

# The Case of the Missing Mexican American Detective Stories:

Mystery Solved?

## I'm on the Case

In 2010, I joined young adult (YA) author Ray Villarreal and poet/anthologist Sarah Cortez on a preconference panel sponsored by the Young Adult Round Table of the Texas Library Association for their annual conference, during which we each spoke about our early reading experiences, specifically how they involved the detective/mystery genre. We also shared our thoughts on the state of the genre as it pertains to young Mexican American readers. It was a well-attended panel, and the presentations and short readings were lively and enjoyable. But the highlight for me as a participant, as often happens, was the question and answer period that followed. Of all the fine questions and insightful observations from the floor, one stood out for me because I didn't have a ready answer, and as a former English language arts teacher and Mexican American YA writer, I felt I should have. The lack of a response bothered me then, and it has continued to nag at me since. So, in order to find a suitable response, I have donned the hat of literary gumshoe. I'm on the case.

The question/commentary combination came from Jeanette Larson, Texas librarian, children's

picturebook writer, and author of *Bringing Mysteries Alive for Children and Young Adults*. Here is what she wanted to know: "Here we have three Latino writers of mystery, but aside from you, are Latino writers not writing mysteries for kids, or are publishers not publishing them? Why is there not the diversity in children's mysteries that there is in mysteries for adults?"

I must be frank: I was stumped. I had been brought in by my publisher, Arte Público Press out of Houston to join Villarreal and Cortez to share my two-cents' worth on a panel titled "Tell Young Adults to Get a Clue with Latino Writers of Mystery Fiction," and I was more than happy to take part in the discussion. The presentation afforded me the opportunity to

visit with librarians, meet Villarreal for the first time, and spend some time with Cortez, a good friend. Villarreal is the author of a handful of novels, among them his mystery/thriller for older elementary and middle level readers, *Who's Buried in the Garden?* Cortez, better-known for her poetry, is quickly building a solid reputation as an anthologist of short fiction and essays. The book she was showcasing at TLA was *Hit List: The Best Latino Mystery*, a collection of noir by Latino/a authors that she coedited

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with Liz Martinez. Though not aimed at the younger readership, it is a project that prompted her to suggest to Dr. Nicolás Kanellos, the independent press's founder and publisher, a second anthology of mystery fiction, this one expressly intended for the younger reading audience.

Mention at the panel of this new book sparked significant interest in the crowd of librarians in attendance. I was excited, too, because Cortez asked me right before we started the panel to submit a story for consideration. Glad as I was about having accomplished so much in one presentation, there was yet this irritating buzz in the back of my head quickly beelining to the fore. Larson's question would soon grow from that bothersome hum into an annoying racket. The educators, panelists, and teacher librarians present that day understood the serious implications of her questions. They originated out of a concern for a segment of the population that, on the whole, remains academically underserved in terms of culturally relevant resources. Certainly books are accessible to them in classrooms and libraries, but there is a noticeable shortage of titles that racial/ethnic/cultural/language minority students can identify with thoroughly. If such books are not there, it follows that readers are not going to find them. If they don't discover them, chances of readers becoming engaged in stories that speak about them and to them decrease, and so, too, do their literacy abilities.

Why make such a specific community of readers my center of attention? When you come right down to it, limiting my focus like this is important due to the latest statistics released by the U.S. Census Bureau. According to the most recent findings, the total population in the US of those identifying themselves as Hispanic or Latino is 16.3% (*2010 Census Data: United States*), and though that number doesn't seem so significant when compared to the population in a state like Texas, the increase nationwide is 43% from 2000. In Texas, those identifying themselves as Hispanic or Latino now number 37.6% of the population, a 41.8% increase from 2000 (*2010 Census Data: Texas*).

So, my reason for writing this article is, in large part, to address Larson's question/observation: Does there exist a list of mysteries by Mexican American authors written primarily to attract young Mexican American readers whose main characters are also Mexican American detectives? (Though Larson was

specific in her use of the term *Latino*, I've taken the liberty to further limit my topic to Mexican American YA detective stories, due to my own cultural background and my expertise in Mexican American YA literature; I understand that there does exist this same gap for all Latino groups, as well as for African American and Asian American readers, but those questions I'll leave for others who are experts in those fields). My second reason for writing this article is that I, as a Mexican American assistant professor in a college of education, have a vested interest in the use of culturally relevant literature in the ethnically and racially diverse classroom, particularly regarding Mexican American children and young adults who are labeled reluctant or nonreaders. The need for solutions to the problems of illiteracy among Mexican American students is obvious, but the resources are few.

