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Keith Hamm

Manuel Muñoz wins Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature

During summers and winters as a kid, Manuel Muñoz worked alongside his family in the farm fields of California's Central Valley, surrounded by hard labor, poverty and his community's constant fear of federal immigration sweeps. Early on, however, young Muñoz realized he was a resourceful student and bookworm. Through writing he discovered an escape to a different and better life, at least on paper.

Today, as a professor of English and creative writing at the University of Arizona, Muñoz is known for revisiting the land and people of his formative years. In 2023, his fiction — three collections of short stories and a novel — earned him a MacArthur Fellowship for his depictions of empathy and nuance in the Mexican American communities of the Central Valley. This month he will receive the Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature at UC Santa Barbara.

Free and open to the public, the award event takes place 4–5:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 5 in the McCune Conference Room on the sixth floor of the Humanities & Social Sciences Building, on the UCSB campus.

Muñoz, 52, credits "a generation of luminaries that deserve our personal thanks for the path-making they made possible," referring to the award's past recipients,

including Cherríe Moraga, a distinguished professor in UCSB's Department of English. Among many influential writers in his life, Moraga's work helped "shape the world I knew (and) bolstered my courage to match the images of my particular place with the same attention to love, anger, tenderness — all of our emotions mattered."

"Sometimes my work is considered to be about poverty or community, but really it is about survival," Muñoz said. "It's about how people under different difficult circumstances figure out a way. What I hope people see in my work is compassion."

"Muñoz was selected because he is one of the newer Chicano/Latino literary stars," said Mario García, a distinguished UCSB professor of Chicano and Chicana studies and organizer of the award, now in its 20th year. "His reputation has only grown with each of his books and was accelerated by the prestigious MacArthur award.

"He is one of the few writing about the Central Valley, a vast and complex region that is often slighted by others, including those in the literary world," García continued. "Muñoz counters this with his moving and revealing stories, and he is not timid about writing about the trials and tribulations of gay Latinos in a politically conservative environment."

The Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature is named in honor of the late Luis Leal, a UCSB professor emeritus of Chicana/o studies who was internationally recognized as a leading scholar in the field.

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Media Contact
Keith Hamm
Social Sciences, Humanities & Fine Arts Writer
(805) 893-2191
keithhamm@ucsb.edu

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