



Why TV Showrunner Ilana Peña Craves Complicated Girl Characters

Growing up, television writer Ilana Peña was a student of books, where, she says, "girls could be complicated." Now, as creator of *Diary of a Future President* on Disney+, Ilana brings that vision of girlhood to life. She tells Alicia about rising from assistant to writer's assistant to writer to creator, how the early loss of her father taught her to use "grief as an engine," and why being in charge forced her to stop saying "maybe."

Alicia Menendez:

Hey, it's Alicia. As you know, we record these conversations weeks, sometimes months, in advance, so know that the next few episodes were recorded before the protests we've seen across the country. If we're not talking about them, it's because we spoke before they happened.

She says she never saw real girls like her on TV and that girl protagonists rarely grew up to do something great. So, after rising up the Hollywood ranks from assistant to writer, Ilana Peña created a show about a Latina who grows up to be president of the United States. And today, *Diary of a Future President* streams on Disney+.

So, thanks for doing this.

Ilana Peña: Thank you for having me.

Menendez: I'm super excited to talk to you.

Peña: Likewise.

Menendez: Growing up, what were you watching on TV?

Peña: What was I watching on TV? I was actually just thinking about this, because I have a lot of TV writer friends who are like, "I was parked in front of the TV and I watched every episode of *Malcolm in the Middle*, or every episode of this." And there were shows that my family watched together. *Boy Meets World* was one of them, and the Olson twins were huge for me. They had this show called *Two of a Kind*, where their dad was a professor and dated the babysitter, and I loved it. And *Lizzie McGuire* was also big.

But I was thinking about it, and besides *Jeopardy*, which my family also watched religiously, the art that I was consuming the most was books, which is such a typical me thing to say. But I was thinking about where did I fall in love with complex young girls, because it wasn't really TV, because there wasn't a ton. It was books. It was like *Beverly Cleary*, and *Lois Lowry*, and *Phyllis Reynolds Naylor*, and *Meg Cabot*, who wrote the *Princess Diaries*, and it was all these. They were series of books. It was basically TV shows. It was series of books about teenage girls growing up, and I would devour them.

And I was like a reader, so when my TV writer friends get together and it's like, "Oh, I was like a student of television." I watched TV, but I was a student of books, and that's what I

was reading, and that's how I... That's where girls could be flawed. That's where Anastasia Krupnik could hate her little brother, and Alice and her friends could talk about boys in the way that wasn't watered down. You know? That's where the girls were complicated.

Menendez: Diary is a coming of age story. What were you like in middle school?

Peña: I was similar to Elena in a lot of ways. I cared a lot about school. In like seventh grade, we had to mark how many pages we were reading on a little index card, and my... I was very proud of the fact that I kept asking for more index cards. That's the kind of kid I was.

Menendez: We would have been very good friends in sixth grade. We would have only had each other, but we would have been really good friends.

Peña: I shared it with nobody, except maybe my mom. I'd be like... It's not like all my friends were like that. I was just like, "Hee hee, moving on. Because I read for pleasure." My mom got remarried and I moved right before I started sixth grade, and I started a new school in sixth grade, so I think one of the reasons that that time of life is fascinating to me is because I was totally starting over, and I was starting over at a time when I wanted to defy the mold and be different, and I cut my hair off to my ears. I mean, rebellious in the way that a type A, studious kid is rebellious, where I would wear... I got glasses, and I would wear purple glasses, and stuff like that. And I was not a cool kid by any means, because I was so myself, and I do feel like a lot of my adult life has been trying to retrieve that person back, because that's the purest I ever was.

Menendez: I feel that so deeply.

Peña: Right?

Menendez: And we're gonna get to that in a little bit. A lot of similarities to Elena. You already laid out the mom getting remarried, being studious. In what other ways does Elena's life resemble your own?

Peña: Well, probably the biggest is the grief aspect. I think a lot of kids of grief feel this. It's like grief has been an engine in my life, rather than a break. It's been something that's propelled me. It's been something that has inspired me to create in general in a lot of ways, because I lost my dad when I was a lot younger than Elena was. I was five years old and I was very... When I found out and my mom told me, I knew that it was sad, and saw everyone around me crying, but I didn't have the words to... I was just kind of like, "I know this is bad, but I'm not crying myself." And I kind of pretended to cry. And I always say that my life in the arts has been like me doing years of work and studying emotions, and being obsessed with feelings, and characters, and relationships, so that I could understand that one moment when I didn't know how to cry.

