



## Novelist Lilliam Rivera Builds Worlds for All of Us

As a young reader, she didn't realize people who looked and lived like her were missing from some of her favorite books. "It felt to me like I was reading science fiction in a lot of ways because it was so outside of my own childhood...And I was accepting of it like, okay, cool this is a different life," award winning young adult author Lilliam Rivera tells Alicia in this emotive episode. But her perspective quickly changed after reading award-winning Latino writers in college. She soon became so empowered she came to see herself as an author of books for young adult readers. She is the author of the newly released book, *Dealing with Dreams*.

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- Alicia Menendez: Hey, if you love Latina to Latina, and I know you do, and you want to support the show, it's as easy as listening on Radio Public, a free, super easy app that works on iPhone and Android. When you listen to Latina to Latina on Radio Public, we learn a little bit with every episode you hear. Thanks for listening and for loving the show.
- Lilliam Rivera is an award winning writer of young adult books. Her first novel, *The Education of Margo Sanchez*, established Lilliam as a fresh, go to voice for YA fiction. Her latest, *Dealing in Dreams*, is a dystopian novel that follows an all girl crew as they fight for survival. Like her characters, Lilliam has faced hard choices about who she is, what she wants, and what she's willing to sacrifice to get it. Lilliam, welcome back to New York City.
- Lilliam Rivera: Thanks, thanks, I'm really happy to be back home.
- Menendez: So, my fellow nerd, what did you read growing up?
- Rivera: Oh man, I read all the coming of age Judy Bloom books, but then I also read *A Clockwork Orange*, and *The Outsiders* by SE Hinton, *Frankenstein*, I kind of like all those things. So I was like, I would read everything and anything.
- Menendez: Did you have a favorite Latina character or author?
- Rivera: Gosh, I didn't get into anyone who was a Latina Arthur until I was in college, and that would be Sandra Cisneros, and then Junot Diaz's collection of short stories called *Drown*, that kind of like woke me up, and made me think, okay, the possibility of me being able to write, to be a fiction author, even though it took years after that, but so-

Menendez: Had it occurred to you between your childhood and college that you were reading books where the characters didn't represent you in full?

Rivera: It felt to me like I was reading science fiction in a lot of ways because it was so outside of my own childhood, you know, growing up in the Bronx. So I was like, wow, this is how, what's it like in Wyoming? Like, you know, so, I was accepting of it. Like, I was just like, okay, cool, this is a different life. You know, I was really aware of the fact that there weren't any Puerto Ricans or any Latinos in any of these books, but I was still accepting of it until I got to college, and then I was like, oh, wait, there's only three? Now there's a little bit more, but not much.

Menendez: The early part of your career is focused on non-fiction journalistic writing.

Rivera: Yeah. Because there weren't that many authors that I could turn to and say, oh, I want to be that person. When I was growing up, I was like, well, I could be a journalist. Like, I loved writing, I knew that was the only way I could cope with all kinds of stuff. And so I decided to become a journalist because an English teacher saw something in my writing, and he knew that I had some sort of talent, and he forced me into the high school newspaper, and then I started, yeah, and then I just started doing the journalism thing, got an internship at Rolling Stone, worked at Latina magazine, the first women's lifestyle, bilingual lifestyle magazine, and I just went that route. It was easy for me to like, focus on other people. I didn't really have to focus on myself, in a way.

Menendez: What skills did you take from that period of time that you still use today?

Rivera: Oh, deadlines. I don't mess around. I hit my deadlines, 'cause that's, you know, if you're a journalist, you have to hit those deadlines if you're producing daily content. So to me, it's like, journalism really instilled deadlines and my words are not, like, jewels, you know, I just produce it, I'm not afraid to have people workshop my stuff. I produce and I rework, and rework.

Menendez: Tell me about the moment you decided to try writing fiction professionally.

Rivera: One of the magazines I was working at folded, and I had to-

Menendez: That's so dark, Lilly!

Rivera: I know, I was like, it's journalism. You know, you just bounce back, because there's always another magazine. But it happened to me, and then I was just like oh, I have a break. This is an opportunity for me. So I decided I was going to write a novel. I wrote a novel very quickly, in 90 days I wrote it. And then I rewrote it and rewrote it until it became *The Education of Margo Sanchez*.

