'Sometimes it's OK to take your time' – A Q&A with new MacArthur fellow Manuel Muñoz

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For 11 years, English professor Manuel Muñoz found himself "a little frozen" as he confronted hurdles while trying to complete and publish his next book. At the time, he was thinking of stepping back from writing. Instead, he persevered and released the short story collection "The Consequences" in October 2022.

Fast forward nearly a year to September 2023, when Muñoz receives a phone call that changes his life: He is one of 20 writers, researchers, scientists and artists from throughout the nation to be named to the latest class of MacArthur Fellows. The fellowships, also known as "genius grants," are awarded each year by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and include an $800,000 stipend to support the recipient's work. The designations honor those "who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction," according to the foundation.

Muñoz, who joined the University in 2008, says the money will allow him flexibility as he continues to write about people who often don't have their stories told – specifically, Mexican Americans living in farming communities in California's Central Valley, where Muñoz was born and raised. His writing often focuses on how gay men and their families navigate their lives in rural communities and about the complicated relationships that many Valley residents have with the area's racial dynamics and limited economic opportunities.

"Those are the kinds of places that I never saw in books, and the less I saw of it, the more I started to love it in my own way," Muñoz said in a video posted on the MacArthur Foundation website.

In this Q&A, Muñoz discusses his reaction to receiving the award, the importance of the short story in American literature and what he hopes other writers can learn from his experience.

What was your reaction when you got the call about the MacArthur fellowship?

Complete surprise. It's everyone's response and I'm not sure how it could be anything but complete surprise because you don't know that you're nominated, you don't know that you're being considered, so the call just comes out of the blue. And it sounds like a joke. Fortunately, they have a very patient set of people on the other line. And after about five minutes of that conversation, I realized it was real and I started crying.

How does this recognition validate your work?

The reason it's so important to me is that it is not a literary prize. They seek out people in so many disciplines doing so many different kinds of things. So that just tells you how much your creative work must stand out to be acknowledged in this way – especially for me as a short story writer and someone writing about a community that doesn't get a lot of space on the literary landscape. I'm still trying to wrap my head around that. It's really phenomenal.

At one point, I went 11 years between books. I was a little frozen. I was at a point where the struggle to get my work published and recognized was increasingly difficult and I wondered if it was time for me to step back from writing. So now I feel very emboldened and confident, and the valley holds more stories than I will ever be able to tell.

You write about people who often don't have their stories told. Why is it so important to you to change that?

Sometimes the way that my work is received by the literary world – meaning publishers, journals, presses, reviewers – they say it's about fieldworkers, it's about poverty. And to me, that misses the point entirely. Those are the people in the stories, but that's not what the stories are about. They're about whatever is going on in their lives – their loves, losses, hardships, joys. Those are the very recognizable attributes of any story. It's just that I'm working in a world and in a time where we still refuse to think that that's possible.

I've largely in my 20-year career been mostly a small-press author, and that's again because the sense in the greater literary world is often that there's not going to be so much interest in these stories. Publishers often don't know how to reach the audience that would be interested in stories like these. That's been the struggle for me as an artist for 20 years.

Has anything surprised you about how your writing career has evolved?

I've surprised myself by sticking to short stories. The pressure is always on for fiction writers to write novels. That is the perceived way to gain a larger audience. But there's something about the short story form that I am very much drawn to, so I have just pushed back against the financial pressures or the commercial pressures that that come along with publishing. Three of my four books are short story collections, and the fifth one is going to be a short story collection as well.
Presses are always wary of that, but I think this recognition gives me the courage to say that's exactly what I'm going to be doing. The short story form is important not only to my community, but I think it's important to the literature of the United States. It has such a rich history.

**How has this award affected your experience in the classroom? What do your students think?**

I'm already a fairly joyful teacher. I really like being in the classroom. When my students found out about it, about this prize, and were asking me questions about it, there was a different vibe in the room. I have a 40-person lecture and their attention for that day was just of a different order. It was it was really great.

One of the things they asked about was how someone applies for a MacArthur Fellowship. And I told them, "Well, you don't. You just do your work. And you do your best work and you keep engaging with your work and you don't worry about how you're going to be validated or compensated or awarded. Just take joy in what you're doing. And down the line there might be some people who will pay attention to it, but we start small."

I remind them that this is my 20th year as a published writer. Things take time.

**So many people at the University are doing their own writing and may find themselves feeling stuck like you did at one point. What kind of encouragement do you think your story can provide?**

It's all about sticking to it. The problem, especially to writers, is watching other writers publish more frequently, and it can be discouraging. But sometimes it's OK to take your time. If that book takes 10 years, then it takes 10 years. There is always outside pressure, but it's about creating your own schedule and deciding when you feel that it's ready. And I would have said the exact same thing had this prize come about or not.

I submitted my latest book when I thought it was ready and it ended up being a book that I am very proud of because I took my time. I was confident about every single one of those stories. I hope that can be the case for anybody who is working on a novel or a memoir or a book of poems or whatever they are working on. When they're ready, they'll know.

Read more about Muñoz and the award in a story posted on the University's news website and see the MacArthur Foundation's video on Muñoz below.

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