

"Hope is the Last to Die": The Quixotic Adventure of Esperanza's Box of Saints. *Bilingual Review* - May 1, 2000 Joan M. Hoffman

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This whole thing is very odd, Esperanza.

I'll do the impossible, even what can't be done, because hope is the last to die. (1)

Surrounded by images of her saints, sheltered, and all too innocent, Esperanza Diaz, the pious protagonist of Maria Amparo Escandon's first novel, has spent her entire orderly and unremarkable life in the same Mexican village, living too briefly with her only love and spending her long widowhood chastely cherishing his memory and raising their daughter, Blanca, with the help of her best girlfriend. (2) This seemingly prosaic woman introduces herself to the reader in the opening lines of the tale with a halting, rambling revelation to her confessor that appears as desperate as it does startling: "It's me again, Father Salvador, Esperanza Diaz, the mother of the dead girl. Only she's not dead" (13). She continues: "What I really came for is to confide to you something the Church should know. I can't tell anyone else. No one would believe me. You see, I witnessed an apparition" (13). (3) This pronouncement, however, is far from being the preposterous, half-crazed imaginings of a grief-stricken mother about to undertake an all-but-impossible search for a dead girl among the living. Instead, these words are nothing less than the impetus for a whirlwind exploration of reality, identity, and faith—a veritable quest of quixotic proportions undertaken by the most implausible of individuals.

Esperanza's quest begins with just five deceptively simple words: "Your daughter is not dead..." (16). Encased in this unadorned utterance, however, is an entire jumbled universe of simplicity and clarity juxtaposed with the most unimaginable complexity, bewilderment, and hope. For an all too brief moment, Esperanza's world stops as these few words are spoken to her, given as if a gift by none other than San Judas Tadeo, the saint of desperate cases, appearing to her in her oven, floating right there amidst the grease drippings and the intermingling kitchen odors of polio al chipotle and fresh-cut flowers (15-16).

Truly, as our first epigraph reminds us, "this whole thing is very odd" (195). As incredible as her experience seems however, Esperanza is endowed with a simple, unshakable, unquestioning faith whose most persuasive quality is precisely its simplicity, its unaffected earthiness, its humanity, its credibility. For Esperanza, faith is not an incomprehensible abstraction found only in holy books at mass on Sunday. Faith is an everyday, active, and participatory experience embodied by God's once-human emissaries on Earth—the saints. (4) Esperanza's saints are not mere statues to adorn church altars; they are more than ethereal beings now residing in heaven and communing with God. Esperanza's saints are a curious combination of the divine and the utterly human. As she reflects on San Judas Tadeo, one of her favorites since childhood: Well, what can we expect? He has been blessed with all the heavenly powers within and beyond our imagination. He is way up there in God's hierarchy. Not everyone is willing to be killed with stones for spreading our Lord's word. (14)

Esperanza's saints are, as we have been saying, hers. She has a personal relationship with each one, including daily conversations and, indeed, arguments. She sees them and awaits their presence in the most mundane of places—from oven doors to highway overpasses, in the back seat of cars, (5) and in every sort of stain. They watch over her from their own altar at her bedside; and she ponders their comings and goings as would a nosy neighbor, as seen in her

own frustratingly fleeting encounter:

I wonder why apparitions are always so brief. Why do saints come down to the world of the living, give us a couple of signs, and leave in a hurry? Why don't they stay a bit longer? Is it because Heaven is so marvelous that they don't want to leave even for just a few seconds? Perhaps earth is just too sad a place for them. Are they afraid they might lose their spot by our Lord's side if they got up to visit us? (16)

Esperanza surrounds herself with her saints' images--in every size, shape and material, carted around in a box so as to facilitate her daily interactions with them. Referring again to San Judas Tadeo, she admits, "I have his image in all kinds of forms. Inside an acrylic pyramid, on a keychain, in a plastic capsule to keep in my purse, on prayer cards of many sizes with different prayers printed on the back..." (226). She enthusiastically continues:

I also have statuettes made out of plastic, clay, plaster, all sorts of materials. He is always wearing his green robe and has a flame flickering out of the top of his head. One of my San Judas Tadeo statues has a tiny lightbulb built into the head and it flickers. (226)