So, grief is a big one. I wanted to tell a story about grief that wasn't a tragedy. I see a lot of people that are like, you know, "Oh, Disney, of course there's a dead parent." And I'm like... Because I guess that's in a lot of Disney shows, but it's my real life. And then I'm Cuban American, and I grew up... Elena's mom is Cuban, and she's Cañero-Reed, but for me it was flipped. My dad was born in Cuba. That was just such a... My dad was so proud of two things, being Cuban and Being American, which I think is true for a lot of exiles and a lot of people who come to this country because they want the freedom. And it's funny, because I've always wanted to tell a coming of age girlhood story, but I didn't have the hook till... The president part came like kind of at the end for me in my creative process of like, "What's the way in? Who is this girl?" But then when I landed on it, I was like, "Oh, of course. It's a love letter to this American dream." It's all my dad wanted was for me to

know that I could do anything. The day he turned 18 he registered to vote. He was obsessed with freedom and obsessed with this opportunity, and it always... Once I found it, I was like, "Of course I'm gonna tell a story about this daughter of a Cuban exile that grows up to be the thing that her dad would have wanted her to be."

Menendez: Did writing that and exploring that on the show give you a new window into your own grief?

Peña: Yes. I mean, the short answer is yes. This was the coolest thing I've ever done. I owe a lot of it to a person who's not here to watch it happen. You forget that the good times bring on the grief, too. And like my mom and my stepdad came to the premier. My family had a viewing party in Miami and FaceTimed me as they watched it together. But there's one person who's not there, and it's like in a lot of ways the reason I am who I am, so that's ever complicated.

Menendez: You are younger than I am, but even for you, talking about girlhood is like 20 years ago, so how did you access that perspective in a way that felt authentic and timely?

Peña: You know, it's funny. When we pitched the show, I read from my 12-year-old diary. I read from this diary that... I don't know if you kept journals, but a lot of my friends that I've talked to, specifically my female friends, the journals that they kept were written almost for this invisible audience, like you write like someone's gonna read it, even though it would be the worst thing if someone ever read it. Which is so performative and so TV. So, I read from my diary, and it's so funny. It's like that person, that 12-year-old girl who was like, "I'm putting on a show, but I'm exploring these feelings, but not too much yet, but maybe here..." That's who I am now, and I grew up...

When I was 12 years old, if you had said like, "You're gonna create a TV show." I would have been like, "Of course. Yeah. That sounds great. That, I didn't even know that was a thing, but now that you've told me that, that sounds like everything I wanna do." And then I think if you would have told me that when I was like 24 and I was writing my own stories and felt like nobody was reading them, I would have been like, "I mean, that'd be great, but how? And who?" And so, accessing that 12-year-old part that was like, "Oh, of course," like this is what I'm meant to do, I have the confidence and the belief in myself, that... I feel like I accessed it. I feel like getting to that part was also a big part of selling the show.

Ad: *It is hard to find the time to do just about anything, and when you don't have free time, you can't read or work on personal development. Well, there is an incredible app that solves this problem. I highly recommend it. It's called Blinkist. Blinkist is pretty unique and it works on your phone, your tablet, or your web browser. Blinkist takes the best key takeaways, the need-to-know information from thousands of nonfiction books and condenses them down into just 15 minutes that you can read or listen to. Blinkist is made for busy people like me, like you, who want to get the main points of a book quickly, so you can start using that information right away.*

12 million people are using Blinkist right now and it has a massive and growing library, from self-help, business, health, to history books. I like Blinkist because I can use it anytime, anywhere, when I only have 10 minutes.

I've read these books, and I highly recommend you check them out: My Beloved World by Sonia Sotomayor, and of course, Becoming by Michelle Obama. With Blinkist, you get unlimited access to read or listen to a massive library of condensed nonfiction books. All of the books you want and all for one low price. Right now, for a limited time, Blinkist has a

special offer just for our audience. Go to blinkist.com/latina. Try it free for seven days and save 25% off your new subscription. That's Blinkist, spelled B-L-I-N-K-I-S-T, Blinkist.com/latina to start your free seven-day trial, and you'll also save 25% off, but only when you sign up at blinkist.com/latina.

Menendez: You made one of the leaps that I think can feel impossible for a lot of people, and that's the leap from assistant on Crazy Ex-Girlfriend to writer on the same show. How did you do that?

