



What Jennifer De Leon Had to Confront to Become the First Writer In Her Family

The educator and author of the new YA novel, “Borderless,” shares the personal conversation that allowed her to break through as a writer, the unique considerations of writing about an immigrant experience that is not your own, and the dangers book bans pose to young readers.

Alicia Menendez: Jennifer De Leon spent a decade teaching in public schools before making the leap into higher education and committing herself to her writing. Her newest YA novel, *Borderless*, follows a teen girl and her mother as they set off on a perilous journey from Guatemala City to the US-Mexico border. Jenn and I talk about the delicacy of writing an immigrant experience that is not your own, and the very surprising action, not hard work, not writing groups, not button the chair, that truly allowed Jenn to step into her future as a writer.

Jenn, thanks so much for doing this.

Jennifer De Leon: It's my pleasure.

Menendez: All of your bios say you grew up in the Boston area and I'm just going to need more detail than that. Where did you grow up near Boston?

De Leon: So I was born in Jamaica Plain, and when I was-

Menendez: I Knew it. I knew it was JP.

De Leon: Yep, yep. My whole family lived there, and when I was two we moved to a suburb of Boston.

Menendez: You're born in the United States, your parents come from Guatemala. What were the stories growing up that they told you about Guatemala?

De Leon: They told us so many stories, in English and Spanish at the kitchen table in the car, and the stories were always ones of pride about being from Guatemala and also struggle. They were not shy about letting us know that they moved to the United States for economic reasons primarily, and that they were here in order to give us the opportunities that they could not have. So that was really saturated in every story that they told.

Menendez: You graduate from Connecticut College with a double major international relations and French, you earn a master of arts in teaching from the University of San Francisco's Center for Teaching Excellence in Social Justice while you were doing TFA. What was it that was drawing you to teaching?

De Leon: I had always loved working with kids, I babysat since the age of nine. But teaching was not something on my radar, to be honest. I thought I would be working for the United Nations in West Africa. I did an internship there in college, so it felt very plausible. My first job out of college I worked for congressman, now Senator Ed Markey, and everyone told me it was such a great job and that I was supposed to love it. And so I was really confused when I didn't. Not because of him, but because I just felt like I wanted to have more hands-on experience. And Teach For America was on my radar. And when I

applied, I was assigned to teach in the Bay Area and I had never been to that part of California, and that's what I did. I filled my car with suitcases and drove out west, and it was life changing because it set me on a path to teach, but it also introduced me to another side of Latina then that I frankly did not experience on the East Coast. I mean, these were Chicanas and Mexicanas, really proud and loud Latinas in the Bay Area, and I just felt so alive in a way that I hadn't been before.

Menendez: Is there an early memory or most vivid memory from teaching that you take with you?

De Leon: That first year I taught third grade and I had 20 students and they were all, every single one, was either from Mexico or Vietnam. And Vietnam is also a place I had studied abroad in college. So I just realized that what I was experiencing in the classroom was a kind of reeducation. Here I was suddenly face-to-face with international relations in a way that was very practical. And it's also when I felt I had something to say with my writing. Whereas before I think I was more exploring feelings and documenting events that happened to me, which was very useful and helpful on a personal level, but I just felt like I needed to use my voice in a different way.

Menendez: You spent 10 years in public education before making the jump to higher education. What was it that was motivating you to make that change?

De Leon: Definitely writing. I always was interested in writing, but I never believed that it was something I could actually do. It felt like, oh, I could go to space, it's possible. I suppose people have done it like I could. But not me, I won't. I didn't know anybody who was a writer. All of the writers I had read were DOWGs, D-O-W-G, dead old white guys. And I just was constantly exposed to Ernest Hemingway, Richard Yates, Raymond Carver, and I admire these writers, their work. But I did not read a book by a Latina author until I was almost 19 years old.

Menendez: Oh my God.

De Leon: And it was *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, and it was life changing. And so it took a while for me to gather the ganas to pursue writing professionally, and that's why it took so long. I was stringing together, teaching and taking classes at night, writing, going at conferences. I studied with Junot Díaz and ZZ Packer and Krishna Sobti. I was in Voices Writing Workshop. I went to Bread Loaf, like I did all the things. I was hustling. But it still takes a while. It takes a while.

Menendez: So it takes ganas, it takes going to all of those things. What else did it require to get your first book published?

