

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

June 17, 2003

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UCSB Joins Santa Barbara Book & Author Festival in Creating Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature

The University of California, Santa Barbara and the Santa Barbara Book & Author Festival have created what they believe to be the nation's first writing prize in the genre of Chicano and Latino literature.

The inaugural Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature will be presented during this year's festival on September 20 and will recognize an accomplished writer of the Chicano/Latino experience. The award will be given in honor of its namesake, Luis Leal, a professor of Chicano Studies at UCSB and a pioneer in recognizing and promoting the merit of Mexican, Chicano, and Latin American literary and cultural traditions.

The award includes a \$1,500 prize, a plaque, and coverage of expenses while appearing at the festival.

"I believe this is the first award for accomplished writing of the Chicano/Latino experience in the United States," said Mario García, a professor of history and a professor of Chicano Studies at UCSB. "I know of no other award like this."

García, a recent addition to the Santa Barbara Book Council, which sponsors the book festival, said a search is on for the first winner of the Leal award. García said he has envisioned such a prize for a long time, and decided to take his idea to Book Council co-president Susan Miles Gulbransen soon after joining the Council earlier this year.

"It is my hope that this will become a major national book award," García said. "And having don Luis's name on it really adds to its luster."

Leal has spent much of his 60-year academic career bringing attention and credibility to Mexican, Latin American and Chicano writers.

"He was the first to do so," said García, who published a biography of Leal in 2000.

Born in Mexico in 1907, Leal earned a Ph.D. in Spanish from the University of Chicago in 1950 and has been doing academic research, writing and teaching ever since. His academic career included stays at the University of Mississippi, Emory University, and the University of Illinois, where university policy required his mandatory retirement at the age of 69 in 1976. Since then, he has worked and taught at UCSB in the Department of Chicano Studies, where he is also the namesake of the Luis Leal Professor of Chicano Studies, an endowed chair currently held by Maria Herrera-Sobek, a professor of Chicano Studies and UCSB's acting Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Policy.

The governments of Mexico and the United States have honored Leal's contributions to Chicano, Latino and Mexican literature. In 1991, he was awarded the Orden Mexicana del Águila Azteca by Mexico. And in 1997, President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton awarded Leal the National Humanities Medal.

Even now, at age 95, Leal continues to work, having just published "Mitos y Leyendas de México/Myths and Legends of Mexico," a bilingual anthology of Mexican stories ranging from Pre-Columbian, to colonial, to independent periods.

And he continues to champion Chicano and Latino writers. In agreeing to be the namesake of the award, Leal said that he wanted it to be a catalyst to encourage reading and writing among local Latino youth. To that end, the award requires the recipient to attend the conference and encourages the person to engage the community with a public reading or talk.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.