



Erika Sánchez is Finding Meaning in the Hurt

The New York Times best-selling author's new memoir, *Crying in the Bathroom*, dives deep into mental illness, desire, "life and death" decisions and the power of creating the life you are worthy of.

Alicia Menendez: Erika Sánchez rose to national prominence with her New York Times best-selling young adult novel, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. Now, in her new memoir, *Crying in the Bathroom*, Erika is picking up where her last work left off, sharing what happens when a rebellious brilliant young Latina wants more for her life than anyone else can imagine, actually begins to live.

Menendez: Erika, I am such a fan. Thank you for being here.

Erika Sánchez: Thank you.

Menendez: I so loved *Crying in the Bathroom*. I have cried, myself, in the bathroom too many times to count. I always feel like when you're writing a memoir one of the biggest challenges is where to start, because you don't want to start with the obvious, which is like, "I was born and I grew up here." And you start with the year your vagina broke, is the title of the chapter. Why the choice to start there?

Sánchez: Yeah. Well, as a youngster, I've always really delighted in scandalizing people. Sometimes I talk to my best friend, from growing up, and we discuss how we just really enjoy making people uncomfortable and it would make us laugh. So I think that is part of it. Also, growing up, I felt an immense shame about my body. I felt like I was dirty, I had to hide my breasts because men would look at me and I would be inviting their stares. I felt so just discombobulated in myself physically.

Sánchez: And I felt that part of the story is a continuation from the novel in a sense, in which this young woman, me, is in college, trying to find herself, trying to make sense of the world and seek pleasure and romance and love, but being told that you're not worthy of that, you're not allowed to have that. You can only have sex when you're married, otherwise you're a whore.

Sánchez: And it's just like, why? I understand that it comes from the Catholic Church and patriarchy and what have you. But I just feel like there's a different way to be now. I feel like my generation and subsequent generations are going to be like, "No thank you, we don't subscribe to these notions because those notions are incredibly harmful to us."

Menendez: I am, like you, raising a daughter. I have two daughters. So I truly hope that is the case. For those who did not read *Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, let's just do a little catching up. You write in this book, "Growing up, I always felt like a pariah, a misfit, and a

disappointment in my traditional Mexican family." Can you give us an example of how that was so?

Sánchez: Yeah, I have many examples. But one was, when I was about 16 I shaved off most of my hair. It was after a really unfortunate haircut, and I was like, "I'm tired of these beauty standards. I don't want to subscribe to this." I was going through this very aesthetic phase and I was really interested in Buddhism. I wore a lot of thrift store clothing because I was like, "I don't care about material things." I thought I was more spiritual than everybody else. So anyway, though, the shaping of that just came naturally as a result of that kind of thinking. And I was fine with it, I didn't really care about how I looked so much. But people were very, very put off by it, upset by it. My father, my mother, they were just so upset. They were like, "How dare you? Why did you do that? You're bringing shame upon your family." I mean, it was inconsequential to me.

Sánchez: So that was one way in which I rejected the gender norms that were given. I didn't agree, I thought they were stupid. I didn't want to heat up tortillas for my brother because he was perfectly capable of heating them himself. That was not something I was going to do. And that created all this conflict all the time, because I was like, "Nah, I don't think so. That doesn't work."

Menendez: That's the adolescent version of wanting more for yourself, which is a tension runs throughout the book, the both wanting more and then the sense of, internally, from you, from yourself, who are you to want more than this? You write, "Success, in my family, meant sitting at a desk. It meant you had air conditioning during the brutal summer months. It meant your boss didn't talk down to you because you didn't speak English. It meant you didn't fear la migra would deport your ass while you were minding your own business, trying to make a living." The hair on my arms stood up when I read that piece of it, because that is the first gen dream. Just get an office job. Just have a solid living. Have a 401k. How did your parents feel then when you were like, "I think, instead, I'll be a poet"?

