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Bill Schlotter

Pulitzer Prize Winner Oscar Hijuelos to Receive Inaugural Luis Leal Award For Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature

Oscar Hijuelos, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love" and other novels, has been chosen to receive the first Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature.

On September 20, Hijuelos will receive the award, believed to be the only major prize in the genre, and give a free public lecture at 4 p.m. at De La Guerra Plaza during the Santa Barbara Book and Author Festival. The prize was established earlier this year by the Santa Barbara Book Council and the University of California, Santa Barbara in honor of Luis Leal, the 95-year-old professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCSB and an internationally recognized scholar of Chicano and Latino literature. It is also supported by a contribution from Wells Fargo Bank.

"Oscar Hijuelos is the first and only U.S. Latino writer to ever receive the Pulitzer Prize in literature," said Mario García, a Book Council member and a professor of Chicana and Chicano studies and history at UCSB. "So this is a major honor to have him receive the first Leal award. It's just a major achievement to get him here."

The son of Cuban immigrants, Hijuelos was born in 1951 in New York City and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in English and writing at the City College of New York. After graduation, he made his living working in an advertising agency for seven years, before publishing his first novel, "Our House in the Last World," in 1983 and earning a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

"The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love," Hijuelos' second novel, was published in 1989 and established him as an important American literary voice. "The Mambo Kings" was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award in 1989. And in 1990, it won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. His other books include "The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien" (1993), "Mr. Ives' Christmas" (1995), "Empress of the Splendid Season" (1999) and "A Simple Habana Melody" (2002).

"While I am honored to be singled out for this award I want it understood that I am accepting it in the spirit of sharing this special recognition with all Hispanic writers. The collective grace and elegance of our literature is far beyond what any one individual can contribute -- and greater than any honor" said Hijuelos who will receive a \$1,500 cash prize with the award.

Leal, who is credited with being the first to bring attention and credibility to Mexican, Latin American and Chicano writers during his 60-year academic career, said he is honored to be the namesake of the award and to have Hijuelos selected as its first recipient.

"I am very pleased with the selection," Leal said. "I hope that this award may encourage other Latino writers to publish their fiction."

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