



Why Novelist Xochitl Gonzalez Isn't Done Being Ambitious

"Could you just be done being ambitious?" That was the question the Brooklyn native asked herself before she "blew up" her comfortable New York life to move to Iowa, pursue her MFA, and complete what would become her New York Times Best-Selling novel, *Olga Dies Dreaming*.

Alicia Menendez: I am obsessed with Xochitl Gonzalez's debut novel, *Olga Dies Dreaming*. Which is to say, I am obsessed with Xochitl herself, given how much of her own life story is baked into her work. The quick plot. Olga, a wedding planner for New York's elite and her brother, Prieto, a Congressman representing their gentrifying neighborhood in Brooklyn, for each a public success and a private mess. Their mom, Blanca, left her kids to be raised by their grandmother so that she, Blanca, could advance a militant political cause. And now as Puerto Rico faces down a devastating hurricane, Blanca has come barreling back into their lives. There is a love story and political corruption and brilliant missives on Puerto Rico's status. But Olga is to me fundamentally about liberation. So my conversation with Xochitl focuses on the expectations that were placed in her as a kid, how she freed herself from those expectations, how she chose to see being 40 and unmarried with no kids as providing her the freedom to take a big leap. One that has undoubtedly paid off. Not only is Olga on the New York Times best sellers list, it's being turned into a Hulu series. And how her mother's absence has shaped her desire to be a mom herself. Xochitl, thank you for doing this.

Xochitl Gonzalez:

Thank you for having me. I'm so delighted and I'm a big fan of yours, so I'm very delighted.

Menendez: Stop. I'm a big fan of yours and I'm freaking out because it is all happening for you.

Gonzalez: Oh my God. It's so weird. Like it's so weird. It's like, you hope it's going to happen. And then you're also secretly terrified. You know, you put anything out in the public and then it's like, oh no, people are meeting them and loving them. And this is beautiful and crazy. And so, yeah, it's just wild. It's been a wild few weeks.

Menendez: It strikes me that in your personal bio, you have two very simple sentences next to each other. I went to public school. I went to Brown. And those two sentences and two life experiences next to each other, say so much.

Gonzalez: Oh, it's so weird. Now I'm going to get weirdly emotional. You know, I wrote that because when I was trying to decide if I had the guts to write, just period, I rebought *Loose Women* and in her bio at that time, Sandra Cisneros would say, "Sandra Cisneros is nobody's wife and nobody's mother." And I knew why she said that. I understood why. And then I was like, I need to put this. Because I think so often you see one thing and you assume one story and you see another thing and you assume another story. And I needed people to see that's that. And part of why I wanted to do the TV adaptation was because I want

people to understand the tiny pains of needing to move in between worlds. And it's almost like in sci-fi, like if you were going through a membrane and every time you inflict a little tiny wound on yourself, like a little rip or something. And a friend of mine who was also a fabulous writer, a Latina writer, was like, it took me a while to read because sometimes I would recognize something that I had compromised in myself and I had to put the book down. And that I felt was something I just hadn't seen that on the page. And I just wanted, I don't know, I wanted to pay homage to that and that back and forth this and that fluency. I just needed to document that and let us see that for ourselves.

Menendez: There's a moment in the book, and I don't want to talk about too much in the book because every single one of you needs to read the book and it needs to sort of exist on the page. But your protagonist is by training a wedding planner, which is a life you have led.

Gonzalez: Yes.

Menendez: And she's at some fancy party where she is both supposed to be playing the role of arm candy and building new business for herself. And there is minor calamity, as happens at events, where like a tray goes flying and she immediately flies into planner mode where she talks to the other person as like, okay, here's how we're going to fix this, blah, blah, blah. And she embarrasses the rich person she is with, because she has reminded him that she is fundamentally part of the servant class.

