



## Book Editor Michelle Herrera on Finding Your Voice By Not Fitting In

Growing up, she was so close to her family, it was unimaginable she'd ever even go away for college. But a curious mind and an adventurous heart freed her to “dream wild” and create her own “fantasy version of my life.”

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Alicia Menendez:

When I first met Michelle Herrera Mulligan a few years ago, she was the editor in chief for Cosmo for Latinas, a job she almost convinced herself she couldn't get. We will get into that, along with how Michelle's career has taken her from the world of magazine publishing to the world of book publishing. She's now a senior editor at Atria Books, and she's giving us really useful insights into publishing, and what it takes for writers to catch an editor's eye.

Thank you, Michelle, for doing this.

Michelle Herrera Mulligan:

Thank you for inviting me. I'm excited.

Menendez: I was watching your TED Talk last night. I loved it.

Herrera Mulligan:

Oh, thank you.

Menendez: And you make a really powerful argument for dreaming wild. What does that mean to you?

Herrera Mulligan:

For me, to dream wild means thinking beyond the boundaries of your own experience. So, for someone like me that grew up in a low-income household, a child of immigrants, it was impossible to imagine even leaving my town. My mother, for her to imagine me not even being within 30 miles driving distance, coming from a Latina family, that was unheard of. Going to college was unheard of. And then that didn't even take into account all the other nevers and shouldn'ts I heard once I got to New York.

And I think that what can happen, especially when you're a member of the media, you're a storyteller, you're an artist of any kind, or any kind of creative person, is that pretty quickly, you're gonna start hearing why you don't fit, or your ideas don't matter, or why they're not quite right. Sometimes they'll use code language, like, “Well, that doesn't seem like something that we could break out.” Or, “Our audience doesn't really like that kind of story or doesn't really relate to this.” There will be so many. So many different versions of the same message, which is that you don't fit.

So, for me, dreaming wild, I like to think of it in an imaginative sense of let's just break this shit open. Let's just be like, "Okay, I don't belong here. I don't belong in your office. I don't belong at your publication. But what if I don't belong anywhere?" It's almost a freedom, right? If I don't belong anywhere, then I actually belong everywhere. I can create my own wildest fantasy version of my life and anybody's life, because there's literally no chance I can walk the straight and narrow path that you've laid out for me.

So, how about we just mess it all up and come up with something way more interesting?

Menendez: Did you get there before 40? Or did it take you until... Because there are all these studies that show that girls' confidence starts to wane in their teen years and that we don't get it back until after we're 40.

Herrera Mulligan:

Oh, man. That's such a good question. I think I did, actually, now that you mention it. Yeah, it was around 40 when a lot of big opportunities happened, but that was what I was talking about in my TED Talk, which was are you gonna make a choice now to act like you're a big baller and believe all the things you talk about? Because I could say a lot and still lay in the cut, right? I could say, "Oh, I'm just waiting for my own big opportunities. I'm making my own path." But what was I really doing? What was really at stake for me? And then the universe tested me by giving me this huge, massive opportunity.

I had to ask myself, "Okay, well, here's the opportunity. Are you gonna take it or are you just gonna anticipate defeat? Are you gonna anticipate the fact that it's not gonna work, they'll never let you do what you want to do, it'll only last six months." Those are all things that I said to myself. "And you're gonna be humiliated publicly and a spectacular failure." So, do you want to take that risk? Or are you really gonna believe you're worth it?

Menendez: You grew up in Chicago, is that right?

Herrera Mulligan:

I did. Yes.

Menendez: What put it in your mind that magazines were even a thing that one could do?

Herrera Mulligan:

At the time that I was growing up, magazines were huge. They don't really have maybe the same resonance that they did at that time, but this was pre-social media, pre everything. The means of communication that we had, or that I had, was my library card. All I had was the big stack of magazines that I could see every Saturday when my mom would drop me off at the library.

Menendez: I love a fellow nerd! Spending the Saturdays at the library.

Herrera Mulligan:

Totally. I was such a nerd. I mean, even sometimes it would be Friday night and then Saturday, to be honest. It was my whole life. I had books, and I had magazines, and that was my connection to the outside world, so reading magazines like Sassy, and Vogue, and Cosmopolitan, it was kind of like how I learned how to be a grownup woman who knows how to dress well and knows how to comport herself. It was a fantasy for me. I mean, I

never went on a family vacation my entire childhood. I never went anywhere. But I loved travel and leisure because it was so beautiful. I was like, "Wow, people have houses like this." I mean, I lived in some really poor suburb of Chicago, so there were some nice houses, but I realized that Barrington rich isn't even real rich, like I just realized what real rich people's lives looked like, and instead of being alienating to me, it was exciting. And I think I just thought I would like to be somewhere in that world.