Menendez: And then you sold it, and then in your own mind you became a professional writer?

Rivera: No, I felt I was a writer in a sense because I had bylines, but when I became an author, that was when I sold that book. Honestly, when I saw the book in the

library, that's when I felt like, that it was real. Any kid, like myself, you know, my younger self could have just gone to the library and asked for that book.

Menendez: As you were writing *Margo Sanchez*, were you also maintaining a side hustle?

Rivera: I'm always hustling. If there's key for survival, it's always hustling. You know, I used to freelance, I don't freelance anymore, but I always used to freelance, I always writing fashion copy, fashion editor, entertainment editors, celebrity interviews, all that stuff. So I was always doing that while I was having the book come out.

Menendez: How did you land on YA as a genre.

Rivera: It was really easy for me to capture that voice. I felt like every time i would write any kind of fiction, it would always come from that young person's point of view, and I really love it. It's exciting to me, it's like, the discovery of firsts, the first time you kissed, the first time you feel shame, all these firsts, and I love being able to continue working in that genre.

Menendez: My hands are sweating 'cause there's no amount of money you could pay me to go back to that period of time.

Rivera: You don't want to think about that. It's like, yeah, no, I love it. I love being able to like, mine that, and the great thing is I speak to a lot of young kids now whenever I'm traveling for books, they're so hopeful and eager, and yes, they get it right off the bat. If you're able to capture that voice, they'll love you, and if you don't, then they'll know that you're fake.

Menendez: Maybe that's why it makes me so scared. But I didn't realize 55% of YA readers are adults.

Rivera: Yes, which makes sense. I mean, I read a lot of it. There's a lot of experimentation in YA, there's a lot of literary, beautiful prose being written in young adult, so I totally get it, why a lot of adults are reading it.

Menendez: If I asked you to curate a bookshelf of young adult writers you'd like to be compared to or grouped with, what five living authors would be on that list?

Rivera: Wow. I'm gonna shout out Matt de la peña, Meg Medina, and I'll also want to shout out some fantasy authors, or speculative, you know, people who write science fiction, like Sorida Cordoba, and I wouldn't even put like Angie Thomas in there, Danielle Clayton, all these amazing authors that are, have come up just recently, and they're all having the same kind of conversations, I feel.

Menendez: I mean, Angie's book got optioned, *The Hate You Give*, before she even wrote it.

Rivera: Yeah, yeah.

Menendez: People just liked the idea that much.

Rivera: Right, I mean, it's a great moment, like people, they're craving those kind of stories. Like, young people are craving that. You know, we want to be seen on the

big screen. They want to see themselves on the covers of these books. It's really exciting for me to be a part of that.

Menendez: Dealing in Dreams has been described as The Outsiders meets Mad Max, and it centers around all girl gang in a near future dystopia.

Rivera: Ooh! Yeah.

Menendez: What inspired this idea?

Rivera: You know, like I mentioned before, I grew up reading A Clockwork Orange, which is all about violence in these young boys, and I watched The Warriors, this cult film, about gangs in New York, gangs of New York, all these films, and I always in my head imagine, but what would that look like if it were girls? What would that look like if it's only young girls in high school, living that life of violence? Like, kind of incorporating these male traits, and I wanted to write that book. It was the book that I would have loved to have read when I was young.

Menendez: And near future?

Rivera: Yes, 'cause in the future, girls are gonna rule, so that's my future.

Menendez: I know, but I think when we say that, we imagine, like a utopia, not a dystopia.

Rivera: For me, we're dealing in dreams, I really wanted to kind of explore this idea of what does that look like when only women are allowed to have all the decisions, to make all the decisions, and men are subservient? So let's push that idea of, oh, that sounds utopian, but is it really? And who really has the ultimate answer? I feel like power corrupts everyone. So for Nahla, my 16 year old, lead character, she really believes that world. She believes in that idea of women can have all the power, all I have to do is use my fist to get to the top, and we follow her journey as to all these decisions that she makes that are kind of like flawed.

Menendez: It's amazing how quickly having read it you were able to set up the world, and how things that are unique and true only to that world, very quickly become normalized. So for someone who hasn't read the book, what are some elements of the world that you built in that are only true there?

