

Latinidad - Fall 2019: Stephanie Jimenez

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BEFORE YOU SEND IT OUT

“It’s all because of you waaay back in 2005, Marcela. My heartfelt thanks for your advice during Gemini Ink in San Antonio. A weekend I will never forget!”

—Sarah Andre, author of the Damaged Heroes series, <https://sarahandre.com>

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1. Saludos

Talent alone is not enough to become an author. Smart writers get feedback on their manuscripts from trusted readers, publish short pieces in reputable periodicals, and are active members of the literary community. Stephanie Jimenez is a shining example of a writer who made savvy choices that led to the publication of *They Could Have Named Her Anything*, a debut novel that sharply conveys the limitations of privilege and perception. To learn more, read the Q&A below.

Helping Latinos get published,  
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2. Q&A

Stephanie Jimenez is based in Queens, New York. Her fiction and non-fiction have appeared in the Guardian, O! the Oprah Magazine, Joyland Magazine, The New York Times, and more. She is a former Fulbright recipient and a graduate of Scripps College in Claremont, California. Her debut novel, *They Could Have Named Her Anything*, was published on August 1, 2019 (Little A). For more information, visit <https://www.stephaniejimenezwriter.com>.

Q: Poetry is a lovely through line in *They Could Have Named Her Anything*. Which poems and poets most inspire you?

A: I discovered my love for poetry at an early age and some of my favorite poems are by Federico García Lorca. His poem *Canción del Naranja Seco* was a favorite of mine in high school, when I was about the same age as my protagonist, Maria. The poem is about a barren orange tree that can't bear looking at itself without oranges. "Córtame la sombra," the narrator laments, "Líbrame del suplicio de verme sin toronjas." I remember so earnestly identifying with this tree that can't meet its own expectations. It became a sort of anthem for my own outsized ambition.

Q: Income inequality is in the headlines, and arguably plays a central part of *They Could Have Named Her Anything*. When did you begin writing this novel? Did current events influence how the story evolved or is the timing fortuitous?

A: I began writing this book in 2013. That was after the housing crisis of 2008, and only two years after Occupy Wall Street kicked off during my junior year of college. As a native New Yorker who has long noticed the class and race segregation in my hometown, I was happy that young people were challenging the myth of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. In *They Could Have Named Her Anything*, Maria understands that so much of the opportunity you're afforded in life has to do with the level of your income.

Maria comes from a home that is struggling financially, but there's nothing she wants more than to attend a campus college. The book is set in the mid 2000's, before the student debt crisis, and that was a time when I think a lot of us were less critical of the cost of college tuition. I've had many readers tell me that they remember having Maria's overwhelming desire to be at one of those colleges, no matter what. Only now are we starting to have conversations about the crippling burden of student debt and the unjust advantage that wealthy students have over their peers. I wrote *They Could Have Named Her Anything* knowing that the connection between economic inequality and educational opportunity remains an unresolved and urgent issue.

Q: You are a Media Relations Manager at Rewire.News (a leading nonprofit outlet devoted to journalism on reproductive health, rights, and justice), and were a writer at Planned Parenthood as well as a publicist at Penguin Random House. How does your non-profit and publicity experience inform your fiction writing? Does your fiction writing inform your other work, and if so how?

A: I am no longer at Rewire.News, but my experience working there and at Planned Parenthood have informed my writing in innumerable ways, especially in writing about girlhood and sexuality. In the same way that

reading the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde helped me become a feminist, working in reproductive justice helped me see the struggles many young women face to have autonomy over their bodies. Now, I don't shy away from writing honestly about the things that make girlhood so difficult.

My experience working at a publishing house has also been an advantage. Working at Penguin Random House helped me understand the steps of the publishing process in a way that is often a mystery to debut authors. Knowing what to expect helped me manage my own expectations for my book.

Q: You have been a member of the Young to Publishing Writers Group, Latinx in Publishing, and the Jasper Collective. How has your involvement with these groups influenced not only your writing, but the publication of your novel?

A: I've been lucky to have found really fantastic writing groups so early in my career. My involvement in those groups included swapping pages every month, and providing editorial feedback to fellow early-career writers. During that time, I worked on several projects, publishing small pieces online and in print, and working simultaneously on two novels. These groups have provided so much support for *They Could Have Named Her Anything*.

Sadly, publishing this book has taken up most of my time, and I am no longer active in the writing groups that first helped me develop my voice. I am now searching for other writing communities, but I know I can only devote so much of my time to them.

Q: Aspects of the novel could be interpreted as autobiographical, e.g. you attended an elite private school like Bell Seminary. Did these aspects pose challenges and if so how did you manage them? What advice would you offer to writers who are composing fiction with perceived autobiographical elements?

A: Writers of color are still not trusted to write about anything other than themselves, so be prepared to be criticized for writing outside of your particular experience. This doesn't mean you can't experiment with writing characters that aren't spitting images of you—just know that when the time comes to talk about your work, you will need to have an answer.

I've managed to evade questions like "is this book about your life?" by discussing what inspired the novel, and often times that has nothing to do with me but the things I've noticed about American culture at large. For example, I love books and movies set in American high schools, but I am disappointed

that students of color are always secondary characters, not storytellers. I also love New York, but I dislike the simple narrative of the city as a melting pot. These were things I kept in mind while crafting my novel.