I didn't really think about what I would be doing in it or what responsibilities I had. I just thought it would be really great to be in the room.

Menendez: Magazines, publishing in general is just such a hard world to break into. No connections. How did you break through?

Herrera Mulligan:

I really didn't have anything except, and this is something I tell especially young Latinas all the time, all I had, in some ways still to this day all I have, is who I am. You know, however corny, or like broke, or confused and ill-informed I may be, which I usually am, and putting in my foot in my mouth 70 times an hour, what I do have is my own story, and my own point of view. At a very young age, I had this instinct to just tell the stories that were important to me. And I don't know where that came from. I think it came out of a fury that so many things were happening that I saw. In my household, in my community, in my school, and I just had this rage that nobody was talking about it.

I was like, "How can it be happening? Am I in a dream or something? Why is this nowhere?" Because at that time, we were nowhere. There wasn't one single show with us. There was nothing. So, having that, I just had to tell my story to whoever would listen. And then I went to college at University of Missouri, where people were calling me a wetback and throwing things at me when I walked down the street. When I was in that, I think that it was a matter of survival for me to tell my story. When I was a senior in college, I had become aware of a school for paramilitary in Latin America called The School of the Americas, so it was a place where they literally trained soldiers to murder and torture our own people. And I was supposed to graduate from college. I went, it was like the November before, and I knew that literally I could lose my diploma if I were to be arrested.

Martin Sheen had led a bunch of nuns actually to this site, and I followed the calling at the time, I was really close with this nun. Long story. I went down there, and I was arrested on federal property for just... We were putting crosses to mark the deaths of all the people that had been killed in El Salvador. So, I was just like... You know, I was kind of bananas. I was like, "I don't give a fuck. I have to tell this story." And I was able to cover it in my local... In the Missourian, the Columbia newspaper. Thankfully, they ended up dropping the charges, but it was a long road to that.

But like all this happened and I almost was unable to do my internship, because I had an internship that I had won in New York at Travel & Leisure, and they were gonna renege it because of all of this stuff, but regardless, that summer when I came to New York, and I was doing the internship, instead of like going to Travel & Leisure with all these great ideas about the Greek Islands, I told them about what had just happened. I went to El Salvador. And I sent them a bunch of dolls made by women there and I was like, "All these women want to thank you for all your advocacy." I mean, they just looked at me like I had three heads, but what ended up happening was... I mean, it's a great metaphor for what

happened, but all of that to say is that was the year that Latina Magazine started. And I had sent them the articles that I wrote without any thought of whether they would read them or care, but Belen Aranda-Alvarado, who's still a dear friend of mine, answered my old school letter talking about how this is a story I want to tell, and this is how I feel about Latinas, and I'm gonna be in New York for this internship.

And when I got there, I went to their office. It was like five people in this extremely shitty room. But they were working. They were doing it. They were doing the initial issue at that time. And I arranged this whole group cadre of interns to go visit their office. We didn't even fit in there. It's really giving yourself an importance that you don't even have. And taking the space when nobody literally could give a shit or wants to give it to you, and saying, "Hey, this is really important. You should care about this." And the biggest shock to me, Alicia, the biggest mystery that I wish so many of us could unlock, is that you'd be surprised how many people respond to that.

Menendez: I loved going through your LinkedIn profile, Michelle, because it really details how you made your way through this world, from assistant editor at Latina, to senior associate editor from Time Magazine, to InStyle, to Publisher's Weekly, to Glamour, to House & Garden. The list goes on and on. Which of these jobs were you at when you got the email with the subject line, "Editor in chief? You?"

Herrera Mulligan:

I was working at Us Weekly as a fact checker. It was hilarious. We would come in from Wednesdays through Fridays, and we started our day at like 2:00 or 3:00 PM. And like ended at 3:00 AM, because it was like the week, you know? We had to... Whatever Kim Kardashian's latest hook up, you're really just fact checking what they said, their sizes, you're just going back through old clips to make sure that whatever the official story is, it's right. But I would stay up late at night and I can remember I have this friend, who was my boss. We were all in a line on top of each other with computers lined in a row, and you didn't have a private moment, you know? You just would be on the phone and everybody heard everybody's conversations.

