

Latinidad - Fall 2022: The Neapolitan Sisters

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BEFORE YOU SEND IT OUT

“The Acentos Review has just published my short story, Zumarraga’s Faith, in their July 2022 issue. Check it out! Thank you for starting me on this journey of writing short stories. I have a couple of others slated for publication later in the year.”

—Sandro Piedrahita, piedrahitasandro@yahoo.com, <https://acentosreview.squarespace.com/sandro-francisco-piedrahita-zumarraga>

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1. Saludos

Do our siblings define us as much as our parents do? My answer would be a resounding yes, which is why I devoured *The Neapolitan Sisters* by Margo Candela. Candela offers a master class in depicting sisterhood on the page, capturing the inimitable voices of people you’ve never met yet instantly recognize. Her characters are as fierce as they are flawed, and make choices that may perplex others but perfectly suit their mindset. Just as *Sex in the City* viewers once asked, “Are you a Carrie, Charlotte, Miranda or Samantha?” *The Neapolitan Sisters* readers will ask, “Are you a Claudia, Dooley or Maritza?” To learn more, read the Q&A below with Margo Candela.

Helping Latinos get published,

Marcela Landres

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2. Q&A

Margo Candela was born and raised in Los Angeles and began her writing career when she joined Glendale Community College’s student newspaper. She transferred to San Francisco State University as a journalism major, and upon graduation began writing for websites and magazines before writing her first two novels, *Underneath It All* and *Life Over Easy*. She returned to Los

Angeles to raise her son and wrote *More Than This* and *Good-bye to All That*. *The Neapolitan Sisters* is her fifth novel and her first after a decade-long hiatus from writing. She now lives in San Francisco. Learn more at MargoCandela.com.

<https://www.facebook.com/AuthorMargoCandela>

<https://twitter.com/MargoCandela>

<https://www.instagram.com/margocandela>

Q: I have three sisters and can say with some authority that you nailed sisterhood. How challenging was it to write from three wholly distinct points of view? I understand you had a playlist for the novel (<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6r5IiLDcX51yty8iXyjYaC>). Did you have specific songs/books/films/snacks that you used to help ease you into each character?

A: Each of the Bernal sisters has always been very distinct to me. From the first draft, I knew who each of them was and where they'd end up by the last page. During the intense and truncated revision process for *The Neapolitan Sisters*, I was able to switch from one sister to the other without much difficulty. They each have such different lives but what really helped was how they viewed their parents because this was influenced by the choices they made as young adults. Booth Dooley and Claudia left home while Maritza never left, even during her brief first marriage. They also have very different work and personal lives which means their word choices and cadence is unique to them even though there is some overlap from them having been raised in the same home. I primarily write in first person which also makes it easy for me to adapt to my character's voice. It wasn't hard to manage three at the same time but I did have to be careful about being consistent when it came to how they referred to their parents ("our mom" and "our dad" for Dooley, "Mom" and "Dad" for Claudia, and "my mother/Mamá" and "Daddy" for Maritza). It was a distinct marker between the sisters and revealed a lot to me as the writer about their own feelings and thoughts when it came to their parents and themselves.

Music has become important in setting the mood and fostering the right mindset when it comes to my writing. I love to listen to music and very rarely write (or do just about anything else) in silence which is a habit rooted in my childhood. My mother always had the radio on and during baseball season, my dad would listen to the Dodgers play-by-play as he did his weekend chores. At the same time, my older sisters would be blasting their music so loud, us younger siblings would have to bang on their bedroom door to get them to turn the volume down so we could hear what we were watching on TV. On top of all that noise, there was plenty of yelling to be heard, talking over each

other, plenty of arguing, and much laughter. So, yeah, I'm used to a certain level of noise and, at this point in my life, I get to choose what it is. This is why putting together a playlist and then listening to it as much and as loud as I want is a luxury I not only enjoy, but it's also one I don't take for granted.

