



## How Meg Medina Summoned the Courage to Write

"Who is she? What does she want? Why can't she have it?" Those are the questions the Newbery Medal-winning children's author asks about each of her young Latina protagonists. What Meg Medina wanted was to write professionally, but first, she had to get brave.

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Alicia Menendez: Meg Medina's picture books, young reader and young adult books have won her many awards, including the prestigious Newbery medal and landed her on the New York Times bestsellers. The title of her newest book, *Merci Suárez Can't Dance* kind of tells you everything you need to know about who Meg is writing for. But here's the thing, she didn't start writing professionally until she was 40, because as she says, she wasn't courageous enough. We talk about how she got brave and went for it, the trauma of her own formative years and her advice for other creatives. Meg, thank you so much for doing this. I think about *Merci Suárez* and this idea of being 11 and having a year where everything changes. And I think we all had that year, whether it happened at 10, 11, 12. For you, was there a year where everything changed?

Meg Medina: Yes. And so when I think of middle school or what was then called junior high school, I think I had a really sharp turn South, actually. In elementary school, I'd been a pretty happy kid. I went to my local elementary school. I was in the glee club and what my mother called "Los Girl Scouts." I did all the things, right? I did all the things. But when it was time for junior high school, of course the world got bigger. And my mother moved us to an apartment closer to downtown, Flushing into a different school district. And suddenly I was in a big school with a lot of kids who I didn't know, of a lot who were rougher than I was. And I just shut down completely as I recall. My uncle died, my mother's brother died at that time as well. So there was just a lot of trauma. And on top of just the crush of growing up. I think as adults, sometimes we think back with affection for being a kid and growing up, oh, it's the best time of your life. It's so fun. And we remember it slightly, the hurts that go on in growing up. But it is really something to see your body change, to see peoples relationships change. Suddenly the boys that you played outside with, suddenly that wasn't allowed anymore somehow. And you couldn't really understand why. For me, there were a lot of moments of wrestling with Latinidad. What kind of Latina was I. And I was really struggling to figure that out. Unlike *Merci*, I just checked out of school. I found it excruciating. And it took me years, really until college, when I finally sort of got through this cycle from girlhood to womanhood to really start to feel courageous again, and to feel like myself again.

Menendez: No, there's no amount of money you could pay me to be 12 again.

Medina: I know it. I feel the same way. And more so now. I'm so glad that when I was that age, I didn't have to be connected to social media, for example. And so that's sort of the world of

Merci. She of course has other issues that she's, other intersections that she's wrestling with. Going to school as a scholarship student and trying to figure out where she fits in culturally, economically as a girl, in all those identities at her school.

Medina: I'm endlessly intrigued by it. The process of growing up, the things that hurt us and the things that build us. And sometimes at the hands of our own family, the people who love us so fiercely and who in so many cases have sacrificed for us and adore us can also be the engine of a lot of grief. So I find that fascinating.

Menendez: I do too. And I identify with Merci so much, especially in the way that I had gone to public school in Union city, New Jersey, which is where all the Cubans who had not gone to Miami went.

Medina: Yeah.

Menendez: And I was in a mixed income, but largely working class neighborhood. We were rich because I had my own bedroom. That was the tell. Then I went to private school for high school and learned that in the context of the broader United States.

Medina: Nope.

Menendez: No.

Medina: Yeah.

Menendez: And learning that not everyone was Latino. I had no idea. It wasn't until that experience that I was, wait a second, this is a minority experience.

Medina: Yeah. Yeah. My growing up was a little different. I grew up in Flushing, Queens. And so my elementary school was really a mix of lots of different cultures. And I'm really grateful for that. Long term, my mother always used to, she worked in a factory over on Northern Boulevard and when things got bad, she was always threatening to pack us all up and moved to Miami. And we'd have boxes at the ready. And a few times she actually started us packing. We never got there until she retired, many years later that we moved down. But this notion of mostly with Latinos, I did not have that experience. And it was an experience my mother longed for. She wanted so much for me to grow up in Miami and among other muchachas finas, and culture that she understood, a place where she could speak her language freely and be understood by many people. And even in New York, that has so many immigrant pockets and so on, she really had to work at it. And there were a lot of moments where she was very much the outsider.

Menendez: Your parents split right before you're born. Dad lives in Massachusetts. And there's a period of time during those high school years where you go to Massachusetts to be with your dad?

Medina: Yeah. Yeah. Those are really hard days. I hardly ever talk about them. So this is actually very new for me. So yes, I had, as I said, my uncle had died in, when I was in middle school. I had tangled with this bully who eventually became the subject of my novel, Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass. Right? And I was just at this really hard crossroads. I was also at the age where I really resented my mother for everything. And there had been just so many difficult moments.

