

**CARLOS CISNEROS.**  
***THE PAPER LAWYER.***

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With his fourth novel, South Texas practicing attorney Carlos Cisneros offers a smart, fast paced legal thriller that shows a clear dedication to his moonlighting gig as a writer. Always situated along the US-Mexico border that is his backyard, his work –published by Arte Público Press– also involves social and/or cultural institutions that are often in conflict with the everyday citizens of *la frontera*. These corporate bodies –insurance firms (*The Case Runner*, 2008), pharmaceutical companies (*The Name Partner*, 2010), and the Catholic church (*The Land Grant*, 2012)– invariably appear conflicted as ethical quandaries appear between their aim to serve their clients and the greed born of the fight for institutional self-preservation.

*The Paper Lawyer* is no different, only this time the foe is law enforcement itself, as the novel offers a much fictionalized version of the scandal involving Hidalgo County’s Panama Unit, an anti-narcotics police taskforce gone rogue that found temptation too difficult to resist, becoming what *Rolling Stone* magazine called “America’s Dirtiest Cops” (J. Heels, *Rolling Stone*, January 5, 2015). As with the corporate bodies named above, *The Paper Lawyer* involves a police unit created for the purpose of combating drug trafficking along the US-Mexico border, all for the greater social good. The perks of the drug trade, however, seduce these officers so that they become key players in the sale and distribution of drugs, often taking the place of those they arrest. One such apprehension is what leads to the legal case that is the central piece of the courtroom drama at the core of the novel. Vicente Aldama, an undocumented Mexican immigrant who commits a crime in an attempt to make enough money to cover his daughter’s medical costs, is illegally detained by a

group of law-bending cops who confiscate what he is transporting for their own benefit. Corruption, in other words, abounds and plagues all characters regardless of which side of the law they stand. The narrative clearly makes the reader sympathetic to the unauthorized migrant who is mistreated by the legal system that would rather look the other way than face the turmoil of its internal corruption.

While the legal drama and the subsequent investigation to uncover the truth about the illicit activities of the police unit in question is the main course, the novel's concurrent drama surrounds attorney Camila Harrison Cantú. While up to now Cisneros' fictional protagonist lawyers had all been male, Harrison provides a chance for Cisneros to highlight the place of women in the practice of law. But this isn't much of a concern, however, as Harrison's issues lie elsewhere. First is that, a successful real estate attorney in her own right, she is engaged to a calculating, up-and-coming Austin, Texas lawyer with connections and a pedigree that point to that of a future elected official. This guaranteed life of social and financial success, however, comes crashing down when private communication emails between Harrison and a client reveal her mocking stance towards "blacks, Mexicans, the poor and other minorities" (32). While she reveals candidly that *everyone* in her social circle feels the same way about these groups, she is made to pay only because she gets caught. To separate Harrison from and damage she could cause her firm's reputation, she is fired. To separate her from the damage she could cause her fiancé's clearly laid out roadmap to political success, he breaks off the engagement. She is, in today's parlance, canceled.

Self-exiled to Houston, away from state capital where she is a liability to her acquaintances and her desire to rehabilitate her career, she begins anew and sets herself on a path of regeneration. A complex character that has issues with her Mexican past, something she can hide behind her "green eyes, reddish-brown hair and alabaster skin" (74), this geographic move should not be confused with an outright embrace to make amends to those she has hurt with her insensitive words and actions. Career-minded first and foremost, it is in attempting to remake herself professionally that she accepts the opportunity to do greater social good by agreeing to help an undocumented immigrant. Apprehended improperly by the rogue anti-narcotics taskforce, Harrison goes against all odds to

eventually get the charges against her client dropped. In such a way, in the process of helping Aldama reunite with his family, she is also reunited with hers and with her Mexican ancestry. She is, in some ways, made whole and in the end, to quote the last sentence in the novel, “She felt like a brand new person” (365).

While at times *The Paper Lawyer* is weighed down by the legal proceedings that are described in great detail, overall the novel is an engaging quick read. At its core is a tale of legal corruption where regular members of the public often stand no chance against the state and its actors. Beyond this, however, it is also the story about a Mexican American who, after rejecting her personal history in becoming someone of success and social stature, is made whole again after coming to terms with her personal demons.

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