Gonzalez: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I had these come to Jesus moments. There came this weird turning point where I was literally under somebody's wedding dress helping her pee, and I thought to myself, you both have Ivy league degrees. How did you choose this? What was the weird subconscious thing going on that you didn't feel, and I think it took me 20 years to raise myself to have the same confidence that I hope your children will have. I was raised so modestly to have such modest ambitions, that I just wanted a job. I told somebody, I was like, I wanted a door with a bedroom. You know, we lived in a railroad apartment. I wanted a door with a bedroom. And after that moment, I just realized we are always the first to roll up our sleeves. And then at the same time we then get positioned or we're seen in this tiny little way. And I felt a lot of pain about it and it wasn't laziness that made me keep her a wedding planner. Because I toyed with other careers. It's just the perfect career to show where you are sort of equals, like your taste is valued and yet you're not a guest at the dinner. And so that scene, that exact thing had not happened to me, but that scene was metaphorical for what I felt so often for so many of us, and that I know I personally had felt. You're just being a good human being. And somehow that being a good human being sets you into some sort of helper class. But is what is that? Is that a pre-perception that's already there? Or I don't know. You know, and I just wanted to put it on the page, I guess.

Menendez: Throughout *Olga Dies Dreaming*, mom comes in and out. Was mom in and out in your own childhood?

Gonzalez: No, my mother came once a year for Christmas, but then my grandparents really couldn't accept, nobody could accept this was like abandonment. Does that make sense? They would do these weird things where like I had an inappropriately age boyfriend. I was like 14, he's like 17 and joined the Marines. And his parents wanted me to go to see his graduation from Parris Island. And my grandparents were like, you need to call your mother and ask her permission. This woman doesn't even know me, but I would have to call her and ask her for weird permissions of things like that. And so we had this

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relationship where she would pass a lot of judgment. And just that idea of not being able to be a person to somebody and yet being made to still belong to them was a way that I felt very confined. And so the letters became a symbolic way to talk about that type of relationship that I didn't realize, and it's been interesting and it's been beautiful to talk to people about motherhood, actually ended up touching a lot of people. Like where they feel a lot of people feel they aren't completely allowed to be their full selves in that relationship with their mother. And how do you live with that and how do you navigate it and that you don't feel heard? My mom was definitely out and yet I can't say she wasn't there. Because she was at my wedding. She was at my high school. Like I was made to give her a place of honor for important occasions, but I wasn't ever allowed to hold any trauma or anger over it.

Menendez: Part of the reason that it's so interesting to me beyond, the reason you saw me looking at my phone is because literally every section to the book that I highlighted was about motherhood. It has such profound...

Gonzalez: Oh, that's so interesting. Yeah.

Menendez: ... revelations about motherhood and the expectations we have of our children and the expectations we have of our mothers. But I do think we are more culturally familiar with the absence of a father.

Gonzalez: Yes.

Menendez: For any number of reasons. Whether it's incarceration or a high level job. That it, just like the idea of dads not being around is very common, unfortunately. And the true anomaly in your upbringing is the absence of your mother.

Gonzalez: Yeah. Even in my main care, my grandmother, my mother's mother, was very depressive and very depressed. And so my grandfather was my primary caregiver. It's interesting. The other Rorschach test is your age and how you see Blanca. Because older women, boomer women, older gen X women, are like, go Blanca. Because there was this certain asleep at the wheel-dom that you were forced to take autopilot-ness with womanhood. And just, how do you get out of your house? How do you get your own place? How do you have any kind of agency? And in some cases, marriage gave you the pathway to that. And then the next thing you know, you're having kids. That was the only road map. And I think that I made a lot of peace, you can make peace with somebody from a distance, if that makes sense. I made a lot of peace with my mother in the writing of this book in a way that therapy I never could have. In the sense that I had to see her as her own person and not write her as a villain or as a good person, just as a person. And at the end of it, I came to the conclusion that they come to in the book, which is I just don't think my mother was ever meant to be a mother.

Menendez: There is another line in your personal bio that I was like, you are really burying the story here. I got into Iowa and blew up my whole life in New York and moved to the land of corn. I want to know more about blowing up your entire life, because I think something happens at 40. You are not the first woman I've ever spoken to where something clicks at 40 where like, this is not the life I imagined for myself.

