

The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education
Copyright 2011 The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education

December 19, 2011

Volume 22; Issue 6

The Book of Want

Book review by Mary Ann Cooper

The Book of Want by Daniel A. Olivas

April 15, 2011

144 pages, \$16.95 paper

ISBN: 978-0816528998

University of Arizona Press

Daniel A Olivas made his mark in Latino literature through his popular short stories featured in many Hispanic anthologies such as *Sudden Fiction Latino* and *Hate Crimes: Social Issues Firsthand*. But Olivas says people always wanted to know when he was going to write a novel. "After writing a novella, three short story collections, and a picture book, I relented," says Olivas. And it was no easy task. Olivas is an attorney with the California Department of Justice by day. Writing a novel would take a great deal of time and energy to complete. But Olivas' readers will not be disappointed by his effort. *The Book of Want* is the story of one family in Los Angeles in the early 21st century. The structure of the novel is unique. Each chapter takes its inspiration from one of the Ten Commandments. The result is a story that spans a wide spectrum of characters and settings from the young and elderly to straight and gay. Ethnic and economic barriers are crossed. Rich and poor, Mexican and Jewish themes are also addressed.

The tapestry he weaves of religion, love, magic and death is taken from his own experiences. Olivas says, "Beyond being the grandson of Mexican immigrants, I am also a husband, father, son, brother, lawyer, urban dweller, Jew by choice, and friend to people from many cultures; the list is long. In other words, my writing reflects all aspects of my life experiences." And because of Olivas' life experiences, what could have been a hodgepodge of disparate stories and characters fits together like a perfect puzzle.

The main character, who influences all other lives in *The Book of Want*, is Conchita, a voluptuous, headstrong single woman of a certain age who sees nothing wrong with enjoying the company of handsome and usually much younger men. She resists pressure from her family to marry. Then she meets a widower with unusual gifts and begins to think about what she really wants out of life.

Julieta, Conchita's younger sister, is much more conventional, but there is more that lurks beneath the surface of her domestic bliss than outsiders know. She and her husband each harbor secrets that could change their marriage and their lives forever. Their twin sons, both in college, struggle to find fulfillment. Mateo refuses to let anyone stand

in the way of his happiness, while Rolando grapples with his sexuality and the family's expectations. And from time to time, Belén, the family's late matriarch, pays a visit to advise, scold or cajole her hapless descendants.

The Book of Want reveals the basic humanity, with all its warts and flaws, but the mystical element lifts it from the ordinary with a prologue that nicely sets up the story and an epilogue that ties up loose ends and provides the last morsel of a satisfying read.