

Latinidad - Fall 2017: Sylvia Mendoza

Contents:

1. Saludos
2. Q&A: Sylvia Mendoza
3. Workshops: A Writer's Survival Guide
4. Resources: \$25,000 Prize For Socially Engaged Fiction

BEFORE YOU SEND IT OUT

“Marcela Landres’ feedback was like having a third eye taking an objective look at my words and finding a deeper, truer meaning. Her advice was—and continues to be—invaluable. Marcela has a gentle but firm approach to dissecting the language and suggesting stronger, more vibrant choices. Together, we’ve outlined the work that needs to be done step-by-step in the next few months in order to make my work shine in the best possible light. The best part is, although I fought tooth and nail to maintain some of the original material which she suggested excising, when all was said and done, she was spot-on with her analysis, and the language of the novel now flows unencumbered, as it should. I wish I had thought to contact her sooner so that I could be further along the editing journey and closer to the finished product. I can’t wait to start my next novel so that I can have the pleasure of her feedback. Thank you again, Marcela, for being steadfast, true, and brutally honest.”

—Alfonso Ramirez, <http://alfonsoramirez.net>

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1. Saludos

It’s no coincidence that Sylvia Mendoza has written the first ever biography for kids of Sonia Sotomayor, as Sylvia has spent her career spotlighting wise Latinas. From interviewing the likes of Sofia Vergara, Shakira, Cristina Saralegui, and others who make a difference for Latino communities worldwide to publishing the classic collection of mini-biographies *The Book of Latina Women: 150 Vidas of Passion, Strength and Success*, Sylvia is as inspiring as the women about whom she writes. To learn more, read the Q&A below with Sylvia Mendoza, author of *Sonia Sotomayor: A Biography*.

Helping Latinos get published,
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2. Q&A

Sylvia Mendoza is the author of six books, including the classic collection of mini-biographies *The Book of Latina Women: 150 Vidas of Passion, Strength and Success*. A popular speaker on the inspiring topics she writes about, Sylvia motivates audiences, especially women and teens, to value their own stories and celebrate their strengths and dreams on the road to self-empowerment. Published in all genres, she has also earned many awards for journalistic excellence. As the author of *Sonia Sotomayor: A Biography*, Sylvia launched the Middle School “Living History” series for Zest Books. For more information, visit <http://sylvia-mendoza.com>

Q: What inspired you to become a writer?

A: What inspired me to become a writer was growing up on the road with a dad in the Navy and a mom who was intuitive. Uprooted every few years, we were far from our extended family in South Texas and in Northern California. Making friends in new schools was tough, especially as my brother and I got older. The saving grace is my mom took us to libraries. Her answer for me was books and diaries. They gave me some transition time. With reading I could escape to other worlds until I felt comfortable in mine, comfortable enough to venture out and make a friend or two. Writing was my salvation. I was able to vent about an onslaught of emotions that came pouring out from not fitting in to feeling alone, to losing connection with my roots.

Eventually I was able to harness all of that diary writing into more a positive direction and energy. When I had to write my first book report in 5th grade, I was in heaven. To read a book and write about it? Best of both worlds! With a great high school English teacher once we came back to San Diego (Mrs. McPhee) I wrote about more: culture, people, love—detailed stories of what surrounded me. Through it all, I built up resilience and a love for pen and paper and took every writing class I could.

I ended up heading to USC (University of Southern California) where I majored in Journalism. With a couple more phenomenal professors guiding me, like Arnold Hano and Felix Gutierrez, I knew writing stories was what I was meant to do and left there with a couple of newspaper job offers and an “Outstanding Graduate in Journalism” award. But I took a leap of faith to become a freelance writer on my own instead.

Q: You've written articles for magazines and newspapers plus authored romance novels. How does your journalism inform your fiction and vice versa?

A: As a journalist, I pay attention to details. When I have to, I melt into the woodwork and watch people, listen, take notes. Think of your reader. Your reader isn't there. If your reader closed her eyes and you read a passage of your work to her, would she be able to "see" that character rub her callused hands together? The bedroom that you entered that faces the ocean? The food that is sizzling on the stovetop?

When I started writing fiction, I'd already had many bylines in newspaper and magazine articles. My critique group was so gracious and helpful. They told me I could write "longer" sentences. In journalism, we are taught to write short and to the point. So I learned to let go of the rules I'd learned. Sometimes I'd literally close my eyes and say the lines first. I wanted to hear what they sounded like. I aimed for a more poetic flow, not like a news story.

Now, I'm comfortable writing in fiction and non-fiction. In the end, what we want in fiction, journalism, creative non-fiction is to tell a compelling story. I trust my voice. And I trust my writing experience to home in on the story that needs to be told.

Q: Sonia Sotomayor: A Biography is your first book for middle grade readers. What were the challenges and rewards of making the leap from writing for adults to writing for children?

