

By Torgny Lilja

Staff Writer

Decorated Poet to Speak on Campus

Her Work Has Been Translated Into 14 Different Languages

Acclaimed novelist, poet, journalist and former guerilla fighter Gioconda Belli gives a lecture about her writing May 5 at City College.

The School of Modern Languages, the honor society for Hispanic studies Sigma Delta Mu and the editorial Cengage at City College have invited Belli to speak at Fe Bland Forum. After the lecture, SBCC Bookstore offers book signing and refreshments outside the auditorium.

“The books are already available at the bookstore,” said Prof. Francisco Rodriguez, one of the initiators of the lecture.

Belli’s struggle against the Somoza regime more than 30 years ago 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.

In 1987, Belli married American journalist Charles Castaldi. Since 1990, she lives both in Santa Monica, Calif., and Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua. While she contributes to the improvement of life in Nicaragua, she has become one of President Daniel Ortega's major critics, Rodriguez said.

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

As a novelist, Belli has been compared to Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez and Laura Esquivel. However, Belli's debut in 1972, *Verse Sobre la grama*, was a collection of poetry, which won a literary prize in Nicaragua. Her early poems mainly celebrate womanhood, beauty and erotic pleasures. *Linea de fuego*, her second collection, won the prestigious Casa de las Américas Prize in 1978.

Belli's first novel, *The Inhabited Woman*, published in 1988, tells the story of Lavinia, a young female architect with a privileged background. After falling in love with her colleague Felipe, a member of the National Liberation Movement, she joins the guerilla against a tyrannous regime in an unnamed Latin American country.

The Country Under My Skin, subtitled *Memoirs of Love and War*, was published in 2001 and 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 learns how to shoot with an AK-47, discusses tactics with Fidel Castro, smuggles weapons, is dropped from a helicopter in high heels, marries three times, raises four children, returns from her exile and represents the liberated Nicaragua. She also gets through inner struggles and starts to challenge how the Sandinistas treat women.

In her latest novel, *Infinity in the Palm of Her Hand*, published in 2008, Belli retells the story of creation from the Bible and from the Apocrypha, which are religious texts that weren't included in the Holy Scripture. Belli's parable, where Adam and Eve discover the world, makes us recognize our own time, while the author transforms ideas about the Garden of Eden.

Like *The Inhabited Woman* and *The Country Under My Skin*, *Infinity in the Palm of Her Hand* has become an international bestseller and was translated into English this year. The title alludes to a poem ("Auguries of Innocence" by William Blake) and describes Eve holding a fig, said Instructor Juan Casillas Nuñez, another initiator of the author's lecture at City College.

"There is no apple in this story," he said.

In Belli's novel, Eve is the creator of life and art, while Adam is the first philosopher. Belli makes Eve the protagonist, and lets her discuss philosophical topics with the serpent from the Garden of Eden.

“Her novels always have female protagonists,” Casillas said.

“Belli is trying to clear Eve as a symbol of sin, said Miguel Arana, president of the Sigma Delta Mu chapter at City College. God knows everything, so he wanted Eve to tantalize Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, 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.

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

During her speech, Belli will discuss and read from *The Infinity in the Palm of Her Hand*, Casillas said.

Belli’s lecture will be in English. It is scheduled from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. May 5 on West Campus. There is no admission fee.