

# Elena Poniatowska: The Art of Questioning

**Writer Elena Poniatowska has essayed almost all literary and journalistic genres, although she seems to be better known for her novelistic work, perhaps because of the public's tendency to read more novels and short stories.**

**But it is precisely her work of interviewer that journalist Beatriz Zalce wants to emphasize in the conversation she held with the author of *Tlatelolco Night*, *Silence is Strong*, and *Dear Diego*, *Quiela Embraces You*, among many other works.**

Beatriz Zalce

Lilus Kikus was devilishly restless: she ran to question a philosopher to find out if he was the owner of the lizards who basked in the sun outside her window; she asked how to make god a nest in her soul without committing adultery, while with the maid, Aurelia, she investigated the size and flavor of her sweetheart's kisses.

Elena Poniatowska is no different from the protagonist of her first book. Even before opening her front door, she is already asking: "Who is it?" and while you go into the living room, she finds out the rest: "How are you?" She is interested, she looks at you, she listens, she smiles, she offers you coffee, sweetbread.

**Why were you interested in the genre of interviews?**

"In general it didn't interest me any more than other genres.

I could tell you that chronicles attract my attention more than interviews. But I was, and still am, such an insecure person that to say anything I needed the support of someone better prepared than myself, with greater authority. I remember that many things that were attributed to interviewees were things that I was thinking.

"The interviewer", continues Elena, "when conducting an interview almost always takes it where he or she wants to and makes the interviewee say sort of what they expect. In general, interviewers are much less objective than one might think."

When Elena began to write, she read the interviews published by Bambi in the newspaper *Excelsior*. They seemed very original to her. When she had the opportunity to work at that newspaper, it occurred to her that she could use the byline of Dumbo.

"Eduardo Correa told me that he wasn't about to have all of Walt Disney's characters in the Society section and that I would have to sign my own name.

"It seemed to me that my name sounded Russian, that it was difficult to pronounce. Sometimes I signed my articles as Anele: Elena spelled backwards or also as Helene, my name in french.

"The most difficult interviews are those with movie stars. People like Lola Beltrán already have a recording inside of them and it is almost impossible for them to say something original. Also, they are very inaccessible: you have to talk to their business managers, with the secretary's secretary. They don't need the publicity at all, nor do they seek it out, and they say the same thing to all the journalists.

"A man who seemed like a real person to me was El Santo (The Saint), the masked wrestler. He came to the bed (cama), look what I'm saying, what a subconscious! He came to the house (casa) with his mask on and I liked that very much.