Far from being evidence of the irreverent idolatry of a crazed zealot, Esperanza's box of saints and her interactions with them are instead confirmation of the lively, genuine, and childlike faith of a woman who readily admits she has more questions than answers (16). She was, after all, present at all the key moments of Blanca's ordeal: the simple operation gone awry, the sealed casket, the awful funeral. Further, she can rely upon the arguably more objective perspective of her comadre, Soledad:

To her, the girl's death was a fact as clear and tangible as the funeral itself. She had signed the death certificate as a witness, she had seen the casket being covered with dirt at the cemetery, and she had prayed for Blanca's soul along with the sixty or so other people who attended the service. (31)

Still, despite overwhelming physical evidence, Esperanza refuses to resign herself to the seemingly inevitable, even becoming angry with Soledad for acting "as if the girl were really dead" (35). As the tide of this novel reminds us, and clearly Esperanza herself has not forgotten, faith is the focal point here. Esperanza's everyday faith--her worn box of saints--will direct and sustain her in this, the journey of her life.

So, despite its obvious oddity for Esperanza, guided as she is by the curt assurances of San Judas Tadeo, the search for her dead daughter is a most natural undertaking--as natural as getting up in the morning, as natural as her daily conversations with Soledad or with her beloved saints. For Esperanza, this quest is like breathing. It is the inescapable consequence of her simple yet profound faith.

This faith steers Esperanza on an adventurous course from her quiet village to border-town brothels and even to the United States in the trunk of a rich man's car. Along the way, this innocent country woman assaults a bureaucrat; digs up a grave; sells her body for money; is degraded, disgraced, and physically attacked; falls in love with an angel; transforms her world; and is, herself transformed--all the while maintaining constant and ongoing conversation with her saintly guides.

As Esperanza sets out on this seemingly insane, seemingly impossible quest, we can not help but recall an earlier, simple gentleman turned extraordinary adventurer: Alonso Quijano as Don Quijote de la Mancha. Despite the apparent irony of a comparison involving a twentieth-century novel whose entire raison d'etre is an examination of faith with a seventeenth-century one primarily known for its secular--almost pagan--character, the similarities between the two unlikely heroes do, in fact, abound. Just as Quijano's incomprehensible transformation into Don Quijote

de la Mancha could be logically explained away as insanity brought on by his overly zealous reading habits, (6) so too would it be easy to dismiss Esperanza as an anguished mother maddened as well--by grief; indeed, Soledad's explanation that "sometimes we imagine things" could hold equally for both adventurers (44). Both, in fact, are misunderstood souls who staunchly hold the presumably outdated conviction that right must triumph over wrong--that knights slay their enemies and that twelve-year-old girls do not deserve to die. Above all, however, both Don Quijote and Esperanza Diaz have a sustaining vision that reaches far beyond mere tangible reality, that defies logical explanation, medical diagnosis, or the overactive imagination. Certainly, both understand much better than those around them that logic and reason can take us only so far, for the rest of the journey hinges on faith.

Be it faith in a chivalric ideal or in God and his saints, such pure resolve as both Quijote and Esperanza possess, for all of its irrationality, can be very seductive. Just as it compels the protagonists, it also seizes the reader from the first paragraphs and convinces us to follow them on their all-but-unthinkable journeys, all the while gradually cajoling us into believing just as they do. Consequently, as the fascinated reader continually turns the pages, driven by curiosity to discover the next fantastic exploit, the next seeming impossibility, it soon becomes apparent that these two heroes are utterly convincing precisely because, for them, believing is much more than seeing.

