



Sheila Ortiz-Taylor.

Ortiz-Taylor, Sheila (b. 1939)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Novelist, poet, and scholar, Sheila Ortiz-Taylor is not only a prolific writer and respected teacher of writing and literature, but she has also bracketed her career with groundbreaking achievements.

Her first novel, *Faultline*, published in 1982, is considered by many, including *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, to be the first lesbian novel with a Chicana hero. Through *Faultline* and her other works, Ortiz-Taylor has helped illuminate the Mexican-American lesbian experience.

In the late 1990s, as she approached retirement, she continued to educate and work for change by fighting back against discrimination when she and her partner were refused housing in a Florida retirement community, thus striking a blow for queer elders everywhere.

Ortiz-Taylor was born in Los Angeles on September 25, 1939. Her father was an Anglo lawyer and musician, and her mother was a Chicana, who worked at home taking care of Sheila and her sister Sandra. Young Sheila began to record her feelings and experiences at an early age; by the time she was in junior high school, she was writing poetry and plays. She has remarked of the upbringing she and her sister received: "Daughters of a tap dancer and a yo-yo painter, my sister and I were sitting ducks for the muses, who handed her a paint set and me three yellow pencils."

In 1957, Ortiz-Taylor entered the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). After only a year in college, she married and moved to Iowa.

In 1960, after having worked as a secretary and nurse's aide for two years, she returned to Los Angeles and to college. In 1961, she transferred to San Fernando Valley State College (now California State University, Northridge), from which she graduated in 1963 with a B. A. in English and the Outstanding Student of Language and Literature Award.

She returned to UCLA for her graduate studies. There she earned an M. A. in 1964 and a Ph. D. in 1973. As a graduate student, Ortiz-Taylor specialized in American literary realism and twentieth-century literature, as well as the work of Emily Dickinson. Since then, she has become notable for the diversity of her teaching interests, which include Women's Studies, eighteenth-century English literature, and Chicano/a Literature, as well as creative writing.

During the time she was in graduate school, Ortiz-Taylor also became the proud mother of two daughters, Andrea Bo Clendenning and Jessica Ann Clendenning.

In 1982, Ortiz-Taylor published her first novel, *Faultline*. Told through the testimony of different witnesses at a lesbian mother's custody hearing, *Faultline* tells the slightly madcap adventures of the eccentric and engaging Arden Benbow. Benbow, like Ortiz-Taylor, is a lesbian with a Chicana mother and an Anglo father, and her life is balanced on the constantly shifting sands of more than one kind of faultline.

Although *Faultline* is rightfully credited with one of the first Chicana lesbian leading characters, Benbow does not strongly identify with her Latina identity. However, in *Southbound*, the 1990 sequel to *Faultline*, both Benbow and her creator are more assertive about their Chicana heritage.

Ortiz-Taylor has written several other lesbian novels, including *Spring Forward Fall Back* (1985), *Coachella* (1998), and *OutRageous* (2006). *Coachella* is particularly noteworthy for its exploration of how AIDS cuts across lines of class, sexuality, and ethnicity.

In 1989, Ortiz-Taylor published a book of poetry, *Slow Dancing at Miss Polly's*, and in 1996, she collaborated with her artist sister on a book describing their lively upbringing, *Imaginary Parents*.

Ortiz-Taylor's works have recently become the subject of critical analysis and scholarship, often studied for their constructions of sexuality and ethnicity and frequently compared with the work of such other Chicana/o writers as John Rechy and Graciela Limón.

In addition to earning respect as a novelist, Ortiz-Taylor has also maintained a distinguished academic career. She is Francis G. Townsend Professor of English at Florida State University, where she has served as Director of Women's Studies and as Associate Chair of the English Department.

In addition, she has been writer-in-residence at a number of well-regarded writing programs, including the Guadalupe Cultural Center, the Cottages at Hedgebrook, and the Fundación Valparaíso. While queer readers might know her best for her lesbian novels and poetry, scholars of American and English literature may be familiar with her 1973 research work, *Emily Dickinson, a Bibliography*, or her 2005 abridgement of Samuel Richardson's 1536-page novel *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*, first published in 1748.

Ortiz-Taylor has been recipient of a Fulbright Award, the Money for Women/Barbara Deming Memorial Fund Grant, and a Florida Individual Artist Fellowship. She has also received a number of awards from Florida State University for teaching, university service, and mentoring.

Ortiz-Taylor spent much of her career making a place for Latina lesbians in literature. More recently, she has worked to make a place for lesbians in retirement housing.

In 1999, she and her partner Joy Lewis applied to move to the Westminster Oaks retirement community in Tallahassee, Florida. They were turned down for admission because the community's parent company, Presbyterian Retirement Communities, Inc., refused to recognize their relationship.

In 2002, Lewis and Ortiz-Taylor, now armed with a civil union certificate from the state of Vermont, tried again. They were again turned down. In response, they sought assistance from the National Center for Lesbian Rights and Equality Florida and filed a discrimination complaint. In June 2004, the couple reached a confidential settlement with Presbyterian Retirement Communities and happily made plans to move into the facility.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.