Before moving on to this more serious subject, I feel I must give some background on my own reading evolution.

## Getting a Clue

Looking back on my early days of reading, I would classify my younger self as an engaged reader. If it had words in or on it, I read it. While I cannot recall every single book (or cereal box ingredients panel) I got my grubby little hands on in and outside of the classroom, I do remember my first favorite character. His name was Wet Albert, and back in second or third grade, I met him on the pages of our basal text. He was a boy clad in a yellow rain slicker and matching hat and boots. Aptly named, the book's unlikely hero is drenched from head to toe, 24/7, because everywhere he goes a grey cloud is sure to follow, pouring down on him. He seemed to me a very lonely boy because who in his or her right mind would want to play with him and chance getting soaked?

It turns out the only one who does play with him is his sister, but only if it's on a see-saw—wet on his side, dry on hers. Later in the story, Wet Albert turns this apparent curse into a work of epic heroism. Accompanied by his little cloud of rain, he travels the world-over by helicopter to wherever there is a drought. In those days, I did not know he existed as the lead character of his own picturebook titled *Wet Albert*, written and illustrated by Michael and Joanne Cole in 1968. What I did understand then, even though I wouldn't have had the language nor the

academic wherewithal to express this knowledge, was that if another story was going to entice me into the reading act as *Wet Albert* did, it would have to include undeniably compelling characters in search of solutions to problems, large and small.

It makes sense, then, that the next character who generated in me a like response was one Leroy “Encyclopedia” Brown, the young boy detective from Idaville created by Donald Sobol in 1963. In the series, Bugs Meany, the town’s bully, has made it his mission in life to look for any and every way to cause trouble for the gumshoe, who then goes about the business of solving whatever mystery he is presented with, thus thwarting his nemesis’

scheme time and again. In retrospect, I can say it was partly my rooting for one character’s triumph and hoping for another’s ruin that kept me coming back for more. Another had to do with the mystery angle. That is saying something, because even with Sobol’s explanations at the end of the book, I was hardly ever able to figure out the mysteries as they unfolded before me. But I tried. I was growing as a reader, and that meant that a character alone would no longer suffice as the sole motivation for my taking up a book. Now I needed the complication of a plot to keep me turning the pages. The more problematic the better.

I eventually outgrew Encyclopedia Brown but not the detective/mystery genre. I searched the school library’s shelves and came across the Hardy Boys series to fill that gap. Frank and Joe Hardy easily took Brown’s place. The sibling-sleuthing duo did much the same work as their younger counterpart, but due to the lengthier nature of these books, their characters could be fleshed out and the mysteries in need of solving could be multilayered and therefore more complex. Just what a maturing reader needed. Around the fourth and fifth grades, I also became more acutely aware of the opposite sex as such, and not as the cootie-carriers I had assumed them to be. So, when my classmates mentioned Nancy Drew as a detective with her own series, I basically dumped the Hardy Boys for this gorgeous, tough-as-nails girl detec-

tive. Joe and Frank had served their purpose, but they were not as intriguing, in more ways than one, as was Nancy. My elementary school teachers supported my classmates and me by teaching us to choose what we wanted to read and by continuing to send us to the library during class time. It was a magical time. We were reading, and that was enough.

Then came my junior high and high school years, better known to me as the dry years. *Wet Albert* was a thing of the long-ago past, and though the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew were more recent reads, my English language arts teachers made it abundantly clear that these were not works of high literary merit, and therefore would not be assigned to us. Instead, we were required to read de Maupassant’s “The Necklace” or any number of O. Henry’s heavily plot-driven stories with the frequently far-fetched twists at the end. I soon lost interest in reading because I simply couldn’t read myself into the Classics, nor was there the sense of intrigue I had grown accustomed to in my reading to date. Sad to say, my teachers weren’t able and/or willing to make of these pieces what I’ve discovered them to be in adulthood: stories of scheming and trickery. If they had, the stories may well have made a difference at this stage in my reading life. Unfortunately, I was not mentally capable of making that connection independently. The result? I fell out of love with reading. I went from being an active and engaged in-class reader to an aliterate, although some of my teachers would likely have classified me as a non- or reluctant reader.