De Leon: Oh my goodness. I mean, there's so much that goes into it because like you said, there are the practical pieces. I'm a good student, I'm able to check those boxes. I have a strong work ethic. I'll wake up early, go to bed late, all those things. But what I think was really missing was this core belief that someone like me could actually do it. And what helped with that, aside from finally reading books by other women of color, writers of color, was having a kind of face-to-face conversation with my parents about my career. It's very common to be raised to believe you can do it all, but we actually mean please become a lawyer, doctor, et cetera, teacher, *miaesta* that was honorable, that had a pension, had health insurance.

And so when I was 28 years old, I was teaching and I was in grad school for writing, and it was my return of Saturn, I guess that happens when you're 28 years old. And I decided to quit my job, sublet my apartment, and take savings and book a one-way ticket to Guatemala, which is where both of my parents are from. And they thought I was crazy. This

was a place that they had essentially fled from in the '70s, and we'd been back many times, but never for me to live. And I wanted to study Spanish. I wanted to learn more about the history and the Civil War and politics, and I wanted to write a novel. And they were really confused. They were like, "Wait, we thought you were going to buy a condo." It just was not on the map for them. But to their credit, they were very supportive.

I think for a while, my mom asked questions that were pointing out her desire to support, but her lack of understanding of the kind of topography of writing and publishing. So she would ask, "How long is a novel?" And I would say, "I don't know. It depends." And she'd say, "No, but how long, really?" And I'd say, "I don't know, maybe 3-400 pages." And then she would say, "Well, what page are you on?" Because she wanted to cheer me on to the finish line, but it just doesn't work that way with creative writing, anyway.

Menendez: Let's talk about how it does work with creative writing. I have talked to writers who are very precious, where when they're going to do a new project, they clear their desk, they put photos on the wall, they light candles, they have elaborate rituals. I have writers who say it's all about butt in the chair, butt in the chair. And I got to tell you, I have a lot of moms who have written full novels in their car in between kid drop off and pick up. What is your process for just getting it done?

De Leon: My husband and I have this, we say GSD, like just getting ish done, you have to. And for us, that might mean working to a deadline. So it means going to a coffee shop for 45 minutes. It means getting a babysitter to hang out with our kids while we're upstairs working. It might mean he takes the boys to the aquarium. And I have three amazing hours to myself. I have lots of readers, I'm part of many writing communities, and so I don't feel like I need to do it alone. But definitely what helps is knowing that it's real work and having my parents now at this point just really value it and seeing it as real work. First writer in the family, not easy. Not easy for anyone and anyone who's out there who is the first writer in the family, we come from trailblazers and people in our family have done this in many ways, so we can do it too.

Menendez: Borderless has the benefit of not being your first rodeo. Talk to me about the experience of, Don't Ask Me Where I'm From versus Borderless, and the mistakes you made the first time around that you were able to avoid on your second book.

De Leon: Yes. It reminds me of having children. Mistakes you make with the first, that-

Menendez: The mistakes you make with the first thing you don't make with the second, but also the things you recognize are outside of your control.

De Leon: Exactly. Exactly right. And for me, Don't Ask Me Where I'm From is my debut novel, and it came out right at the peak of COVID, right during lockdown. So I had all these plans to go to festivals and schools and conferences, and I had a book tour planned and all of it was just one after another canceled, canceled, canceled. I pivoted, and we did everything virtually and in some ways there were some silver linings to that, but I still feel like a hole in my heart, like I didn't get that experience. And then when my next book came out, White Space Essays on Culture, Race and Writing, I felt like, okay, I know how to do this virtual thing. And it was wonderful, especially to be in conversation with other Latina writers across the country, virtually.

But then now with Borderless, it feels different because it's in person, and this is definitely the hardest book that I have ever had to write. It tells the story of 16 year old Maya Silva, and she is living in Guatemala City, which I intentionally wanted. I wanted a book about a

teenager, "A normal teen girl" in Guatemala live in her life doing her thing. She's not dreaming of coming north. And she-

Menendez: To the contrary, she has dreams that are very much in Guatemala City.

De Leon: Yes, yes. She's a fashion designer. She is really close with her mom, who's a single mom. She's got her best friend, she's got this new love interest. Life is good. And she's in the wrong place at the wrong time one day, and she cannot undo this. It's a point of no return. And she and her mother are suddenly running for their lives, and in the dead of night they decide to go north.