Rivera: Well, my favorite is bodegas. Right? Everyone knows what a bodega is, if you were in New York, you know what a Bodega is, like a corner store. You go there, you get your sandwiches, your breakfast sandwich, and you know, a soda. I grew up with those, right? But in my world, bodegas are really boy-degas, and they're night clubs where the gangs hang out. Only girl gangs get to hang out, and you can quote unquote rent a boy, a boppy. That was taken from a documentary that I watched in Japan, that young professional women can rent boys. Or rent men, you know, to speak to them.

Menendez: I see. You know, I'm not speculating.

Rivera: But I wanted to create that world, what would bodegas look like? You know, we have robotic pinatas, we have codigos, which are just like, they're connections to

the server, and the server, sort of like your Facebook or cell phone, but they're called codigos, I mean, I had a blast just kind of creating these worlds, and just playing around with words.

Menendez: In the Dealing in Dreams world, vulnerability, not allowed. Anathema. How much of that was pulling from your own life?

Rivera: Yes, I love this idea of you have to be hard all the time, like I think I, because I grew up in the Bronx, and because I grew up in the housing projects, there wasn't a lot of room for being soft. You come in always hard. And you know, being soft is being vulnerable, and you don't have time for that because you know, it's a harsh world, and you gotta make it, and all those kind of like cliches, but in a lot of ways, it's the way I grew up, right?

Menendez: And I would argue that the softer a kid you naturally are, the earlier and the more often that message is given to you.

Rivera: Oh yeah, for sure, and the weird thing is, I grew up, it's two sisters and my three brothers, but I learned, like, oh, you have to be hard, from my brothers. You know, so I love that idea. So, I wanted to really write about that, and I feel for a lot of young people of color, there isn't room for failure. So there's this added burden of you have to be hard, and you have to succeed no matter what, at what cost.

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Menendez: You've written about how when you arrived at Binghamton University for college, you were suddenly surrounded by people of much greater means than yourself. Part of the way that you coped with moving between those worlds by drinking. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Rivera: Sure, I mean, you know, I've been pretty public about my drinking, and I'm sober close to 20 years. And I've written about being an alcoholic, so I feel like when I went to college, it was the first time I was away from home, it was the first time I was away from the projects, from my family, you know, my family lives all in the same vicinity, in the same neighborhood. And so I felt very alone. And that was again, that burden of succeeding, right? I couldn't go back to my family and say, "I feel alone, or I feel isolated, there's no one here that I can really talk to, or I'm broke. You know, none of that was happening. So, how did I cope with? I coped through trying to fit in, and trying to fit in was really through drinking.

Rivera: And that was really when I found out that I had a serious drinking problem. Like it hit me in college, and it took a really long time after college for me to get help. Because it's not something that you really talk about with your family.

Menendez: You came home with a black eye.

Rivera: Oh, yeah. From college, yeah.

Menendez: And the joke was that, not the joke, but the sort of rationale in the house was that you must have an abusive boyfriend-

Rivera: Oh yeah, I have family members telling, like insisting, they were like, give me the name of the guy who did that to you. And I was like, no, there is no guy. I did this to myself. But they could not, there was no way of them to fathom the idea that I could not stop drinking. That wasn't even a possibility, but a possibility of some guy hitting me, yes. And I feel like a lot of young Latinas have to go through this, like there's such a huge shame about even admitting that you have this problem, because you're supposed to be ladylike, because there's these roles that you're supposed to be excluding, you're not supposed to drink, you're supposed to have ladylike drinking, you know, and it took a long time, even with a black eye, it took a long time for me to admit that okay, I cannot have a drink.

Menendez: It wasn't just your family that didn't notice, I mean, even after you got married, your husband didn't realize.

Rivera: No. I knew how to hide that stuff. You know, I would just take shots and then go brush my teeth. Afterwards, and when I finally admitted to him that I had a drinking problem, he was floored; he didn't know. He was like, what are you talking about? And then it sort of slowly came into focus, like oh, but that's why those bottles were always empty, or that's why we kept on buying more and more. I was really great at hiding all of that.

Menendez: It strikes me in your retelling of the story, though, that the way it starts with him, is that he realizes more your depression, than anything else, and that somehow your instinct isn't to admit the drinking initially, it's rather to pin it on the marriage, and say that you're unhappy in the marriage.

