

## ROMANCING SPAIN SYNOPSIS

During an age of alienation, Lamar Herrin seeks a sense of belonging. Spain holds out the possibility of that—and much more when he meets a lovely and intriguing young woman.

As a probing memoir, *Romancing Spain* distinguishes itself by looking back at a modern romance not gone awry but gone right. In the 60s, Herrin, in his late 20s, packed his bags for Spain purposely leaving some of his baggage behind, namely a nation at odds with itself and a marriage that had ended in divorce.

It is the perfect set-up for a story of hitting Europe on the rebound and plunging into foreign-flavored one-night stands and manly misbehavior. But no, Herrin meets the earnest Antonio who wants to take him home to meet his family and his sister Amparo. Her parents don't initially like the idea of her coupling with this divorced interloper. Yet, early on, there is no question that Herrin wants to marry her. The question is will the Catholic Church allow it.

Its Spanish army of grandiose stone cathedrals reflects its stony will and massive power. And high castle walls that dot the land hint at the challenges Herrin will have to scale to overcome that theological pull.

His life engaged in Amparo's pursuit becomes a courtship of her country as well. His romance begins in this new land near the Mediterranean coast with its palm trees and Old World plazas. As he zigzags across the emerald valleys, flourishing citrus trees, and steep swirling hills of the southern coast—to find a permissive priest—the nation reveals itself to be both fertile and forbidding.

So much seems to say yes, from the alluring, spicy aromas to the perpetual invitation of lush dining to the unself-conscious fiestas that unfurl on sunny streets. Yet, Herrin keeps hearing no—take our hospitality but not our innocent young women.

In Spain, he finds a people as contrary and complex as his own. And his existence becomes layered with contradictions. Though a product of the sexual revolution, he must now submit to dates shadowed by chaperons. He eschews America's political shortcomings but finds himself tolerating the dictates of Franco's fascist Spain. Though not particularly religious, he must navigate and negotiate the rules of the Catholic Church as if he were one of its subjects.

But for his adored Amparo, he will fight to defy cultural gravity. The problem is will it be enough? *Romancing Spain* is a thoughtful and uplifting tale of a love that came easily but a marriage that had to be fought for.

## *ROMANCING SPAIN* About the Author

After his initial trip to Spain, Lamar Herrin returned to the United States in 1973 with his wife Amparo and their then toddler son Rafael. “Just in time to catch the Watergate hearings on television, in effect, my wife’s introduction to the US,” he says.

His first year back he taught freshmen English at Northern Kentucky State University. The second, he sold Britannica encyclopedias at night while he wrote his first novel, *The Rio Loja Ringmaster*, during the day.

By the time their daughter Delia was born in 1980, the book had been published, Herrin had earned a Ph.D. from the University of Cincinnati and was teaching creative writing and American literature at Cornell. He and Amparo (despite being “a warm-weather Mediterranean girl”) fell in love with Ithaca, New York.

For the next two and a half decades, Herrin wove together the writing life with academic and family responsibilities. He wrote four more books and earned tenure at Cornell. And his son and daughter graduated from the university. Herrin has recently retired from academia to concentrate on writing.

He and his wife plan to divide their time between the US and Valencia, Spain. Overseas, they will live in a house that could be considered symbolic of

the full circle their lives have followed. They will be back in the country where they met in a home designed for them by the son who was born there and who is now an architect.

### ***ROMANCING SPAIN: Interview with the Author***

#### ***When did you first decide to write a book about courting your wife?***

It was always in the back of my head to write the story of our difficulties in making it to the altar. And I've always wanted to write a real love story (my novels all veer off from being just that). About six or seven years ago when we talked of traveling through small-town Spain, it occurred to me that the two stories, my courting of my wife and our search through Spain for the perfect pueblo, could be paired off, that one complemented the other. How long did it take you to write the book?

Hard to say. The first draft probably about six months (after all, the plot was already determined), but the rewrites and the playing around with which towns to include and how much of the career of Francisco Franco to relate probably took another year. It's hard to quantify these things, but say in total a year and a half.

My wife is a late riser and I an early one, so as we traveled I began to write both accounts, the twin excursions into the past and present. After traveling for about three months I had a nice leap ahead on the first draft.

#### ***Why did you want to write this story?***

Because I love Spain and I love my wife— two love stories in one. I also like it as a counterweight to the novel *House of the Deaf*, which is on the dark side.

***Did you or anyone else have reservations about your writing a somewhat personal story?***

I had reservations and so did my wife. A novelist (and I've published five) is used to "hiding out" in his characters; it's what novel-writing and acting have in common. It is not so easy to hide out in yourself.

***There are many references to Don Quixote. Do you see yourself as a quixotic man?***

To the extent that we live in the past, we're all Quixotes, to one degree or another. And believers in romance and poetry (in our horrifyingly prosaic age) are Quixotes through and through. In those senses, I suppose I'm pretty much a Quixote.

***In the book, as a young man in Spain, you seemed to be looking for a close-knit community to belong to. Once back in America, were you able to find or create situations that recreated the social cohesiveness of 1960s Spain?***

Not really, or not in the Spanish sense since that close-knittedness was centuries in the making and could be a bit asphyxiating. I'd had a taste of that when I was a child and we visited relatives and grandparents in Georgia. Someone, I believe it was Cleanth Brooks, said that at the outbreak of the American Civil War the South was the most European place in the world (and he meant including Europe). Family, story-telling, and a semi-prescribed way of doing things, ceremonies at every turn—that I have not found, nor do I quite want to, back in the US. But my colleagues in the creative writing program these last 29 years at Cornell have amounted to a close-knit community, and for that I've been extremely grateful.

***What does your wife think of the book?***

She is in partly embarrassed by it (and by the photograph on the front) and, in part, proud of it and what we managed to achieve and keep going for these last 35 years.

***What do your children think of the book?***

Our children are not in the story, not really, although they would be the first to read intimate details of their parents' love life, so I'm sure they had reservations, too. In fact, our daughter, Delia, said when I told her the final copies were in, "Well, I always knew this day was coming." But I'm relieved and happy to report that she loves the book. Our son is just about to read it. He is a real perfectionist, a tough-sell. We'll see.

***Your story implied that Richard Nixon's dishonesty made living in the United States difficult for you. How do you feel about life in the United States now?***

This is no place to get into that except to say that the current administration stinks of self-righteousness and what they think they can do in the name of being divinely right. Unlike the mendacity of the Nixon era, this is pretty aboveboard now. When Bush says that, no, he didn't consult his father much about the Iraq war, but preferred to consult his heavenly father instead, I'm scared to death. It'll come down to one heavenly father against the other and which of the two is better armed. But, as I said, this is no place to get into all of that.

***Apparently your father-in-law has passed away. Is your brother-in-law Antonio still alive? How did his life turn out?***

Antonio lives and paints and makes his living doing just that. He has lived all over Spain but is currently back in Valencia

***What happened in the life of your sister Sally? What profession did she choose? Did she marry and/or have children?***

She married and had and raised two children, a girl and a boy. She's been a housewife and mother and, in part, a real estate agent.

***Do you think the struggle to win you wife's hand and to marry her in the Catholic Church made you value her all the more?***

I haven't changed my opinion of her. She's one of a kind. The book is past and present. The present is still my--our--present.

***Second marriages have a higher divorce rate than first marriages. So what made your second marriage successful nevertheless?***

Really, I'm surprised that second marriages are more likely to end in divorce. I can only speak for myself, but I can say I have never ceased to be fascinated by my wife. I suspect that would have been true whether she'd been my first wife or my second. But maybe not. I did write a book trying to figure all that out.

Lamar Herrin

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QUESTIONS for DISCUSSION

1. After traveling to Spain in his youth, does Lamar Herrin find the peace and sense of belonging he seeks?
2. Do you think there was some wisdom in the strict and traditional way Spaniards lived in the 60s? If so, elaborate.
3. Were there sensible reasons for skepticism regarding Herrin's ability to realize a successful marriage with Amparo?
4. What was it that made Amparo so special to Herrin?
5. Why was he so drawn to Spain? And was his attraction to Spain only a part of his youthful political alienation, or was there more depth in his affinity?
6. What is your opinion of Amparo's family?
7. How did you view Herrin's family?
8. Generally, do you think it makes any difference if couples intending to wed consummate their relationship before or after marriage? If so, what sort of difference?
9. What did the bullfight symbolize to Herrin? What is your opinion of bullfighting and how it may reflect upon the counties in which it is legal?
10. During their return to Spain, how does the couple seem different from their younger selves?
11. What does the story of Don Quixote symbolize for Herrin?
12. How is contemporary Spain different from Franco's Spain?
13. If American couples today had to jump through all of the hoops that the Herrins had to penetrate in order to marry, do you think that fewer would divorce?

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RECOMMENDED READINGS

*Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert

*Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, translated by Edith Grossman

*House of the Deaf* by Lamar Herrin

*The Lies Boys Tell* by Lamar Herrin

*The Unwritten Chronicles of Robert E. Lee* by Lamar Herrin

*American Baroque* by Lamar Herrin

*The Rio Loja Ringmaster* by Lamar Herrin

*Sarah Phillips* by Andrea Lee

*Under the Tucson Sun* by Frances Mayes

*A Year in Provence* by Peter Mayle