A: When I wrote *The Book of Latina Women: 150 Vidas of Passion, Strength, and Success* it changed my life, personally and professionally. I was moved by the stories of these incredible Latinas who made such an impact on our communities. My goal was to keep writing stories of inspirational women, especially women of color.

I had the honor and privilege of seeing Justice Sotomayor when she came to speak at the University of San Diego years ago. When she walked into the theater, she had such a powerful presence, we all sat up straighter like we didn't want to miss a word or gesture. She challenged us to follow our own dreams. When I exchanged a few words with her afterwards, I was like a groupie; forever changed again.

When I got the contract with Zest Books to write *Sonia Sotomayor: A Biography* I was over the moon. The rewards were many. I joyfully researched her for a year, and with every bit of information, I was more inspired by her

journey. The challenge was writing in a way that would engage middle grade and YA readers.

I came back to storytelling. What was the most interesting detail to me? That's where I wanted to start the story for them. My editor was great, and his edits were spot on. They all made my manuscript better. My friend who is a children's librarian brought me many YA biographies to study for their different stylistic approaches—and I found my own rhythm.

But how could I go wrong? I had to trust the details. Sotomayor is touted as the most powerful Latina in the United States. From the age of nine, she knew what she wanted. She was discriminated against for being a girl, being Puerto Rican, being poor. Her father died from alcoholism. She had diabetes. And was raised by a mom who had to work two jobs to keep her and her brother in Catholic school.

But she loved school and knew she was smart. And didn't let any of the obstacles keep her from her goals and doing the right thing on her journey through Princeton, Yale, being a lawyer, judge, and eventually being tapped by President Barack Obama.

The biggest reward was being inspired all over again by Justice Sotomayor, and sharing her story with kids. I spoke at a charter school in Los Angeles and every seventh and eighth grader had a copy of my book. They could tell me something they liked about her. It was awesome. I want these young readers to know that if she could do it, they can do whatever they want, too.

Q: In addition to writing and speaking, you are a professor at Palomar College. Has teaching enhanced your writing? What have your students taught you?

A: I teach Media Studies, Journalism, and Creative Writing classes at Palomar College, Mesa College, and UCSD (University of California, San Diego/Extension). Teaching definitely enhances my writing, not only because I have to stay sharp and relevant in the subjects I teach, but because I learn so much from my students.

A writer can't be in a cave all day long. I want to experience life and people. Teaching is a good way to do that. My students are brilliant, visionary, and help me see new perspectives. They remind me of hope and the need to take risks. They remind me to add depth and perspective and emotion to what I write. And most importantly, they remind me that everyone has a story to tell if we just take a minute to listen.

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 Zest Books?

A: My agent is Leticia Gomez of Savvy Literary Agency. We met way back in the 1990s when we were both part of the group of launch authors for Encanto bilingual romance novels released by Kensington. I always had a great respect for her (and have remained friends with other Encanto authors, too!), and when I was looking for an agent a few years ago, our paths crossed again and it was the right fit.

Q: If you knew then what you know now about the book business, what would you have done differently?

A: This is a great question. I am surrounded by writers. Journalists. Fiction writers. Professors who teach writing. My critique group. As I read this question, I think of them. We always talk about writing and where we are with our projects and goals.

In the end, though, I don't think I would have done anything differently. It's all been a process. I made choices, good and bad and didn't act on some. I don't want to dwell on "What if's" or regrets.

I have a plaque near my desk that reads, "You're right where you're supposed to be . . . Serenity."

I have to say, I've met some of the most phenomenal people in the publishing world and have learned something from every single person I've ever interviewed—and that's been hundreds of people. I'm doing what I love and what I feel is my purpose and my passion—how blessed am I?

That's not to say that I'm not dreaming that my next novel will be an auction book or a New York Times bestseller. I dream big for my writing. My goal is that I become a better writer with every project, every book, every article. So many projects, so little time.

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

A: Sometimes writing isn't enough. Learn more about the business. Go to a conference, join a professional writer's organization, meet people in the industry, take classes, develop your brand, learn social media. And travel—or at least leave your comfort zone. Expand your horizons. This is a business.

Writers lament that we are “creatives” and that business/marketing is not our forte. It’s true. But we have to be the entire package. Be someone your publisher would want to promote.

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

A: With Zest Books, I’m contracted for a second book on the wonderful astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. This is for the Living History Series for kids which celebrates inspiring men and women of color. It’s the first time I’ll get to write about such an inspiring male figure in contemporary society, so that’s exciting!

But my agent is waiting for the book of my heart—and that’s what I really want to finish next. A women’s fiction novel. My kids know the characters like they’re extended family. My son even dreamed about the book cover. It is time. And I’m ready.