I wanted to tell this story because it's different than many of the narratives we see in the media about Central American people coming to the United States. And I felt that it was important specifically to write for young adults, although I hope many people read it, but young adults because they are going to be our game changers, our decision makers, our policy makers. If they don't have varied stories about the US-Mexico border, we're in trouble. We're in big trouble.

Menendez: There is, of course, the tricky element of this, which is it is a story you have proximity to but it is not your story. What were the complications? What did you have to do in order to write a story that wasn't squarely based in lived experience?

De Leon: To be honest, I wrestled with that at the beginning. I felt like, is it my place to write this story? Even if in fiction. I felt that I was, like you said, close to Guatemala, much of my writing centers Guatemala, and this particular story is about a mother and daughter separated at the border, among other things. But that does happen, and I don't have that experience. My parents became US citizens before I was born, and I was born in the United States, but when 2018 hit, I was pregnant with my second son. And I just remember in the thick of it that spring, that late spring, everybody was suddenly marching and taking to the streets, and I could not, I was very pregnant. And I decided to start writing this story because it was my way of marching. It was my way of doing something. And that is what kept eclipsing any doubt I had, is this my story? I also did research. I went to the border. I went to McAllen, Texas. I interviewed migrants, I read articles and policy papers and books and documentaries I watched. I definitely tried really hard to, "Get it right," but knowing that I don't have this lived experience.

Menendez: When you are writing for young adults as a mother, as an educator, as a writer, how are you assessing how much a teen can handle?

De Leon: It's so funny to me because so many people will say, "Oh, I would love to write YA but I just can't because it's just too intense or there's a scene in my novel that is too violent it couldn't be YA or the subject matter it's too much for YA." And I just laugh inside because YA is not what it was 30 years ago. It just is an umbrella to all these matters, social justice, themes that are in the news. I absolutely think that YA is a space that can hold so much, and I'm glad for it because these are books that young people are assigned, books that are on reading lists, summer lists, books that theas and theos buy for their kids. It just feels so important to have young people. They're already exposed to it all, so let's just be honest. They're already exposed to it all, so why not give them a story where they can come to conclusions themselves rather than just be given whatever is on the news quickly.

Menendez: You said something really powerful earlier about the role that these books can play in shaping a young person's thinking about the world, about social justice. It strikes me that when you release, *Don't Ask Me Where I'm From* you're at the height of the pandemic. You're releasing this now, you're releasing *Borderless* in a moment when there are fraught

political conversations about banning books in this country, and a lot of those books have to do with race, with ethnicity, with the most complicated and unsavory elements of US history. For you, again, as a mom, as an educator, as a writer, how does that impact your work and the young people that you're trying to reach?

De Leon: So much. So much. I feel such an urgency to do this work, I really do. It feels so critical to me to create space for these stories that are intentionally being left out of textbooks, stories that are being erased, physically removed from bookshelves, sometimes taken out of students' hands. We saw that in Arizona. We saw that in New Mexico. We saw that with so much that's happening right now. And the thing about it is it's not only hurting the students or the young people who might see their lives reflected in these stories, it's hurting everyone. It's hurting the students who really need this window into these experiences who might not know anything about Central American immigration or immigration in general. So I feel that, I hate to say it, but the word timely isn't the right word. It's more like imperative. You know that this is happening now. This is a book that I have always wanted to have in the world, but it just feels, I don't know, a little bit I guess timely. I don't know how else to put it. It feels like it's the right time.

Menendez: I love that. As a writer, you are so committed to getting the right word. I love it.

De Leon: Always.

Menendez: You're going to call me in the middle of the night, you're going to be like, "No, if I figured out what the right word is." Jenn, what did I miss?

De Leon: Oh my goodness. I just thank you so much for creating space for this conversation. I want to tell people listening who are interested in writing, who want to write, that you absolutely deserve to be a writer and to be writing in this world. It took me a long time to, like I said, get the ganas, but once I did, once I started on this path it only makes me want to make the path wider for others. It really does.

Menendez: I love that. Jenn, thank you so much for your time.

De Leon: Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at *Latina to Latina*. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop and remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google podcast, Good Pods wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us grow as a community.

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