You Can't Call it Cheating When You Cheat on a Married Man: and other wisdom from Ana Castillo


ABSTRACT


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I never make it easy. Carmen, for example, Carmen la Coja, loses her virginity to her best friend -- a girl -- but she has a crush on the brother who's gay. Then he tells her, "I'll never love another woman." At that time she didn't believe him. Later she finds out why he'll never love another woman. So that's what I'm talking about: the complexity of sexuality.

FULL TEXT

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Ahem. Ana Castillo clears her throat. And then she says,

"I wrapped my thighs around Manolo's neck and drew him right in...."

"But Manolo didn't do it like he was doing me a favor. He did it like he had dropped deep into the sea and knew exactly where the treasure was, small and precious and belonging to him and me, mostly me I was thinking when suddenly a gush I had never known, never believed could come from a woman poured forth. I thought my brains had blown out of my head at the same time - shot out through my skull, gone out the window and landed on the blinking neon light of the Hollywood Hotel. Then Manolo moved up to me, his under-the-sea voice repeating my name in my ear into the damp space between my neck and shoulder into the spray of my hair over the pillow again and again not like a chant not sweet or hypnotic or mystical but terrible and low, terrible and low like everything would always be between us. But that first night I welcomed our wet birth like a calf in a barn born just before light. It was still ours to do with as we would choose, to sustain us or to sacrifice for the greater cause. For a long time after Manolo fell asleep I lay awake repossessing my soul bit by bit, my head against the satin of Manolo's chest."

It must be the Chicagoan in Aria Castillo that she can stand in front of a packed room of strangers and read those paragraphs and not blush. Leave a hundred people sweating and letting out little gasps of - embarrassment? Disbelief? Pleasure?

She doesn't appear to care whether this offends anyone, whether the people who think every Chicana writer should set a good example for grade-school kids will gang up and vilify her, or burn her books, or banish her from any standing she ever had as a Role Model.

Ana Castillo has published more books than even she can remember, from criticism ("Massacre of the Dreamers") and novels ("The Mixquiahuala Letters," "Sapogonia") to poetry ("My Father Was a Toltec").
Her prose reached a high level of polish in last year’s "Peel My Love Like an Onion," the story of the Flamenco
dancer Carmen "La Coja" Santos and her art and love affairs. Now Castillo’s new nonfiction volume "Spirit, Sex,
S. Guevara, is just out from Duttons Childrens Books.
Ana has won a Carl Sandburg Prize, the American Book Award and the Southwest Booksellers Award. She lives in
Chicago, where she grew up, and we spoke while she was on tour in California.

Julia: In several of your books, you have this real affection and understanding for men who would be considered
scoundrels by a lot of people.
Ana: Only in fiction.
Julia: Why do you say that? What a great sympathy you have for them!
Ana: Do you think I do?
Julia: I do, especially for a post-feminist writer. And by post-feminist, I don’t mean that feminism is gone, but that
you're writing after feminism has become a literary force.
Ana: I've been thinking about that. My father was a very good looking man. He was a very young father and a
womanizer perhaps with his marriage to my mom. He was a very likable guy, you know. And my mother did forgive
him, and they ended up having a good marriage when he finally settled down.
I think that that probably is, psychologically, the only explanation I would have for where the affection comes from.
Because I can assure you this woman doesn't have a reputation for displaying affection and sympathy for cads
and vatos! I really don't. It's probably the whole psychological dilemma we have in working out archetypes for
ourselves: Who the man is and who we think or do not think our father-figure was.