Rivera: Oh yeah, for sure. If everything's falling apart, then I can figure out a way, an excuse, for it. Oh, then, it's probably this relationship. Or, it's probably because I moved from New York to LA. It's LA. You know, it was always something else, until I was, until I really did feel like I was in a corner, and I could not hide the fact that I was falling apart. There was no way around it. So in a great way, you know, if someone asks me, oh, how you doing, there's sometimes, I'll just tell them how I'm doing.

Rivera: Like I can't hide the fact that I'm sad, or I'm like, oh, I'm feeling down. Or whatever, I'm honest about it to the point that because it'll save, I can't hide behind this pretend. You know, it's easy to hide behind all that stuff because of Instagram and social media, for sure I buy into it, but sometimes I'm like, low.

Menendez: Yeah, no, a public success and a private mess.

Rivera: Yes! And I buy into it, believe me, because I love Instagram, I love pretty pictures of you know, I like to document that life. I think positive is good. But I also, you know, if you follow me on Twitter, I also talk about, oh, I have to write another book, I don't know what I'm doing. You know? Like I still don't know what I'm doing.

Menendez: 20 years into this, have you talked to your family about it?

Rivera: No. I mean, I talk to them in the sense that they know that I don't drink. Everybody does. In my family, they all know. They are aware when I'm at a family functions that I'm not going to drink, but I just, it's not a topic that anyone topic. You know, and that's the same with in general, if I talk about it in public, you know, people will come up to me afterwards, or they'll send me an email, and say, hey, I have a friend, or I'm struggling, and I will gladly tell them my experience about it. So it felt really liberating to write about it, and it felt scary as well.

Menendez: Of course.

Rivera: Yeah. But I'm glad I did it; I'm really open about it.

Menendez: Your first book, *The Education of Margo Sanchez*. You wrote both the first book and the second book, each in 90 days.

Rivera: Oh, yes. Yes.

Menendez: What?

Rivera: Yeah, that's crazy. There's an author who's my mentor, who used to be my mentor, Al Watts, and he does this thing called the 90 day novel. I took his class, his workshop, in LA, and it really is, like every single day he just sort of like, you write every single day for 90 days until you have a finished draft. I mean, by the end of that draft, you know, depending on how many words you produce every day, you will have a full novel. And so I've done that for both *Education of Margot Sanchez* and for *Dealing in Dreams*.

Rivera: Mind you, it's rough draft, it's terrible. But it's a great skeleton for me to start, and then the rewrite process takes years for me. You know, so it took years for both books to just finally get it to wear I liked it. But, you know, producing content, or writing fairly quickly, I try just to get out of my way, and just write it, and let it be.

Menendez: I would find writing a book in 90 days impressive for everyone, but having just written my first non-fiction book as a mom, that's the part where I don't know how you cranked that out in 90 days.

Rivera: Because I was a mom, it felt even that much more pressure to produce, in a way, because I didn't want you know, there was a lot of people who were coming up to me, especially for *Dealing in Dreams* when I was rewriting that book, who were like, well, now you got two kids. You might as well just forget about that.

Menendez: That's the quickest way to get me to do anything.

Rivera: Right? It's like spite. Like, I'm all about rage writing. Like, let's just rage write all day. I'm like, you telling me I can't do it? All right, here I go. So, you know, for me, that's just, that was the way it was for both those books.

Menendez: But does that mean you also have to be less precious, like does that mean you're standing in the grocery line writing, does it mean you're at soccer practice-

Rivera: It's me in my car, I can't tell you how many times I've written in my car. I will have my laptop, I'm waiting for someone to get out of practice, and I'll just be writing in my, you know, I'll find a library, this is the best thing is to find the nearest library, 'cause I don't like to go to Starbucks a lot, and all those kind of coffee places, I just want to go to a library and just work. And so I'll find a library nearby, and I'll just stay there.

Menendez: I found though my home is lethal for me, because there's a part of me that's like, I should be folding laundry. I should be loading the dishwasher.

Rivera: I don't want to do any of those things.

Menendez: Never! Ever! But there's a part of me that like, none of that stuff I want to do can get done until these things are done. So I've had to learn to just kick myself out of the house.

Rivera: Oh, okay. Yeah. No, I can write with everyone talking to me in the kitchen, and asking me for things. And I will just continue, I'll be nodding, yes, and I'll just keep writing. 'Cause I just, there's no way, there's no time, I don't have time to waste.

