



How Author Alexis Daria is Complicating Our Notions of Romance

The Bronx-native was juggling multiple jobs when she decided, at 30, that it was time to stop playing small. It paid off: her first romance novel was recognized with a prestigious RITA Award, and her newest solo project, *A Lot Like Adios*, is continuing to ask powerful questions about who gets to fall in love and what love really looks like.

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- Alicia Menendez: Alexis Daria was consumed with her day jobs. Yes. Day jobs, plural. When she decided at 30 that she needed to make room to pursue her creative passions. The outgrowth, a RITA award for best first book and some of the most buzzed about romance novels in the past few years, including her most recent book, the second in a series, *A Lot Like Adios*. Alexis shares how she got her first deal, how those deals have evolved over time, the hustle she is still in to make writing possible and the art of writing fanfic and the other F-word. Thank you so much for doing this.
- Alexis Daria: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited.
- Menendez: My favorite episodes are episodes where our audience has specifically requested a guest and you are one such guest. Your name has been circulated a number of times, and yet you are like a sphinx. I have Googled you to the heavens. I have listened to multiple interviews you have done. I know almost nothing about you. So fill in the gaps for me. You're born and raised in the Bronx?
- Daria: Yes.
- Menendez: Your family is Puerto Rican?
- Daria: Yes, my mom's side of the family.
- Menendez: So as I understand it, you didn't get a degree in English. You have a ...
- Daria: No.
- Menendez: Oh, you have a degree in computers?
- Daria: I have a BFA in computer arts, but I went through a number of majors before I got to that point.
- Menendez: What did you think you wanted to do?
- Daria: Well, I always wanted to be an artist and for people in New York, I went to the "Fame" school, LaGuardia, for visual arts, but I didn't think that was a viable career path. It's not that it was discouraged, but I couldn't see the way forward with that.
- Menendez: Wow.
- Daria: So I went into finance first when I went to school and that was a total mistake. From there, I worked at a bookstore for six years because I've always loved books and I loved writing. Took me a roundabout path to finishing school. I did eventually get a BFA and I worked freelance for a long time. I worked for a magazine for a little bit. And then when I was 30, I was like, "Well, I've given art kind of a fair shot and I either need to go all in with it or go all in with writing, which I have not given a fair shot." So, that's what I did.

Menendez: Was there something that happened at 30 that kind of pulled you into that choice?

Daria: Yeah, I was doing a lot of work. Finally graduated and I didn't want a full-time day job because I wanted to be able to work on creative projects. But I realized that I was just filling up my schedule with all kinds of odd jobs, PA at a Katy Perry listening party, I was an assistant. I was a babysitter. I was a tutor. I was a photographer for like a catering company. I just did everything. I was a group facilitator for women's group. I did all kinds of things and I never had any time. I wasn't maybe working exactly 40 hours a week, but with all the running round I was doing, I just didn't have any time for myself or my own projects. What the turning point was, I was finally able to pay my bills and have a little extra and feel secure in that. And I was like, "Okay, I finally set up my life in this way to do creative work and I'm not doing it."

Menendez: What was the first step you took once you realized that you wanted to immerse yourself in your creative work?

Daria: Well, I had been writing for a long time. I was writing fanfic when I was in high school and I always loved writing and I thought it was something I would do later. And now later had come, I was 30 years old. And I was like, "Wow, I've never actually finished writing a book." I've started lots of them. I kind of just had to prove to myself that I could do that first. And from there, it was also filling in the gaps in my own writing education, learning about structure and outlining and revision and the publishing industry, things like that. So I tackle each of those things one at a time, building my skillset. I signed up for online workshops. I joined a writer's organization that had a New York City chapter. I joined a critique group. I also, I'm a private tutor for kids. That's my day job. I'm doing it a lot less now, but that was basically what afforded me this opportunity go all in on the writing.

Menendez: I love that.

Daria: I'm like still helping 10 year olds write one paragraph essays.

Menendez: Can you remember the first romance novel you ever read?