So, I got this email, and I thought it was a joke, and my friend Stephanie, I told her. I'm like, "This is hilarious. They're saying that they want me to interview for an editor-in-chief position at Cosmo. Can you believe it?" I mean, of course it's not the big Cosmo, but some special edition. And to me, it seemed so absurd, I thought she would laugh. And she was like, "Dude, are you fucking kidding me? You have to go for that." And I still, to this day, thank her for pushing me, because she's like, "What are you gonna do, fact check for the rest of your life?" I don't know. I think I thought it was like this punk rock, alternative lifestyle. I don't know what I thought it was. I thought I would just be like, "Oh, I'm just gonna write some articles, man, and then I'll just do a few books."

And I wanted to live outside of the context of the world, like them. I wanted to be me, and they could be them. But then I realized there is no you and them. You have to become the them. The way I'm gonna bring it back to today is that one of the editors there, Albert Lee, Albert was an editor. He was somebody that was writing and publishing small books about celebrities there. After I was working there and then I got the Cosmo job, this is the beauty of... It's really special to me because everybody else around me believed it. I got the job and they started running my covers in the magazine, like I didn't even ask them. And they wrote me letters saying, "Michelle, we always knew you would do this. You're such a star."

I was like, "I mean, I didn't even know you guys knew my name." So, you never know. Whatever position, no matter how lowly it is, or what your title is, you don't know who's seeing your light at that time, and who's noticing, and who's listening to your conversations, and who sees something in you when you don't see it yourself. And the really beautiful universe part of it is today, so when I first started this job as an editor, again, and this happens to me every fricking time I start a new job. I wish that it didn't, but I always have that moment of doubt, and then I got there, and I felt really insecure, and I was like, "None of these agents are gonna answer me." And a lot of them didn't at first. But Albert had become an agent at UTA, and he was like so fantastic, and, "Now we're in the book game together, so I have all these things for you." And he just kind of... We took it from there. And now, not right away, but within maybe six months or so, I bought a book from him and it's Danny Trejo's memoir, and it just got announced today.

So, it's just really incredible how all of these relationships will come full circle.

Menendez: What did making the leap into book publishing require of you?

Herrera Mulligan:

Making the leap into book publishing required me to become A, very, very patient. It's a much slower process than what I was accustomed to. And also, to listen, to learn how to become a very astute listener. I had a lot to learn about this industry. I didn't know it, but I didn't come into it with the arrogance that I was gonna revolutionize it or change it in any way. And I think that that was wise of me, because in the past I'd say, "I'm gonna change the terms of the deal, man. I'm gonna own this." And I think this time around, I'd learned and said, "Okay, I'm gonna learn what the boundaries are, what the playing field is, and then I'm gonna see how I can make a lot of noise within that."

That's what I did. You know, I interviewed a ton of people. I talked to a lot of legendary mentors, like Dawn Davis, who is now the editor in chief of Bon Appetit, but at the time, she was literally one of the most groundbreaking editors of color that publishing has ever seen, and she happened to be working for Atria at that time. So, just watching her actually was an education. And also, watching how people conducted themselves with confidence, and how they developed a gut for what might work and what might not, and also learning perseverance. Because when you publish an author, you have to believe in them with every ounce of your being, and not just... Forever. It's not an article that you publish and everybody's gonna forget tomorrow. It's like you're gonna be talking about that person now, and over, and over, and over again.

It's almost like you're married, or your kids, like that's how I feel about my authors.

Menendez: I hope my editor feels that way about me, so that makes me very-

Herrera Mulligan:

She does.

Menendez: ... very happy. I like that ethos.

Herrera Mulligan:

She does, by the way. I know your editor. I work with her now.

Menendez: Oh, that's right! That's right! That's right! You're both at Atria.

Latina to Latina: Book Editor Michelle Herrera on Finding Your Voice By Not Fitting In

Herrera Mulligan:

She loves you. Yeah.

Menendez: I love her too. We're due for a catch up. So, I want to talk to you a little bit about book publishing, because I think we have a lot of listeners who probably have it in their aspirations or their dreams to at some point write a book. I learned so much selling my first book. It was incredibly humbling. Mostly because I, like everyone else, we just don't know that much about it until we try to do it, so I'm gonna talk about nonfiction because that was the type of book that I was trying to sell, and trying to write, so I wrote a... Let's say a 40-page proposal. Two-to-three-page summary. A proposed table of contents, where I outlined my idea for each chapter. Two to three sample chapters. A media plan. And then a bio. First of all, does that sort of sound like your standard proposal? And when those proposals reach you, what separates the ones that get a response from the ones that get discarded?