Julia: I don't want to give away the ending of "Peel My Love Like an Onion." But there's certainly a kind of making
peace with men there.
Ana: Carmen's got the keys, she'll always have the keys, and the men have to call first. One man was her mentor, a
very important figure in her life. The other was a great love for her, very passionate. But she lets them into her life
on her terms.
Or not. I think what's curiously funny about her is the segment that's called "You can't call it cheating when you
cheat on a married man." Because all this time you think that maybe she's suffering while Agustin goes off to his
wife every summer. But every summer she goes back with Maximo.
Now I'll tell you something about "Peel My Love Like An Onion." I did three endings to it. The original ending was
like a telenovela. Carmen gets together with Manolo, he shows up with a bouquet of flowers, her diabetic mother
becomes a vegetarian, her father and mother reconcile. It was terrible!
When I was writing this novel my mother was very sick. I was living with her and taking care of her, and she was
getting worse and worse and everybody was gone, dying or dead. Then my mother had a heart attack and dropped
dead. Like three weeks after I finished that version. I realized that as things got progressively worse, I started to
idealize everything.
I didn't turn that one into my editor. I asked for a six month postponement. And six months later, I go back to work
one January day and I amputate the second half of the novel and I turn around and make it my Swan Song to my
mother. It's a beautiful ending and the mother dies.
I'd had a talk with myself by then: Why are you writing? You're write for the truth. You write for yourself. You write
for what's important to you. I submitted that to my editor and he called me up and said, "That's a very beautiful
story." He said, "I think it should be written, but I don't think it should be this book, because the mother is stealing
the show."
Carmen is the diva. She's center stage. And if anybody is going to die, it has to be her. And as a feminist, as a post-
feminist writer, I have a problem with these sexualized characters like the original Carmen. Because whenever they
possess their sexuality they have to die. I have a problem with that. So, well, my Carmen's obviously not going to
die.
Julia: Do you dance Flamenco?
Ana: Yes at home, after a few drinks!
I've got friends who are Gypsy, one who's quite a character himself in Chicago. I used to recite poetry – I had an ensemble – and we did poetry like García Lorca and Miguel Hernández. We've been friends all this time, and when my book of poems "My Father Was a Toltec" came out a few years ago, he said to me one day, "You wrote My Father Was a Toltec. When are you going to write 'My Brother Was a Gypsy'?
As a Chicana, as a mestiza in this society, you feel marginalized by virtue of your color and features all the time. I'm very fascinated by people who are even more marginalized, because you tend to get wrapped up in your experience and see the world from that experience. My Gypsy friend would say things like, "You know you think you people got problems. At least they've got you on the census."
Julia: You don't seem, at least on a surface level, to be concerned about the U.S. Latino identity. I mean, you can write about Europe in a friendly way. You write about Central America. You aren't just writing about identity and racism in the U.S.
Ana: First of all, looking the way I look, if I'm in Paris or I'm in Germany, I look like whatever it is that the maids are in that country. So whether it's Turkish or Algerian, I understand racism in terms of color, and color in terms of colonialism.
And so [my writing] is still talking about that, without simplifying the subject and making people feel comfortable, as if [racism] is only supposed to be going on here. Or it's only the bad Gringo. Colonialism has haunted most of the world for a very long time, five hundred years.
Julia: Yet you can be sympathetic toward Spain and Spaniards without painting everyone as bad, as if they're the evil empire. Did you live in Spain?
Ana: No. I visited very briefly. But this is my perception of the world, at this point of my life and this point in history. We have the globalization of an economy [to the point] where a Mexican woman in the United States has more in common with an Indonesian woman and a Malaysian woman than she does with other American women, because of her economic situation.
I'm not taking people off the hook that easily. See, it would be very easy for me to go down in history as a Chicana writer, as a Latina writer, and say that I wrote about all the quirky things, the wild and wacky world of being a Chicana. That's not my interest. My interests are these issues that have to do with humanity. As a feminist, they have to do with female humanity.
It will always be important for me to put on the page a brown woman and make her beautiful, because I didn't see that as a writer. That's what's missing for me.
Julia: There's an underlying romance in Carmen -- obviously there's a love story -- but it's also there in the details of her clothes and things around her. Do you wear lacy things to bed?
Ana: Yes I do. I am most definitely not a T-shirt woman. I feel I am very sensuous. There's that really weird combination of wearing a cropped camisole with trousers, you know, underneath trousers. I do have that sensual aesthetic and, I hope, sensibility. Not today -- but then, I've been on the road for a long time!
Julia: Speaking of sex, do you get a lot of grief? You know, occasionally we get our magazines thrown in the trash when we run certain things. A few people were upset about Sandra Cisneros's story, "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess," which had appeared in the anthology you edited, "Goddess of the Americas."
Ana: That's a hard one to talk about.
Julia: Let's just go back to sexuality, then.
Ana: Let's talk seriously now. Sandra is very playful, and I think we have very different approaches on what the Chicana feminist agenda is. [I think] it's always a lot more complex. How women are treated because of their sexuality isn't easy either.
I never make it easy. Carmen, for example, Carmen la Coja, loses her virginity to her best friend -- a girl -- but she has a crush on the brother who's gay. Then he tells her, "I'll never love another woman." At that time she didn't believe him. Later she finds out why he'll never love another woman. So that's what I'm talking about: the complexity of sexuality.
That's what I meant about the seriousness of what that's about. It's beautiful to have a handle on language, to know how to turn a phrase. But that's not why I write.

