

## JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER: I'm Judith Ortiz Cofer and I consider myself a writer who teaches. I love both professions but what I get up to do in the morning is usually to face the blank page, and then later in the day to face the full classroom.

My early education in storytelling came directly from my Puerto Rican relatives particularly the women in the family. My grandmother and her four daughters and their children, the girl children, would be at mam's house and the women would be in their rockers—it seems like there were four or five rockers always—and my cousin and I would be sitting on the floor pretending not to listen and mam would say “I have a *cuento* to tell you.” Sometimes it was a folktale; sometimes it was gossip, but all I know is that as I listen to these stories I was always enthralled. And later understood that it gave her power; she was like an empress, you know, sitting there sort of ruling. And if she could make us laugh, she had even more power. And one of the things that I try to infuse into my stories is the sense that, yes, there's a lot of sadness and tragedy, but there's also a lot to laugh about.

A lot of my work deals with the bicultural, bilingual experience that I know so much about because my brother and I were always the new kids and having to adjust to a new language and a new environment. And while I was living it, I didn't like it. But as a writer, I now know that it was my heritage, this is my material.

Luckily, most artists are driven not by statistics; they're driven and possessed by the need to tell stories. So even when my novel was rejected by every publisher in New York, I still felt like writing my stories and writing my poems. You know it was just something I needed to do in the same way that my grandmother needed to tell her stories; in the same way my mother needs to tell her stories.

We tell stories so that we know where we are in the world.