Herrera Mulligan:

Great questions all around. The first question about the proposal itself, yeah, that's the standard layout. It's like what people want are chapter summaries to give you a sense of the scope of the book. What is this individual going to cover? And what is the breadth of how well they're gonna take on that territory? Because it's a balance of having a really standout, powerful idea, that can... You can break out in a marketplace. But also, the approach, right? The point of view.

So, you really want to see the voice there, and sometimes the voice comes through in those chapter summaries, believe it or not. Sometimes even more so than in the sample chapters. I mean, each proposal is unique. There have been several proposals that I have accepted and completely changed the concept, like I didn't-

Menendez: That's what happened with my book, so I am very familiar with that.

Herrera Mulligan:

Yeah. No, and it happens more commonly than you would think, like I'm talking about fundamentally change the concept. But what you're looking-

Menendez: But that's also incredible, like I remember when Stephanie, my editor, who you now work with, sat down in our meeting together and she said, "I love the idea. Here's how I would change it." And it almost became so exciting to me, because I did feel like I had been fighting my way through the proposal, like I was circling around something, but I couldn't land it. And it took her and the way she saw it to help me get to a point where it was like, "Oh, this is a book I could actually write."

Herrera Mulligan:

Yes. Exactly. That's an editor's job. But to reverse engineer it for your listeners, the thing that you absolutely have to have and prove is your voice. What's your unicorn point of view? That's the way I always put it. What can I get from you that I can't get anywhere else? That is... For me, personally, I can only speak for myself, that is the most important thing. It does matter what the point of view is.

The second thing is I think just also giving a real sense of who you are, like why you specifically are the person that can break this idea out. It always comes down to what's new and powerful about your message, what makes your voice stand out, and what's fresh about what you're adding to the conversation? That is the most important piece to me. Because I have a media background, I always think about what people are gonna talk about, like what are people gonna talk about about your book? Why will people care? Not about you, but about your message.

So, that's what I think you should really focus on if you're doing a nonfiction book.

Menendez: Can you talk to me a little bit about the money and the way that you're assessing what a book is worth?

Herrera Mulligan:

Absolutely. So, I thought it was just mystifying before I got here, and it still mystifies me, but it's kind of like any other business. You're gonna look at the market and you have to make a case. Like as an editor, you have to make a case for how many books this is gonna sell, right? So, regardless of whatever the proposal is, or the book is, the first thing you do is you say, "Okay, I think this will sell 50,000 copies. I think it'll sell 100,000 copies." You have to actually come up with a number. Whether you make that number or not isn't really the issue. It's how you see it. And then that's how you make the case for the level.

The number ends up coming up dramatically based on the demand, like if there's several editors that want the book, that are compelled by the book, then you get in an auction and that's self-explanatory, right? Then the number goes up. But it's a delicate dance between how new or groundbreaking is this, versus how much of a market is there for it, like do I see trends going towards this type of book selling this amount? Because that's how you have to make the case to your bosses. This is why. So, you're gonna look at comparative titles, you're gonna be looking at social media, you're gonna bring a lot of stuff in to try to make the case for that, but that's what is happening on our end. So, the more you can do on your end to show, that's I guess where your marketing plan is. Show what platform. Because your platform doesn't have to be social media.

You just have to show how this idea and this person has legs. It's the book is something that will be timely, but also timeless. There has to be something really classic also because it's a book. It'll live forever. But all those factors will lead into how much it ends up going for.

Menendez: Is there another piece of advice that you give to people when they are trying to sell a book? Specifically, if it's a Latina.

Herrera Mulligan:

Honestly, my best piece of advice for anyone, Latina or otherwise, but especially a person of color, is know your craft. Be really, really, really good. Because the one thing that trumps everything that I've said is spectacular writing. And you would be surprised how many people I've met over the course of my life where like, "Oh, I don't really read much, but I'm a writer." Or, "I just... I know I may not be the best writer, but I have this great idea," or whatever. And it's like that's not gonna get you anywhere. This is a writing and reading business. There are those writers who had no platform, no connections, nothing, but they were absolutely unforgettable storytellers. They just knew that craft. And storytelling in

whatever, whether it's a how-to book, or it's fiction, or it's business, or whatever category you want to take on, it doesn't matter. It's all storytelling.

If I want to stay up so late my eyes bleed because I love this so much, that goes a really long way.

Menendez: Thank you, Michelle, for sitting in your bathroom and doing this with me.

Herrera Mulligan:

Thanks for inviting me. It's so fun. I love your show and I feel so honored that you would include me.

Menendez: Oh my God. This is wonderful. I'm so happy.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

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