

By Georgia Rowe, Correspondent

It's her third interview of the day, and Michele Serros is getting seriously tired of answering the inevitable question: "Why do you write from a Mexican-American point of view?"

"I don't know how many times someone would ask that of other authors," exclaims Serros. "Why do you write from a West European point of view?," she asks in a droll interviewer's voice.

Maybe the question arises because her new book, "Chicana Falsa, and Other Stories of Death, Identity and Oxnard" (Riverhead Books), so aptly captures the experience of growing up Mexican-American in Southern California. Serros, 30, is in town for a round of interviews and readings from the book, a humorous collection of poems and short stories based on her own experiences as a young Latina in La La Land.

"I just write what I have a passion about," Serros says. "My family, my old neighborhood, a lot of the characters I grew up with, my old teachers. A lot of the language I use is very familiar to the Latino culture, so right away it's deemed 'Chicano literature'."

Written in a hip, irreverent style, "Chicana Falsa" paints vivid word pictures of everyday scenes, skewering both the Mexican and American sides of her heritage in the process. From the Chicana activist who discovers racism in the frozen vegetable section of the supermarket

("Attention Shoppers") to the only woman of color working out in an exclusive all-white gym ("Disco Gymnasium") to the day her sister went on "The Price is Right" and lost because she didn't know the price of a washing machine ("The Day My Sister Was On Television"), "Chicana Falsa" is both hilarious and on point.

It's also become a national success. Serros, who toured with Lollapalooza as a featured poet and teaches poetry in schools and correctional facilities, says the book is now being taught in high schools and colleges across the country. A recently released spoken-word CD of stories from the book (read by the author) is getting rave reviews.

In person, Serros is just as frank and funny as her writing style. She's quick with a comeback (when this interviewer mentions the Contra Costa Times, she says, "The Contra Times? What is that, some left-wing radical paper?"). She laughs often. But she explains that she started writing as a way to deal with fear and anger - feelings discouraged in a young Latina.

"We just weren't allowed to express emotions in my household," she says. "It was seen as unladylike, and people thought you were being a baby. So I was pretty much taught to grin and bear it and be tough."

That worked up until she was 11, when her parents got divorced. Sad and confused, Serros wrote a long letter to one of her idols, novelist Judy Blume. "I had grown up reading her books," says Serros. "I read one called 'It's Not the End of the World,' and the narrator was going

through the same thing I was. Within a month, I got a letter back from her. In my neighborhood, it wasn't every day my pals got letters from New York authors. She told me to keep a journal and record my feelings. That was a big turning point for me - here's Judy Blume telling ME to keep a journal! And I thought, I will."

Working at a minimum wage job and struggling to get passing grades at a community college, Serros started writing - on her father's advice, she used the pen name Michael Hill (cerros is Spanish for hills) - and encountered a lot of resistance, much of it from her own family.

She says she'll always remember an aunt telling her to forget about being a poet. "She said, 'what are you writing about' - like, what could you possibly know?," says Serros. "The look on her face made me feel so small. And I thought, she's right. What could I write about? It was that event that inspired the second poem in the book, 'Annie Says'. In the poem it's one aunt, but it was really all my aunts and uncles and cousins and English teachers telling me what it meant to be a writer."

Even her best friend ridiculed her. The title story portrays the tough-as-nails Letty, who scrawled the words "Chicana Falsa" in huge letters on Serros' junior high locker one day. "I kept talking about being a writer someday, and she saw that as very fake," says Serros. "In her eyes, a true chicana was someone like her - someone who was down with the home boys, someone who partied and ditched school a lot, a chola like her."

Serros says that it wasn't until her mother's death in 1991 - an event she describes as both traumatic and empowering - that she began writing in earnest.

"It was her dying that gave me the strength to really start writing," she says. "I didn't care if somebody laughed or rolled their eyes - what else could harm me? And I had so many questions I'd never asked her. I realized I wanted to start documenting my own stories for my children. I didn't have any, but it was like, just in case. So the book is really a gift to future family members."

Another turning point came when she enrolled in a "Mexican American Literature" course. "I thought, how many books can that be - what, maybe three? It'll be a piece of cake," she says with a laugh. "Then I got the course syllabus, and there were all these names! It made me angry. I thought, why didn't I know about these writers? And then I began to think, maybe I can be part of this rich literary heritage I know nothing about."

Part of that, she says, is writing about serious things - from her own wacky point of view, of course.

"I like to be identified as a comedic commentator, but I'd also like to be known as a social commentator," she says. "The vegetable story - yeah, it's a funny little story, but it's kind of sad, too. My sister being on 'The Price is Right' - when you think about our economic standing, why wouldn't we know the price of a washing

machine? Was that really a luxury item that only the economically advantaged get to know about?"

These days, Serros is still living in Oxnard with her husband, a drummer in a rock band - "it's a big joke with my friends," she says, "you know, I'm a poet, he's a musician - we are POOR! But we always have a lot of fun at our house" - although she says the movie-obsessed LA scene drives her crazy.

"Everyone says, 'If you're not a screenwriter, what are you doing?' My screenwriter friends are all going to sell scripts for thousands and thousands, and I'm toting this little book for ten dollars. And it does irritate me to have people say, 'When you write your stories do you already picture who's going to play the part? Do you see Andy Garcia as your brother?'"

She's working on a new book of short stories; the working title is "How to Be a Chicano Role Model". She says she enjoys doing readings, although she looks back on Lollapalooza with amused horror - "the kids are there to see the Beastie Boys and Smashing Pumpkins, and there's someone like me, reading an ode to pork rinds" - and especially loves speaking in schools.

"It's a personal priority for me," she says. "I loved to read and write, yet my grades in school didn't reflect that at all. I was so happy to get a C plus! I think if more students get works by writers of color, something that has the last name of the woman who lives on

their street, that sparks an interest. From there, they can take off and read the classics, study Shakespeare.

"I got a letter from a junior high school girl who said, 'I never knew a poet could be Mexican.' I thought, what class was this? What state was this in? I was amazed to see it was from Los Angeles. That just kills me. So 'role model' isn't a position I applied for, but I think there are so few Latina/Chicana poets around, I've been put in that position. And I want to be responsible, because I think a lot of the role models we have - sports figures, celebrities - just aren't cutting it."