
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Interview with Novelist Jennifer Givhan

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Monday, August 11th, 2025

Jenn Givhan's new novel *Salt Bones* (Mulholland Books, July 22, 2025) is a haunting reimagining of the Persephone and Demeter myth. Set in the sun-scorched Mexico-California borderlands near the Salton Sea, Givhan explores the bonds between mothers and daughters, the darkness of environmental collapse, and the power of ancestral memory.

Givhan is an award-winning poet, novelist, and self-described bruja who draws on her Mexican-American and Indigenous roots in *Salt Bones*. We spoke with her about myth, motherhood, the desert's dark light, and what it takes to write fiercely in the post-post-postmodern world.

Read these excerpts, which we published last week:

[“The Salton Sea, Southern California”](#)

[“The First Missing Girl”](#)



1. Let's begin with the title. What does *Salt Bones* mean to you, and how did that phrase come to represent the heart of this novel?

In the desert borderlands of Southern California where I grew up, a toxic river fed a deadly, ancient lake, the Salton Sea. This river and lake were reanimated in the early 20th century through flooding and a break in an irrigation dam fed by the Colorado River. As a girl, I'd run barefoot past the date palms and horse pens to that river, where my mama warned me not to eat the fish, not to swim in that water, poisoned by decades of pesticides dropped by crop dusters over surrounding farmland.

Seven years ago, when I returned to El Valle with my children, my comadre grilled carne asada and told me the sea was drying up, releasing pesticide-laden dust and threatening to turn our town into a ghostland. Our Ancestors had followed the sea's rhythms for generations, but this drying was different. A century ago, settlers took the water rights and banned Native and Mexican people from land ownership. They built a billion-dollar farming empire, but the people of El Valle saw little of that wealth. Now, the water's vanishing, and the chemicals left behind are aerosolizing and entering the lungs of El Valle residents.

When I heard this, I pulled a short story I'd shelved, "Salt Bones," and began again. I immersed myself in the Valley's history: the racism that shaped it, the forgotten labor, the stories buried

under pesticides and dust.

I've been haunted by the millions of fish that once swam the Salton Sea. Their bones now crumble into white hash along the playa—little shards that look like human teeth. The fish have died off, but I won't let the same happen to mi familia and comunidad.

This book is about a family haunted by the so-called accidental sea, but more than that, it's a love song for my disappearing homeland.

2. You've drawn from mythology before—La Llorona, for instance, in *River Woman*, *River Demon*. What called you to Persephone and Demeter this time? How does their story fit within a borderlands context?

This story of mama-daughterhood has followed me my whole life, probably because it encompasses my greatest fear. As a daughter, that was losing my mother. As a mother, it is losing my children. My own mother is a storyteller. She embellishes like nobody's business, but she also has a keen sense of timing, place, familial connection, emotional underpinning, and striking symbolism. And, like many Mexican and Indigenous girls and women of her generation, she's gone through some terrible things, but she's also a resilient, sensitive spirit who made forgiveness and love the utmost priority in her life, and all of that rubbed off on me. Throughout my childhood, my mother's stories became my own. Sometimes I don't know where her voice ends and mine begins. I didn't set out to write a retelling of any myth in particular, but I've been obsessed with Persephone and Demeter for years, and it just bled through the pages as *Salt Bones* rooted in the girlhood of a character who shares certain similarities with my mother and me.

The novel begins with a quote from Eavan Boland: *The only legend I have ever loved is / the story of a daughter lost in hell. / And found and rescued there.*

As an English major, I was steeped in the Western canon, but as a Chicana and Indigenous woman, my heart thrums with Mesoamerican myth. I braid Demeter with La Siguanaba to show that our stories are just as powerful, although often erased. Both spring from the same mother-root of grief, survival, and fierce love, which my novel fuses as reclamation and lovesong.

I don't want to give too much away about La Siguanaba and how she haunts this story, but I will say that my daughter fell in love with horses and we've spent a lot of time together at the horse pens and arenas and trail rides along the Rio Grande, so I honestly became as haunted as Mal in terms of horses.

As with many of my novels, the characters in their landscapes come to me and ask me to tell their story, and the myth of La Siguanaba grew inside of me as Mal's story unfolded along the Salton Sea, along with El Cucuy and los chupacabras and many of the other so-called monsters that roam through the Mexicali borderlands where I grew up.

A fellow writer and I were once laughing about how people ask if we write fantasy or horror or magical realism, and all of that might be true, but for us, we are also just writing our childhoods as he grew up in the Caribbean and I was born and raised on the Southwestern border. Most of my books focus on La Llorona, and you'd think that with the Salton Sea being a prominent feature of this newest book that she would have appeared again, but I do feel like she's in the subtext and heart of everything I write, and it was time for another monstrous mama to make herself known.