"We got along very well and every February 14, Valentine's Day, the day of love

Journalist

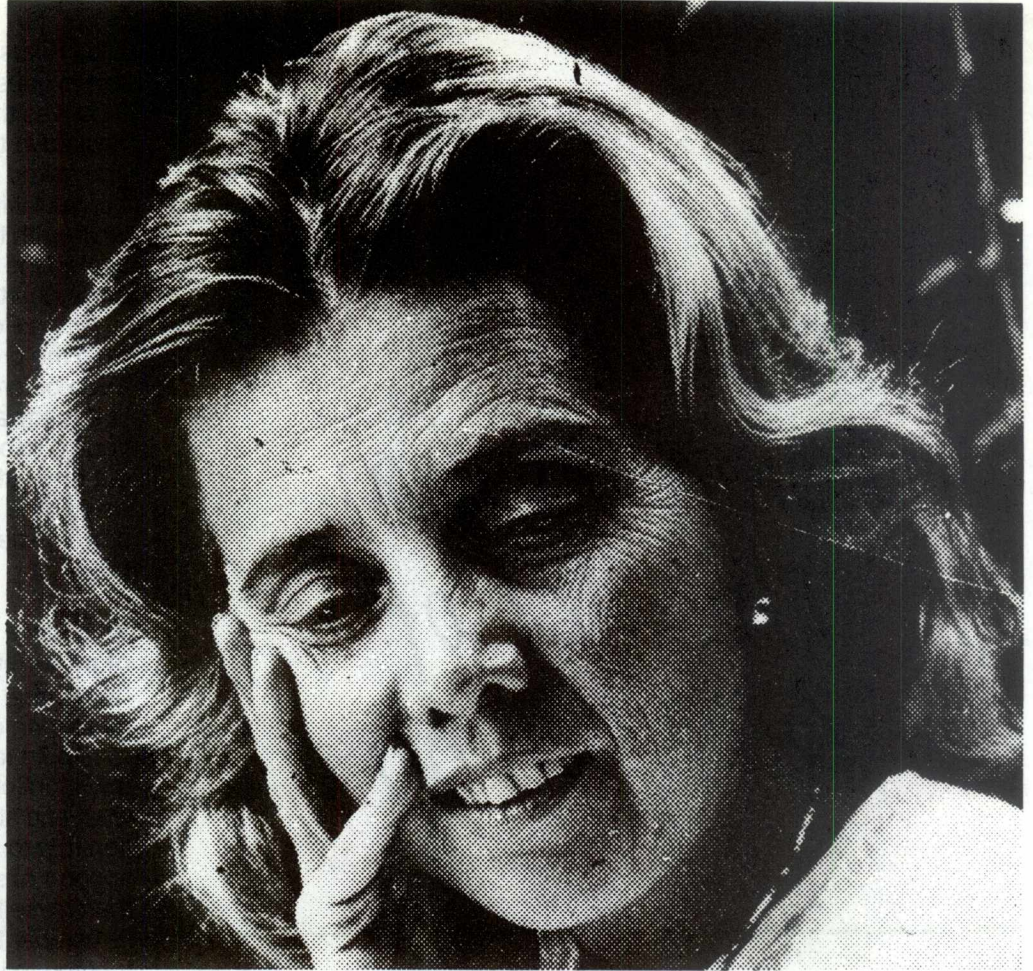


Photo of the author by Lourdes Almeida.

and friendship, he used to send me a huge bottle of perfume. Until he died. For me he was a great dream.

"One day he gave us front row tickets. I took my children to see the fights. It was then that their true character was revealed to me. Felipe my son, with infinite kindness, said: 'Don't hit him, don't kill him, don't do anything to him!' He was upset by everything he was seeing, while Paula, the really evil one, yelled: 'Blood, blood!'. She must have been about five years old and Felipe seven."

In April 1954, Elena went to interview the writer Francois Mauriac. He was very angry because his interviewer had not read his books and had wanted him to speak about them. He refused to talk.

"Now I understand that he was absolutely right. Sometimes people come to interview me and I have to tell them everything right down to my name.

"Many people come here to the house to interview me and to pass their examinations. In the month of June students begin to arrive in groups of eight or ten. At the beginning I felt flattered until I realized that they came so that I could do their homework for them.

"And I continue doing it because I think that I am very supportive of the youth. They come to me because other writers tell them to go jump in a lake.

"An interview is good if one goes prepared. After what happened with Mauriac, I never again did an interview without being prepared.

"At that time I was completely hare-brained. I did things totally unconsciously. If they had told me that I had to interview general Charles de Gaulle, I would have said 'yes', without thinking of a single question, thinking only that at the very moment of the interview, the Holy Spirit would appear to me and help me."

**Elena, you have become famous for asking the most appalling things with great equanimity...**

"Yes. I would ask the first thing that came into my head. I repeat that I had no preparation whatsoever. I photographically tell everything that I see and hear. It is my way of approaching the subject of the interview. It caused great surprise when I said to Diego Rivera: 'Why are you so fat?'"

Poniatowska compared the painter with a stuffed toy elephant and in two lines she paints a portrait of the master. During the interview with Rivera the lights went out, so she asked, "And now what should we do?" He answered, "Well, I think you should go home, Elenita, because there is no virtue in the dark".

However, the author of *La noche de Tlatelolco* (The Night of Tlatelolco) does not remember this.

**How do you interview people who are suffering?**

"You can never interview people in prison with a tape recorder. You simply can't take a recorder into jail, nor a notebook, nor any little thing. They examine you very carefully before you can enter.

"They perform a gynecological examination of poor women every time they go, searching for drugs in the vagina.

"They've known me in prison since 1958, the time of the railroad worker problem. I went to visit Siqueiros and those arrested in 1968. The very well known photo of Siqueiros with his hand out in front, protesting, was taken by Héctor García because he asked General Martín del Campo, the director of the prison, to let him come in and take photographs.

"In the case of the 1985 earthquake, nothing can be added to the horror of death. Nor could a tape recorder be used. If they came to the house to give me their testimony, then it could be used. But out on the streets, it's very difficult to carry a tape recorder, taking it close to people who are crying...

"I talked with them and since in days of crisis you are extremely sensitive, you remember everything they say to you. Everything was recorded inside of me."

Elena Poniatowska's capacity for work is enormous. She is filled with enthusiasm, she publishes an interview daily and she still finds time to write, and to smile at her loved ones.

"García Márquez says that an interview is like love: it takes two people who are disposed, but it doesn't always work...

"In the first place, I can tell you that I once did an interview with Guillermo Haro, my husband, and it was not an act of love in any way. He was very negative and bad-tempered with me. I interviewed him about a very good collection he was editing at the time, called *Scientific and Philosophical Problems*.

