



How Johanna Rojas Vann Wove the Truth Into Fiction

She grew up listening to her mother's stories of immigrating from Colombia to the United States, then decided to honor her mom by making those experiences central to her debut novel, *An American Immigrant*. Johanna shares the inner workings of her writing group, the importance of accountability partners, and the role faith plays in her creative process.

Alicia Menendez:

So many of us have been there. We hear our family's stories and think "that should be a book." Most of us stopped there, but Johanna Rojas Vann kept going. She took her mother's story of immigrating from Colombia to the United States, wove the truth into fiction, found an agent, and sold her first novel, *An American Immigrant*. Before she was a published author, Johanna and I worked together at Fusion, the ABC Univision Cable Channel based in Miami. I wanted to talk with her both because I am so proud to watch her soar and because in a time when platform often trumps actual talent, Johanna's success is a reminder that there is a path for those with grit and faith who are willing to do the work. Johanna!

Johanna Rojas Vann: Hi!

Menendez: Hi. Oh my, the second I hear your voice, I am transported back in time. Johanna, I want to start with you growing up in suburban Maryland, there were not a whole lot of other Latinos around you. I wonder how that changed your points of inquiry around your story, your acceptance of what it meant to be American, how living in a predominantly white suburb shaped your sense of identity.

Rojas Vann: I think it shaped so much of me and there were some Hispanic people where I lived because where I lived in suburban Maryland was where the poor people lived. We lived in an apartment complex, but we were just on the precipice of the high school that was for the wealthy people. My high school was predominantly white, and a lot of my friends were white. That did shape a lot of who I am because my home life looked so different from the home life of my friends, and I knew that and I saw it very clearly, and it was an insecurity that I lived with.

Menendez: How? Tell me, paint me a picture.

Rojas Vann: Yeah. I just remember visiting the homes of my friends and being like, "What is it like to have this much space? You can go to a corner of your home and be alone and not have to hear people talking or share a room or your parents leave for the weekend and leave you home by yourself. Where are your parents even going? My parents don't go anywhere. Like what?" I don't know. It was just mind-boggling to me to feel that insecurity all the time of these people are so different from me. I'm ashamed of where I live. I'm ashamed of the car that my parents drive. I don't want to be seen with them.

And something I didn't write in the book, but that is such a core memory of my life, is being at the skating rink when I was probably in middle school and my dad calling me on my phone. And when I hung up when we were about to say goodbye, I said, "Okay, bye Dad." And I didn't call him Dad. I'd never in my life called him Dad. I called him Papi. But I was so embarrassed to say Papi because nobody has a papi. Everybody has a dad. And I remember hanging up and being like, ugh, that felt so weird.

Menendez: And when does that switch for you, that sense of trying to hide?

Rojas Vann: Miami, 100%. The first year that I was there, I was like, whoa, this is weird. This is culture shock. I've never been around so many Hispanic people. And I would go to Walmart and the people would speak to me in Spanish and I'd be like, I've never spoken Spanish to anyone but my parents. This is strange. And then as I got more acclimated and made so many friends, I was finally like, oh my gosh, these people get it. These people are children of immigrants. They grip being Spanish at home. I felt like I could even hide because everywhere I went before that, I stuck out like a sore thumb. Everyone would say, "Where are you from? You look so exotic." And once I got to Miami, no one ever asked me that, ever, ever, because I looked like everybody else.

Menendez: Was it that your mom began to reveal additional parts of her story to you as an adult? Or was it that as you became an adult you became more curious about her story and started to ask more questions?

Rojas Vann: I think it was both for sure because I know that there are so many hard parts about my mom's story that she probably wouldn't have wanted to share when I was young. I think it was definitely that as I got older, she shared more and was more vulnerable with me. And then as I heard more, I was more curious and I asked more.

Menendez: At what point do you begin to think to yourself, "Wow, this is a story that belongs in a book"?

Rojas Vann: I think when I first heard it, I felt that, but as I shared it with more people, I had lots of friends telling me, "You need to write this. You need to write this book. You need to write this book." I would get texts randomly throughout the day like, "Hey, have you written that book yet?" Or, "When are you going to work on this book?" And it was ultimately my husband because I kept talking about the different stories at dinner time and stuff. I would talk about the different stories that my mom told me and my experiences growing up with parents who were immigrants. And he would always tell me, "That would be such a cool book. That would be such an incredible book." And so finally when I had my first baby and I was on maternity leave, he was the one that ultimately said, "It's time to put all the freelance work away. It's time to start writing for other people, and you need to write this book."

And my mom felt the same way. In the beginning, she actually was a little like, "Oh, don't tell my stories. This is uncomfortable. I don't want the whole world to know all these things." But after a little while, she told me, "I think if it could give someone hope, I think it's a good thing to share it. I think if it could give people hope to keep going, even when the world tries to break them down and tries to tell them that they're not good enough or that they don't belong somewhere, if it will give people hope, then we should write the story."