Peña: A lot of people are like, "Wow, you did this thing. It happened overnight. That's amazing." And Crazy Ex was my fifth job out of college. I was years out. I had been in the slog of assistanthood. I had done a lot of the stories you hear that assistants have done. I had wonderful bosses, but I was sending reminders for eye doctor appointments at 7:30 AM. I was doing everything that was unrelated to my writing.

Menendez: And assisting is really complicated, because if you're really good at it, you almost can never get out from being an assistant. Like it-

Peña: Yeah, and I was unfortunately pretty good at it.

Menendez: Yeah. Right, your competence can actually be your downfall.

Peña: Exactly, and I was kind of finding that, and I was finding that I was in these jobs, and a thing that I tell people, if you're in a privileged enough position to be able to leave a job, know when to leave, because you can get caught and stuck. And people can like you because you're... Most people that I'm giving advice to are competent, and smart, and interesting, and also like a generally good hang, and if someone can get that, they want to hang on to that.

So, I landed on Crazy Ex-Girlfriend as a show runner's assistant to Aline Brosh McKenna and Rachel Bloom, and it felt different for... The biggest reason it felt different was because the show was so in line with my own sensibility. This is the show that everyone talks about, like if there's something that's your voice, go after it. And this was my voice, so it felt different for that reason. And then it felt different because of my bosses, and that's... All of this is luck, and it's luck plus years and years of the slog, but Aline Brosh McKenna and Rachel Bloom are... They nurture young women. They care about promoting women. From the first interview, I had mentioned I was a writer. I had mentioned I had just shot a short film, and they would honor that by giving me tasks, like we would have comedy Twitters for some of the characters on the show. Aline would be like, "Wouldn't it be funny if the law firm had its own Twitter?"

So, I would be writing puns about law and that was part of my audition, I realized. Or even like they were... They had to write a letter for something, and they would be like, "Ilana, can you do the first draft of this?" And it was like not... I wasn't going in there and writing scenes for them, but I was showing them that I could write and I was showing them that I cared. And then a position to be the writer's assistant came open, which is the position that takes notes as all the writers talk, so I was in the building, but writer's assistant is in the room. And I was so excited, and I took that position, and I remember it was actually... It was my birthday. And I pitched my first joke, basically. I pitched a visual joke that didn't make it in, but it got a laugh and made it into the script.

And Aline got out her phone and took a picture of me and tweeted it, and said, "Our writer's assistant just pitched her first successful joke. Happy birthday." I was like, "Well, this is the room I'm in." And I learned everything about being a writer from that room,

because that gave me the allowance to keep pitching, and to just... I was like, "My voice is necessary." And then I started pitching larger things. And I started pitching story. And then there was an episode about a big mental health episode, and Aline and Rachel said, "Do you want to co-write this with us?" And I was like, "Yeah." And that was my next audition, and I was able to be on set for that. I was able to work with the director. I was able to let the vision, like watch the vision from page to screen.

And then luckily the show got a fourth season and they said, "Do you want to stay in the room but move over a seat?"

Menendez: That's amazing. You then make what is truly the hardest leap to make, which is to go from being a writer to creating and executive producing your own show. Tell me what it looked like to bring *Diary* to life.

Peña: It feels like I dreamed it in a lot of ways, because you're right, it was like I was still kind of getting over the shock and excitement of being in the room, and now I was helping to run the room. And I was calling shots. And people were coming to me and saying, "What's your vision for this?" It wasn't that long ago that I was like, "Do I pitch?" I used to write in outlines or scripts, when I would write my notes on *Crazy Ex*, I would write maybe. I would be like, "Maybe she talks more about her fear here, so it lands more in the later beat." And I would literally write the word maybe, because I wasn't sure if I was right.

And I went from having written the word maybe and saying maybe, to having to be like, "Yes. 100%." And standing in my own power. And that was the biggest lesson and the biggest thing, and it was honestly, that's part of tapping into that 12-year-old girl, of someone who knew what she wanted, and someone who... And the craziest thing, because I remember being nervous that I wouldn't know what I wanted, and that I wouldn't be able to access that power, but when somebody is a good collaborator and is having a conversation with you and says, "What do you think?" You can answer. And you can talk with them. And I was very, very lucky to have wonderful collaborators who continued to champion my vision and my voice, and I found myself being able to be like, "Well, this is what it should be." And not saying maybe anymore.