I never took a writing workshop. I'm not an English major, I wasn't a Spanish language major. I wanted to be a visual artist.

I was the young revolutionary of the 70s. And my idea was to communicate, jump on the soap box and be a political poet. And the same issues that were important to me then, of being Mexican, of being a brown woman in this country and this world are the same issues that I'm still writing about twenty years later.

Julia: A political poet! You have ideas to get across. You're an idea writer to me. What are the things you feel have to be explored now and in the future?

Ana: Here's what I'm thinking. Since you asked...

In the 70s, it started out very revolutionary: it was the time of "viva la raza" and that whole great time. I was part of all of that. [I got] very disillusioned with the male segment. The leadership at that time was for men. So in the late 70s, I started moving towards feminism. In the late 70s, early 80s, I reconciled with issues of racism and began to think about myself. What was the problem here working with these men? The problem [to them] was being a woman, biologically and sexually.

I was a young woman thinking a lot about this stuff. Then in the mid-80s when I was in the Bay Area it was the height of the radical women of color. You had these radical Chicano lesbians, and I was all wrapped up in that. By the end of the 80s and early 90s, I moved to New Mexico alone with my son and I was a single mother. I moved there and became very introspective. And as one becomes spiritual, as you do in New Mexico, I started moving a lot toward introspection. I also turned forty in the 90s. I began thinking more about the world, about humanity. Now I'm much more private about my own life and my own issues. I'm more acutely aware of the human connection without losing the politica.

Julia: Where does that leave you? What's next?

Ana: Here we are going into the 21st century, and in five years I'll be turning fifty, which is also the age in most ancient cultures, including the Gypsy culture, when you become an adult. When you become a human being.

At fifteen you think you're an adult, but fifty is when you really become one!

The book that I'm working on right now is called "Spirit, Sex, Eternal Love." It's turning out to be short pieces that have to do with spirit, sex and eternal love. How women are dealing with their evolving spirituality at this time.

That's where I'm going: believing in a feminine spirituality, a feminine religion.

What has been missing, what feminists have been talking about, is the imbalance of energy in terms of the masculine. It's not like we haven't been working on it, but it's very private.

After my own mother died about two years ago, on one of my visits to Mexico, I was taken to a Nahua elder. With a group of people. I did a couple of visits to him and he said that I should be initiated formally, not only as a curandera -- he said that was what I had come into the world to do -- but [he also told me] that there are graniceros (literally, those who brings granizo, or hail).

This is all the pre-conquest belief of Indians who call the rain every year. They literally call in the rain and thank all the dioses. I was asked to come back, and I was initiated as a granicera and as a curandera.

Julia: So you can bring rain?

Ana: I'm a certified rain maker. What was interesting is this man who doesn't read any language somehow perceived that my work is not going to be bringing the rain there, but that I fly around. He said he sees me flying all the time. And so he wished to give me their blessing. A different kind of rain.

I had to really think about it. I didn't see myself as the kind curandera who's rubbing the egg and doing the chants. I haven't gone and called the rains with them, which has left some graniceros disgruntled.

Another thing about being a granicero is that one of the only ways to tell, a sure indication, is if you're struck by lightning. I'm the only one who was never struck by lightning. And nor will I be that's what he said. Most of [the other graniceras] are kind of wondering what that meant. I have also tried to ask myself: What does this mean? So that brings me to the answer to your question: now I feel part of that blessing, as I've understood it, by talking to
a couple of the other graniceras.
It has to do with womens' empowerment. As a curandera, I choose to focus on women of color, primarily Chicanas and Latinas who are already in the services. Women who are medical doctors, therapists, professors, teachers, social workers.

Julia: You actually work with them as a curandera? But with no egg.
Ana: No egg. The only thing I do with eggs is eat them for breakfast.

Photo (Ana Castillo)
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