Daria: Yes. I was 15 years old and a good friend of mine from the neighborhood in the Bronx, dragged me to our local library. And she was like, "You have to read these two books by Nora Roberts right now." So we went to the library and she found the books for me and I took them out. It was Sea Swept and The McGregor Brides. And I read both of them and I was hooked.

Menendez: One of the things that strikes me about your most recent work, you had me at Hola, A Lot Like Adios, is while the romance is critical, and while these are romance novels, the cousin relationship is so core. These are fundamentally, to me, books about the power of cousins. When in your own life, have your cousins played a critical role?

Daria: Oh my gosh. These books came about because I wanted to write about that cousin bond, and one of my cousins actually coined the phrase, "Primas Of Power", which is the series title now

Menendez: She asking for commission on that now?

Daria: She brings it up a lot. I grew up in New York City, but I'm very close with some of my cousins in California, and I spent a lot of summers out there with one of my, with some of my mom's cousins and all of their kids. And one of them, my cousin, Katherine, she was just my creativity buddy. We made movies and recorded our own little radio shows, and did drawings and wrote stories and built websites. And a lot of times we did that while being on completely opposite coasts. So we were always, it felt like on the cutting edge of Latina to Latina: How Author Alexis Daria is Complicating Our Notions of Romance

technology for how we could talk to each other, without begging our parents to let us make a long distance phone call.

Menendez: When you began writing, did you know that romance was going to be your genre?

Daria: No. I was writing a lot of paranormal stuff with vampires. Obviously, I was a teenager in the nineties, as one does. I was writing fantasy. I was writing YA. I was writing mystery. I tried writing mystery. It's very difficult to write. I tried writing historical, which is also very difficult. And then I got to romance and romance was also a lot harder than I thought it would be, to tell a convincing and believable, romantic story where at the end you're rooting for the characters all the way through, and at the end, you really believe that this is it for them, and they are going to be together, indefinitely after the end of the book,

Menendez: Growing up, like a lot of Latinas, your grandmother would watch telenovelas, they were on in the home. And I've heard you say, and I love this, that she would kick you out not because she thought it was too mature, but because she didn't want you bothering while she was watching.

Daria: Oh yeah. Yeah. We watched all kinds of things. I was always at my grandmother's house with my car. I kind of lived there on the weekends too. So we were definitely watching things we probably shouldn't have been. I remember walking in once and my uncle was watching *Kujo* and I was like, "Okay, I'm going to leave the room." But when the telenovelas came on, she was like, "Okay, it's time for mis novelas", and we had to get out.

Menendez: Growing up, what were the messages that you were given about romance and about desire?

Daria: So my mom is also a big romance reader. So there were tons of romance novels in my house growing up. And my mom would read parts of them to me. The funny parts, not the steamy parts. She'd be like, "Oh my God, Alexis this part is so funny. You have to listen to this." And she'd tell me generally what the story was about. She would listen to some of the books on tape in the car, and then my brother was in the car too. So when it got to those scenes, she would just turn it off. But for some reason, even though I was taking Nora Roberts books out from the library and reading them, I didn't want her to know that I was reading hers, because she caught me once when I was 13, maybe, and she was like, "You're a little young for these." Maybe I was 11 or 12. I don't know. So I didn't want her to know that I was reading them. She knows now. But in terms of the messages I got about relationships though, it was your main focus is school, you are not allowed to have a boyfriend, and also don't get pregnant. So, that was also something that I felt like I had to hide. And then yeah, otherwise we just didn't really talk about it.

Menendez: When I went back to everyone who suggested that we do this episode and it was like, "Well, she's coming. So let me know", your question is, everyone had the same question, and it was, "How much does she pull from her own life? How much of this is from your imagination and how much of this is things that you've experienced or things that you've watched others experience?"

