

Latinidad - Summer 2019: Alexandra Villasante

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BEFORE YOU SEND IT OUT

“Marcela Landres tells the truth. When she edited my work-in-progress, I not only got an understanding of what that particular manuscript needed, I also got a roadmap to my future career as a writer. With her advice, I feel ready to embark on this journey.”

—Anika Fajardo, <http://www.anikafajardo.com>

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1. Saludos

Timing is everything. Writers who have invested years of their lives researching, writing, and rewriting manuscripts sometimes find that current events make their work either irrelevant or topical. Case in point: *If Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance had been published before 2016, it likely would not have become media catnip.

These days, when Latin-American refugees and undocumented immigrants are hot issues, being a Latinx writer is a decided advantage. Alexandra Villasante, author of *The Grief Keeper*, is the daughter of immigrants and witnessed the burdens taken by her parents as they pursued the American Dream. Their experience inspired her young adult novel’s premise—one as chilling as it is credible. To learn more, read the Q&A below.

Helping Latinos get published,

Marcela Landres

marcelalandres@yahoo.com

<https://marcelalandres.com>

2. Q&A

Alexandra Villasante has always loved telling stories—though not always with words. She has a BFA in Painting and an MA in Combined Media (that’s art school speak for making work out of anything). Born in New Jersey to

immigrant parents, Alex has the privilege of dreaming in both English and Spanish.

When she's not writing, painting or chasing chickens around the yard, Alexandra plans conferences and fundraisers for non-profits. She lives with her family in the semi-wilds of Pennsylvania. You can find Alexandra on Twitter and Instagram at @magpiewrites and visit her web site <https://alexandravillasante.com>.

Q: I found *The Grief Keeper* to be riveting because it feels as if the events in this novel could take place in the US in the near future. How did the concept of grief keeping come to you?

A: Thank you so much! The central idea of *The Grief Keeper*—that of transferring an intangible, emotional burden from one person to another—really came of thinking about the burdens immigrants take on when they arrive in this country. Working two, three or more jobs, jobs that many Americans find too arduous or in some way undignified, jobs taken on to survive and build better futures. My parents were immigrants (they are naturalized citizens now) and were very much willing to do any job they could, no matter how over qualified they were, no matter how difficult the job. Writing is often about asking ‘What if?’—taking something you already know well, and adding an unexpected element. I asked myself, What if the burdens placed on immigrants were intangible? What if there were a way privileged people could burden immigrants with their unwanted emotions and unbearable grief? What would happen to the person giving up their grief? What would happen to the person taking on the grief? In my book, I was able to explore these questions.

Q: Clearly, you did a great deal of research about the migration of unaccompanied youth, LGBTQ human rights, grief, and PTSD. Did you have experience doing this kind of research or did you have to learn how to do it for this novel? What advice would you offer to writers who are research newbies?

A: I was constantly doing research, reading news articles, then searching out the non-profits and NGOs that focused attention on issues of immigration and LGBTQ human rights so I could read their reports, look at their statistical data. In addition, I found a scientist with expertise in neurotransmitters and the role they play in PTSD and depression to help me understand how the brain processes grief on a neurological level. That way, I could make a ‘speculative leap’ as to how a grief-transferring device might work. I also spoke to a wonderful immigration lawyer in Miami who helped me understand how immigration policy was shifting. So, I guess my advice is to dig, read as much

as you can, and when you don't understand something, or need more information, ask experts!

Q: You have a BFA in Painting and an MA in Combined Media. How does your art background inform your writing? And vice versa?

A: I think that visual art informs my writing in the way that I use description. Painters are taught to see more than just a blue couch, for example. They're taught how to see shapes within shapes, degrees of warmth, the 'bones' of an object beneath what can be seen.

Because of this different way of looking, I make sure I anchor description to emotions—it's not just a blue couch; it's a couch the same blue as a character's favorite night sky, or the texture of an old velvet dress that hung in a beloved grandmother's closet.

Another, somewhat unexpected way my art background helps me in writing is that I am excellent at taking on critique! I won't say I love it (who would?) but once you've been critiqued on a daily basis by your whole drawing, painting or photography class for years, you develop a thick skin—and an instinct for how to use feedback.

Q: When you're not writing, you do event planning and fundraising for non-profits. Have you found yourself using that skill set in the promotion of your book?

A: Yes! Event planning teaches you to think methodically about the steps in a particular process—from the signing of a contract to the breaking down of a show. When I'm planning an event, I create meticulous timelines that detail every aspect of an event down to the last quarter hour. When I drafted my marketing plan, that's how I went about it. And when I wanted to tackle pitching myself and others in my debut group for conferences and festivals, I created Excel spreadsheets (Oh, SO MANY Excel spreadsheets!) to sort and track the information. But I think the biggest skill from event planning that's helped my writing career is my ability to adapt. Publishing is not the kind of business that is static or evenly paced. There's a lot of hurry-up-and-wait. There are also times when you need to say YES! to an opportunity on the spot. The preparation and attention to detail allows you to be able to do that. It's kind of a perfect match.

Q: Who is your agent and how did you meet him/her? If you don't have an agent, how did you come to be published by Putnam?