Menendez: What intrigues me about what you've done, Johanna, is that for most it's a fleeting thought and we think, "Well, maybe I'll capture it and I'll package it up for the grandkids." But it's bold to say, "There's enough here that I, an unpublished author, I'm going to take the leap of faith to write this as a novel to then attempt to sell it and to ride the wave of this story

existing in the world." I want to dig into the how of how it was that you came to do that. Did you first spend time interviewing your mother, getting the details of the story, or did you begin butt-in-the-seat writing and then continually coming back to her with additional questions?

Rojas Vann: Yes, it definitely felt a little bit arrogant at times to think that my story was so special that it could be written in a book and published and the whole world would want to read it.

Menendez: I just want to be clear. Arrogance is your word, not mine.

Rojas Vann: Yes.

Menendez: There is nothing arrogant about you.

Rojas Vann: No, no, no. Those are the thoughts that go through my head that I'm like, is this arrogant? Should I be doing this? I was in college when I first started hearing some of these stories, so I was collecting them in my head over the years. I started writing them down. I had voice memos with conversations that I had with my mom, and I would just write down stories as I heard them sometimes on my computer. It was finally when I felt like I had a little bit, I know this sounds crazy, but I felt like I had a little bit of margin once I had my first baby because I didn't have the nine-to-five job to go to every day. That's when I started butt-in-the-chair writing. But as I wrote, I would always find holes. I'd think, okay, well I forgot. I don't know what to put here. I don't know what to put there. I would call my mom and we would talk, and sometimes she would come visit me. She actually spent a whole month with me when my baby was five months old. And every morning we would sit at my dining table, have breakfast and just talk. We would talk. She would tell me stories, I would ask questions, we would dig deeper. And it was one of the best times of my life. And to be honest, as I heard more and more stories and wrote more, there were moments of time where I felt like, I'm not even writing this book. I feel like God is writing this book. And that's what kept pushing me because it felt sometimes a little bit supernatural. I would go back and read a scene that I wrote and think, "Wait, did I write that? Because I don't remember writing that. That is really good." That's what kept me going because I would think, "I can't stop writing this. I feel like God is writing this book. I feel like it needs to be written and I feel like it's going to help people, so I need to keep going."

Menendez: I noticed in the acknowledgements of *American Immigrant* that it seems you did work with a few other writers in a writing group. How did you find them and what was the value for you of writing in community?

Rojas Vann: It started with a girl that I was working with at my corporate job before I had my baby. We were on a walk. We were talking about writer groups and how, I think it was Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were part of a writer's group. She's a writer too. We were just talking about how cool it would be to have something like that where a group of writers get together every week or every other week and just workshop things. We'd talk about our writing, we'd rant, we'd celebrate, we'd show each other our work and get feedback. And so we said, "Okay, let's each find one other writer who doesn't work with us, not at our job. Let's go out and find new people. We'll each find one writer and we will start a writer's group. Let's just see what happens." I failed. I found no one. She found two people. She brought two people to our first meeting, and it was just magical because we all got along so well and it was just perfect. One of the women ended up inviting two more women. Now there's six of us, and we've been together for about two years.

Menendez: But what is happening in-

Rojas Vann: Magic.

Menendez: What's the alchemy?

Rojas Vann: I think it's just community and it's having someone to share your work with to say, "Am I crazy or is this good? Is it my insecurity, or is this really actually bad? How can I make this better?" We get together once a quarter on top of our bimonthly meeting, and we meet for a full day and we work on one of our projects together. I wrote a lot of my book on these Saturdays where I'd get away from my baby, get away from my husband, and just go from 9:00 to 5:00, just work on my book. And then throughout that day, we would stop and one person would get 30 minutes to just workshop something. I remember work-shopping like, "Hey, is this character unlikable? Let's read some chapters on this character and tell me, do you like her? Do you hate her? What should I change about her?"

I truly think that they have been such a large reason why I've been able to publish this book because I remember telling them, "Listen, I'm telling you guys that I'm going to write this novel, so I need you to hold me accountable. I need you to ask me about it. I need you to tell me, 'Hey, how is that novel coming? Hey, did you write a chapter this week? Hey, did you watch TV during nap time or did you write another chapter?'" Because I knew that once I said it out loud, they were going to hold me accountable.

Menendez: There's a huge market of books that are published by publishing houses that are considered Christian publishing houses. And when we think that those books are explicitly Christian, there are homages to faith, there are stories of family, there's nothing salacious in what you have written. Was the objective in writing it in matching with an agent, in matching with a publisher to find somewhere where that was part of the connective tissue?

Rojas Vann: Absolutely, yes. That was my intention from the beginning. Now, I will say there are some Christian publishers who very much want their books to be overtly Christian and to have those strong themes with Bible verses in the book and things like that. And I knew from the beginning, I am a person of faith and I cannot separate my life or anything that I do from my faith. It's just impossible. I don't separate my work, my family, nothing from my faith. It was important to me to work with a publisher of faith, but I also didn't want to force the spirituality in the story.

