texasobserver.org/ (September 21, 2005), David Romo, "The Unbelievable Goodness of Jimmy Santiago Baca.*"
Source Citation

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000004058
Jimmy Santiago Baca was born in Santa Fe County, New Mexico, in 1952. Abandoned by his parents at the age of two, he lived with one of his grandmothers for several years before being placed in an orphanage. He wound up living on the streets, and at the age of twenty-one he was convicted on charges of drug possession and incarcerated. He served six and a half years in