This type of faith recognizes no obstacles. Thus, middle-aged Alonso Quijano relinquishes his entire tranquil life to transform himself into an anachronistic knight-errant, "asi para el aumento de su honra como para el servicio de su republica" (DQ 1: 38; ch. 1), only to be attacked and mocked at every turn. Similarly, Esperanza surrenders her calm, simple life in the face of unbelievable odds. Convinced that Blanca is the victim of a sinister kidnapping plot, this naive, trusting woman who has scarcely left her village, who has lived for years as a virtuous widow and who wonders if condoms are reusable (Esperanza 82), chooses to enter the perilous world of prostitution in search of her child. Clearly, "she could become whatever she needed to be to accomplish her goal" (150). As Soledad reminds her friend: "Before, you wouldn't even dare to hang your underwear to dry out in the sun because you were afraid some man might see it over the fence. Now look at you. Showing your panties to strangers" (195). The clash of innocence here with the dangerous reality of prostitution only serves to further highlight both the absurdity and the jeopardy of Esperanza's transformation.

Indeed, no truer words have been spoken than Esperanza's almost offhand comment to the Virgen de Guadalupe: "It's amazing what one will do for one's children, right?" (188). Like Don Quijote who would risk even death for his love, Dulcinea, Esperanza will go to any extremes for Blanca. With her saints as her guides, constantly goading her on, always testing her limits, she migrates from brothel to brothel in search of education and information. (7) Along the way, she endures a frightening initiation into the sex trade at La Curva, her village brothel; she survives a harrowing bus ride to Tijuana, complete with an adolescent thief, and she outsmarts the creepy advances of the weasel-like Cacomixtle. She pushes on to the Pink Palace in Tijuana and eventually across the border to the Fiesta Theater in Los Angeles, always searching, hoping, and waiting for some further instruction from San Judas Tadeo. Unfortunately, her guide is often excruciatingly slow in his response, and Esperanza often loses patience: "I never thought I would dare to do what I've done, and yet you don't give me a sign! How do you expect me to continue?" (119). And later:

My strength's running out, and I have to tell you frankly that I don't feel you are being responsible. You told me Blanca was not dead. You asked me to find her. I left my house. I've searched for her in the most despicable places, and you haven't bothered to guide me. (178-9)

Esperanza chides San Judas as she would a spoiled child. She, after all, did not pursue him; he entered her kitchen interrupting her tranquil grief with this life-altering message. He must not abandon her now.

These passages are evidence more of Esperanza's unique relationship with the saints than of any deterioration of her resolve or her faith. Indeed, despite the difficulties of her quest, like Don Quijote before her, Esperanza rejects those who attempt to help her, her rescuers so to speak, because of their inability to believe as she does. Soledad, for example, is her best friend, her comadre, who would be willing to live out her life at Esperanza's side cherishing together the memories of their dear departed; but "a deep silence, the kind that hurts, settled between the two women" (74) precisely because Soledad can not share Esperanza's deep faith. In a moment of profound self-realization, Soledad confirms: "I am handicapped in that respect" (240). The aptly named Soledad is left alone with her skepticism as Esperanza pursues her adventure in faith.

Perhaps the dearest case of Esperanza's rejection is with Scott, her kind, rich American client at the Pink Palace. Despite his love for her, despite their "communion of ... souls" (161), all of his offers to search for Blanca--the rewards and the media coverage--go unheeded because, as much as he tries, he just does not understand: "How could she be looking for her dead daughter among the living?" (161). He wants to believe in order to complete his love, to make Esperanza love him; but he needs "hard facts" that Esperanza is unable to provide (164).

Short on answers, Scott does what he can by ferrying her across the border, hidden with nothing more than her box of saints in the trunk of his car. For her to choose such danger and uncertainty over the love and security he could provide, to him seems incomprehensible. In letting Esperanza go to pursue this, her "private quest," without him, Scott at least begins to understand the great power of her faith (165)

All of those things--love, support, faith--that the rich, and powerful Scott is unable to provide for Esperanza come to her from a most unlikely quarter: professional wrestling in the person of Angel Galvan--"El Angel Justiciero"; in fact, two people could not seem more opposite than Esperanza and Angel. From the outset of her journey, on that grimey bus to Tijuana however, sweet, simple Esperanza--for whom wrestling is an alien concept--finds herself strangely drawn to the garish masked man's glossy photo in a magazine: "The mesmerizing image of the winged wrestler made her forget to breathe and, after an entire minute, she remembered and gasped for air" (89). Later, on impulse and having no particular interest in the sport, she buys a ticket to his match and ends up in bed with him:

