

Magical Realism **Biographical Sketch of Jim Sagel**

Writer and educator Jim Sagel was born in 1947 in Fort Morgan, Colorado, to parents Edward and Betty Sagel. The eldest of three brothers in the farming family, Jim graduated from Fort Morgan High School in 1965, and published his earliest piece in the school's literary newspaper "Prufrock" that same year. He continued his education at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1969. Later that year, Sagel moved to Española, New Mexico, and began substitute teaching at Española Valley High School, where he met Teresa Archuleta, a native of the Española Valley. They married in 1970. Sagel continued to teach high school in northern New Mexico until 1976, when he received a Master of Arts in Creative Writing from the University of New Mexico for his thesis "Rebuilt," a poetry collection.

Sagel's tenure at Northern New Mexico Community College started in 1976, and during his 22-year career as a university instructor, he taught at the Institute of American Indian Art (Santa Fe), at University of New Mexico campuses in Los Alamos, Española, Santa Fe and Taos, and at campuses in Peñasco, Gallina, and Mesa Vista. He was appointed director of the Division of Humanities at the University of New Mexico in Los Alamos, a position he held until his death in 1998. He was awarded the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts in 1993 and appointed the Carruthers Chair in Honors in the UNM General Honors program.

Of Prussian descent, Sagel arrived in New Mexico neither speaking nor writing Spanish. He quickly determined, however, that mastery of the language was a necessary skill. With the help of his wife's family, particularly his father- and mother-in-law, Jacobo and Matilde Archuleta, Sagel learned Spanish solely through contact with native speakers, and began to write in both English and Spanish. Three collections of his bilingual poetry, *Hablando de brujas y la gente de antes*, *Foreplay and French Fries*, and *Small Bones, Little Eyes*, were

published in 1981. In the same year, Sagel won Cuba's Premio Casa de las Américas for his Spanish-language collection of short stories *Tunomás Honey*. Sagel was the second United States citizen in the prize's history to win the prestigious award, and *Tunomás Honey* remains Sagel's most-recognized work.

As a result of the recognition accompanying this achievement, Sagel became a controversial figure within the Chicano literary community. Though Sagel was widely praised for the quality of his work and for the precision of the vernacular New Mexican Spanish in which it was written, his ethnicity made him difficult to categorize. Given that the subjects and themes of his works pertained to the Hispanic communities of New Mexico, the descriptive term "Chicanesque" was applied to Sagel's pieces. Coined by Chicano literary critics Donaldo Urioste and Franciso Lomelí, chicanesque works sympathetically treat subjects relevant to the Chicano community, but are written by non-Chicano authors

Sagel's series of bilingual children's books, *Where the Cinnamon Winds Blow/Donde soplan los vientos de canela* (1993), *Garden of Stories/Jardín de cuentos* (1996), and *Always the Heart/Siempre el corazón* (1998), were met with much popular interest, as was his final collection of poetry, *Unexpected Turn* (1997). In 1997, he won the Premio San Sebastián for his Spanish-language play *Doña Refugio y su comadre* (Kuxta, 1997), a work that was performed bilingually in Española in 1998

After suffering from bouts of depression throughout his adult life, Sagel committed suicide at the Sevilleta Wildlife Refuge in Socorro, New Mexico on April 6, 1998.

Santuario

Even bank americarded turistas
And their rancid kids are humbled
By the rough ivory walls
Thick enough to bury santos
And the relentless gaze of a faded indigo san jose'
Whose flat features on the peeling retablo
Mark the far edge of the universe

A steady stream of comically solemn pilgrims
File into the crutch-lined cuartito
To scoop up a paper cup of holy dirt
Which thy rub on tia's arthritic legs
Or a delirious baby's forehead back home
Leaving a brown plastic rosary
For the exquisitely gowned santo nino
Whose little shoes wear out annually
From his busy nocturnal rounds
Protecting the poor children of his beat
From the ravages of Diablo

On one knows how the shoes scuff and disintegrate
Or how the hole miraculously
Replenishes its supply of sacred dirt

No one really wants to know

In the dim chapel
A lonely vietjita lights a vela
At the feet of an agonized Cristo
An army boy on leave in uniform
Cracks his head on a low-lying beam over the holy doorway
Someone behind me farts
And for an instant I think I hear
The inaudible scratch
Of tiny feet over the rusty tin roof

Swallows probably
Or a baby saint

Cuartito-small room
Diablo-devil
saint

tia- aunt
vietjita -old woman

vela-candle
retablo-painted wooden image of

Santo nino-holy child

santuario-church

The poem describes the church and discusses two “magical” elements of the church which is located in the village of Chimayo, New Mexico, not far from where the novel takes place. Answer the questions that follow.

1. What are two magical elements?
2. Explain who each magical element works.
3. What is unknown about both?
4. What inferences can be made about the “crutch-lined cuartito”?
5. What do you think the last five lines of the poem mean?
6. What does the one –line stanza (stanza 4) say about the people who come?
7. How do you think Jim Sagel was influenced by his community and culture when he wrote this poem?
8. How would your values and belief system influence your experience at this church?