When choosing the music for The Neapolitan Sisters playlist, I went for what sounded right as opposed to what songs were popular in 2003. I really love this playlist and go into detail as to why I picked each song in the official book club guide, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kpgStjJPGXubM7yfM-CUZpuGSmUW491R/view>. Just a head's up, the discussion questions contain major spoilers. As for snacks, just about anything bread is my snack, meal and treat of choice. And I still like a good action movie, but I try to keep eating and movies out of my writing space. Less distraction and crumbs!

Q: So much of Latino storytelling, whether for adults or children, seems to overlook that Latinos can have careers and colleagues. In contrast you infuse work culture into your novels, often with tantalizing detail such as Claudia working the room at an industry screening. Is this a conscious decision on your part? What kind of research did you do?

A: I have a fascination with work and the dynamics that occur between people in the workplace. A lot of on-the-job interactions mirror private and personal interactions with friend and family. There is a constant push-and-pull between their jobs/careers and family/personal lives. And, even when they don't particularly like their jobs, they still find their work lives much more satisfying and logical than their personal or family relationships.

Making a character's job central to her identity is just natural part of developing who they are and exploring their lives through work also allows me to vicariously try out jobs and careers I'd never consider pursuing in real life. As soon as I know what a character does for work, I start researching using a variety of sources, the internet, message boards, books, news outlets and magazines. Once I have a basic understanding of what it is my character does for a living and why they do it, I'll ask someone who does the same kind of job what they like about it, what they don't, and will listen for anecdotes. I also practice a degree of artistic license but the journalist in me strives to be as accurate as possible.

Q: The Neapolitan Sisters is your fifth published novel. Has writing fiction gotten easier with each book? Have you needed to adjust your writing routine?

A: Writing is a hard-won privilege that I've made many sacrifices to be able to do again. I'm very aware of what an anomaly this second-chance opportunity

is and don't intend to let it go to waste. With my first four novels, I was raising my son and wrote around his needs as he was my priority. Through sheer force of will and by following a very strict schedule, I managed to be very prolific but that kind of output wasn't sustainable for many reasons. Once he left for college, I not only had much more time to myself but also time for myself. As soon as I sorted through most of the noise that had drowned out my creativity, I was able to focus on writing. What I quickly realized is that even though I wanted to write, what I needed to do was work on regaining my confidence. This took a lot of mindfulness and being uncomfortable with where my mind sometimes went. I'm lucky that I have a great group of friends who not only encouraged me but let me give voice to the doubts without trying to "fix" me. I'm grateful I was able to sort through those issues with humor and compassion for myself and with the support from others who I reached out to for help.

I'm a lot less strict as to when I can write. While revising *The Neapolitan Sisters*, sometimes, after a full day of writing, I'd turn my computer back on in the evenings which I couldn't and wouldn't do before. Allowing myself to write when the mood or need arises is new for me and I look forward to enjoying this freedom for the next books. But I still like a schedule which is why I block out times to workout, run errands, space out in front of the TV and, especially, connect with friends. Taking a break from writing is just as important as getting writing done.

Q: Some writers assume that once they have an agent they're set for life, not realizing that the author-agent relationship is like a marriage—it requires maintenance and sometimes ends in divorce. You've had multiple agents. What did you learn from each (no need to name names!) that you now find helpful in managing your writing career?

A: Agents and authors are only human and humans are as wonderful as they are fallible. Because of this, an agent-author relationship needs regular check-ins to make sure both parties are on the same page or at least are reading the same book. People change as do their needs in any relationship, sometimes both parties can adapt and other times it's best to move on. It's not easy to sign with an agent and it's even harder to sign with a good one which is why the impulse to just go with whomever expresses even a modicum of interest or staying with an agent who isn't necessarily "the one" happens a lot. This mindset is a disservice not only to the author but also the agent. An unhappy author will spend a lot of time being unhappy and nothing is more distracting than being annoyed by what is or isn't going on with your agent.

