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Venerable UCSB Professor Luis Leal Publishes Book of Myths at 95

At an age when most people would be content to reflect upon their accomplishments, 95-year-old Luis Leal, professor of Chicano Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has published another book.

"Myths and Legends of Mexico" is a bilingual collection of 20 myths dating from Pre-Hispanic Mexico, some from the Mayas, and others from the Toltecs and Aztecs, Leal said.

Large and visually striking, the book was illustrated by local Mexican artist Álvaro Ángeles Suman, translated by University of Illinois graduate student Amanda Harris-Fonseca, and published by UCSB's Center for Chicano Studies.

"The purposes for writing this book were to have an available written text of these myths, which form part of the Mexican/Chicano people. And I wanted to acquaint others with this rich tradition," said Leal, a 1997 winner of the National Humanities Medal.

After 60 years of university teaching, Leal, known affectionately as don Luis by colleagues and students, has made a significant impact not only on his field, but also on his peers. "Luis Leal is the ultimate role model for me and my colleagues in Chicano Studies," said Mario Garcia, a professor of Chicano studies and history at UCSB, and the author of a Leal biography. "He is the quintessential scholar, as his

new book so well indicates."

Leal was born in 1907 and grew up in Mexico City during the Mexican Revolution. He came to the United States seeking a college education and earned a bachelor's degree at Northwestern University. After a hiatus to serve in World War II, Leal – at age 43 and a U.S. citizen – earned his doctorate from the University of Chicago.

After a career teaching at the University of Mississippi, Emory University, and the University of Illinois, Leal "retired" to the Santa Barbara area at the age of 69, only to quickly join the faculty at UCSB as a research fellow once the Center for Chicano Studies was established.

Leal has enjoyed a distinguished career as one of the most highly regarded scholars of Mexican and Latin American literature, and was one of the first to draw attention to this relatively new field of study. He is the author of over 30 books and 300 articles. In 1988, he received the Distinguished Scholarly Award from the National Association for Chicano Studies in recognition of his lifetime achievement. In 1995, UCSB created the Luis Leal Endowed Chair in Chicano Studies – currently held by Maria Herrera-Sobek – in recognition of his accomplishments.

Earlier this year, UCSB and the Santa Barbara Book & Author Festival created what they believe to be the nation's first writing prize in the genre of Chicano and Latino literature. And they named the award in honor of Leal. The inaugural Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature will be presented on September 20 during this year's festival and will recognize an accomplished writer of the Chicano/Latino experience.

Leal has also received high cultural honors from the Mexican and American governments. In 1992, Mexican President Salinas awarded Leal the Mexican Order of the Aztec Eagle, the highest award granted to foreign citizens. It was President Bill Clinton who presented Leal with the National Humanities Medal in 1997.

The forward to "Myths and Legends of Mexico" was written by UCSB Chancellor Henry Yang, who recounts the friendship he and his wife Dilling have had with Leal and his late wife Gladys, to whom the book is dedicated.

"The beautiful myths and legends are a touching tribute to Gladys, and to the deep love that existed between her and don Luis," Chancellor Yang said.

Gladys Leal was largely responsible for her husband coming to UCSB in the first place. In 1976, it was she who purchased a home in Goleta in just one weekend, which made the relocation possible.

"Myths and Legends of Mexico" is distributed by the Center for Chicano Studies at UCSB. The proceeds from the book will be used to establish a fellowship for Chicano students, through which Leal will continue to influence young scholars.

As Chancellor Yang writes, "Don Luis is an inspiration to us all - he is a man who continues a life of rewarding work and a love of wholehearted living. Truly, he is a living treasure in higher education."

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