Daria: I would say bits and pieces. Sometimes it is specific things. In *A Lot Like Adios*, Michelle has a nerdy backpack. She's got like a captain America backpack. I have a Captain Marvel backpack that I use as a purse, because it's just easier to wear walking around the city. There's little things like that. But then there are bigger things like the bond with the cousins or the way that the family gossip mill works, or just really the vibe of being in that kind of family and in those kind of family events inside their grandmother's home. Those Latina to Latina: How Author Alexis Daria is Complicating Our Notions of Romance

are things that I pull, and a lot of things that the characters are feeling about a certain thing, like their thoughts about their career, their work, their success, wanting more. A lot of that comes from me too.

Menendez: I've heard you refer to the books, having both a lot of fanfic and the other F word. So let's talk about the other F word because ...

Daria: Sure.

Menendez: My goodness, that feels easy to underestimate how challenging it must be to write those scenes.

Daria: Oh yeah. God. it can be so difficult sometimes because there's so much relying on those scenes. They're not just in there for shock value or anything like that. They're there because they are advancing both the character's relationship and also their own internal arcs, because sex is intimacy and there's physical intimacy and there's emotional intimacy. And I always think about how the characters show up in both regards. So it's making sure that the scene flows, that I'm not overusing the same word over and over again. I keep that the source open in a tab while I write, or at least while I'm revising, the pacing has to be right and it just really has to be the book and fit the characters. And then of course you just don't want it to be boring, because I feel like that would be the worst thing.

Menendez: It would be tragic. Is it possible to write those scenes without being self-conscious?

Daria: I don't know. I used to write in cafes a lot or I would meet up with other writers to write and I would sometimes open up my laptop and I'd be like, "Oh, I'm at a sex scene. Okay. I'm not going to write this right here. It's going to have to wait till later."

Menendez: We've talked with a lot of authors and the process of getting books published really does vary by genre. So for example, I have written a nonfiction book and we've talked about the fact that for nonfiction books, submit 40 page-ish proposal, that really lays out what the vision of the book is, where you're going to take the book, some of the research that you're going to use. For novels, you submit at least your first manuscript to the publishing houses for consideration. With your first book, how did that deal come to be? And then once you'd established yourself as an author who could sell books, which if we're being honest, is what the business of publishing is about, how then did those deals begin to change?

Daria: Well, my first book deal was not the first book that I wrote. It was I think the fourth finished book that I had written. The third one is the one I tried to get an agent with, and I did not get an agent. So I said, "Okay, this book is not the one. Let me write another book."

Menendez: Wait, and tell me when you were saying you were trying to get an agent, were you cold submitting? Were you asking people for introductions?

Daria: Everything? I tried everything. I was querying through their websites or their Submittable. I was entering contests or going to conferences that allowed you to either pitch an agent face to face, or where the final judges were, agents and editors, which is actually how I got my first offer. Was that I had entered a contest and I won and three of the agents and one of the editors who were final judges asked to see the book. And that first deal, it was a two book deal. I had written the first book I sent in, I think just a one page blurb, for the second book. And I had no advance, zero dollars.

Menendez: Wait, explain though, for those who don't know, because you were putting your work out and essentially you were seeing no compensation for it?

Daria: You're basically selling the publisher, your books for free, but with a higher royalty rate, on the back end. But the book is only out in E-book, and so there's no discoverability in libraries, bookstores, in indie books stores, because it's not in print. And then there's very little marketing done for the books because they got it for free. So that was my first deal, and my second deal, I sold on proposal and this was after my first book had won kind of a major romance or award. And the second one, my second deal, people were waiting for a proposal. My agent would message me every often. Just be like, "Just so you know, three more editors asked this week when you're going to submit a proposal." So no pressure, right? And it took me a while to really put it together. But then we got a couple offers right away and to pre-empt with real money on the table, or what I thought was real money. Now I'm hearing about some other deals.

Menendez: Explain what a pre-empt is.

Daria: A pre-empt is when a publisher jumps in with an offer and tries to snatch the deal off the table before anybody else can make an offer. They're like, "We will pay you X amount of money for you to not consider anybody else." So we did a little bit of negotiating and then I went with that offer with, at HarperCollins.