Menendez: It feels like a lot of writers spend the bulk of their time avoiding writing. And so I wonder, what do you do with that time?

Rivera: I go to museums. I know it sounds corny, but I do, art feed ... to me, if I go to a museum, that feeds my fiction. If I just take a walk, you know, you always have to be observing people, so I just need to walk, and watch people. You know, New York is great for that, LA, not as much, but I find ways to do that. I like to go see movies, and watch Bad Bunny. You know, if anybody wants to buy me a ticket to Bad Bunny, I would go.

Menendez: That's a character study.

Rivera: I know.

Menendez: I hear a lot of writers say that one of the most critical parts of becoming a better writer is becoming a better reader, do you agree?

Rivera: Oh yeah, definitely. If you're not reading, how are you gonna be a writer? I'm constantly reading. You have to find out what's happening, what people are writing, and then you also just have to be informed. If I'm gonna be a poet, I'm gonna read all the poets, you know, I'm gonna read the contemporary ones, and

the ones who made history, so then I could start being a poet, you know, start writing poetry. It's the same way with the young adult, it's the same way with literary fiction. I'm just gonna read as much as I can so then I could you know, get better at my craft.

Menendez: The Education of Margo Sanchez is often compared to Pretty In Pink, Dealing in Dreams is compared to The Outsiders. It feels like a lot of your work is taking the cultural references that we grew up with, and reimagining them with people like us included.

Rivera: Yes, that's what I want. All those things that I kind of grew up with, watching and imagining myself as the title of those books, I want to recreate those into my world, the world that's only mostly people of color. So yes, to The Outsiders, yes to Pretty in Pink. You know, coming of age stories.

Menendez: So which worlds do you still want to recreate?

Rivera: Oh man, I want to do aliens coming down and invading the city, and what's that look like for young people of color. Because you know, maybe you've seen Attack the Block, which is a great movie, and there's a Star Wars, all these like, you know, all the movies that Tom Cruise stars in, right? He's done all of them. And I'm just like, I want to see what people of color would look like, what would that look like if that happened in your city, in your neighborhood?

Menendez: Why, what about it do you think would be different?

Rivera: Oh, man. I just think about Los Angeles itself. Where I live right now is right next to a high school, a lot of brown and black kids come to that high school, or come in through the buses, and then it's originally an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood, and there's a lot of sneaker stores all lined on Fairfax, so a lot of young, hiphop, people just lining up for these sneakers. So there's this really interesting thing that's happening in that neighborhood of people who maybe don't have some money, or don't have money, are spending a lot of money on sneakers. Then orthodox Jewish young girls or boys who don't talk to any of these kids. And it's all in there. What if an alien invasion happened in that neighborhood?

Menendez: I feel like this is meta commentary on gentrification.

Rivera: Oh, yeah. I feel like that's all I talk about. Like it's like, future, gentrification. What does that look like? I'm constantly thinking about history of buildings and the imprints of that history, and what's that look like in the future. So for kids, they're inheriting all that.

Menendez: I want to ask you one more question about Margo, which is, in it, there is part of what you're grappling with is she's always been la princesa, and then she has her fall from grace.

Rivera: Right.

Menendez: That feels like an almost universal Latina experience. When did it happen for you?

Rivera: When did I have my fall from grace?

Menendez: I mean, were you ever princesa?

Rivera: I was never princesa. Not in my family, 'cause there was too many of us, I was always the really super shy, quiet one, that everyone else around them was sort of taking up a lot of space. I feel for me, the Latinx experiences, us navigating all these different worlds. And it's a very American story, right? And I'm constantly writing about this American, Latinx story is just navigating all types of welcoming or unwelcoming spaces, speaking Spanish, not speaking Spanish, loving JLo or not. So you know, to me, that's all, it's very American story. You know, it's coming of age, finding your voice, destroying monsters.

Menendez: I love it. Lilliam, thank you so much.

Rivera: Thank you! It was great.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us today. Latina to Latina was originally co-created with Bustle. Now the podcast is owned and executive produced by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, and me. Maria Murriel was the sound designer on this episode. We want to hear from you. Tell us who you want to hear from, and how you're making the show a part of your life. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com). Remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Spotify, Apple Podcast, or wherever you're listening.

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