I feel like the biggest thing of last year, whatever time is, whenever the year was that we made the show, was like crossing off the word maybe. Because I would find myself still doing it. When I would be reading a writer's script, a writer that was like sharing in the vision that I had for the show, I would be like, "Maybe..." And sometimes, you need maybe. Sometimes I'm not sure and you want to talk it out. But sometimes I am sure, and I don't need to say maybe.

Menendez: When you found out that the show was getting picked up, was gonna be put into production, you called your mom. What did she say?

Peña: She cried. I remember it was like a very cinematic moment for me. I was on the lot of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and the sun was setting, and I called my mom and I was like, "I think they want all 10 episodes." And she was like, "What?" And I was like, "Yeah, they don't," because I was hoping to sell a pilot. I was like, "Crazy Ex is ending. It'd be great to sell a pilot, so I have something on the back burner." She cried. I think that whenever I share news like that with my mom, we both, without saying it, are like, "God, how cool would it be if your dad could be here?" And that's like anytime my mom cries, I know that that's part of it.

And then of course I probably was like, “You can’t tell anybody yet.” And then she gets very militant with that and really doesn’t tell anybody, because she’s like me, and then we have this little secret for a little, which is nice. But yeah, I think that my mom experienced kind of like the worst-case scenario, and from the way she raised me and my brother, you would never know, because of how much joy we live our lives with and how much we share those joys with her. And I think that’s just always part of it, and especially... I mean, my dad was a lawyer. My parents met in law school. But he wanted to be a writer. It’s always like I’m communicating with my dad and kind of living out this thing that he wasn’t able to fully live out, so that’s always in the air whenever I tell my mom good news.

Menendez: You’ve said that there was concern about *Diary* being perceived as niche. What does that mean and what have you done to avoid that?

Peña: I think that there, when there’s a show about a girl, unfortunately, it is for girls. And if there’s a show about a boy, it’s not just for boys.

Menendez: It’s for everybody.

Peña: Yeah, it’s for everybody. It’s *Wonder Years*. It’s *Malcolm in the Middle*. It’s family viewing. It’s *Boyhood*. It’s literally the movie *Boyhood*. But I do think if there was a *Girlhood*, it would be a chick flick. And I was conscious of that, and I really wanted to write a story that the whole family could watch together, while also celebrating girlhood, while also not shying away from talking about your first bra, or talking about your crushes on boys, because... And I said this in my pitch, too. It’s like you know the boyhood stories almost like they’re ingrained in you, of like the textbook in front of the boner in school, and like stuttering before you ask a girl on a date, and like a big brother being like, “Come on, dude. I’ll teach you how to be a man.” We don’t have a template for girlhood. We just don’t.

And I’m not saying that *Diary* is in any way. I think that... I hope that *Diary* can open the door, so that more people can see it and be like, “This is a show, she has a brother, she has a mom, she has friends, she has ambitions that are universal and specific.” And I think in the writer’s room, we were always trying to tell stories that were universal and appeal to whole families, and also appeal... I mean, a bunch of adults wrote this show. It’s a show that I think mothers are watching with their daughters, and families are watching together, which I’m so grateful for. I also wanted it to be a show that if I was sitting at home, I could turn on Disney+ and I could laugh, just me, by myself. Because I remember what it’s like. And then I could call my mom.

Even if you’re not quarantining with your whole family, you were a kid once and you can remember what that’s like, and you can... And so, when you are a parent sitting there, when you are a mother sitting with your daughter, you’re not on your phone or thinking about the eight million other things. You’re engaging and it is a family show, and I think that that’s... I think that that’s what I set out to do, is make this a show, as much as I love the shows I grew up on, the *Lizzie McGuires*, *Hannah Montana*, *That’s So Raven*, they were on the network for just kids, and then the boy shows were on the networks for the whole families, and I wanted to make something that we could all watch together.

Menendez: Tanya Saracho, creator, showrunner, *Vida*. Gloria Calderón Kellett, *One Day at a Time*. Count both of them among your mentors. How did you cultivate those relationships?

Peña: I met Tanya because I was... I had a staffing meeting on *Vida*, and I couldn’t do it, because it conflicted with *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, but she’d read my work and she was excited to meet

me. And I remember, I felt bad having to be like, “Oh, I have to take myself out of the running. Crazy Ex-Girlfriend is gonna come back and I’m gonna be promoted.” And I had people telling me like, “You’re gonna burn that bridge. She’s not gonna want to work with you. You’ve made it seem like you were available.” And I was like, “I didn’t know if it was coming back.”