Sánchez: They were not pleased. They were confused. They were like, "What is that? How do you make a life out of that?" And I didn't really know myself. But I had read many books, I had seen many movies, and I was like, "This is a thing that I'm going to do because I've seen white people do it. So, why not?" And I felt like I was meant to do it, like that was my calling in life. I knew this very young, ever since I was like 12 years old. I decided, "I'm going to be a poet. I want to be a writer." And I never wavered. My parents felt that it was a very risky path. I agree, it was. But there was nothing else for me to do. I didn't know how to function in a regular job. I tried office jobs because I needed to make money. And I tried to just suppress myself in order to just survive and make money and be able to eventually one day have a writing career.

Sánchez: But that was very painful for me. I didn't know how to act in those environments. I always felt like a loose cannon. I would always say things that people thought were weird. It's just like I literally couldn't help myself. So my parents, they never imagined that I would have a life like this. And then finally, when Mexican Daughter came out and my poetry collection came out, they were like, "Oh, I see." It started to make sense to them what it was that I was trying to do.

Menendez: What I loved about learning about this in your new book, is you are this huge public success in that moment. It is the moment when, externally, everyone thinks she's doing so great, she must be so happy. But in reality, your life is unraveling in those years.

- Sánchez: Yeah. It was very surreal to have reached this peak that I always dreamed of. I went to the National Book Awards and I was traveling and I was speaking at all these different events. I felt so excited for my life. And it was like the hard work paid off. Until a culmination of things happened and I burned out in some ways. I think being so public was really hard for me. When I write these very intimate stories, people have very strong reactions and they expect a lot from me. So that was tough to navigate. I wasn't sure how to draw boundaries. That, in conjunction with a really terrible relationship, in conjunction with a change in my medication, being away from my family, my community, in Princeton, New Jersey, all of those things. And then, on top of that, getting pregnant and then not knowing what to do. All of that just crushed me. It was so, so, so excruciating. I don't even know how to describe it. I tried my best in the book, but it doesn't really do it justice. It was like being alive was a penance, it was like, "Why am I here? What am I doing? What's the point? I don't matter." I literally just wanted to disappear.
- Menendez: You write very powerfully about that unexpected pregnancy and about the decision to terminate that pregnancy. What do you want us to know about that decision and about the period that followed?
- Sánchez: I think what is most important to understand is that it was a life and death situation. It wasn't something that I took lightly. It was the worst experience of my life. I'm glad I did it, and yet it was just the worst thing that's ever happened. So these two things are simultaneously true. And I think a lot of people struggle with that sort of nuance, especially when it comes to abortion. I was grieving for so long after I had that procedure. It was such a traumatic experience, for many different reasons. I don't feel like we have to justify our abortions to anybody. No one likes it. It's not a light decision. It's something that many of us do because we might die if we don't. And even so, even if it's just like, "I don't want to have a child right now," it doesn't matter, our bodies should be left alone. We should not have to answer to other people about how we deal with our bodies, what we do to our bodies, because that is dehumanizing.
- Menendez: When you say it was a matter of life or death ... I mean, you referenced changing your meds. You'd long been diagnosed as a depressive. You had a psychiatrist who changes that diagnosis to bipolar expression. Puts you on different medications as a result. And part of what you're not picking up on is the fact that these meds are not working, that this is not actually a fit.
- Menendez: In the period after ... I'm trying to remember in terms of you going to the psych ward ... you realize you need help. Are you with your mom when you realize you need help?
- Sánchez: That was the second time. The first time, I was by myself and I just drove myself to the psych ward because I was like, "I can't go on like this. I might die." And I'm over here with this really prestigious fellowship and all of these accolades, all these beautiful things happening for me. And I'm like, "I don't want to be alive." It was crazy. It was surreal. And people were checking in on me, not understanding what was happening. I wasn't answering emails or texts or anything because I was literally in the hospital, without access to any of that. Yeah, I don't think anyone could have suspected that that was going to happen to me, especially me. It was really debilitating. So I figured, "I need to take control of this situation before I just dissolve into the ether," because that's how it felt. And it was really frightening.

Menendez: Coming out of the second trip to the psych ward you really begin to make some major life changes. What were they? And as your approach shifts, as your energy shifts, how do things in your own life begin to shift?

