

# Chronicler of Mexican Picaresque

*Mexicans use language creatively to laugh and make friends. A leading exponent of this humorous language has also become its editor.*

Picaresque, the roguish, mischievous turn of phrase known in Spanish as *picardía* expresses the infinite wealth of emotion and experience in the daily life of the people. Just as a Mexican song may break a heart or make it overflow with joy, a good picaresque conversation may seal an indestructible friendship.

The only Mexican writer who has studied picaresque and shown it to be basic and necessary to popular use of language is Armando Jiménez, a 69 year-old architect by profession whose real occupation is that of mischievous rogue. "I was one of the few architects in the world specializing in the design of sports facilities. I carried out projects in 17 countries and was successful in my profession until one fine day it occurred to me to write a book on so-called Mexican vulgarity."

Little did Armando Jiménez know that he would abandon his profession and spend 10 years writing his first book, *La Picardía Mexicana (Mexican Picaresque)* which has gone through 78 editions and sold close to 4 million copies. It's estimated that each book is read by 10 different people which, according to the National Autonomous University of Mexico, makes Jiménez the most widely read author in Spanish after Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, the genius

who gave us Don Quijote de la Mancha.

*Picardía* was an unusual project from the very start. When Jiménez began his work, dirty language was still forbidden in books, magazines and newspapers, and the penalty for this crime could be as bad as imprisonment in Islas Marías, the country's main penitentiary. Jiménez consulted his idea with some of the country's most prestigious artists and writers. He went to Siqueiros and Orozco, the great muralists. He spoke with Salvador Novo, the deceased Mexico City chronicler; with Agustín Yáñez, former Secretary of Education, and with Alfonso Reyes who besides being an illustrious writer was, "a very vulgar punster when he's with his pals." They all thought Jiménez had hit on a great idea.

Thus the author set out on his project. He bought a ream of paper and tucked himself away to write down every single vulgarity he knew of. It came easily because he'd lived around "foul-mouthed" construction workers for years. But he felt he didn't know enough, so he consulted over 2,000 books that in some way or other touched on the subject.

"I followed up on my research in brothels, bars, prisons and the poorest barrios. I scoured the country from top to bottom and talked to people from all different social strata. I went to the town of Alvarado on the southern coast of Veracruz, famous for being the most foul-mouthed city in Mexico, and I was named a favourite son.

"I was surprised to find -adds Jiménez- that cultivated people in the highest positions (two former presidents, several ambassadors, a minister of state, senators and bank managers) were thoroughly knowledgeable in picaresque. This means that in Mexico we're all foul-mouthed and that the most cultured people can talk like the worst stevedore."

The author of *Picardía Mexicana* believes so-called "bad words" are not so bad at all. They can be pretty and funny and allow for greater strength and precision of expression. Yet these words are constantly rejected. "There are taboos and forbidden things in Mexico -says Jiménez. Writing vulgarities was a crime before my book was published. Now they're acceptable in books and magazines, but not on radio or television. For example, if a television announcer were to use the word 'buttock' on the air he could lose both his job and his professional license."

"Buttocks" (*nalgas*) is a dirty word in Mexico even though it appears in the Royal Academy of Language's dictionary, "which is written by prudish, puritan old men." "Nalgas" is the precise Castilian word. Yet, adds Jiménez, "it's forbidden, and we have to make up others such as *pompis*, *nachas*, *teleras*, and *ignacias*. Maybe these are bad words because they keep us from communicating with Spanish-speakers from other countries. If I were to tell a Uruguayan that the nurse just gave me an injection in the catcher's mitt he probably wouldn't know what I was talking about."

Jiménez is a 69 year-old youngster who travels frequently, carrying his thoughts and writings on Mexican picaresque with him. His books are greatly appreciated, especially if they've been dedicated by the author. He tells of how he once dedicated a book to international billiard player Joe Chamaco: "To my friend Joe Chamaco, world champion of three cushion

