

## Chapter 61 PROFILES

ROB BAKER

### *Jimmy Santiago Baca: Poetry as Lifesaver*

*Rob Baker is a freelance creative writer who teaches English and creative writing at Barrington High School in Illinois. The following profile appeared in a 2008 issue of the Council Chronicle, a monthly magazine published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). As you read, notice how Baker focuses his profile on the significance of poetry for Baca, using details from Baca's life to support his point. To read one of Jimmy Santiago Baca's poems, see p. 798.*

**C**HICANO POET **JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA** was born with rattlesnake poison in his blood. In January, 1952, just before his mother gave birth, she was bitten by a rattler. The healer who tended to her wound and then brought Baca into the world said that because of the venom Baca would be able to see in the dark and that he would change many times throughout his life, just as a snake sloughs its skin. And change many times he did.

As related in his award-winning autobiography, *A Place to Stand*, Baca's parents abandoned him when he was seven; he lived briefly with his grandparents and then in a series of detention centers from which he constantly ran away. He attended junior high, but dropped out after less than a year because he could not keep up academically nor mesh with the "normal" kids who had families. As a teenager, he lived a haphazard existence on the streets of Albuquerque, fighting, drinking, and doing drugs. He worked piecemeal jobs — loading food on planes, operating a vending machine route, a handyman business. Then, during stints in California and Arizona, he became a very successful drug dealer.

That he would morph into a renowned poet is perhaps the least likely change anyone would have predicted for Baca who, as a young adult, could barely read or write, who "hated books, hated reading," who had "never owned a book and had no desire to own one." And **this** change probably wouldn't have happened if Baca hadn't been sentenced, at age 21, to five to ten years in prison.

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handbook

To read of Baca's prison years is to marvel at the human capacity for survival and renewal. In a place more reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno* than of an institution for rehabilitation, where blood was shed more often than light, and where the inmates' chronic lassitude, fear, and anger led to depression, murder, rape, and paranoia, Baca — remarkably — endured, and exited not only sane and alive, but as a poet.

Chance encounters catalyzed Baca's transformation. A couple years into his incarceration, Baca received a letter from a man as part of a church program to write to prisoners without families. As a result of their continued correspondence, Baca painstakingly taught himself to read and write, activities that helped bring purpose into his monotonous days. The man then put Baca in touch with a poet friend. Poetry changed Baca's life forever.

"I believe something in my brain or something in my nervous system was impacted by poetry, by the way the lines and the words were arranged," said Baca. "I was such an emotional animal and I had never read any poetry. When I read it, it just tolled so many bells in my head, it was like, 'Wow! I can actually communicate like this. There are actually people who talk like this and write like this.' I was just absorbed into it, into the vortex of this ecstasy."

Baca published poems while still in prison. His first collection, *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (Louisiana State University Press, 1979), came out just after his release.

Baca's writing explores his fractured family and personal life, his prison experiences, and his ethnicity. In addition to his autobiography, he has penned ten poetry collections, a book of short stories, and a screenplay, the 1993 film *Blood In, Blood Out*.

"Language gave me a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevented it from devouring me," he wrote in his prologue to *A Place to Stand*. "It was a resource that allowed me to confront and understand my past . . . and it opened a way toward the future that was based not on fear or bitterness or apathy but on compassionate involvement."

In another life change, Baca ultimately morphed into a teacher. He began by working with gang members who regularly congregated near his home, though his initial contact with them seemed more likely to result in violence than poetry. One night, when the youths hanging out

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on his street were particularly raucous, Baca went outside in his pajamas, baseball bat in hand. He told them that they had awakened his baby and that they had to leave.

“They said, ‘We ain’t got no other place to go,’” Baca recounted. “So I said, ‘All right, meet me at St. Anne’s church tomorrow and I’ll ask the priest if we can use the barracks there.’ And you know what? They all met me there and I had my first workshop ever, and I realized with a sort of vague ignorance that I was really gifted at working with kids.”

Baca now does many workshops a year and receives frequent visits from public school educators who come to observe his techniques. He says he’s “very much into Latin American poets,” but he also uses more frequently taught poets such as William Carlos Williams, Denise Levertov, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Walt Whitman.\*

Baca encourages students to tell the stories no one else has: the stories of their own lives. He also encourages students to use poetry to discuss issues they might not normally talk about. “Most of the time there are subtle protocols you have to abide by. You’re sitting at a table with friends, there are certain things you don’t talk about. With these kids, ninety percent of their lived experience is stuff you don’t talk about.”

Baca believes poetry is able to reach the people he works with — people often considered by society to be “the worst of the worst” — because “there’s nothing that is required for you to speak poetically from your heart.”

To Baca, his mission as a teacher — and the role of poetry in general — is nothing less than to save lives.

“My job is simply to keep the light inside [my students] burning. That’s it. My job is to make sure they do not fall into despair. And I guess

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\*William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), Denise Levertov (1923–1997), Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1919), and Walt Whitman (1819–1892): American poets who composed in free verse. With the exception of Whitman, all wrote during the twentieth century. [Editor’s note]

that's the answer to why I work with unwed mothers, I go to prisons, I work with homeless and gang kids, because their light's starting to go off, to dim, and I have to come in there and fire it up, and I do that with poetry, and I do that with commitment, and I do that with compassion."

### Engaging with the Text

1. Rob Baker begins his profile of the poet Jimmy Santiago Baca with an **ANECDOTE**. How does this anecdote foreshadow the changes Baca experiences during his life? What role does language play in those changes? ◆ 265-66
2. What **ENGAGING DETAILS** does Baker provide in his profile to create an impression of Baca as someone who sees "his mission as a teacher — and the role of poetry in general — [as] nothing less than to save lives"? 166
3. This piece was published in a magazine for English teachers. How does Baker shape his profile of Baca to appeal to that **AUDIENCE**? How might his profile be different if he had written it for an audience of high school students? Prison inmates? ■ 5-8
4. How much **BACKGROUND** on Baca does Baker provide in this profile? Why is this background important? How does it help the reader better understand who Baca is today? ◆ 165-66
5. *For Writing.* Identify someone with an interesting career, job, or hobby that has played a significant role in his or her life. Interview that person and write a **PROFILE** that demonstrates how that hobby or job has changed him or her. Use **DIALOGUE** and engaging details to help reveal your subject's character. ◆ 161-70  
◆ 333-37