"If a very close contact is established between the interviewer and the interviewee, you succeed in establishing a dialogue, a very friendly conversation. Don't you think it's like love?"

**Sometimes...when they interview you, don't you start to think what questions you would ask to improve the interview?**

"No, never. I never think that because I am very supportive of the person who interviews me. I think that this is how they were with me.

"Rarely do I refuse to give an interview. If they had said 'no' to me upon seeing my ignorance and stupidity, I would have felt very bad. You will be measured with the same stick that you used to measure.

"There are people who ask you something and they never look at you. They say, 'Why are these green plants that are so tall, so poorly arranged?' And while you answer, they say to you, 'what do you think of Gorbachev?' They go from one extreme to the other and you feel as though you don't matter to them. They are doing something that is a little outside of themselves."

**Is there anyone whom you have not interviewed and you would like to interview?**

"Alberti", says Paula, Elena's daughter, who sits herself down in front of her mother and responds without any hesitation.

"No, because anyway I've interviewed him", clarifies Elena. "There are people whom I would have loved to have interviewed and I didn't do it or else I didn't pay enough attention to them.

"For example, Dr. Atl. He was extremely kind to me. He came to the house to leave me his books and to chat with me. He gave me a letter that he had written to Diego Rivera. I have several things that he gave me.

"Since I spent all my time being friends with him, I never said to him: 'Oh, I'd like to interview you'. He was fairly elderly and it didn't occur to me.

"There are other people...Frida Kahlo. She died in 1954, the year when I began in journalism. I could have had access to her.

"Look, I'm not that kind of journalist, I have no sense of opportunity. I don't rush out to get news.

"Who else? Máximo Pacheco, a not very well known muralist.... Goitia...I would have liked to talk with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz."

#### **If you interviewed God, what would you ask?**

"God? Which god?," asks Felipe who settles down on the arm of the chair where Elena is sitting and he puts his arm around her shoulders. The question remains unclear.

"If you interviewed Cinteotl (this spelling is more common than 'Zenteotl'), the god of corn, you would say please..."

"Don't be a hypocrite, mom. You don't think about that."

"Oh Paula, honestly. Let me say...I would say that it is absolutely necessary that there be more corn to make more tortillas.

"If I interviewed the god of my childhood...It's that I don't have him drawn in my head. Rather, I have an image of Jesus Christ."

#### **What would you ask him, Elena?**

Paula interrupts, "The question would be why doesn't he give private classes to priests?"

Elena reflects. She says nothing. She looks at her cup of coffee with milk. Finally she speaks, for herself.

"It would be very difficult. One is very resigned to one's childhood prejudices.

"When something very serious happens to me, such as the death of my father, the death of my brother or Guillermo Haro, I need a handle.

"Above all with the death of Jan, my brother, so unexpected, so inexplicable. You start to say, 'Please, help me, let me see him again, please, let him not be dead'. You ask God, you are prepared for everything, I promised him that never in my life would I eat sweets again, that I would get up every day at six in the morning and bathe in cold water. I promised these tasks...

"My mother paid her tribute of pain to god. She sacrificed her son. Let's say that they took her heart. Afterwards, you think that nothing so serious can happen again in the family. And then the son of my sister Kitzia is left paralyzed for life in a car accident and there is nothing on earth that can cure him..."

"So, I would ask him: 'What are you thinking about, God?'"

Within a few months, Editorial Diana will publish the first volume of interviews written by Poniatowska, among which are those with Luis Barragán, Jorge Luis Borges, Tongolele, María Félix, El Santo, and Lola Beltrán among others.

"I have always felt that I have been a bad mother. When my children were little, I did lots of interviews. With the publication of this book, they will see the fruit of my work and why I was not with them.

"In school they asked Felipe to do a portrait of his mother. He drew a table with skinny, skinny legs and a typewriter. All the other children did their mother in the kitchen, cooking...I said to myself that I'm not here for my children. I pass the day in front of a typewriter, like someone obsessed, like someone with a mental illness.

"When my children come in from the street, they go upstairs and they always go to my room. They don't look for me in the kitchen or in the laundry, rather in front of the typewriter."

"Aw, mom, I'll tell you why." Felipe removes one of Elena's earrings and begins to play with it. "I'd rather have you writing than being in the kitchen and turning sixty wondering what you're going to give us to eat.

"What we all search for in this life, when we're 50, 30, 25 or any age, is to know where we're going. Some look for it in painting, others in the broom and dustpan. You found it in writing.

"We all look for something that we fall in love with to dedicate ourselves to that love. You write for love and not for the pittance they pay you. Writing makes you come alive as a person, to resolve your emotional and intellectual problems. By writing you come out of yourself to give yourself to others." ■