3. Workshops

Slice Literary Writers’ Conference

WHAT: A Writer’s Survival Guide Panel

At a past Slice conference Francine Prose explained how she balanced writing with motherhood: from the time her sons boarded the school bus to the time they returned, she wrote. Junot Díaz told the Wall Street Journal that he sometimes writes sitting on the edge of the tub: “My ex would always know I was going to write because I would grab a notebook and run into the bathroom.” Balancing writing with the rest of life is often so overwhelming, it can seem that those who succeed know a secret the rest of us missed. Whether we are parents, students, employees, or just plain procrastinators (or a combination of these roles), it’s often a constant struggle to find the time and the right place to write. So, how does the writing ever get done? A group of authors reveals how they manage to block out time for their work without compromising other life essentials. Glean tips on how to find time in overcrowded schedules and how to optimize productivity when you do steal those precious moments for your work.

WHEN: Sunday, September 10, 4:30 p.m. – 5:40 p.m.

WHERE: St. Francis College, 180 Remsen Street, Brooklyn, NY

WHO:

Rumaan Alam, Author, Rich and Pretty
Dave Essinger, Author, Running Out
Michele Filgate, Writer, Book Critic
Lisa Ko, Author, The Leavers
Marcela Landres, Editorial Consultant
Courtney Maum, Author, Touch

REGISTER: Visit <https://slicelitcon.org>

List of upcoming workshops: <https://marcelalandres.com>

4. Resources

\$20,000 POETRY FELLOWSHIP

Deadline: October 1

A nine-month fellowship—which includes a \$20,000 stipend, health insurance, office space, and housing—at the Stadler Center for Poetry at Bucknell University, is given to a poet who has not published a full-length collection. For more information, visit <https://www.bucknell.edu/stadlerfellowship>

\$25,000 PRIZE FOR SOCIALLY ENGAGED FICTION

Deadline: October 12

The PEN/Bellwether Prize offered \$25,000 and publication by Algonquin Books for an unpublished novel that addresses issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships. For more information, visit <https://pen.org/literary-award/penbellwether-prize-for-socially-engaged-fiction-25000/>

SEEKING LONG-FORM WRITING

Deadline: November 1

Hayden's Ferry Review is a semi-annual and international literary journal whose main purpose is to introduce the world to up and coming writers. They seek long-form writing in English and translations in prose which defies the bounds of the short-story, perhaps a novella, and poetry in any form which develops a scope and complexity that cannot be contained in just a few pages. For more information, visit <http://haydensferryreview.com>

\$2000 SHORT PROSE CONTEST

Deadline: November 15

The Robert C. Jones Short Prose Contest offers \$2000 and publication by Pleiades Press with distribution by Louisiana State University Press for a collection of short stories, flash fiction, essays, or lyric essays. For more

information, visit <http://pleiadespress.org/about/guidelines/prose-contest-guidelines/>

SEEKING SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

Deadline: December 1

The Ab Terra International Science Fiction Anthology for Brain Mill Press, edited by Yen Ooi, seeks science fiction short stories (not fantasy) with cultural flavors from far-reaching corners of earth. They welcome submissions from people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ writers. For more information, visit <http://www.brainmillpress.com/>

\$3800 POEM PRIZE

Deadline: December 1

The Peter Porter Poetry Prize, one of Australia's most prestigious prizes for a new poem, offers approximately \$4000 and publication in Australian Book Review for a poem. For more information, visit <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/prizes/peter-porter-poetry-prize>

LESBIANS IN THE CITY

Deadline: April 30, 2018

Sinister Wisdom, a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal, seeks stories, photos, drawings, interviews, and poems that tell how the city changed what being a lesbian means to you. For more information, visit <http://www.sinisterwisdom.org/lesbiansinthecity>

EERDMANS BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

Eerdmans Books for Young Readers seeks stories that celebrate multiculturalism and diversity for children of all ages, from babies through young adults. For more information, visit <https://www.eerdmans.com/Pages/YoungReaders/EBYR-Guidelines.aspx>

NEW GUARD SEEKS SHORTS

The New Guard showcases authors individually for thirty days on their online component BANG! Each author installment is made up of three pieces in any combination: poetry shorts, fiction, or nonfiction. For more information, visit <http://www.newguardreview.com/bang/>

GUERNICA MAGAZINE

Guernica is an award-winning online magazine which is always looking for new voices. Their contributors come from dozens of countries and write in nearly as many languages and include J. Malcolm Garcia, Julian Rios, and Edith Grossman. For more information, visit <https://www.guernicamag.com/>

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“Sometimes, idealistic people are put off the whole business of networking as something tainted by flattery and the pursuit of selfish advantage. But virtue in obscurity is rewarded only in Heaven. To succeed in this world you have to be known to people.”—Sonia Sotomayor

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