3. You braid Latina and Indigenous myth, family drama, horror, and magical realism into a seamless story. What's your approach to blending genres and traditions?

As a mother-poet who grew up in the borderlands, I couldn't escape the strange cadences and rhythms and nonlinear, recursive patterns of thinking and understanding and storytelling if I tried. I'm grateful that voice is queen in writing since what perhaps felt like a curse while I was growing up (how sensitive I am—how much of an outsider I felt like everywhere I went) becomes a strength in my writing.

Poetry lives in my bones, and from that skeleton I start with voice, image, and rhythm, writing toward what hurts. Every novel feels like a long sonnet with a turn, that knife twist. Poetry taught me to listen for silence and shape it into story, while horror and mystery and magical realism live side by side, especially for marginalized folks.

Salt Bones peels back a murder plot to reveal deeper hauntings such as environmental racism, ancestral grief, family rot, and gendered violence. The monsters in this story wear many masks, and as the central mama of the story, Malamar "Mal" Veracruz learns, some monsters can only be exhumed from the damp, dark soil feeding poison to the water.

4. You're incredibly prolific—eleven novels in nine years. How do you keep the creative fire burning while mentoring other writers and raising a family?

Most mornings, after coffee and hot chocolate with my daughter, I declare: *Today I'm gonna write something UGLY!* We growl and stomp and chant it together—*UGLY! MESSY! FERAL! WEIRD!*

That ritual gives me permission to show up as I am—brain fog, chronic illness, self-doubt demons and all. I follow my unruly characters through the fog and trust the story will find me.

5. You describe yourself as a *bruja*. How does your spirituality inform your writing? Has writing become a ritual of its own?

Writing is absolutely a ritual and has helped me deepen my connection to my Ancestors. As I've practiced *brujería* and *curanderismo* over the years, I began building portable altars—spaces to honor the sacred wherever I am. Sometimes that means lighting candles beside the bathtub while I soak to ease chronic pain. Sometimes that means placing my grandmother's photo next to my laptop. All of these rituals, large and small, help open portals to the underbelly, which I often liken to the Upside Down in *Stranger Things*, where I'm able to transmute story.

My spiritual practices have taught me to be gentler with myself. If I can't write on a particular day, it isn't failure, but rest, which can be sacred, fertile, and resistance. These altars remind me that the sacred is already within. The Muse is already here; my job is to quiet myself and listen.

6. Motherhood is central to *Salt Bones*, as it is in much of your work. What draws you to write about motherhood again and again?

Because it is the site of the unspeakable and the sacred, motherhood poetics holds space for the liminal, the overlooked, and the dismissed. Writing about motherhood can be labeled sentimental or confessional, which I find outrageously suspect to begin with, since men have won major awards writing about mothers, for instance. Even so, I tend to see myself as crafting motherhood through the underbelly, creating an act of reclamation and sassing back to the boxes or pedestals

our society has tried cramming mothers into or atop.

As Cheryl Strayed says in her Dear Sugar column, *We must write like motherf*ckers, on the kitchen floor, with all our strength, wrestling with the second beating heart inside us.*

As a mama writing through post-partum depression, for instance, my work became lifesaving. The mother must survive the wound that never heals, if only to carry her babies to safety. That paradox and tension between survival and loss is the core of my motherhood poetics. It's what I return to, over and over.

7. Your identity encompasses many layers—Mexican-American, Indigenous, poet, mother, daughter. How do those inheritances shape your work?

My writing comes from the confluence of all the identities I carry. As a Chicana and Indigenous woman from the borderlands, my stories resist erasure. They fuse myth and memory, personal and political, lyric and narrative because that's how I live.

Our communities have survived through story. My work continues that legacy.

A major goal for this book was to show the deeply entrenched eco-socio-political inequities woven into the fabric of our society and way of life especially in the Southwest where Latinos and Indigenous people often live in poverty even though our Ancestors have called this land sacred and home for millennia.

And at the same time, show how resilient and strong we are—how adaptable—and that our ancestral practices carry us as do our family traditions, even when, as in *Salt Bones*, there is sometimes sickness at the root that must be dredged up and healed.

For instance, my protagonist Mal became a butcher as I knew from my hundreds of pages of prewriting into her childhood on the Salton Sea that she was raised mostly by her father, a Cahuilla and Kumeyaay man whose family is from both the U.S. and Mexico side of the border as they traveled back and forth over the centuries, and that her father was also a skilled hunter and fisherman.

Mal was the sibling in her family most open to learning their ancestral practices, and there was a scene that meant a great deal to me about where her father took her hunting and taught her to respect the lives of the animals whose lives she takes for food. This was tied for me into El Valle's practices of farming, fish and game in and around the sea, and the beef plant nearby—all of which I wanted to examine without becoming preachy.