Esperanza was making love in the tiny apartment she hadn't been able to call home until that moment, in a faraway city that was now so close, with a stranger she felt she had known her whole life. Even if she had never seen his face." (210)

This passage speaks clearly to one of the many functions of the "wrestling angel" in Esperanza's quixotic journey (210). The character of Angel is probably the best illustration--of many throughout the novel--that everything is upside down and backwards, that nothing is as it seems. Just as Cervantes forces his reader to challenge reality by transforming a country gentleman into a fearless knight, windmills into monsters, and lowly peasant girls into beautiful maidens, Escand6n asks her reader to explore the nature of faith through precisely the same mechanism. Esperanza's is a world where a doctor is transformed into a slave-trader and a dead girl a slave; where household smudges become holy images; where, instead of a child escaping a sheltered existence to become a prostitute, a small-town innocent becomes a sexy harlot to save her child. This is a world where a soft-spoken hulking brute is recast as Cinderella (205); and an angel descends on wires from an arena-heaven amidst clouds of manufactured fog (200-01). Saints are humanized and men take on angelic proportions.

Like Cervantes before her, Escand6n constantly tugs and pulls at the sense of reality in her novel, at once manipulating and challenging her readers' perceptions, grasping at the fantastic and then pulling back, offering a more mundane Sancho Panza-like foil. (9) Here this measure of unadorned "reality" is dispensed not by a single individual as in the Quijote, but rather by several characters and in varying forms. It is apparent in the narrator's discussion of Esperanza's simple

village life; in Soledad's conversations and letters; in Scott's clear, logical manner of thinking; in Padre Salvador's personal conversations with God, and his confessions and telephone calls with Esperanza; in Blanca's diary; even through the offhand comments of other townspeople sitting in mass or waiting in line for confession themselves.

Nonetheless, for as much as everyday reality attempts to intrude into Esperanza's journey of faith, to challenge her quest, Escand6n constantly champions and makes believable Esperanza's seemingly preposterous viewpoint. After all, Soledad is left behind, alone in her cynicism; Scott can not retain Esperanza's love and disappears without further mention from the pages of the novel (9); and even Padre Salvador is left to question his own faith. Only the unlikely Angel remains with Esperanza from the beginning of her journey on that bus to Tijuana until the very end; only he is rewarded with her love. As much as the reader may want to rebel against the sweaty Spandex image of a professional wrestler as the chosen partner for our heroine, Angel is very likeable. He is the one person who believes Esperanza without question, without explanation. As if in response to Soledad's skepticism from our epigraph, Angel finds only logic: "I don't see what's odd about it. On the contrary. What else would have driven you to do what you've done? It has to be on orders from above" (225). Faith is as much a simple reality for him as it is for Esperanza.

Further, Angel instinctively understands the role he is to play in his lover's life. Unlike Quijote's Sanson Carrasco, Angel does not constantly duel with Esperanza, always challenging her, bent upon proving her wrong. Unlike Scott too, he is not her rescuer: "he knew to stay away from her search" (229); he is Angel Justiciero, not Angel Redentor. He loves Esperanza, listens to her, believes her, supports her, and lets her go.

Even at her lowest point, beaten and bruised by her old nemesis Caxomixtle and with "her saint...more silent than ever," Angel does not attempt to rescue her from her predicament (222). Instead, he offers her a salve for both body and soul and sends her on her way once more. Armed with a "bright blue ointment" (224) for her bruises and directions to a "beautiful, life-size San Judas Tadeo" in a downtown church (229), Esperanza continues her journey alone. Angel knows--and accepts--that this quest is the most important thing in Esperanza's life, something that she is unable to share completely--with even him.

So the reader is saddened but not altogether surprised when, on page 232, Esperanza abruptly quits her job and leaves Angel without even a goodbye to return to Mexico: "...she couldn't promise him anything then. She was awaiting orders from her saint" (233). Lured away from the sure promise of love by a vague message imparted by a glittering tin statue in a faraway church, Esperanza seems more desperate than ever (230). Here again, her combative personal relationship with her saints is quite evident:

You know I've been trying to make contact with you in every oven I've come across. I've searched for the grimmest ones. In brothels. In restaurants. In rented apartments. No luck. I left my house, my town. I've had to put up with men's sexual desires to get information you could have given me so easily, in a plain old apparition. I've tried to decipher your riddle. Yes, Blanca is not dead. I understand that. But where is she? Are you only going to appear before me in my own oven at home? (231)

In answer to her own question, then, a defeated Esperanza returns home. Her quixotic journey is seemingly at its end, bringing to mind the sad homecoming of her predecessor, Don Quijote, following his crushing defeat by the Caballero de la Blanca Luna (2: ch. 44). The knight returns home dejected and hopeless to forfeit his idealism and reject his quest: "Dadme albricias, buenos senores, de que ya yo no soy don Quijote de la Mancha, sino Alonso Quijano, a quien mis costumbres me dieron nombre de Bueno" (2: 1063-64; ch. 74). He has recovered his judgement and will never again sally forth.

Esperanza's homecoming, however, takes a much different course, with a more favorable outcome. After withstanding all of the fear, the hardship, the grime, the smelly men; after La Curva, El Atolladero Motel Garage, the Pink Palace, the Fiesta Theater, she is successful in her quest. She finds Blanca in her own village, in her own home, in her own bathroom--in a rust stain caused by a leaky pipe (Esperanza 244). Couple this with her reunion with Angel, who suddenly appears to her in full angelic costume in her home church (249), and her realization that "sometimes saints made people go through Hell so they could appreciate Heaven" is quite understandable (234). She has earned her happy ending.

It is a happy ending that seems in jeopardy, however, when next we see Angel driving north, lost in thought (251). Once again, he appears to have been rejected by this strong woman who insists upon completing her life's journey alone. This novel, however, in both content and form, with all of its twists and turns teaches us that we, like Esperanza, must expect the unexpected. It is not until almost two pages into this final section that we realize that Esperanza is sleeping at Angel's side, that they are returning together to Los Angeles, that they are dragging along with them the entire wall of Esperanza's bathroom, the sight of Blanca's last apparition.

Esperanza herself has been forever changed by experience, sin, love, faith--her quest. She has a mesmerizing new look: "The perfect makeup, nearly unnoticeable. The haircut, so sleek and citylike" (242). Her old saints no longer stir her as they once did: "none of them came to life for [her]" (242); and she has learned to love again. More importantly, she now understands that her daughter has been and will be with her all along: "Blanca is not dead. Blanca is not alive. She's in that little space in between" (244-45). So unlike Don Quijote who returns home defeated and ready to die, Esperanza sallies forth once more, a transformed woman with her strange cargo and an anthem--her anthem--coming from the car radio: "'I'll do the impossible, even what can't be done, because hope is the last to die Hope is the last to die.'" (252). (10) Clearly, her search for Blanca may be over, but her journey is not yet completed.

From the beginning of this journey of faith until this, it's humorous, happy end, Esperanza--like Don Quijote--has proven that the prosaic, even the sordid, is permeated by a most unlikely everyday magic. (12) In this thoroughly modern take on the classic, Esperanza, like her predecessor, challenges the impossible and discovers the divine in the merely human; and as we would expect, Esperanza's story is Quijote's with a twist. (13) The aptly named Esperanza never denounces her quest, never loses faith, never loses hope. Whereas Quijote rejects one wondrous, preposterous reality for a more prosaic one, dying in the process; as evidenced by the bathroom wall and the ragged box of saints, Esperanza begins a new life without completely abandoning the old. Unlike Quijote, she is able to reconcile her seemingly disparate realities--always accommodating wonder and oddity, faith and hope--in order to persevere in her journey.

Notes

(1.) The first epigraph is taken from page 195 of the novel; the second is found on page 252. Subsequent references to this work appear parenthetically in the text.

(2.) As Maria Amparo Escandon has communicated to me in an e-mail dated 16 February 1999, she considers herself to be part of "a quite depopulated niche of Mexican authors who happen to write in English." She further compares herself to such Latin American authors as Laura Esquivel and Isabel Allende, with the intriguing difference that she first writes in English and translates her own work into Spanish; her Spanish version of Esperanza's Box of Saints is entitled *Santitos*. Because the English version was written first (dates of publication notwithstanding), I have chosen to work with it in the present investigation.