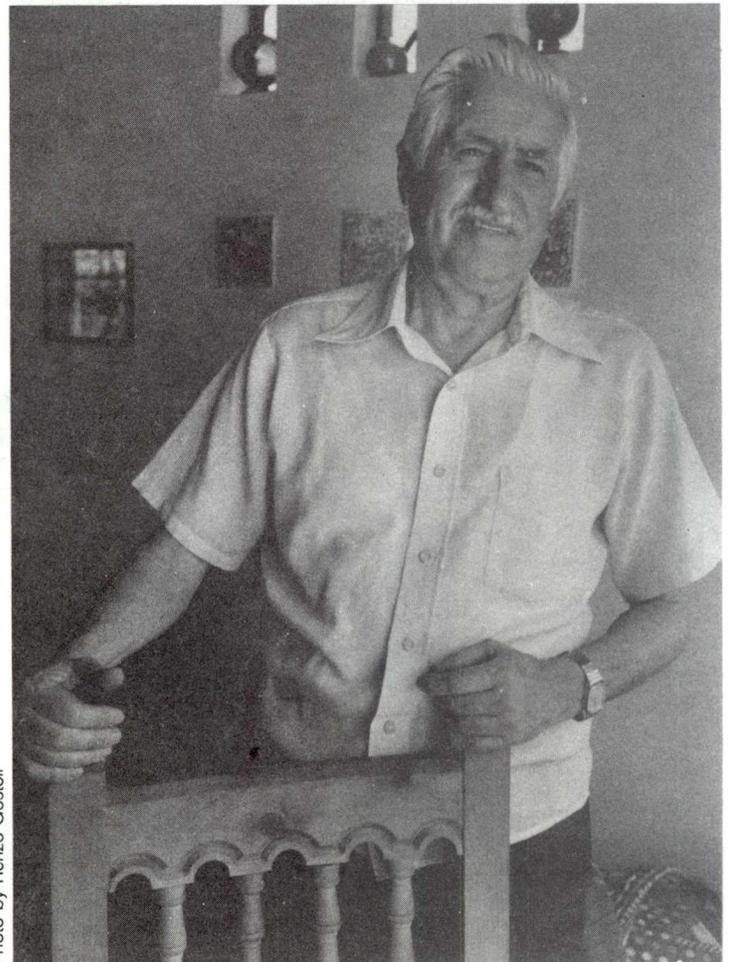


Photo by Renzo Góstioli

Picaresque author Armando Jiménez

carom, from his friend Armando Jiménez, world champion of pocket billiards." It looks serious enough, but it isn't.

"Picardía is not exclusive to Mexicans," says Jiménez. "The papaya is a delicious fruit plentiful in tropical countries, but in Cuba the word means vulva, vagina. If an unawared Mexican in Havana were to ask a waiter for a good serving of papaya, he would sure-

celebrations in Argentina. That night as we were gazing at the fireworks so common in Latin American popular festivities, I was standing next to the first lady, the president's wife, when one of the firecrackers failed to go off. The lady said, *Ya se chingó* (it got screwed.) I was worried, she's said something vulgar, I thought. I later went up to the Venezuelan ambassador who was accompanied by his young and beauti-

winner and a loser, yet rather than a fight it's a creative game of ingenuity and intelligence. Without resorting to so-called dirty words, the *albur* is the highest form of *picardía*. It consists mainly in funny ways of referring to sex by playing with language, and seems to have few equivalents in other languages. It's basically a play on double meanings of words and phrases. Someone may say "chili," and the answer will

popular artists used *albures* to entertain the public." Mexicans live and laugh together, make friends and relax with *albures*. Anyone who can't take a joke is a bad *alburero*. "A couple of expert *albureros* can talk for hours on end, and a foreigner listening in would only think the conversation was slightly unhinged," says Jiménez.

Thus Mexicans, mainly the



The now famous book which has gone through 78 printings.

ly be told: 'Sorry, we don't serve that here.'

"The word *cajeta* is used to mean vagina in Argentina, whereas in Mexico it's a kind of milk and sugar candy. When my Argentine friends come to Mexico I enjoy taking them to a typical candy store downtown called 'The King of Cajetas'. They're usually tickled and ask to have their picture taken to show their countrymen that Mexico's *cajetas* come in all tastes and sizes."

The author tells some other anecdotes: "I was once invited to independence-day

ful wife. She said to me: -Mr. Jiménez, would you like to have a 'palito' (little stick) with me?-. Well, I was speechless. Then and there? How could she make such a proposal in public? I later learned that a 'palito' wasn't what I believed it to be. In Venezuela it means a snack, an hors d'oeuvre or a drink before the meal. "Whereas in Mexico, *echarse un palito* is a picaresque way of referring to sexual intercourse.

Aside from all this fun and games, the *albur*, a kind of pun, is the core of Mexican picaresque. There's usually a



Drawing by Alberto Beltrán

Roguish Mexicans attack a very elitist "Academy of Language".

be "it's hotter with onions," or "cousin" and "bring her over tomorrow."

"The *albur* is Mexico's contribution to universal humour. It was born in Peralvillo and Tepito, popular barrios in Mexico City, and then spread through the circus and the rough urban theaters where comics such as Cuatesón Leopoldo Beristáin, the ventriloquist Count Bobby, Chaf and Kelly, Cantinflas and other

residents of the city's poor barrios, gave rise to their own picaresque, and with it the *albur*, and later this special form of language passed on into society as a whole and became a defining, particular aspect of Mexican sentiment. We can be losers at soccer or in financial matters, at keeping our currency stable or at paying our foreign debt... but nobody beats us at *albures*.★

Jorge Luis Sierra Guzmán



Drawing by Alberto Beltrán