And then I remember a couple weeks later was like my first Latina TV writers brunch, because we get together and we have brunch quarterly, and I knew Tanya was gonna be there, and I was so nervous, because everyone’s voice was in my head about how I was gonna burn that bridge. And like voices that knew the industry were telling me that. And I remember I walked in and she gave me the... She looked. I was like, “I’m Ilana.” Like, “Remember me?” And she was like, “Oh my God, of course! You were maybe gonna work on our show!” And she gave me the biggest hug, introduced me to all the Vida writers. I sat with them and she was my sister immediately. And she was like, “I’m so excited that you’re going back to Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, like another showrunner wanted you. How awesome.”

And then, like a couple weeks later, she heard of a feature opportunity and she emailed me and she’s like, “Do you have a feature? Send it to me.” And it was... She just wanted to lift me up, and I was so caught up in the Hollywood, if you let someone down they won’t... That’s not the way Tanya works. That’s not the way kind, giving mentors work.

And Gloria, I met her because I talked to her on the phone like years ago. I wonder if she’d even remember. Years ago, when I was just an assistant, and I asked for advice, because I had a friend who took an improv class with her. Gloria and her husband would take improv classes together for fun, and my friend was like, “Oh my God, Ilana, you and Gloria, you have so much in common,” and so she gave me like 15 minutes of her time. I sat in the car on the Crazy Ex parking lot and she just listened to me, and she talked to me about, gave me advice on getting a manager, on my own work. She said, “I will keep you in mind.” And then when I saw her at the next Latina brunch, it was like, “Oh, Gloria, I did it! Thank you for your advice.” It’s just these women whose goal is to lift people up, and there’s the Untitled Latinx Project, which is this group of women. We just... submissions closed today for this Latinx TV List, which is like The Black List, but for Latinx writers.

And it’s like we still meet. We met on Zoom the other day. It’s always about lifting other people up. It’s always about what can... We are here, like we’ve gotten in the room, you know? And how do we make it so that we don’t let any of our sisters, leave any of them behind.

Menendez: I want to loop back around to something you said, which is so deeply resonant for me, which is that you were most yourself at 12. And then other people beat that out of you, and you are coming back now to being that person. I’m so happy for you that is happening at the age you are now, because it can take longer. What happened along the way that you lost that sense of self?

Peña: It’s a good question. You know, I think growing up can be really beautiful and I think growing up can be really scary. And a lot of the things that made me me, and that I... Parts of myself that I loved were not necessarily cool. I was trying to fit a mold of what I thought I should be, and whether that was with a group of girls that would make fun of me behind my back when I was 16, or like the boyfriend that kind of made me feel small... You really, you sure you want to be in this? The arts? That doesn’t sound very practical. Stuff like that. The people in my life that like all the things about me that were like these... The sparkly

things that made me tick. There were people who would be like... Like, I remember there were girls I was friends with, and they thought I was too nice, and I would defend people they would make fun of, so I was like a wet blanket and they didn't want to hang out with me.

But of course, when you don't want to hang out with someone in high school, you just don't invite them to something, and then you find out, and I would just like feel devastated. And you know, I think also I didn't have a clear path, necessarily. I was like I wanted to act for a while, I wanted to direct, I still do, and I wanted to write, and I didn't know what that looked like. And I kept, I think, fearing that it wouldn't work. You know, my family's all pretty practical, and their paths are very set, and I didn't want to waste all this money on my theater degree if I couldn't do it.

And I think I was like, I was scared I wouldn't do it, and then by the time I went to college, I found people that were kind of my people. But I think growing up, a lot of people try to tell you that the things that make you special are the worst parts about you. And then you have to be like, "Well, no. That's the thing that actually inspired me to write my first play, or that's the thing..." Like, "Oh, you think that I'm too nice? Well, that made me a really good boss when I had my own TV show." You know? I feel like growing up is a very... You can lose sight of your own voice and I started to, and then I was lucky that I knew I had... I was expressing myself in whatever way I was, whether I was in a play or writing a story, and that was how I always returned back to it.

Menendez: Ilana, thank you so much.

Peña: Thank you so much. This was great.

Menendez: Thanks as always for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you are listening, and please leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why TV Showrunner Ilana Peña Craves Complicated Girl Characters." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., June 15, 2020. LatinaToLatina.com

Produced by:

