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Staff Writer

Gioconda Belli Talks About Forbidden Fruit

Famous Spanish-Language Novelist Visits Santa Barbara

Best-selling author Gioconda Belli answered questions about her novels and politics, when she last week gave a lecture at City College.

“We’re proud to have her here and we hope that our community will respond,” said Prof. Francisco Rodriguez, one of the initiators of the lecture. “We often talk about literature from the past, but here we have the opportunity to talk to a contemporary writer.”

Belli’s struggle against the Somoza regime forced her into exile in Mexico and Costa Rica 1975–79. In 1982, she was appointed Nicaragua’s director of State Communications and the Sandinista National Liberation Front’s international press liaison. Five years later, Belli married her third husband, the American journalist Charles Castaldi.

“He was very good-looking, and I fell in love,” she said. “I ended up sleeping with the enemy.”

Since 1990, Belli lives part time in Santa Monica, Calif., and part time in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua. While she contributes to the improvement of life in the Central American republic, she has become one of President Daniel Ortega's major opponents, Rodriguez said.

"She constantly talks about Nicaragua as a problem," he said.

The School of Modern Languages, the honor society for Hispanic studies Sigma Delta Mu and the publishing house Cengage Learning invited Belli to speak 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. May 5 at Fe Bland Forum on West Campus. At the same time the devastating Jesusita fire, which started in the hills on the other side of the city, cut the power in the building.

While a small chamber orchestra played ancient Mapuche instruments from Chile at the left aisle, organizers and college security tried to solve the electricity problem. In the faint light from the main entrance, Belli entered the podium.

"I feel like I'm in Nicaragua right now, because we have *apagón* (a blackout)," she said.
"I feel at home."

Belli, who had henna dyed curly hair, sat down behind a table with a white cloth and some of her bestselling novels. Critics have compared the Nicaraguan author to Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez and Laura Esquivel.

In 1972, Belli made her debut with a collection of poetry, *Verse Sobre la grama*, which won a literary prize of the national university in Nicaragua. Though there are a lot of good poets in her native country, Belli didn't think about writing poems until she was 22, she said.

"Then I began seeing these lines going through my head," she said. "I got published like 10 days after I started writing. It was a big scandal."

Belli's early poems celebrate womanhood, beauty and erotic pleasures. She never thought portraying men in the same way as they have been depicting women for centuries could be any different, she said.

"I was rebellious against the hypocrisy of society," she said.

Belli's second collection, *Linea de fuego*, won the prestigious Casa de las Américas Prize in 1978. After that, her desire to give expression to several people made her think about writing a novel, she said.

"What I love is how my mind starts to work," Belli said. "It takes over. I see things in my head when I go home at night."

The fact that she doesn't know how a story will end makes her want to stay in that world, she said.

"The hardest book to write was my memoir, because I knew what was going to happen," Belli said.

Her memoirs, *The Country Under My Skin*, published in 2001, begins the storytelling when Belli is trained as a guerilla soldier for the Sandinista movement that overthrew Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship in Nicaragua in 1979.

Belli remembers going to the university and seeing blood from youths who recently had been playing baseball on the streets. She was very scared and had one daughter, she said.

"I don't think I should do it!" Belli told the guerilla soldier, who wanted to enroll her. "I have a child."

"Because you have a child, you should do it," the recruiter had said. "Then your child doesn't have to do it."

Belli got involved, learned how to shoot with an AK-47, smuggled weapons and discussed tactics with Fidel Castro. Then she had to go in exile, because the Nicaraguan government had discovered she worked for the Sandinistas.

“I was trialed in absentia,” she said adding that the judgment was never realized.

Belli doesn't think there should be more revolutions, because they belong to the past, she said. When asked how she felt about Castro today, she replied that he was too old now and should stop influencing what was happening in Cuba.

“You can't separate freedom from socialism,” she said. “It's a pact with the devil.”

Belli's latest novel, *Infinity in the Palm of Her Hand*, published in 2008, tells about the first human beings in the Garden of Eden. It is her favorite book, because she was able to be a novelist and a poet at the same time when she wrote it, Belli said.

“You know I like children,” she said. “It took me exactly nine months to finish.”

The novel retells the story of Creation from the Bible and the Apocrypha, religious texts that weren't included in the Holy Scripture. Belli's parable about Adam and Eve makes us recognize our own time, while the author transforms ideas about the Fall of Man.

“We're such a product of our myths,” Belli said. “It's about Adam and Eve but also about every one of us.”

The title, which describes Eve holding a fig, alludes to “Auguries of Innocence” by William Blake, Belli said. Because the Bible tells how Adam and Eve covered themselves with fig leaves, it could have been that kind of fruit they ate, she said.

“I do not change how things happened,” she said. “My forbidden fruit is a fig and not an apple, because my research showed that there were no apples in this region.”

Eve is not only the creator of life and art, she is also the main character in Belli’s version of the story.

“Her novels always have female protagonists,” said Instructor Juan Casillas, another initiator of the author’s lecture at City College.

“The story is the Creation story without guilt,” Belli said. “When I heard the story as a child, I thought ‘why did she have to do this terrible thing?’ I decided to change this image. Eve has a vision, and she realizes that she had to bite the fruit.”

God knows everything, so he wanted Eve to tantalize Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, said Miguel Arana, president of the Sigma Delta Mu chapter at City College.

“Belli is trying to clear Eve as a symbol of sin,” he said.

Belli is challenging the view that the woman according to the Bible is subordinate to the man, Arana said. At the same time, Belli is introducing evolutionary theory in the story about the first human beings.

“She makes a link between the Biblical creationism and Darwin,” Arana said.

The Garden of Eden is not the beginning, Belli said adding, “I believe in the theory of evolution, so I decided to have this surprising end.”