Gonzalez: Yep.

Menendez: And it becomes time to either take the risk or decide that you're going to live a life of regret. But most of the people I've talked to, it's all worked out. And it doesn't always. And I

think we also skip over what the risk is. I would love to hear more about the depths of the risk that you took.

Gonzalez: Well, it's funny, because it actually has a lot to do with ambition, I think. There was this middle ground from when I got out of wedding planning to before I went to Iowa where I had a really great job at Hunter College and I was working for the President of Hunter and I was doing a lot of really interesting things. And yet at the same time, I had time to write, like I would write in the mornings, I'd write on the weekends. And I had time to still see my friends. And I had this very cute apartment. And I lived in a neighborhood that I loved and I knew everybody in my community. I was very happy. I had a 401k, I had a great salary, I didn't feel like a servant anymore. You know, like I was very proud of what I did. And I was like, could you just be done being ambitious? Why do you have to keep going after the big thing? There's a line that Blanca has. I felt small in my own skin. And I think that was what it was. I just felt like I knew my brain could do other things and I just had never given it the chance to do it. And that was why I did it. I think the risk was that I was actually not unhappy. It's easy to walk away from something when you're deeply unhappy, but I actually was very, very happy. It wasn't even a choice of like happier. It was like different. And that was kind of why it felt like a risk.

Menendez: I'm legitimately curious about this, both how the book really caught. Every article about you and about Olga Dies Dreaming includes the phrase, highly anticipated debut.

Gonzalez: Yeah. Yeah. It's actually, it's sort of random. When I was a wedding planner, I had a blog. And one of my nice clients, because I had some not nice clients, one of my very nice clients was like, you should really be writing a memoir. Your blog is so good. And so she had introduced me to a woman over email. We never met. We spoke on the phone once and we always just emailed. And I wrote a proposal for a memoir and she was like, your writing is amazing. This is like in 2012, but this is too dark. People don't want a dark memoir about a wedding planner. And years later, I had gotten into Iowa and I'd won this Disquiet prize, and I had like a hundred pages of Olga written at that time. And I was taking, my childhood best friend who works in publishing, she loves Bar Method classes and I hate them. But I would go to hang out with her basically. And so in the locker room she sees another woman that takes a class with us and she was like, you need to meet. She just got into Iowa. Molly is an agent. And because our names are spelled weird, we didn't connect it until we followed up over email and it was the same agent. And so I sent her the first hundred pages of Olga and she said, I think you're a lifelong talent. You're an epic talent. And I see where your career is going. And I don't just want to send you for a book. I want to send you book for film. And it was off of a hundred pages of Olga. She's like this is going to be a special, important book. She was so passionate about it. When it went to auction, it ended up being like a 10 house auction. So then people were talking. But what had also happened is that there aren't enough Latinas in media, period. Publishing, film, TV, but it was making its hands into the few women who there were and then a few men. And so I actually feel a lot of that buzz was, there were a lot of other types of people that loved the book, but was Latinas really talking to each other and talking about it. And so by the time we got to like the press points, people were like, I've been hearing about it. I really want to see it. I really want to hear it. And then I got the beautiful cover, which is amazing. My publisher just believed in it so much. My agent just believed in it. And I think, I knew there was a path to sales that also obviously motivated me. And the

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great part was when I went to Iowa, I decided every single thing that I let traumatize me as an undergraduate, I'm not going to let happen this time. And I just felt like I was on a mission. I could barely sleep once I got to Iowa. And the thing that I wanted to say to anybody out there that's like single and doesn't have kids, what was beautiful was that I had a moment especially when I turned 40, where it's like, I could have decided, oh, everything's a failure. You got a divorce. You never had kids. You haven't met anybody in a while. You've had a couple of these really terrible breakups. Instead, I was sort of like, you aren't married, you don't have kids. You can go anywhere. You can go to Iowa. You can spend your time however you want. And to see that and embrace it, at that moment it was right. And that was sort of a really cool, empowering aspect of it.

