

Review of 'House of Houses'

Review of 'House of Houses'

By **Paul Trachtman**

SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE | [SUBSCRIBE](#)

DECEMBER 1997



House of Houses

Pat Mora

Beacon Press, \$24

In this chronicle of a Mexican-American family over several generations, there are no skeletons in the closet. All the skeletons are sitting around the kitchen table or walking in the garden, cooking, drinking coffee, getting headaches, telling tales and arguing with each other, regaling their living heir, author Pat Mora, with recipes, proverbs, prayers and gossip. In *House of Houses*, Mora turns her family's old adobe casa, built along the Rio Grande between El Paso and Santa Fe, into a place where present and past tense are one, a realm where memory and imagination are fused in the style of magic realism.

Amid such layers of time and kinship, Mora is searching for and writing about those family qualities that are both unique and universal. This is not a book for readers who like all their ducks in a row. It's easy to get lost among the generations of ghosts and other relatives. But for a reader willing to stumble into the Mora family gathering and enjoy the fiesta without worrying too much about who's who, the book's real magic is in its portraits of ordinary people struggling to live ordinary lives.

For example, there's Mora's aunt Lobo, who goes to work at the Popular Dry Goods Company in El Paso in 1917 and works there until 1963. "I am a saleslady in piece goods and bedding, selling cloth of all kinds, satin, silk, pique, and blankets, bedspreads, sheets," Lobo says. "I do eighty inventories and my figures are always correct." As youngsters, Mora and her sister spend Sundays with their aunt. "After movies," writes Mora, "we walk to the train depot or the Greyhound station . . . and watch the trains or buses leave, enjoy a hot roast beef sandwich and mashed potatoes. Lobo, the long-lived nutritional rebel who avoids fruits and vegetables, . . . urges us to drink the bubbles in our glass of milk because they signal money in our future."

Mora's spinster aunt Chole tells the story of her great love, a radio announcer who reads poetry on the air; after she calls him anonymously to express appreciation, he devotes months to asking his mystery caller to reveal her name, professing his love for her. But she is blind, and never does.

Mora's writing adds to the magic, as in her description of the grandmother called Mamá Cleta, "who listens to the secret life of spiders, to beetles burrowing, pods swaying in the trees. She touches the yellow columbine, hears its clear, soprano melody calling to butterflies and bumblebees. . . . She goes to her room, brings out the book in which she writes her thoughts, her recipes and gardening lists. With the ink she scented with a decoction of lemon verbena, she writes, '*Sólo lo barato se compra con dinero*,' only what's cheap, can be bought with money."

Writing of her father's death, Mora evokes the suffering and love of a family as it cares for him through the cruel and sometimes comic stages of dementia. In a way, the whole meaning of the book is condensed in a scene at her father's bedside in the hospital. Mora's sister and mother reassure him as the doctors take him off for tests, sliding him into the dark metal cylinder of an MRI. "When he comes out of the room," Mora writes, "he's grinning. 'Honey! Honey! I did it! I'm the first Mexican to go into outer space! VIVA MÉXICO!'" And then, this: "At the end of their daily visit, Stella and Mother smooth his hair, straighten his pajamas. 'Remember, family is the most important thing,' he says. . . . 'I just want the family to stay together.'"

Paul Trachtman is a freelance writer who is based in New Mexico.