Having had dealings with a number of agents and having signed last fall with my third, I've learned that direct, clear communication and a willingness to listen is the best way to approach setting goals, meeting expectations and having uncomfortable conversations. Being able to ask for what you need from your agent and a realistic understanding of what your agent can do to further your career is central to successful partnership.

Q: If you knew then what you know now, what would you have done differently before you sought publication of your first novel?

A: Nothing and everything! I was driven by instinct and informed by what I'd read in *Getting Published for Dummies* as well a lifelong love of reading and awareness that there was a lack of stories that reflected a larger Latina experience. When I wrote my first novel, *Underneath It All*, I adapted what I'd learned in journalism school so I was very strict about word count and structuring each chapter like a long form feature story. Once I had completed and revised a draft of the manuscript, I attended a seminar you gave sometime in 2002. I had to stand in the back of the room as I was still nursing my son at the time but paid very close attention. You told us it was possible to get published but the odds were stacked against us not only because publishing is a very selective business but because we, as writers of color and primarily Latino, were underrepresented at all levels in publishing which is still very true.

I'm still amazed that I'm a published author and even more so that it happened again after a decade's long gap between *Good-bye to All That* and *The Neapolitan Sisters*. This life is not one I could have ever imagined for myself and I have a very good imagination! I'm still learning and challenging myself to become a better writer as well as having less self-judgment and a more open attitude toward experiences of all kinds. Except for skydiving—not interested and not going to happen.

Q: Clearly, you have many stories in you. Are you working on multiple projects right now, or are you focusing on one at a time? What might your next book be, and how soon may we hope to hold it in our eager little hands?

A: I may have not been able to do much of any writing in the years between *Good-bye to All That* and *The Neapolitan Sisters* but I did think about what I'd write once I could. This why I have more than a few stockpiled ideas and a couple of half-finished manuscripts waiting for my attention. I like to think of them as airplanes lined up on a tarmac. With *The Neapolitan Sisters* now fully launched, choosing my next book means having a conversation with my agent as this isn't only a creative decision but also one that must consider what

editors are looking for. I'm looking forward to doing a lot more writing in the form of essays and op-eds too. I'm also active on Facebook [<https://www.facebook.com/AuthorMargoCandela/>], twitter [<https://twitter.com/MargoCandela>] and Instagram [<https://www.instagram.com/margocandela/>] and am mining my journalism skills to put out a monthly newsletter [<https://pages.margocandela.com/newsletter>].

Now that I have the freedom to write, I'm going to make the most of my creativity and passion for what is my life's second most important endeavor. (The first is being a good mom and parent to my son.) I've been told that I'm a fast writer which is why my first four novels were published in the span of five years or so. I can't promise that kind of output this time around, but I do plan on writing the next book in the coming year. As for what kind of book it'll be, I can promise that *The Neapolitan Sisters* is a good indicator of what readers can expect. There'll always be humor in my novels, but I'll be exploring darker and more complex issues with much more honesty and candor. And while I'd never promise a reader a neat 'happily ever after' by the last page, they can expect one that is full of hope after a messy, challenging, and entertaining journey to 'The End'.

Q: Bonus question: Is Austin Ford Taylor a composite of different actors or is he based solely on Matt Damon? :-)

A: This isn't the first time Matt Damon has come up which I find not only funny but very telling about how some people feel about him. I wasn't thinking about any specific man when writing Austin Ford Taylor but rather of the traits and attitudes I've noticed when interacting with men who are both very sure of themselves and also deeply insecure no matter how successful they happen to be or not be. Different guy, same game and they always lose because I ain't playing. So Matt Damon is off the hook, but, hey, if he wants to play Austin Ford Taylor in an adaptation of the novel, I'm more than cool with it.