(3.) Form interestingly meshes with function here as the tantalizing term "apparition" is not only the final word in the paragraph but also the final word on the page. Thus, literary tension is increased by requiring the reader to turn the page in order to further the plot at this crucial point.

(4.) Esperanza's list of saints is indeed impressive. Among them are the Virgen de Candelaria, San Judas Tadeo, San Ramon Nonato, San Pascual Bailon San Isidro, San Martin de Porres, San Antonio de Padua, the Virgen de Gaudalupe, and Juan Soldado.

(5.) As a further measure of his humanity, Esperanza even imagines San Judas Tadeo wearing a seat belt (164).

(6.) As we recall from Don Quijote de la Mancha (DQ), "se le pasaban las noches leyendo de claro en claro, y los días de turbio en turbio; y así, del poco dormir y del mucho leer se le seco el cerebro, de manera que vino a perder el juicio" (1: 37; ch. 1).

(7.) Whereas Esperanza is accompanied by her saints who guide and aid her in her search, Don Quijote is constantly pursued in his journey by various sorts of "malignos encantadores" and "diablos"--subverted saints who, far from assisting him, revel in hindering his progress.

(8.) Whereas the relationship between Esperanza and Scott is crucial to the development of Esperanza's character, precisely because it illustrates the power of her faith, I find the characterization of Scott to be one of the weak points of this novel. We learn quite a bit about Scott--about his family, his dual identity, his fondness for border towns and his drug habit. Most of this information, while it helps to explain his attraction to Esperanza, is extraneous, however, as it does not impact directly upon his skepticism regarding her search; it does not influence the novel's underlying exploration of the nature of faith. After Esperanza leaves Scott, he disappears from the novel; and the reader is left to ponder the importance of all of the detail that was provided about him.

(9.) We are reminded of Cervantes' lesson on verisimilitude from the Quijote:

tanto la mentira es mejor cuanto mas parece verdadera, y tanto mas agrada cuanto tiene mas de lo dudoso y posible. Hanse de casar las fabulas mentirosas con el entendimiento de los que las leyeren, escribiendose de suerte que, facilitando los imposibles, allanando las grandezas, suspendiendo los animos, admiren, suspendan, alborocen y entretengan, de modo que anden a un mismo paso la admiracion y la alegria juntas; y todas estas cosas no podra hacer el que huyere de la verosimilitud y de la mitacion, en quien consiste la perfección de lo que se escribe. (1: 482; ch. 47)

(10.) After page 192.

(11.) As Escandon told me in an e-mail dated 17 Feb. 1999, the lyrics are from the song entitled "Esperanza," originally written in Spanish by the author herself. The complete lyrics are as follows:

Tanto te he buscado y no te he encontrado,

yo lo que mas quiero es estar a tu lado.

Movere montanas, oceanos y valles,

no descansare hasta que te halle.

No importa lo que el destino nos depare,

te amare hasta que la muerte nos separe.

Se aguantar todos los golpes de la vida,

pero si te pierdo sera una gran herida.

[Upside down question mark]¿Que me importa lo que haya en tu pasado?

para mí tu alma nunca se ha manchado.

Te perdonare relampaguee o llueva,

porque conmigo es borron y cuenta nueva

Me vale perder todo lo que he logrado,

si a cambio yo puedo estar a tu lado.

Hare lo imposible, lo que no se puede,

porque la esperanza es lo ultimo que muere.

Hare lo imposible, lo que no se puede,

porque la esperanza es lo ultimo que muere.

(12.) In an interview on her book's web page, Escandon classifies Esperanza's tale as an example of "magical reality." She explains by asking the question, "Why keep magic within the parameters of extraordinary worlds, when it is all over the place in real life?"

(13.) This work's modernity extends far beyond the novel itself. Taking full advantage of late twentieth-century technology the book has a World Wide Web page--accessible through either of two addresses. Further, Escandon wrote a screenplay based on her novel, and the resulting film won the Latin American Jury Award at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival.

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