Medina: The trauma of losing your country doesn't happen without consequences. So there were sadnesses and depressions and undiagnosed issues in the family. And so it was time for my sister to go to college. And we went to visit my father, who was a surgeon in Massachusetts. And he had married an American lady. He had six other children. And I went to his house. And when we pulled up, I remember this so clearly, I slept on a sofa bed

with my mother, most of my life. And I pull up to this sprawling, incredible house in the woods in Massachusetts. And I just decided I needed to have that. I wanted that. And I wasn't ready to let go of my sister. He agreed that he would help pay for her college if we went to live with him. All these years later, it's a heartbreaking thing for me, because I think about my mother and how galling that must have been for her to see us get on a bus and leave her. But life teaches you things, and experiences teach you things. And so I did go live there and I got to feel firsthand what it is to be sort of the practice child, so to speak. I got to feel what it was like to be a Latina in a largely American landscape. I got to feel for the first time, and so this is so sad, but what it's like to not be loved by a parent. And those were just terrible realizations. They were just awful, but they happened. And they were part of my growing up. And now from this space, it allows me, all that sort of pain allows me to see myself, see my mother, see our lives together in Flushing through a different lens. It allows me to write, I think, families with a deeper sense of empathy for the mistakes that are made and the complicated ways we love each other and the complicated ways we fail each other. I don't know. I think nothing's wasted even the really miserable experiences that happen to us.

Menendez: Yeah. It is all right there on the page.

Medina: Well, that's a beauty books, right? With kids. That's what I think they do. They give them a way to experience life by proxy safely, sort of watching this thing transpire on the page and make decisions in their mind about who they'd be in that story, what they do different, how they might handle it, and so on. It helps them grow up by offering them an experience, I think that might not be theirs.

Menendez: One of the most surprising parts of your own personal story is that you didn't really start writing professionally until you were about 40.

Medina: That's right.

Menendez: And you always thought of yourself as a writer, because you say you weren't brave enough to write this way. Take me back to the day you quit your job and opened your parachute.

Medina: So here's the thing. I did lack courage. And some of it had to do again with the way I grew up because my mother was minimum wage employee. She didn't have a safety net. She didn't have health benefits, all those things. And that's what she most wanted for me. She wanted me to have a secure life. And let me tell you, a life in the arts is not that at the beginning, especially. It is a risk in every way. So I tried to do as many other respectable things as I could. I was a teacher for a while, a job that I loved. I wrote advertising copy. I was a freelance journalist. I did so many things that I liked well enough and was good at, but it wasn't the thing. It wasn't this deep thing that I wanted. So we were living in Virginia at that time. I had all three of my children were born and I was working at my oldest daughter's school. My oldest daughter is disabled. She has intellectual disabilities. And I was working at her school. I had started as a volunteer and then they hired me as their first development director. And literally my office was the supply closet, still smelled of pine sol and there were pipes and everything else. And I worked in this teeny little office typing letters, basically, asking people to support the school. It was worthy work. It was beautiful work. I was happy from that perspective and also miserable. And so I turned 40 and something inside me just sort of clicked. I just decided that if I didn't try, if I didn't step away from all the things that I was good enough at and happy enough at, and really try to

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go for the joy and the passion, I wasn't ever going to do it. And so I got up and I quit. I told my boss that I was leaving. I came home and I told Javier, "Oye, I quit my job and I'm going to write a novel." Y por poco se muere. He looked at me, he said, blanquito se puso, he was so afraid, but I always tell this story because to his endless credit, Javier said, "Okay, I think you can do it." And I did. And so I say this a lot to Latina creatives I meet along the road, right? They're busy, they're raising kids, they have families, their families don't understand a life of the arts. They feel so ashamed almost to stay, "This is what I want to do." And I say, "You'll know." Because there comes a time when not doing it is so painful that you're going to have to make a decision to stand up for yourself, for what really matters for you to just take that risk.

Menendez: Well, that, and you also say that the other big place where people fall down is the discipline.

Medina: Yeah.

Menendez: That first year when you're writing that first book, it was really butt in the seat, three to four hours a morning, just consistently knocking it out. Yeah.

Medina: And that's still true. You got to show up for work. And you got to show up for work, whether you are on the factory line or whether you are an author. Right? I meet so many people who want to be writers or want to do X or Y, right? Whatever the career is, but they leave it in the safe realm of dream. And so the thing is that to make dream the reality, you have to break it down into actionable steps. It doesn't sound very sexy that way. Right? I need to visualize this for myself. That's the first thing. I have to be able to say out loud, this is what I want my life to look like. This is how I want to make my living. And then figure out the smaller steps, the conferences you need to go to, the people that you need to meet. How many stories are you going to write this year? Who are you going to approach to sell your work? And get serious about the business and learning what you need to learn to move in that sphere.