8. You've cited Toni Morrison and Ana Castillo among your literary influences. Who are some others who've shaped you?

Toni Morrison changed everything for me when I first read it in a senior AP English class I was taking online through Stanford University on a computer the program had lent me, the only person at my school that year to take the class. *Beloved* showed me a novel could be ghost story, lullaby, reckoning, and time machine all at once. I'm also deeply influenced by Ana Castillo, and more recently by Jesmyn Ward's haunted South, which echoes my desert borderlands with ancestral grief, complicated mamas, and land that both loves and devours. A few other top contenders in my heart are Victor LaValle's *The Changeling*, Ana Dávila Cardinal's *The Storyteller's Death*, Erika T

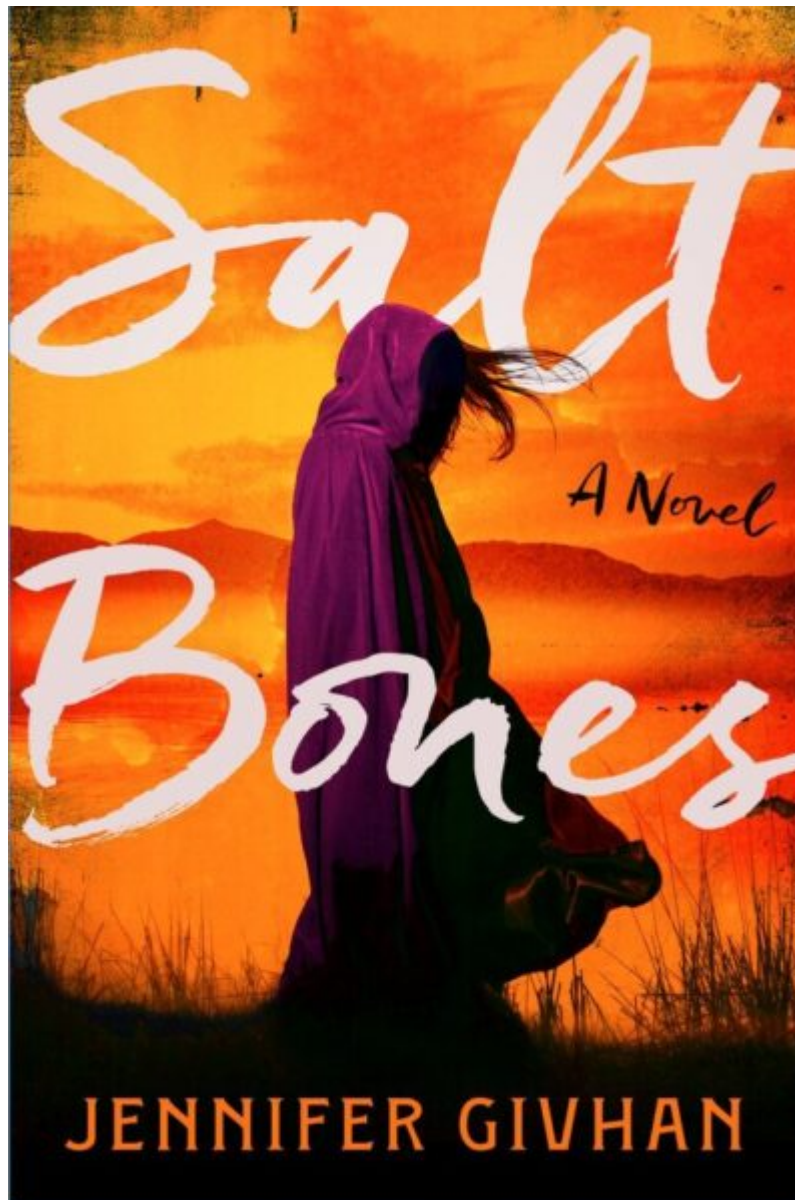
Wurth's *White Horse*, Cynthia Pelayo's *Vanishing Daughters*, Jessica Johns' *Bad Cree*, and Carolina Flórez-Cerchiaro's *Bochica*. I'm always looking for stories that inspire, gut, and rebuild me.

9. If readers take away just one truth, image, or question from *Salt Bones*, what do you hope it is?

My heartwork and reason for being are to share the stories of the people too often unseen and ignored. The land, the animals, and the people are all integrally interconnected, and I'm asking for an overall move toward empathy and awareness. Toward asking, how did we make this? Who are the people behind what we often take for granted? How are my everyday actions affecting those in regions perhaps unknown to me, and how can I learn their stories to bridge that gap and make more ethical choices in large and small ways?

I hope readers leave this book both haunted and awakened, with a deeper love for the strong women in their lives and a renewed reverence for the marginalized communities that hold us up.

Even in poisoned places, beauty and resistance will rise.



Purchase *Salt Bones* by Jennifer Givhan

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