

A Literary Inspiration

By Kelsey Woodburn

On April 5th and 6th of 2016, I had the amazing opportunity to meet Judith Ortiz Cofer at the annual literary festival at Western Carolina University. Western Carolina University is a regional university hidden away in the mountains of North Carolina. For many of the students, the attraction of going to school in the mountains is the sense of place one gets when there. The annual Literary Festival is an exciting week with authors of varying backgrounds, but something that they all have in common in their writing is a sense of place, though these places may be very different from one another.

This was my first exposure to Ortiz Cofer's writing and I found myself instantly captivated by her personality and charm. As she explained in her talk, she was born on February 24, 1952, in Puerto Rico, but moved to New Jersey when she was six. Her stories gave a sense of place from her time in Puerto Rico, and from her time living in New Jersey. Her storytelling takes the reader on an adventure, and this was also true for those of us listening to her that night.

Ortiz Cofer read from several of her works that night at the Literary Festival, giving her audience a sense of the rich culture of Puerto Rico. Her readings were striking, but what I remember most from that night was the question and answer session. A student in the audience asked Ortiz Cofer what she does to overcome writer's block and what her writing habits were. Her answer was to get up every morning before her husband and daughter were awake, to sit down and write. It did not matter if what she produced was particularly good or bad, it was simply getting into the habit of writing.

I was astounded by her dedication to her craft, and it inspired me to be that committed to my own work. A few of the professors who were instrumental in getting Ortiz Cofer to come to campus were also able to have her come talk to a class. In that class, she was candid and fascinating. She did some readings for the class, and students were able to ask questions. Again, her writing habits came up, and she gave the same answer as before. The students around me seemed as enthralled with her discussion as I was. After the class, I immediately went and bought two of her books, *The Meaning of Consuelo* (2003) and *The Year of Our Revolution* (1998). In a Booklist review for *The Meaning of Consuelo* Donna Seaman says, "Cofer's insights into the art of female suffering are as devastatingly accurate as they are scathingly funny."

On December 29, 2016, I was shocked and saddened to hear about the passing of Judith Ortiz Cofer. Suddenly this influential writer was no longer with us. I did not know her personally, but she had an impact on me. Her readers can still get that sense of place from her writing, along with a sense of who she was. Judith Ortiz Cofer will be greatly missed by many people. I am incredibly grateful to have spent some time with her, if only for a day or two.