Menendez: I've heard you say, and I just love this, that in your process, it is always the girl who comes to you first and you sort of work backwards from that girl. And you want to know what she's about, what does she want and why can't she have it. And part of the reason the hair on my arm stood up when I read that was that's exactly how I approach these interviews. What is this person about? What does, or did she want? Why can't or couldn't she have it? Because that is the core conflict we're all up against whether we're a 12 year old or a 45 year old woman.

Medina: For sure. But I think that a lot of the arts approach things in that way. What's at the heart of everything is people that's, what's interesting always, the girl, what's in her heart. And what I find really fascinating is what she's willing to tell me in the beginning. And maybe that's the same thing with interviews too. What they're willing to tell you in the beginning. And then as you dig, what you find out. That they almost... It's almost unexpected. My character sometimes reveal things to me as I'm writing them, that is shocking and that I didn't plan and I'm just so surprised.

Menendez: Well, and I find that fascinating about your process that you often don't know what you're trying to say or what the book is about until the end, at which point you go back and very often rewrite the beginning of your book, which by the way, Meg, is a luxury I do not have as a podcast host.

Medina: Lo siento! Yeah. That's a thing, because the beginnings and endings are bookends. Right? They have to hold everything in the middle of the book together. And so sometimes you get to the end and I start to ask myself, so hmm. So what was I saying about families here? How did Merci grow here? What was it that she most found out about herself and about other people? And then I go back to the beginning to see, did I promise that at the beginning, are there echoes of that at the very start of it? And then I shape it somewhat.

Menendez: Meg, what do you never get asked that you want to be asked? What do you want to talk about that you never talk about?

Medina: I think people don't appreciate or would be surprised to know that fears and insecurities, they follow me certainly even now. I am having a beautiful career. I have you many professional friends and opportunities. I cannot possibly complain. And yet, I'm subject to the same sort of insecurities, am I relevant? Do I still have things to say? When will that change? Do I still understand the heart of kids? Am I enough? The imposters' syndrome that so many of us carry around. So yeah, that lingers. I wish it weren't true. But I was listening to some of your old podcast with, in fact, I was listening to America Ferrera talking about creatives and film and so on. And there was so much wisdom in there, but that she was talking about her need to please and be pleasant and be a pleasure to work with. And I had to stop. I was on a walk while I was listening to it and I just had to stop and take all her words in because I said, "Ay, hermana... exactly right. That's exactly right."

Menendez: When I was writing my book, *The Likability Trap*, about this exact thing, one of the Latinas I interviewed said, she was, "Well, as Latinas, we're raised with a PhD in graciousness and the sort of like, what will people say? You don't just represent yourself, you represent your family, represent the neighborhood, you represent every Cuban that is..." I mean, it's just like it's...

Medina: That's true. That's true. That's a lot of pressure. And the fact is families are families, are families. There's muck in every family. There was just so much concern about "¿Que dirán?". What are they going to say? And not appearing low and not appearing that you're sort of a drain of any kind. And so the underlying message of course, is just that, that is the status quo. That is how you're going to be seen. And you have to dig out of that whole constantly. And we see this with kids all the time now, still with Latino kids. I mean, the language around Latinidad and Latino kids and immigration and kids at the border, all of that has just been so toxically offensive to their identity, to how they think about their families, to their sense of pride in themselves. So I mean, I think we continue to have a lot of work to do in that area, shore them up.

Menendez: For those of us who are parents, I have two young daughters, educators, anyone who just has a kid in their life, who they love, what do they need right now?

Medina: I think they need a lot of conversation. I'd like to see parents actually reading a lot of books with their kids, making it sort of a family experience. And there's lots of ways to achieve that, even in families where there's multiple languages being spoken. My books for example, are available in Spanish and English edition. So someone could read Evelyn Del Rey *Se Muda* at the same time that their kid is reading, Evelyn Del Rey *Is Moving Away* and still have connection around the story. I think what we want to be talking to kids about is not only their life and the problems that they're experiencing inside themselves and how they see themselves and so on, but opening the world to them about all the many kids that they're in class with who are in their neighborhoods, that populate the world, this country

and really give them some tools to understand each other's experiences, respect them. And embrace that as part of our national identity, as opposed to something to be afraid of or something to have to guard against.

Menendez: Meg, thank you so much.

Medina: Thank you. It was just such an honor to be with you, Alicia.

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](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com). Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise at [latinatolatina.com/shop](http://latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember, please subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, 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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