Menendez: Your writing is spectacular. You don't need me to tell you that you now have the accolades and the sales that suggest it. But I do wonder beyond that, how much on the publisher side was seeing that you were reaching and resonating with an audience that they had previously found untapped?

Daria: I do think that was part of it. I think timing was a big part of it. I am in a group with a lot of other Latina romance authors. And we talk about all of this stuff in detail and the kinds of deals that some of us got in the last four or five years, versus the deals that we are getting now, and the deals that some newer authors are getting now, which are much better than they were. So there is progress in that regard, but we do talk a lot about the kind of market support that we're getting at our houses, and what we should all be expecting. And if it's not happening when to bring in our agents, things like that. So I have a holiday romance anthology, that's out with six other Latina romance authors, and we're just friends. And we had decided we wanted to do this.

Daria: It's called Amor, Actually. And it's these interconnected stories with happily ever afters. And we did try pitching it to publishers. We were just going to self-publish it, but my agent wanted to take a crack at it and she represents like half of us. So we put together a proposal. And it was like such a solid proposal. And we have such, all of us together, it was really impressive, and nobody took. We got a lot of, "Oh, we already have a Latinx project. Oh, we don't know how to sell this. Oh, we don't know what to do with the mythology, with this many people." Things like that. So we were like, "Okay, well, our plan was always to publish this ourselves anyway." So we did. So we'll see, but it's just those kinds of things that even with all of the things that all of us have done so far in publishing, it was still just that reminder that, "Okay, we still have to do things for ourselves, sometimes."

Menendez: It was interesting to me, the amount of thought that you put into your covers and the extent to which it is important to you, to have power over your covers because it sends a message about the type of book that it is going to be. Can you tell me how you came to understand that?

Daria: Well, my background is in visual arts, so this is just an area that is very important to me. And like I said, I also had worked in a bookstore. So I had years of looking at countless Latina to Latina: How Author Alexis Daria is Complicating Our Notions of Romance

book covers every single day. I was doing merchandising at one point. So what books are going to go on this table, and which ones look good together, and what message are these covers giving? So that's something I think about a lot with my covers and something that I have bought to get as much control over as I can. And I think my publishers have realized that it's paid off, so they are willing to entertain me on this. With the Primas of Power series, we got this fantastic artist, Bo Feng Lin. I had been following him on Instagram for years and I was writing it in like my vision journal. I was like, "I want him to do my book art," like, every day. And when it came time to talk about it, I was like, "He's the only cover artist that I want to use for this." And Avon really, Avon is my publisher—they got him, and I sent in a 20 page PDF with all of my ideas and color schemes and stuff. And they worked with me on that and were focused on making sure it looked like a romance with both of them on the cover together, in the classic clinch, but in a very fresh and new style. Because for me, one of the things that I don't want is for it to look like everything else. I want it to look like it's my book, but I also want it to be recognizable for what it is, a romance novel.

Menendez: I get that it's about the writing. It is about the story. There're also though is just the truth that you in the process of writing and telling the story, are also normalizing things, especially for women in our communities in particular, that might not be normal for people like therapy.

Daria: Yes.

Menendez: Like using lubricant during sex, and I wonder how important it is for you that beyond the story, the books have that impact?

Daria: It's hugely important to me and I think that it's something that can be done. It doesn't have to like be beating people over the head. It doesn't have to take a lot of work. It just has to take a few lines in the book, carefully placed and carefully phrases, to make it normal because it is normal. So if I'm showing that these are things that are normal for the characters, then that's doing the work right there. They don't have to stop and have a conversation about it. Or in, *You Had Me At Hola*, Jasmine doesn't have to make it a big deal with her family that she's going to start going to therapy. She just does it, because it doesn't have to be a big deal, and yet it feels like it is.

Menendez: Alexis. This was so fun. Thank you for letting me pepper you with questions about your life.

Daria: Thank you. I also just wanted to say that I was so honored and flattered that you asked because I've been following the podcast. And I was like, "Man, that would be so cool to do someday. Like what a cool thing."

Menendez: Thank you, Alexis!

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