While middle and high school were dry years for me as far as *school* reading went, I found my way back to the library during my eighth-grade year and rediscovered I enjoyed spending time there. Mornings leading up to the opening bell, during lunch sometimes, and after school waiting for football or band practice to start, I snuck in and scoured the shelves, looking for I don’t know what. I’d pull a title from the shelf and literally judge the book by its cover. If it looked appealing, I’d read the flap copy, then move on to the opening paragraphs or replace it. Depending on whether I enjoyed what I’d read the previous visit, I would go straight back to it or move on to the next book. There was no method to my madness. Without knowing it, though, I was in search of a story that would take me back to the days when I read for the pure enjoyment of it. Jim Trelease (1982) calls this find a “homerun book,” a title so engaging it will

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serve as an initial entry or eventual re-entry into the reading act.

Then one day, I found it. Back then, I didn't keep track of authors and titles, so I didn't know that the book I now credit for bringing me back to reading was Piri Thomas's *Stories from El Barrio*, a collection of tales about Puerto Rican youth growing up in El Barrio in New York City. The first piece I read was called "The Konk," (2006b) about 14-year-old Piri who, like a great many of his friends, is "trying to pass for white" (p. 41). One day, he decides to straighten his "nappy" hair by getting a konk (p. 42). At Roy's Barber Shop, Roy warns, "If you want white man's hair, there's a price you gotta pay" (p. 44). It's a beautiful story of suffering shame because a boy doesn't fit in, and when he attempts to pass for someone he's not, he suffers ridicule at the hands of his own, except for his parents who know what his "hurting [is] all about" (p. 49). His mother wraps him in her arms and says, "Don't ever be ashamed of being you. You want to know something, *negrito*? I wouldn't trade you for any *blanquitos*" (p. 49). I found the story compelling because it was both hilarious and tragic. Its brutal honesty moved me enough that I made sure I reshelved the book where I knew I'd find it on my next visit.

I was happy I did, because the following story I read was "Blue Wings and Puerto Rican Knights" (2006a). This piece is about a boy, Pedro *Pistolas* (Pistol Pete), who is the smallest of the Puerto Rican Knights: "At fifteen, he still looked ten years old, with a baby face and a voice that sounded as if it belonged to a girl. Somehow, wearing a name like *Pistolas* made him feel he was seven feet tall" (p. 70). To compensate, Pedro romanticizes gang life and makes of himself a banger bigger than the universe; unfortunately, his bravado costs him his life. Another tragically stirring tale.

This was the first time in my whole reading career that I'd ever met a character this attractive. Though Pedro *Pistolas* was a Puerto Rican teen living in El Barrio and I was a young Mexican American boy growing up in deep South Texas, the boy spoke my language, and his story, so to speak, was my own. In addition, this story included elements of the thriller I had become familiar with while reading mysteries, but it also contained the cultural connection that I now realize had been missing in the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series.

Though "Blue Wings" by Thomas is not classified as mystery on its face, it most certainly met the criteria for me in junior high school. Dr. Teri Lesesne, in her book *Naked Reading* (2006), describes the appeal of stories of this sort: "Perhaps a large part of the attraction lies in the mentality adopted when we read mysteries. A mystery is a puzzle waiting to be solved by the reader in tandem with the protagonist of the story. Reading mysteries is, in effect, becoming part of the game, part of the puzzle" (p. 33). To me, "Blue Wings" was a puzzle. I was anxious to find out whether Pedro *Pistolas* would make it back alive after a pretty violent gang fight. If he did, would he become a leader among his gang? Or would he be relegated to the rank of follower? Questions like this swirled through my brain. Reading "Blue Wings" served as a solution to my growing aliteracy, and I haven't stopped reading in the thriller/detective/mystery genre since.

Today, I prefer the works of Henning Mankell, Dennis Lehane, Jeffery Deaver, and Patricia Cornwell, among others. When I'm in the middle of any one of their titles, I feel the same excitement that I must have felt as a young reader tip-toeing alongside Nancy Drew as she approached a purportedly haunted house; hunching over a crime scene with Encyclopedia Brown, collecting clues in order to foil Bug's evil plan; or growing increasingly concerned that Pedro has not returned long after the fight. I lose myself in the puzzle like I did in childhood. Nothing matters except turning to the next page and the next, attempting to figure out who did the crime and how, wondering how that tale's hero will fare, and, if I must, falling asleep nights living in the book until I'm done with it.

I count myself among the fortunate ones, though, who was turned on to reading early enough in life, whose parents, in their own ways, promoted reading, and who found for myself the entryway into the act so that in spite of losing touch with it for a couple of years, I picked up the habit again when I found just the right book, with its fascinating characters,

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its riveting tales full of exciting plots and twists, and more than satisfactory resolutions. Just as important, in Thomas's *Stories from El Barrio*, I discovered the cultural connection. Others are not so privileged.

## A Perplexing Piece of the Literary Puzzle

Though not surprised when I read the latest statistics on young adults and their reading lives, or lack thereof, when I do look at the numbers, I cannot help but become concerned. In one of its recent reports, the National Endowment for the Arts (2004) shows that among young adults (identified as those aged 18–24) between the years 1982 to 2002, there was a 28% drop in literary reading, defined as reading “any novels or short stories, plays, or poetry” (*Reading at Risk*, p. 1). There does appear to be some good news. In NEA's 2009 *Reading on the Rise*, then-chairman Dana Gioia writes that the most current findings point toward “a significant turning point in recent American cultural history” (p. 1). According to this study, reading among young adults has increased almost 10% between 2002 and 2008, from 42.8% to 51.7% (p. 4).

I continue to be troubled, though, when I pick up these or similar studies and surveys. Allow me to explain. First, I am distressed because I am a teacher of literacy in a college of education, whose primary duty is to equip my students, future educators themselves, with the tools necessary to ensure that their children can read. When there is a report, formal or anecdotal, that states that children are not reading at a higher percentage, I feel that I am not doing my part well enough. Second, I am unsettled because the findings for my cultural/ethnic group indicate that Mexican American youth are not keeping pace with their white and black classmates. In NEA's reports, for instance, Hispanic young adults trail White and African American young adults by 24.9% and 10.1% in the 2004 report, and by 23.8% and 10.7% in 2008, respectively. The difference remains stark.

The research on the use of culturally relevant literature is by now plentiful and easily available, so I will not spend too much time rehashing it here, but let's take at least a quick glance at it. Simply put, culturally relevant literature is literature in which characters and themes other than those of the dominant culture are presented accurately and respectfully for the express purpose of reaching out to students from nondominant backgrounds who are not active read-

ers. The hope is that these students who are reluctant or nonreaders will see and hear themselves portrayed in the stories they're being asked to read and find a means into the reading act. Much like happened with me and Thomas's “Blue Wings.”

Yvonne Freeman and David Freeman (2004) describe the positive outcome when this literature is made available to these underserved students: “When teachers use culturally relevant books, students understand the books more fully, and, as a result, become more engaged in their reading. When students become more engaged in texts, they are motivated to read more” (p. 7). According to Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown (2010) in their *Essentials of Young Adult Literature*, “Relatively few Latino books for young adults are published in the United States despite the fact that Latinos represent the largest microcultural group . . . and are the fastest-growing segment of the population” (p. 152). What titles are published, they argue, are largely confined to a few recurring themes, including “life in the barrios . . . , identifying with one's native heritage and the culture of the United States . . . , life under repressive Latin American political regimes . . . , and immigration to the United States for economic or political reasons . . .” (p. 152).

Certainly these themes are of cultural interest to many Latino/a young readers. They might well do for non- and reluctant readers what Victor Villaseñor's epic novel *Rain of Gold* (1991) did for Francisco, who arrived in the United States from El Salvador as a young teen with no working knowledge of English. Francisco eventually graduated from high school and enrolled in college. Still insecure about his reading abilities in his second language, Francisco forged ahead nevertheless, opting for a multicultural literature course rather than an easier way out. According to Freeman and Freeman (2004), “once he started reading the book, Francisco couldn't put it down” (p. 7). One reason might be because of the cultural connections he was able to make with this novel.

But the recurring themes listed by Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown may not be applicable across the board. Not all Hispanics make the journey northward into the United States from Mexico, Central America, or South America seeking a better life for themselves and/or their children. Not all Latinos/as are political refugees leaving house and home in Cuba or the Dominican Republic due to opposition to one dictator's regime

or another. Such was the case with Ray Villarreal. He recalls his early days of teaching, “when bilingual education was in its infancy”: “In an effort to demonstrate cultural diversity, the district provided me with books for Latino students. Mostly the literature was about the lives of the Aztecs and the Mayans. I was also given biographies of famous Latinos, such as Cesar Chavez and Rita Moreno. The materials were pretty boring, and the kids didn’t really like reading them” (email interview, Feb. 7, 2011).

Today, there are more culturally authentic titles, but this problem that Tomlinson, Lynch-Brown, and Villarreal point out still exists. Sometimes, brown-skinned, Spanish-speaking characters are not enough. So, if these texts that address such serious subject matter do not draw Mexican American children and young adults into the act of reading like *Rain of Gold* did Francisco, what will?

I contend that introducing this group of non- and reluctant readers to the detective/mystery genre just might do the trick. After all, aren’t most children a curious lot? Aren’t they innately attracted to puzzles? So why not provide them with puzzles to solve on the page? Lesesne (2006) further maintains that “[r]esearch finds over and over again that the one genre enjoyed equally by male and female readers is mystery. . . . What is it about mystery that attracts readers of both genders and from a wide range of ages and abilities?” (p. 33).

That there is no mention in her statement of race, culture, or ethnicity is perhaps the very clue that might lead to a solution for Mexican American children and young adults. That is to say, it is conceivable that the detective/mystery genre alone may be enough to invite a Mexican American child or young adult into the reading community. It stands to reason that if the genre is gender-inclusive and spans across age and ability, it might persuade the Mexican American student, too. Villarreal remembers: “As a kid, I read Alfred Hitchcock mysteries, the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, the tales of Robin Hood and his Merry Men, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and Greek and Roman mythology. I was also hooked on comic books . . . they were ‘guy’ stories, with lots of action, adventure, and suspense. I never read Nancy Drew or the Hardy Boys. [But] Alfred Hitchcock and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle satisfied my taste for mysteries” (email interview, Feb. 7, 2011).

It makes sense, then, that if mysteries grabbed Villarreal’s and my attention, why would they not also attract other children who happen to be Mexican American and in need of just the right kind of book to serve as the catalyst for them?

But the research on the use of culturally relevant literature also suggests minority readers will more genuinely take on a work that tells their story. Much of my work on the subject has been informal and the data anecdotal. For instance, a former student in deep South Texas studying to become an educator

described her fourth-grade daughter as a soon-to-be nonreader . . . until, that is, the girl found her book of entry back into the reading act. Not only did the girl finish reading Xavier Garza’s *Creepy Creatures and Other Cucuys* (2004) on her own in one evening, she also took her mother’s class copy to school the following day to share with her good friend—this without her

mother’s knowledge. The girl later admitted to having “stolen” Garza’s collection of Mexican American bogeyman stories because she knew them so well already, having heard her mother, aunts, and grandmothers tell the exact same Mexican American tales around the dinner table over coffee and sweetbread. The means for her to fall back in love with reading was that these were her stories, tales representative of her culture. Another book, one by R. L. Stine perhaps, may not have done the trick. Garza’s, though, did. Proof like this abounds. Reluctant and nonreaders are more likely to keep turning the pages of a book if the story is somehow about them, if it uses the language(s) of the reader, or if it includes references to his or her culture and history in a meaningful way.

And so now I return to Larson’s big-picture question: Are there any other Mexican American authors writing mysteries/detective stories for and about Mexican American children that could possibly interest them as mysteries, culturally relevant texts, or both? Fortunately, the number of Hispanic titles is on the rise, though not at the rate necessary to keep up with

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the growth of the various US Latino groups in recent and coming decades. The list of Mexican American mysteries for kids is even smaller, almost nonexistent. After a cursory search, I uncovered almost no titles. Then I delved more deeply into this puzzle, the case of the missing Mexican American mysteries for young readers. After speaking with a handful of Latino publishing insiders, I was directed to a few titles (an annotated listing follows), but not more than that. Interestingly, the entire list consists of titles published by Piñata Books, Arte Público's children's and YA imprint, and one of the few presses that concentrate on publishing material by Hispanics.

The call is simple: educators know well that mysteries work to attract a child's attention. They also know that culturally relevant texts do the same for the reluctant and nonreader. Webster (2002) writes that "choosing and using materials that foster these connections [to texts] rests at the center of a culturally responsive pedagogy" (p. vii). Educators understand exactly what Webster means. Their goal has always been and continues to be to provide every single student the opportunity to succeed in his or her literacy life, so they will most certainly put to use such a list, killing two birds with one book. Teacher librarians already search high and low to stock their shelves with the books they know their readers will crack open and love. But if the list of Mexican American YA mysteries is short, what else can educators do but point out the obvious gap?

I argue that it is up to Mexican American authors to write the books teachers and librarians will utilize. After all, if we writers are asked to remember back to our younger days, a great many of us share nearly identical reading experiences: we were fans of the Hardy Boys and/or Nancy Drew, the Hitchcock stories, or other similarly thrilling and mysterious tales. Today, as adults, we continue to read thrillers. We escape into them, trudging next to Kurt Wallendar down snow-covered sidewalks in Malmo, Sweden, in search of as yet unidentified killers. We are hot on the trail of a serial murderer with Scarpetta. We know our heroes will most undoubtedly get their man, or woman. The endings, though not the details, are givens to those of us who follow the genre, yet we continue to read them. So, why not write them? Anthologist Sarah Cortez concurs: "What I would like to see is more of the accomplished Latino/a writers delve into the mys-

tery genre for the YA market" (email interview, Jan. 6, 2011). Chances are that young Mexican American readers will take a similar liking to them. Especially if we combine two irresistible elements—mystery and cultural connections.

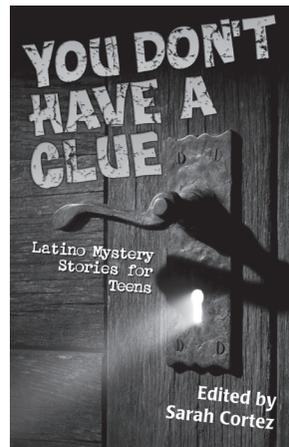
## Throw the Book at Them

Following is a short list of titles, the result of my search that meets both the cultural relevance and mystery genre criteria, with accompanying notations:

- Cortez, Sarah (Ed.). (2011). *You Don't Have a Clue: Latino Mystery Stories for Teens*. Houston, TX: Piñata Books.

This anthology includes 18 stories of varying kinds of mysteries, from the paranormal, to the more traditional detective story, to straight-up noir. The instant success of the adult *Hit List*, according to Cortez,

propelled me into an immediate consideration of *What's next?* Given my own penchant for reading mystery fiction as a pre-teen and teen, the idea was a "natural" for me. My intuition was that people of all ages loved to read mystery and solve crimes in their imaginations. Once I researched statistics about teen readers, my gut-level feelings were confirmed—teens in overwhelming numbers choose mystery to read when given free selection choices. (email interview, Jan. 6, 2011)



Among the selling points of such a book is "that so many of the authors who contributed excellent stories to *You Don't Have a Clue* were first-time YA writers," Cortez states. Many of them are well-regarded and solidly established in the adult mystery and literary circles, and yet they see the need in the young Hispanic community for stories

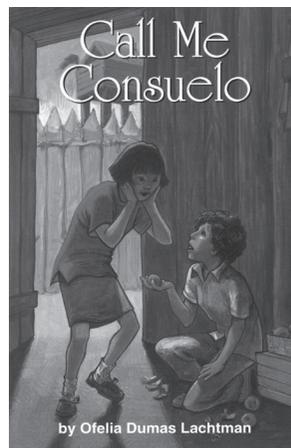
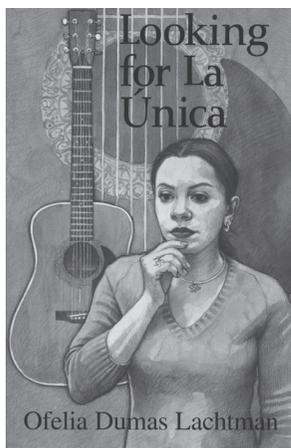
written specifically for them. The collection includes a story titled "No Soy Loco" by Mario Acevedo, author of the Felix Gomez detective-vampire series. His story is not a whodunit in the traditional sense. There is no detective on the case. There is an accident, though, that leaves the narrator hearing voices, but these are no ordinary voices. His search for where the voices

are originating and what they are trying to communicate to him bring him face-to-face with the mysterious woman who seems to pop up everywhere he goes.

Diana Lopez, author of *Confetti Girl* (2009) also contributed a short story. In her piece, titled “All the Facts, A to Z,” we meet Abigail, a failed journalist who is told by the school paper sponsor that her news reporting days are over for not digging deeply enough. On her way home from school, she comes across a suspicious-looking Mrs. Garza, a neighbor who’s “peering through some bushes” (p. 152). More curious still, the old woman claims she’s wearing binoculars because she’s out bird-watching. Readers are also introduced to Abigail’s grandmother, who is not the kindest person, and so it comes as no surprise when her *santitos* go missing. Our failed reporter turns gumshoe to find who pinched the old woman’s saints. She collects fact upon fact, thus solving the case, concluding it’s a dog-eat-dog world out there.

Other contributors include R. Narvaez, Ray Villarreal, Sergio Troncoso, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Daniel A. Olivas, myself, and many others. Teachers will enjoy reading through the whole to find the stories that best fit their grade levels, since the pieces range from middle school through high school. Rest assured, there is something for everyone in this anthology.

- Lachtman, Ofelia Dumas. (2004). *Looking for La Única*. Houston, TX: Piñata Books.
- . (1997). *Call Me Consuelo*. Houston, TX: Piñata Books.



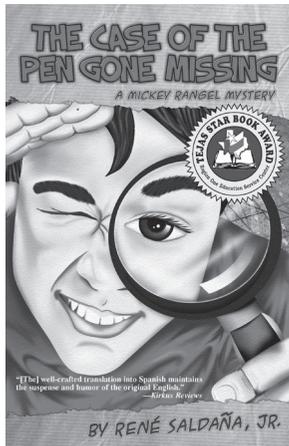
Lachtman has authored various books for children and young adults, among them *Looking for La Única* in which Monica Ramos has recently moved with her

father from their posh home and neighborhood in the DC area to a barrio in Los Angeles. On the heels of solving her first mystery on Lucia Street in *The Summer of El Pintor*, the tables are turned in *La Única*: she is thrown into the role of alleged criminal on the defensive, blamed for being an accessory to a theft. Missing is a guitar, an heirloom in the Salcedo family. She must discover who the real rat is and thus clear her name. During her investigation, she uncovers more than she anticipated, something more precious than any heirloom—her mother’s childhood diary that helps her understand who she is and what this new place means to her family.

Lachtman has also authored *Call Me Consuelo* (1997), a mystery meant for younger readers, as the main character is 12-year-old sleuth, Consuelo, who faces the bad guys on an abandoned movie lot. Of all the authors mentioned, Lachtman is the one who has the longest list of mysteries for children and young adults, including *The Girl from Playa Blanca*, *Leticia’s Secret*, and *The Truth about Las Mariposas*. Interestingly, Lachtman said in an interview that she fell into writing mysteries. It isn’t her favorite form, she says, preferring instead problem-based fiction, as found in her Pepita picturebook series. But she lists as among her reasons for tackling the genre the innate curiosity in children and young readers; like Lesesne, she compares mysteries to “puzzles.” She argues that “Young people love to solve puzzles, love to solve mysteries.”

- Saldaña, Jr., René. (2009). *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing: A Mickey Rangel Mystery*. Houston, TX: Piñata Books.
- . (2011). *The Lemon Tree Caper: A Mickey Rangel Mystery*. Houston, TX: Piñata Books.

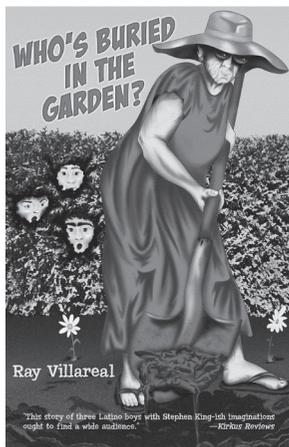
Also from Piñata Books is my own bilingual Mickey Rangel mystery series that includes *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing* and *The Lemon Tree Caper*. Rangel is my tip of the hat to Sobol (Rangel being my Encyclopedia Brown skin, if you allow me the play on words). Mickey is a full-fledged P.I. who got his badge and certificate by taking online classes. On his first case, he must discover who stole Eddy’s dad’s pen given to him by the president of the United States. Toots Rodriguez, the prettiest girl in the fifth grade, is the obvious suspect. She is just too pretty, though, to be the culprit, according to Mickey. Instead, he knows in his gut the real rat is Bucho, his long-time



arch-nemesis. With the assistance of his “angel,” who leaves clues for Mickey in the form of notes, our hero exposes the thief.

In the second installment, Mickey goes in search of the villain who plucked every prize-winning lemon off of Señorita Andrade’s tree, a crime more scandalous since she won’t be able to enter her sure-to-win lemonade recipe into the annual Lemon Festival and Lowrider Bicycle Show that is only a couple of weeks away. The clues all point to Tina, Bucho’s baby sister. In spite of her being the complete opposite of Bucho, she’s Mickey’s only suspect. Until, that is, he finds another note left behind by his “angel,” putting him on the right path.

- Villarreal, Ray. (2009). *Who’s Buried in the Garden?* Houston, TX: Piñata Books.



In Villarreal’s third novel, though his first mystery, three boys set out to solve a murder, but their skills as gumshoes are lacking, to say the least. According to Josh, the narrator, his childhood pal Artie is a fabricator of tales, a nice way of calling him a big, fat liar, and his latest whopper involves Mr. and Mrs. Foley from the neighborhood. The way

Artie tells it, he heard from his cousin that the elderly couple fought all the time, yelling, cursing, calling each other names. Then one day, the fighting sud-

denly stopped, and Mr. Foley has mysteriously disappeared. Next thing you know, there’s a new mound in Mrs. Foley’s backyard, which can only mean one thing to Artie: it’s got to be Mr. Foley’s final resting place. Well, Josh isn’t having any of it. Not at first, anyway. Then one afternoon, he, Artie, and another friend named Wolf Man overhear Mrs. Foley and a lady friend talking: “He never seen it coming,” Mrs. Foley says (p. 69). Then the two women walk over to the flowerbed/graveyard where Mrs. Foley adds that she didn’t have any problems mixing the poison. She then kicks at the dirt and says, “Well, look at you now. Dead, dead and gone” (p. 70). Only then is Josh convinced that Mr. Foley is worm food. Artie hatches a plan: Josh will serve as lookout while he and Wolf Man dig and dig until they uncover the corpse, at which point our bumbling detectives will dial 9-1-1 and become famous. Josh is iffy about the plan and would prefer to tell the police now what they suspect. Always the conniver, though, Artie works it out so that Josh has no choice but to take part in the plan. What happens next is completely unexpected. Older elementary and middle school readers of mystery will enjoy Villarreal’s story for its twists and turns. But they will have the most fun reading about this blundering trio as they fail miserably at the work of investigation.

There you have it: mystery solved. Or is it? My take is that the case is nowhere near resolved, not until even a cursory search for Mexican American YA mysteries online yields a minimum of 20 pages of entries.

I keep telling myself this is not such a bad place to be. At least there is a handful of books available that might assist teachers and librarians attract the young Mexican American reluctant and nonreader. But try as I might to shake that annoying buzz in the back of my head, I just can’t. This short list of titles is not enough for Larson and other like-minded educators to even begin to help remedy the problem of illiteracy and aliteracy among their Mexican American students. The absence of this sort of title is so glaring, the need so obvious, my hope is that this article might serve as a clarion call to other Mexican American writers of mystery who are similarly concerned about our community’s reading problems. Let’s write mysteries for them and in so doing, crack the case.

**René Saldaña, Jr.** is the author of several books for young adults, including *The Jumping Tree*, *Finding Our Way*, *The Whole Sky Full of Stars*, *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing: A Mickey Rangel Mystery*, and *A Good Long Way*. He is an assistant professor of Language Literacy in the College of Education at Texas Tech University.

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