

Opening Hearts, Changing Minds:

YA Lit and Defending the Immigrant Voice

Speech Delivered at the 2017 ALAN Workshop, St. Louis, Missouri

Good morning, everyone. I'm so happy to see you this morning on our last ALAN day together, and I'm so honored to have been asked to speak with you—the fearless ones who travel so close to Thanksgiving for the camaraderie that is here, for all the strength that you gather together to take back with you to your schools.

We are at a time of unprecedented challenges to our concept of what it is to be American, specifically what it is to belong, to be heard, to be valued. This is especially true for teens whose families are immigrants. At about this time last year, the day after our presidential election, I visited a school in New York City where I was to speak to ESL students about my novel *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (2013), or the version they were reading: *Yaqui Delgado Quiere Darte una Paliza* (2016). The students came in red-eyed and crying. Several were terrified of what would happen next. And that scene has been repeated throughout the year as I've traveled this country, peaking at times when issues such as DACA, the Dreamer's Act, and other policy debates have made their way into the headlines.

And so I come to you today as someone who uses writing to provide dignity for young people who are sometimes denied it by those at the very highest reaches of our country.

If you're familiar with my work, you know that I write from the lens of a bicultural Latina. I am the first-

generation daughter of Cuban immigrants, the wife of an immigrant. I proudly draw from both of my experiences to write the work that I do.

A long time ago, I learned that the strongest stories for teens cut closest to the bone and spare them nothing about the difficult facts of growing up. That sometimes means that I write hard stories that will trouble adults and make them squirm, but I believe that I write stories that give voice to questions that kids actually have about who they are and what is happening around them.

Generally, my novels do two things:

One, they allow for readers to see Latino teens drawn not as deficits or drains or gang members or dropouts, but as fully formed, dynamic, strong people, who speak all sorts of ways and live in all kinds of circumstances and who have something to offer their families, their communities, this nation.

And two, I pull readers—all readers, Latino and non-Latino—to a shared place where we wonder about how we navigate the hard things that come at all of us and how our cultural identity and experience impact that. Teens know their families, their schools, the people they fall in love with. Some know loneliness. Some of them will know what it's like to have parents who fail them. Others will be familiar with hunger, whether physical or emotional. A few will know violence that no one wants to name. I write those universal corners and overlay culture on those things—along with love and dignity—and then I ask kids to make sense of it all through those characters.

Here's a look at how that works:

Some of you know my most recent book, *Burn Baby Burn* (2016)—my love letter to New York City in 1977 during one of its darkest years. It's a gritty book about a tumultuous time in American history, and I took pains to add a Latino family to it because we Latinos have always been part of this country's history. A reader can enjoy that novel for its nostalgia: the early women's movement and Dr. Scholl's. The serial killer, Son of Sam. And let's not forget The Soul Train and disco. I chose to write the story of Nora Lopez and her family, which is a tale of family secrets around mental health and juvenile domestic violence, a topic shrouded in shame because no one wants to talk about children who are violent against their siblings and parents. This is not family as we *want* it to be, but it is family as some kids experience it. When we look at the 1970s through *that* lens—the one of an immigrant family struggling to make it economically and socially in New York—what else do we see about our country? What did the 1970s look like to them? How does someone get help when there's no money, no language with which to talk to a doctor, no footing underneath you? What would the women's movement look like to Nora? The police? Her school?

I'm known, for better or worse, for my YA novel *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, where I turned to bullying, the eternal plague of American school life. Piddy Sanchez is harassed to the breaking point at a school that is filled with kids who aspire and kids who have been broken, shards waiting to cut others. I took pains to look at all the ways Piddy has to think about her identity as a student, as a girl, and as a Latina. I let her sink inside this problem of being in the crosshairs of a bully and made her draw strength from who she is in the most essential way. From her mother, from her neighbor Lila, from the cast of immigrant women at the beauty salon, from her own clave—that beat that guides a song in Cuban music and never changes. When I visit schools to discuss that novel, kids often talk to me about their bully, their own horrible experience. They come to me with the terrifying question: What should I do? But just as often, there are the Latina girls who come to say, "What you said about getting bullied is true. What you said about being too white or too black to be Latina is true. Ma? She's just like my ma, all up in my business and too busy to help me."

But the book you have in your box today is *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* (2012). It was my first YA novel, a novel that nearly killed me to write because I had to rewrite it over and over. I wanted to write a sweeping tale of love and adventure, a sort of telenovela with a brain and much less hairspray. I wanted a tale told in the stylized language of the masters who had inspired me, like Isabel Allende. I wanted to use magical realism—Latin America's literary gift to the world—and present it to English-dominant Latino kids so they could hear it, love it in the language they're most comfortable in. But mostly, I wanted to capture a story of migration, which was and is everywhere around us. Migration is the story of my family. It is the story of so many families, whether the migration happened 100 years ago or just last Tuesday.

Truly, I almost couldn't do it. There were all these characters and settings and questions of how graphic I wanted to be. I wrote this book several times before my editor offered a contract. And each time she'd say, "We're almost there," my heart would break a little more. Of all my novels, I learned the most about writing by wrestling all this to the ground. It is my first YA. It is imperfect. But it's the book that feels the most relevant right now. In the end, I suspended the story in time and place so that readers in a classroom might have a space to have a conversation about why people leave everything they have ever known, every person they have ever loved, and why people launch themselves across rivers or set afloat on rafts or give their children to strangers who may or may not take them across a desert safely. I wanted them to wonder and discuss why human beings are willing to come to a place to be loathed and blamed and hated in exchange for a sliver of hope. I wanted teenagers, who are so good at asking hard

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questions, to be able to talk about migration without the politics of our current immigration debates poisoning the well. I wanted them to think about people everywhere who want to hope in the way that teenagers here may take for granted.

So here is what I know: To be a Latina author at this moment in time has been for me a journey as an activist and an advocate and a fierce friend to children. I've entered an effort to change hearts by trying to expand who we write books about, how we discuss their stories, where we place them on our shelves, and to whom we make them available. My work can be read as art or as a political act. It is beloved or deeply suspect. One thing is certain: I do my level best to create my own work and to bring new Latino authors to the table so that all of us have a richer understanding of our collective experiences across our many nations.

The voice and literature of Latino authors is the voice of this country. It isn't "other" anymore. The truth is that Mayberry USA now serves cafecitos and empanadas, and that's where you'll find me. We are 54 million people of every race and economic strata and religious affiliation and orientation and ability. We are multitudes. We are you. We are Americans. And so, I ask you, as educators, to discuss my books as American literature, and let what I have to say become part of the American story that no one has to dig to find.

For my part, all I can do is continue to meet you—as my friend Tim Tingle, who is a Choctaw

author, says—on the path that you are crossing. So, I encourage you to broaden your literary palate to include Latino authors and all diverse authors, to use our novels so that young people can understand one another better, so that they can really do the hard work of valuing one another.

I want to wish you all safe travels back to the people you love. May the coming days be filled with good food and a time to reflect on all that is happy in your life. May the rest of the school year be filled with stories that remind you that we are all one.

Cariños.

Meg Medina is the author of numerous prize-winning works for teens, including Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass, which received the Pura Belpré Award in 2014, and Burn Baby Burn, which was long-listed for the 2016 National Book Award and was a finalist for both the Kirkus Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. She is a founding member of We Need Diverse Books, a faculty member of Hamline University in its MFA program for children's writing, and on the Board of Advisors for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. When she's not writing, she works on community projects that promote diversity in children's literature, especially those with a focus on Latino youth and girls.

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