

Visiting writers bring real-

Austin author debunks misconceptions about Cinco de Mayo

The month of May is quickly approaching and with it comes days of celebration and recognition. Among them, the popular celebration of Cinco de Mayo's takes the holiday of Mexican forces against the French army in the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862.

It is a common misconception that May 5 is Mexican Independence Day, which is actually September 16. Author Don Miles set out to invalidate that misconception. His new book, appropriately titled "Cinco de Mayo," sheds a whole new light on the Mexican holiday.

In today's culture, Cinco de Mayo has evolved into an increasingly popular holiday celebrated in the United States more so than in Mexico. For the most part these celebrations center on food, drink, music and dancing. In Los Angeles alone, more than half a million people show up every year in commemoration of the day but, according to Miles, very few Americans really know what they are celebrating.

Although retrieving all the necessary components for his book was difficult, Miles's main concern was getting it all out there for everyone, especially Hispanics, to finally understand the day's true mean-

ing. "I had a large percentage of Hispanic students in my class and I wanted to show the whole story," said Miles. He said the author who paid a visit to the University of Texas at Pan American to celebrate their 50th anniversary. "I wanted them to honor heritage they're not fully aware of. To have some bearing on what the consequences could have been for the U.S. I know history buffs will enjoy the story. There are fascinating subplots that have never been told before."

An incident at an elementary school where Miles was a teacher first drove him to further explore the widely preconceived notion about that day and what it means.

"The principal announced over the P.A. on May fifth that it was Mexican Independence Day, just like the fourth of July is our Independence Day," said the author. "I was like, that's not right. I knew that wasn't right so I told her and she said, 'I'm certified in history and you're not, so I'm right.'"

It was then that Miles realized that people had been misinformed because of what they had been taught throughout their education.

"There are more than 50 children's books

about Cinco de Mayo that talk about the battle of that day, but you don't really know the context," said the author, who currently resides in Austin. "I do hope that the children are given their own insight into the Mexican-American war so they are celebrating their heritage but they don't know the story accurately. They don't know what they're missing. There are a lot of things they don't know."

"Cinco de Mayo" is the first in-depth, adult-level book on the holiday. There's nothing else in print that contains what Miles's book has: little-known scenarios that are hard to believe, but true.

"A sub-plot in my book is about a farm girl from Vermont that joined a traveling circus and became a bareback rider. She met a German prince, got married and wound up fighting in the emperor's army," said Miles. One of one of the many colorful characters in his book.

Miles's inspiration came mainly from his late wife, Minerva Gonzalez-Angulo Miles, a teacher and professor who grew up in a neighborhood in Mexico City - where the Emperor Maximilian's castle still stands. With his wife's support, Miles set out to seek the truth behind the Mexican holiday. But the journey wasn't as easy as he had planned.

Pulitzer Prize finalist

When author Robert Whitaker majored in English at the University of Colorado, he never knew that when it came to his writing career, his major would mean very little.

English has come in handy for Whitaker as a writer, but it college taught him anything. It was that the didn't want to focus on just one subject.

"When I look to do something that I don't know books, often I like to do something that I don't know about," he said in a phone interview. "For me, the thrill is taking into the material and reading myself and trying to make sense of it and dig up

things other people haven't. I really like this sort of Renaissance approach of bouncing from subject to subject."

The bouncing has allowed Whitaker to produce two books with another one on the way - "Mad in America," "The Map-Maker's Wife," and a yet-to-be-titled book about a little known 1919 racial massacre in Arkansas. When Whitaker visits the University of Texas-Pan American next week, he will spend time with his books and much more.

April 23, Whitaker will take the stage at Student Union Theater at 7 p.m. where he will dis-

cuss "Mad in America," which focuses on what he sees as ineffective schizophrenia treatment methods in the United States.

The book came as a result of research Whitaker was doing for an article for the Boston Globe. That article resulted in Whitaker being named a Pulitzer Prize finalist.

Whitaker said the research and learning involved in writing all of his books is the best part. "I do this to know why I wanted to know and why I continued to like to write. I found that it was to delve into a subject, learn about a subject and to learn

world knowledge to campus

about Cinco de Mayo

GETTING THERE Miles and his wife traveled extensively through Mexico and the United States, from library to library and bookstore to bookstore in search of critical information. "I looked at all the libraries for books about it but didn't find any except at the Benson Latin American Library at the University of Texas at Austin in the 1800s," said the author, who started on the book after retirement from radio. "I uncovered so many things while living in the stacks at UT."

Miles's book has made such an impact that Fred Heath, vice-president and provost of the UT Library System, has recommended his work to all high schools and university libraries statewide, because it not only offers something new but provides for easy readability. "My writing style is informal and fast-paced. I keep it moving. There's a lot of stuff that's hard to believe," Miles said. "This is a book you can put down at night and pick up the next morning and know exactly where you left off."

While the book was meant for the public unaware of the day's true meaning, Miles also found himself opening doors to a world he had never imagined.



Don Miles

Story By: Jeanette Perez

For more information on his book or appearances, visit www.donmiles.com or contact his publicist, Stephanie Barbo, at: stefere@austin.tx.us.

describes joys of writing, learning

Whitaker will also present on April 24 starting at 6 p.m. in a "double feature." The first half will leave Whitaker giving a sneak preview of his upcoming book and the second part, which begins at 7 p.m., will focus on "The Map-Maker's Wife," which tells the story about that first woman to travel the length of the Amazon River.

"Whenever I speak to students...I think the hope is that you say something or deliver some information that raises questions," he said. "It's not about imparting knowledge as it is about raising curiosity."

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Designed By: Roy Bazan



Robert Whitaker

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