Now, my mom, I inherited my faith from my mom. She's incredibly religious. She loves God, and she feels like her story, she feels like she has victory because God brought her out of that depression. That was an important part of the book, but I also didn't want to force it in places that it didn't have to be. From the beginning, I wanted to have an agent who specialized in faith or Christian. I call it more inspirational fiction. I think that's a better title. I think that's a better way to put it. I wanted an agent who knew that space because I wanted a publisher who was in that space.

Menendez: I have so many vivid memories of you, Johanna, because we were together during such a formative time in our lives. The memory though that is the sharpest is of the day you sat me down and said that you realized that working on our show was no longer a good fit for you, that you had a different vision of your life. And I remember, what you were like 24, 25? How old were you?

Rojas Vann: I think 23.

Menendez: 23. And you had such clarity and grounding. There was no angst, there was no confusion. You didn't want me to pull you back. You were very clear that the work we were doing and the values you hold dear did not align fully, and that in the next job, you wanted to be in

full alignment. I want to go back to that moment because I feel as though it lays the foundation for so much that followed.

Rojas Vann: Yeah, I remember thinking, "I want to serve, I want to help people. I don't know what that looks like. So I'm going to try to go work at a nonprofit," because at the time, I was only 23, and I thought that that's how you help people. You work in a nonprofit. That's the only way to do it. And ultimately a month later, I ended up getting a job as an assistant. And I remember you also telling me that you were like, "Don't do it. Don't get a job as an assistant because you're going to be so good at it and you're going to get stuck." And Alicia, that's exactly what happened.

I got stuck. I remember being at a nonprofit as an executive assistant, and the copywriter left the organization. I remember thinking, "What does a copywriter even do?" Because I was a journalist, and that's very different from copywriting, but I remember thinking, "Hey, it's writing and I'm a writer. I could write. I'm pretty good at writing." I remember asking my boss like, "Hey, can I do that job? I'll still do this job. I'll still be your assistant, but can I do that job too? Because I want to practice. I want to see if I can do it." And he said, "Sure." I did the copywriting there for a while, but I could never get out of that grip of being an assistant. No one could ever see me any differently. And it had been maybe two and a half years where I realized they're never going to let me be the writer. They're never going to see me as anything but an assistant. No matter how much copy I write, no matter how much emails get sent out that I wrote, they're never going to see me as anything different. Like when I was at Fusion, I'm going to have to move on to something else. While I was working there, I was just trying to get as much experience as possible writing. I was taking on freelance gigs as much as possible, building a portfolio so that I could try to get a job as a writer straight out to the next job. And it worked. I was at that job for a couple of years, and then I built up a portfolio. I applied for a writer job here in Nashville, and I got the job, and within a year I was promoted to Senior Writer. I was like, okay. I knew it. I knew I was a writer.

Menendez: I want to circle back to something we touched on, which is being a person of faith. Can you give me an example, Johanna, of a time throughout this process when it has been your faith that has sustained you?

Rojas Vann: It was exhausting, but one moment really sticks out to me. I think I'd already written the whole book many times and something was missing. There was something missing in the book, and I don't remember how it came up, but I was talking to my mom and she said something to me about my grandmother having written a bunch of beautiful poems. And I was like, "Wait, what? You waited this long to tell me that my grandmother was a writer and that she wrote poems that you have? What?" I remember feeling like I was at the end of my rope with this book. I was like, I don't know how to take it to the next level. But when she said that to me, she went down into her room and found this photo album where she had taped one of the poems, and she took a picture of it and sent it to me, and I read it and it connected, and fit so well with the story.

It was like literally, God placed it in my lap. And this is what I mean when I say I feel like God wrote this book. And so many times throughout the writing of the book that even my sister would say, "Hey, did you know this story about mom or this story about grandma?" And that I'd never heard and being like, "Oh my gosh, this is exactly what I needed. This is the story I needed to connect this scene to this scene." There were just so many moments like that that made me feel like God is writing this book. He's giving me all of the pieces

that I need to finish this because he wants this book to be written and he wants me to do it. There were just so many moments writing this book where I feel like my faith held me up, pushed me, gave me endurance and strength, and literally gave me words to write.

Menendez: Johanna, what did I miss?

Rojas Vann: Our ancestor stories are so important, and I don't know if we spend enough time just sitting with them listening, asking, asking for more. Even when you get some, ask for more, dig into it more. And this is one of the biggest reasons why I wanted to write books was reading Isabel Allende's books. And her stories are always intergenerational. And it's just beautiful to see when you read a book, it's beautiful to see how this person's life was impacted because of two generations ago, decisions that they made two generations ago or one generation ago. And when I read her book, the House of the Spirits, that book was life-changing to me. I was like, these are the kinds of books I want to write.

Menendez: Johanna, congratulations.

Rojas Vann: Thank you.

Menendez: I'm so excited for you.

Rojas Vann: So good to talk to 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 @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Good Pods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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