A: My agent is the incredible Barbara Poelle from the Irene Goodman Literary Agency. I met Barbara at the Pennwriters Conference in Pennsylvania back in 2011. She's not a fan of in person pitch sessions. I think she believes (and I agree) that writers should be good at writing, not necessarily giving a three-sentence pitch (though it's always helpful to have an elevator pitch). Instead, Barbara asked for the first 10 pages of my manuscript so she could offer feedback on them. On the first day of the conference, when I picked up my attendee packet at registration, there was a note from Barbara on my pages that said, "SEND FULL MS" which nearly caused me to hyperventilate. It took me a while to revise my manuscript to the point where it was as perfect as I could get it, but when I did, and when I sent it to her, Barbara offered representation. Sounds like a happily ever after ending, but it wasn't exactly. That book, and the two that followed did NOT sell, though a few got close. All this is to say that your relationship with your agent is about longevity, respect, and belief. Choose someone who keeps fighting for you, rooting for you for as long as it takes, even if it takes years. That's the agent you deserve.

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

A: First: Assuming you are reading widely, don't forget to read Latinx authors old and new. There's a breadth of experiences and stories from our comunidad being published today—stories that affirm our cultures while celebrating that we are not a monolith, but contain multitudes. Second: Find your writing community: in real life by joining (or starting!) a critique group. And by attending conferences and festivals. I've been on the planning committee for an incredible annual conference for IPOC kid lit authors, Kweli, The Color of Children's Literature. (<http://www.kwelijournal.org/the-color-of-childrens-literature-conference-3>) So many amazing connections are made at this conference—and so much visibility is given to POC authors.

You can community build online by following authors you admire. I'm part of an incredible group of Latinx writers called Las Musas (<https://www.lasmusasbooks.com/>). We started out as a debut group but we're growing and expanding. In the coming year, we hope to offer resources for unpublished authors—details are still being worked out, but watch this space! In other words, community building is the foundation of a sustainable writing life.

(Here comes the disclaimer: You can do everything right and still not land a book deal. As I mentioned, I had three books go out on submission to publishers and be ultimately rejected. The only thing you have absolute control of is your writing. Make that as incredible and authentic as you can.)

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

A: I do . . . but I can't talk about it yet! I'm just excited to get out in the world with *The Grief Keeper*, talking to readers, librarians and writers about what I love most—books!

3. Resources

\$3000 SHORT STORY AWARD FOR NEW WRITERS

Submission Period: July 1 - August 31

The Masters Review Summer Short Story Award offers \$3000 and publication for a short story by a writer who has not published a novel. Writers who have published short story collections are eligible. The winning story will also be sent to agents affiliated with major literary agencies. For more information, visit <https://mastersreview.com/short-story-award-for-new-writers/>

SANTA FE WRITERS PROJECT BOOK AWARD

Deadline: July 15

A prize of \$1500 and publication by the Santa Fe Writers Project is given for a book of fiction or creative nonfiction in any genre. Two runner-ups will receive \$500 each. Carmen Maria Machado will judge. For more information, visit <https://sfwp.com>

WILLAPA BAY AiR RESIDENCIES

Deadline: July 31

Willapa Bay AiR offers monthlong residencies to emerging and established poets, fiction writers, and creative nonfiction writers. The Residency provides lodging, meals, and work space, at no cost. Willapa Bay AiR welcomes residents from across the globe. For more information, visit <http://willapabayair.org>

WRITER'S POLICE ACADEMY

Dates: August 1-4

MurderCon, presented by the Writers' Police Academy, is a special hands-on training event for writers of all genres. Attendees receive the same instruction that's offered to, and attended by, top homicide detectives and investigators from around the world. Classes cover various topics including Clandestine Grave Recovery, Arson Investigation, and The Art of Interrogation. For more information, visit <https://www.writerspoliceacademy.com>

POLITICAL OR SOCIAL ACTIVIST WRITING AWARD

Deadline: August 30

The Thomas Paine Award offers \$1,000 and publication by Defarge Press, an imprint of Hidden River Publishing, for an original book-length manuscript of political or social activist writing. This may be a full-length work, or a collection of essays/articles. The competition is open to international submissions for all writers in English. For more information, visit <https://hiddenriverarts.wordpress.com>

QUEER PROSE AWARD

Deadline: August 31

The Quill Prose Award offers \$1000 and publication by Red Hen Press for a short story collection, novel, or essay collection by a queer writer. For more information, visit <https://redhen.org>

NEW ENGLAND REVIEW

Reading Period: September 1 - November 30

The New England Review seeks fiction, poetry, nonfiction, drama, translation, creative writing for the web site (NER Digital), cover art, and art for their website. They encourage submissions from writers of every nationality, race, religion, and gender, including writers who have never been affiliated with an MFA program and whose perspectives are often underrepresented in the literary world. For more information, visit <http://www.nereview.com>

NOVELLA PRIZE

Deadline: September 30

Dzanc Books offers \$1500 and publication for a novella. For more information, visit <http://www.dzancbooks.org>

\$3000 POETRY PRIZE

Deadline: September 30

The New Criterion Poetry Prize offers \$3000 and publication by Criterion Books for a poetry collection that pays close attention to form. For more information, visit <https://www.newcriterion.com/bookstore?mode=poetryprize>

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Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine publishes award-winning authors and first-time writers alike. They seek stories in which the characters, rather than the science, provide the main focus for the reader's interest. For more information, visit <https://www.asimovs.com>

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“Everybody walks past a thousand story ideas every day. The good writers are the ones who see five or six of them. Most people don't see any.”

—Orson Scott Card

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