3. Resources

\$5000 POETRY COLLECTION AWARD

Deadline: October 16

The Alice James Award offers \$5000 and publication by Alice James Books for a full-length, previously unpublished poetry manuscript. In addition to the winning manuscript, one or more additional manuscripts may be chosen for publication as the Editor's Choice. They welcome submissions from emerging as well as established poets. For more information, visit <http://alicejamesbooks.org>

SEEKING SPIRITUAL MANUSCRIPTS

Submission Period: The month of October

Orison Books seeks to publish spiritually engaged fiction and nonfiction of exceptional literary merit. They seek to be broad, inclusive, and open to perspectives spanning the spectrums of spiritual and religious thought, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. For more information, visit <https://www.orisonbooks.com/>

ESSAY COLLECTION AWARD

Deadline: October 31

The Tamaqua Award for a Collection of Essays offers a prize of \$1000 and publication by Hidden River Press for an original collection of essays. This competition is open to international submissions for all writers in English. For more information, visit <https://hiddenriverarts.wordpress.com/awards-deadlines-and-guidelines/the-tamaqua-award-for-a-collection-of-essays/>

RISING WRITER PRIZE IN FICTION

Submission Period: October 1 - November 30

A prize of \$1000, \$500 travel/publicity grant, and publication by Autumn House Press is offered for a first full-length book of fiction. Novels, novellas, and short story collections are eligible. For more information, visit <https://www.autumnhouse.org/>

KURT VONNEGUT SPECULATIVE FICTION PRIZE

Deadline: November 1

A prize of \$1000 and publication in North American Review will be given for a work of speculative fiction in the form of a short story, flash fiction or novel excerpt. They seek fairytale, magical realism, fabulism, the fantastic, horror, Afro-futurism, science fiction hard and soft, and everything in between. All finalists will be considered for publication. For more information, visit <https://northamericanreview.org/>

PATRICIA GRODD POETRY PRIZE FOR YOUNG WRITERS

Submission Period: November 1 - November 30

The Patricia Grodd Poetry Prize for Young Writers is open to high school sophomores and juniors. The contest winner receives a full scholarship to the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshops. In addition, the winning poem and the poems of the two runners-up will be published in the Kenyon Review. For more information, visit <https://kenyonreview.org/>

C.P. CAVAFY POETRY PRIZE

Deadline: December 1

A prize of \$1000 and publication in Poetry International is offered for a single poem. Poetry International is one of the oldest and most respected literary journals dedicated to publishing poetry from around the globe. Each issue of the print journal brings together poems, portfolios, and prose representing a rich diversity of countries and languages. For more information, visit <https://poetryinternational.sdsu.edu/>

FULLY FUNDED MFA PROGRAM

Deadline: December 1

The Michener Center for Writers is the only MFA program in the world that provides full and equal funding to every writer. There are no teaching duties, a luxury that allows their Fellows to commit themselves fully to their writing, and because only 12 writers are admitted each year, their faculty can devote ample time and energy to every writer. Recent and upcoming faculty and guests include Sigrid Nunez, Carmen Maria Machado, and Joy Harjo. For more information, visit <https://michener.utexas.edu/>

FINE ARTS WORK CENTER FELLOWSHIP

Application Deadline: December 15

Fellowship Period: October 1 - April 30

The Fine Arts Work Center Fellowship offers a seven-month residency for poets and fiction writers who have not published a full-length book in any genre. Fellows are awarded a \$1000/monthly stipend plus a \$1000 exit stipend at the end of the Fellowship to support relocation. For more information, visit <https://fawc.org/>

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“Everything you could ever think of has been written. That’s worth saying three times. You’re not going to think of a new idea, per se, as far as plot or story. What you can infuse it with is your voice, because while every story has been written, there is only one you. We are unique snowflakes. Be yourself. Tell the story about the teddy bear who can talk, but give it your voice. Don’t try to make it Corduroy or Winnie-the-Pooh. Make it your teddy bear. That’s what you can give the world—give the world your voice.”

—Drew Daywalt, author of *The Day the Crayons Quit*, <https://www.drewdaywalt.com/>

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