I cringe a little every time someone insists on knowing if the book is about me (or that the book SHOULD be about me), but now I've started to use that question to establish myself as an authority. Instead of talking about what I alone have experienced, I talk about what people in my community have experienced and what I've learned through my work in the nonprofit world, and how my book incorporates those voices.

Q: How did you meet your agent? If you don't have an agent, how did you come to be published by Little A?

A: My agent had participated in an online call for pitches from authors of color called #DVPit. On #DVPit day, writers with finished manuscripts describe their work in progress in one tweet and agents can like the tweet as a way of requesting the manuscript. My agent didn't like my tweet, but the fact that she participated in #DVPit helped me know that she might be interested in my manuscript. Weeks later, I queried her. She loved the book, asked me if I were willing to make some changes (I was), and after that we started the submission process.

I learned of Little A after reading an essay by Naima Coster in which she described her process of publishing *Halsey Street*. After Little A offered to buy my book, I actually got on the phone with Naima and she had so many positive things to say, I was confident that I was making the right choice. I would encourage writers to always reach out to an agent or editor's clients before making a decision like this. Usually, writers are happy to talk to you.

Q: Other than honing their craft, what advice would you give to Latinx writers looking to land a book deal?

A: Send out your work. Send your manuscript to anyone who wants to read it. But when you're actively working on a project, make sure you spend more time reading your own work than anybody else's. The more you are able to revise and edit on your own, the less susceptible you will be to taking bad advice from others who might not understand your vision.

With that said, I still think you need a really fantastic editor (or editors), especially when you're publishing your first book. One way to find the right editor is by approaching an author you admire and asking if they offer editing services (many do). These services might seem expensive, but having great

editorial advice is invaluable, especially if you haven't had a lot of eyes on your work yet.

Q: Do you have upcoming projects that my readers should have on their radar?

A: I'm working on a second novel that is much stranger than my first book. My agent needs to read it first and agree that it's a good idea, but I would encourage readers to follow me on Twitter at @estefsays. That's probably the best place to find my event and writing announcements.

### 3. Resources

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#### CAMARGO FOUNDATION RESIDENCIES

Deadline: October 1

Six-to eleven-week residencies for poets, fiction writers, and creative nonfiction writers in Cassis, France, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Residents are provided lodging, a \$250 weekly stipend, as well as funding for transportation to and from Cassis. Spouses/adult partners and dependent minor children are welcome to accompany fellows. The Camargo Foundation prizes diversity and welcomes applicants from all countries and nationalities. For more information, visit <http://camargofoundation.org>

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#### AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY FELLOWSHIPS

Deadline: October 5

The American Antiquarian Society offers at least three fellowships to poets, fiction writers, and creative nonfiction writers for four-week residencies at the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) to support historical research for works dealing with pre-twentieth century American history. For more information, visit <http://www.americanantiquarian.org>

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#### FABULIST FICTION CHAPBOOK/NOVELETTE CONTEST

Deadline: October 15

A prize of \$1000 and publication by Omnidawn Publishing is given for a work of fabulist fiction. For this contest, fabulist fiction includes magic realism and literary forms of fantasy, science fiction, horror, fable, and myth. For more information, visit <https://www.omnidawn.com>

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#### INNOVATIVE FICTION CONTEST

Deadline: November 1

The Ronald Sukenick Innovation Fiction Contest offers \$1500 and publication by FC2, an imprint of the University of Alabama Press, for a collection of short stories, one or more novellas, or a novel of any length. Works that have

previously appeared in magazines or in anthologies may be included. For more information, visit <https://www.fc2.org>

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#### SHORT PROSE CONTEST

Submission Period: November 1 - November 30

The Robert J. DeMott Short Prose Contest offers \$1008.15 and publication in Quarter After Eight for a prose poem, short-short story, or micro-essay. For more information, visit <http://www.quarteraftereight.org>

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#### \$1000 POEM PRIZE

Deadline: November 30

The Munster Literature Centre sponsors The Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize which offers approximately \$1000, publication in Southword 38, and a weeklong residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Annaghmakerrig, Ireland for a poem. For more information, visit <http://www.munsterlit.ie/>

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#### POETRY COLLECTION AWARD

Deadline: December 1

The Cider Press Review Book Award offers a prize of \$1500 and publication for a poetry collection. For more information, visit <https://ciderpressreview.com>

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#### INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN INDIAN ARTS MFA

Scholarship Deadline: December 15

Application Deadline: April 15

The Institute of American Indian Arts' Low Residency MFA in creative writing places priority on indigenous world views in a contemporary context where one can meet and learn from other Native-American writers and poets, as well as non-Natives with similar interests. For more information, visit <http://www.iaia.edu/academics/mfa-in-creative-writing/>

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#### ERNEST HEMINGWAY FLASH FICTION PRIZE

Deadline: December 31

Fiction Southeast Journal seeks fiction of approximately 1500 words or less. Winner receives \$200 and publication. For more information, visit <https://fictionsoutheast.com>

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#### SEEKING NEW VOICES

The Masters Review is an online and in print publication celebrating new and emerging writers. Their New Voices category is open year round to any author who has not published a work of fiction or narrative nonfiction of novel length. Authors with short story collections are free to submit. There is no

submission fee, and published writers are paid. For more information, visit <https://mastersreview.com/>

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“Here is this amazing thing: the more thoroughly you read the manuscripts of others, the better your own editorial eye will become, and this, above all, is what you take back to your own work.”

—Sands Hall

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