Sánchez: Yeah. So I came back to Chicago because I felt like I needed to be with my family and my friends. I eventually recuperated over the course of the summer, and that was because I had an outpatient program and then I also got another round of electroconvulsive therapy; which used to be known as electroshock therapy but it is very different now. So that was the last resort for me, because nothing else was working. And I was desperate, I was like, "Please do this for me, because I can't go on." I got, I think, a total of 12 rounds. And by the time I was finished, I began to really feel like myself again. I was eating more. I was able to joke with people. I experienced joy and pleasure again. I was able to read. I was able to write. I just was given myself back to myself. It was an incredible shift. And I'm so grateful for science, like, oh my God, I never would've thought that this was something that I could ever do. And after that, I returned to Princeton, I finished out my fellowship. Which really worried me, I didn't want to quit. I was like, "I cannot give this up, this is too important." So I went back, I did my job, I traveled again. I went to Italy. I went to London. I went to Dublin. I was like, "I'm going to really live it up because I almost died." So it was a really amazing renaissance.

Menendez: You also got married. You have a baby. Everything sort of unfolds from that moment on. The epigraph of *Crying in the Bathroom* really sets the tone for the story that you'll tell and the journey you will take us on, which is from the poem by Emily Dickinson, "The wounded deer leaps highest." How in your own life has that been true?

Sánchez: Yeah, that's a very personal quote because I don't know if that's the case for everybody else, but I think having had such deep trauma ... for many reasons, mostly my bipolar disorder ... that's been, in a sense, a gift, to be able to turn that horrible suffering into something that is beautiful, that is art, that people can connect to. So finding the meaning in the hurt is really what I was trying to get at in the epigraph. And I love the image of it. I think a deer jumping is so exquisite. That, to me, as a poet, I'm just like, "Ah, chef's kiss." It's just one of my favorite images.

Menendez: I cried a lot, reading *Crying in the Bathroom*. And I think it's in part because that experience of being an outsider, of not fitting in anywhere, of not belonging anywhere, is bizarrely so shared as an experience. And you articulated something that I have never quite been able to put my finger on, and it's you pushing away the idea of imposter syndrome and instead putting it this way, "It's not that I believe myself to be fake or unworthy, it's that I question whether a person like me will be allowed to live the way I choose. I've always known that there was something special about me, a part I wanted to share with the world, but my fear was that the world wouldn't see it or wouldn't care."

Menendez: What is your best advice to someone who feels the same way?

Sánchez: Well, there's so much to say. I teach young Latinas all the time, and this has been such a healing experience for me because I want to give them the wisdom that no one gave me. Whenever I teach, I try to make them understand that they may be different but that makes them special, that that is an asset. That being bicultural is an amazing, beautiful thing that we often don't really recognize as a society. So I felt, as a young woman, so alone. I didn't know what it was going to take for me to just have the kind of life that felt right for me. And it seemed to me that society decided that I wasn't worthy of such things, that I, as a brown woman, as a working class woman, or someone who grew up in that environment, I wasn't

worthy of all those things. I mean, I thought I was worthy myself. I was like, "I should be able to do that." But I had so much rejection, I faced so much criticism throughout my writing career, that it was as if I just didn't matter in the grand scheme of things in the literary landscape.

Sánchez: The landscape was very different when I was trying to come up. Almost everyone was white. And here I am, insisting that people pay attention to my work. It felt really demoralizing at times. But I knew that what I had to say was important. I knew that. And I see it now with the young women who respond to my work, where they're like, "I've never seen this before. I'm so encouraged by this. I see things differently." That is what makes writing all of this worth it, is that kind of response, because that's what I needed as a young person. And I have examples here and there, but not enough. So I had to do it. I'm like, "If I want these books to exist, I need to write them," which is what Toni Morrison said. And I really took that to heart.

Menendez: Erika Sánchez, we are also grateful that you stayed with it, that you remained insistent. Thank you so much for your time.

Sánchez: Thank you so much.

Menendez: Thank you, as always, for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you, it makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us, @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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