Menendez: You've said that's very much at the heart of what Olga's journey was. And it's at the heart of what my journey was of being so lost and clinging to anything and trying to find my own center again. In that period, what was it you were clinging to?

Gonzalez: Oh my God. I would cling to any kind of affirmation. I would go to an envelope opening if they told me that my name was going to be on the inside. Like, this is a funny, true story. I was so lost at Brown, but I was very popular because my grandfather had told me to go and be popular. And so I was asked to run for class president. I was the first Latina at Brown that was a class president. My senior week, like when you're supposed to be doing all these things, the daughter of a very famous and rich person had a party on her stepfather's yacht and everybody on the senior council was invited except for me. And whatever it was, I don't know if it was my own thing, if it was their thing, but whatever it was, no matter how I might look or whatever, I did not fit their version of who this group of people was supposed to be. And I held that so tight that I couldn't do enough to feel affirmed by this institution. Does that make sense? I have given them money. I have been on every council. I've gotten awards, blah, blah, blah. And then I was asked to be on the trustee committee. And I got there and a man who had met me maybe 30 times in my years since I've graduated, suddenly like the book is coming out and comes over and says, oh, it's our famous author, and then introduced himself. And what was great about that moment that was a present, what was a present about that moment was that I realized that I had been trying to heal an old wound and that it didn't matter. And that if I wanted to be there and I wanted to keep this role, I was going to do it because I wanted to make sure that other people weren't ingesting that trauma. I had this partner, this guy that was my boyfriend, I guess you'd call it, even though he is a grown man. That's such a weird term to use when you're older. And I know I found him so boring and so tedious, but he looked like the kind of guy that would never have dated me at Brown. I literally was steps away from moving in together, literally to heal an ego wound, if that makes sense. So when you say, like, what were you after? I was after everything that I felt had rejected me. And I think some of the stuff that happens in the book for her, I just extrapolated. And one of the lines that makes me cry is when she's actually reflecting on her sex life and how she'd not had sex without disdain. Even when I wrote it, I was like, uugh! But I think sometimes we look for these partners and we're trying to fix something or make up for something. And especially in this success space, where we are going out with people that are also ambitious and also whatever they are. And we're not just human souls connecting. We're like something on an arm or something on a resume. And that's a weird place for partnership.

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Menendez: When you talk about chasing all of those things and the approval and the ego stuff, I don't know that I see where she lands on her own relationship to motherhood. Meaning I don't know where you land on your own.

Gonzalez: Actually I'll tell you this, is that I am going to freeze my eggs. I'm literally starting the process of freezing my geriatric, but literary eggs. Actually, in a funny way, bringing the book out into the world, the working on the production of the pilot, what I realized is that I had had this narrative in my head that because my mother wasn't a good mother, I would probably not be a good mother and I should just not do that. And I realized that I needed to free myself from defining my life choices. That the next step was actually to not just eliminate something, it was to free myself from defining my life choices that way. I want to just say, the work of raising a toddler is terrifying, especially at my age. But, I know that I didn't want to take that option off the table. And it was super emotional when I went in for the consult and I walked out and I was like, oh my God, you can totally do this. I wrote an end for her in the book that funnily enough, like a year later or two years later, I guess, I don't know that I would've kept that same end. There was something about like, it felt very freeing. It felt so freeing to come out of that and I had them money to do it. And the idea that I could turn that pain and get myself a stable house, I could pay for my eggs. And I just felt like what a poetic reward for finally being honest.

Menendez: I love that so much. Thank you for doing this Xochitl.

Gonzalez: Thank you.

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. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us at [LatinaToLatina](https://twitter.com/LatinaToLatina). Check out our merchandise that is on our website, [Latinatolatina.com/shop](https://www.latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, 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.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Novelist Xochitl Gonzalez Isn't Done Being Ambitious." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. March 7, 2022. [LatinaToLatina.com](https://www.LatinaToLatina.com).

Produced by:

