Celebrated Latina author and feminist Ana Castillo is a woman of many identities—some acknowledged and lauded, some unspoken.

"I'm not really sure what it was about the public that insisted in, first of all, boxing me into Chicana; then I was a woman—and they still see me that way," Castillo said. "They don't see me as an American writer. I was born and raised in Chicago. We have to categorize people to try to understand them, I think and I was categorized as a Chicana and a woman. Maybe the rest was too much."

Black Dove: Mamá, Mi’jo, and Me, her recent memoir in says, confronts many of these identities. "The memoir genre requires a lot of introspection, a search for something—maybe a mystery in one’s life, a conundrum, and it requires going back, it requires investigation, comparing your memory with other people’s memories, and most of all, a desire to be honest. At all times I was trying to be as honest for my own sake in telling the story," Castillo said. The centerpiece of the book began as a piece about her mother’s time in Mexico as a young child. As time went on, Castillo realized that her shifting identity, from daughter to mother to grandmother, was important to chronicle. Essays began to assemble themselves. There are joy and sorrow in Black Dove, but far more of the latter. Castillo writes of growing up in Chicago a lonely child. She’d never before written about being raped or attempting suicide in her teenage years. "But I’ve been teaching memoir writing for about five or six years now to the general public, and it was time for me to walk my talk, which was, you gotta go where you have to go," she explained.

The hardest essay for her to read is about her vibrant son, called Mi’jo throughout, being arrested and jailed for a robbery—a stark departure from the creative, successful young man Castillo thought she was raising. "It’s definitely the hardest essay because I gave everything, most of my adult life to being a mother, and I have the greatest expectations for my son, but seeing him suffer the way he’s suffered and spiraled was really just heartbreaking," she said. "It’s even difficult now to talk about it without feeling that sadness. And then the disintegration of our little family during that time. It was the biggest heartbreak of my life, I think, and just to see your child suffer in any form is difficult, but that was very painful." Her son is doing better, but the hurt still remains.

An aspect of Castillo’s work that she feels is often ignored important to chronicle. Essays began to assemble themselves.
CASTILLO from cover

appears in the essay “Mothers, Lovers and Rivals.” Castillo is bisexual, but it’s something she says people overlook in her work, starting from her early days of writing and activism.

“As I began to look at the female body and female desire and the taboos about that, in my 20s I published a little chapbook called The Invitation,” Castillo said. “I was still in Chicago, it was my second chapbook, and it was erotic poetry, and it spoke about desire to another, for another woman, desiring myself, all of that, and sort of a kind of silence fell on me with regards to the Chicana latina literary/artist/political movement at that time.

“In any case, I became more and more feminist and more and more entrenched in all the complexities of my identity. By the time I got to The Mixquiahuala Letters, I was ready to say everything I could say. But again, there was this denial. It was right there! It was talking about desire for another woman and not just desire, having desire as a woman.”

She recalled finally feeling validated when her novel Give It To Me won a Lambda Literary Award for best bisexual fiction. “I knew the book was nominated, but I really did not think it would get it after 40 years of writing about bisexual characters, gay characters, transgender characters, and nobody saying anything,” Castillo remembered. “When I heard my name I went up there and I was truly stunned, and I thought about that chapbook, the invitation. I stood up there and I had a flashback of 40 years.

“In my novel, the very first novel that I ever wrote, there's always sexual desire for same sex, or they'll be secondary gay characters or bisexual characters. It was really important for me, in terms of human rights, to have their presence there, not as an exception but as integrated into the story. [In], Give It to Me, the character that’s bisexual, what I love about her the most is that she doesn’t really give a damn what people think. She doesn’t politicize it. I think sometimes I write about people that I wish I could be more like, or that I wish maybe more people would be like that in the future, and she’s one of those characters.”

“Mothers, Lovers and Rivals” covers the period of time Castillo spent raising her son with another woman, who Castillo declines to name.

“I have never publicly addressed that relationship with this particular person, who is also a public person,” Castillo said. “It was a very significant relationship for me on many levels, and it’s time that I tell my side of it. It was a very exceptional coupling, intellectually as well as socially and romantically. It’s rare when you meet somebody that you can just talk, and still feel like isolating myself from others. But when it becomes a lifestyle, you ask yourself, ‘what is it about about me?’

“Writing [Black Dove], I was trying to understand where some of that came from, some of that loneliness beyond the solitude for writing and creating which is so wonderful to have, and to enjoy it as well,” Castillo said. “I’ve been able to do that, and I immerse myself in it, I appreciate it. I understand this is not how life always is. And I shaped my life to have that life. I’m very proud of because we know that most writers and artists don’t get to do that. There are tradeoffs—you don’t have the financial means, but you have the time.”

Ana Castillo will appear in conversation with Cyn Vargas on Saturday, April 30, at Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark St., 4-5:30 p.m., in a celebration of Independent Bookstore Day.