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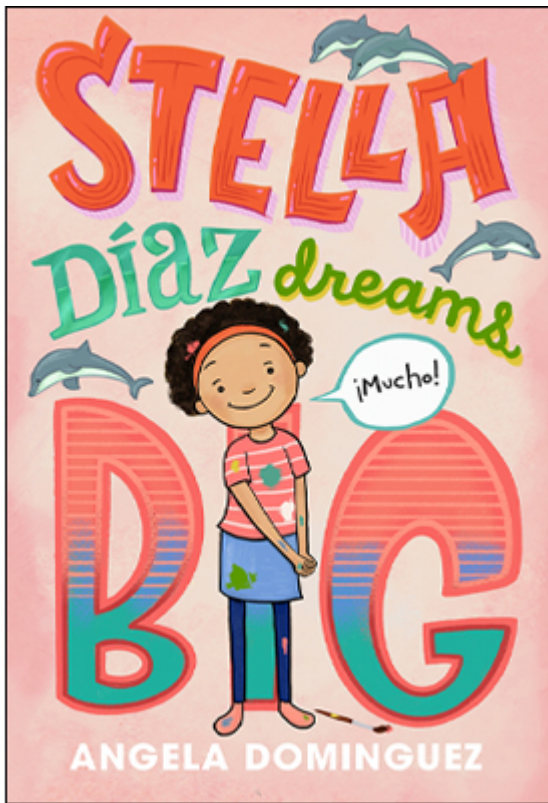
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Q & A with Angela Dominguez

By Patricia J. Murphy | Dec 21, 2020

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Angela Dominguez is the award-winning author and author-illustrator of a number of picture books, including Mary Had a Little Llama and Mango, Abuela, and Me (the latter written by Meg Medina), both Pura Belpré Illustration Honor winners, and the Stella

Díaz series. Her forthcoming books include Stella Díaz Dreams Big and I Love You Baby Burrito. Dominguez is also an instructor at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. She recently spoke with PW about how her teaching inspires her work, and the inspiration behind her character Stella Díaz. She also shared how she integrates STEAM, Spanish, activism, and diversity themes into her popular middle grade series.

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What's it been like to teach at your alma mater, the Academy of Art University, and when did you begin?

After graduating from SCAD—the Savannah College of Art and Design—with my BFA in illustration, I went to the Academy of Art University for my MFA in illustration. Two years after I graduated, I started teaching children's book illustration mostly at the graduate level. In addition, I've also recently begun teaching an undergraduate class, plus an art experience class for high school students—which is a ton of fun. The class is a six-week college course where students receive an introduction to the illustration world. I used to teach on-site, but now I teach online because I don't live in San Francisco anymore. I live in Richmond, Va.

From the start, it has been amazing to see the enthusiasm of the students realizing their dreams of becoming an illustrator—or a children's illustrator—

and how they are like sponges. They take feedback and want to learn everything, and I am able to open their eyes to all of it! I especially enjoy teaching my students about what I've learned about the industry and as a children's book illustrator, to help them start illustrating children's titles sooner. It's so exciting and exhilarating to teach them—and it inspires me.

What are some of the challenges of teaching now that you've moved from the West to the East Coast and are teaching remotely, like many teachers during the pandemic?

Some of the challenges are definitely technology-based. Often times, in person, you can express things that are more encouraging because the students can hear the tone of your voice, and they can see where your feedback is coming from, whereas online, some of these things are missed. I try to do audio recordings for my students to remedy this, but it isn't quite the same. I also find that there is less of a "community" when teaching online, and students don't engage with each other as much as they would in person.

When I was teaching on-site, I formed a children's book club for my students and all of them became super close—and were so enthusiastic. And, being in San Francisco with Chronicle Books there, I was able to invite guest speakers to the class for them. Now, to create more of a community, I share more of my own experience as a student, and lead by example. I also do Zooms, and everything I can to help the students to connect more.

When did you start writing and illustrating?

I started illustrating for children in 2008, and I was lucky to get some work right away. Both earning my MFA in illustration and joining the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators certainly helped me make a quicker transition into the children's book industry. In 2011, when work slowed down, my agent encouraged me to try writing my own picture books. When I started writing, I felt this component that had been missing in my work suddenly appear. I fell in love with the writing process, and I'm so grateful for my agent's mentorship.

How would you say your teaching has influenced your writing/illustrating?

Since many of my illustration students, especially in the graduate program, want to become authors as well as illustrators, a lot of times helping them revise their stories has helped me realize what's wrong with mine.

Also, being on site, especially the first few years, I was able to share my manuscripts with them. The first book I ever wrote and shared was a combination of my *Mary Had a Little Llama* and *Let's Go, Hugo!* The students were so excited to see my work, and to give me feedback. We were all around the same age, so they were peers giving me valuable input. I also used this as an opportunity to teach them about the writing process—and publishing.

Can you tell us about your Stella stories? Where did she come from?

Stella started with an image of a girl with curly black hair and a polka dot dress that I had in my mind. Then I drew her and hung the drawing over my desk for a while.

Soon after, I had an idea: “wouldn’t it be fun to write a picture book about a girl who is too shy to talk to any of her classmates while visiting an aquarium, and who runs away from a classmate all day?” I thought I would try writing about a shy girl because I was shy as a kid; and I knew that at an aquarium all the fish look as if they are staring at you. And, if you are already nervous, because you are shy, this is going to make you even more nervous! So, I started writing the story and came up with Stella, the main character, and a friend, Stanley— (inspired by *A Streetcar Named Desire*). I chose a boy as her friend since it would be harder for Stella because of her general shyness around people, and especially around boys.



An original drawing of Stella Díaz.

Then, I had a moment at the aquarium in mind where Stella’s mom and her brother would become so fed up with her running away that they would call out her name, “STELLAAAAA!” again inspired by *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

I worked on this story for nearly a year with a previous editor, but it wasn’t acquired. So I kept working on it, became so emotionally attached to Stella, and realized why: *Stella was me!*



So, how did Stella find a publishing home?

With the help of my agent, Linda Pratt, I kept writing and showed it to a new editor, my current editor, Connie Hsu, at Roaring Brook Press. She told me she loved the story, but that it needed to be longer. And, it had to be a middle grade novel.

Since I had only written picture books, I wondered how I was going to write something at that length. So, I started by asking myself, “Why was I shy as a kid?” and discovered that it was a number of things. First, it was part of my personality, also the fact that my family and I emigrated from Mexico City to the U.S. when I was less than two years old. I had to take speech classes until I

was in third grade, my parents divorced when I was young, and I was always nervous to speak up or introduce myself in school or in public. But, in the comfort of my home, with my mother and brother, I was always playful and fun.

So with these things in mind, I started writing what would become *Stella Díaz Has Something to Say*. Stella is a real extension of who I was as a child—especially in this first book, and what my interests are today.

Can you tell us what these interests are, and how/why you chose to integrate them into Stella’s stories?

These interests include my love of art and science. I have always loved art, and I took every art class that I could while growing up. And, now, as an art teacher, I see so many students both in the classes that I teach, and the schools that I visit who have this interest, and love art, too. So, with Stella’s interest in art, I hope to promote that art is as a wonderful hobby and something to do other than watching a screen and/or playing video games.

As for my interest in science, part of it comes from the fact that I lived in San Francisco and it is very eco-friendly. Living there makes you very conscious of not using plastic bags—because they are not allowed. Then, when I moved to the East Coast, and started dating my boyfriend who is an environmental science teacher, I learned more about the growing problem of plastic pollution in the ocean. I started to think about how if I were a kid today I would be overwhelmed by this—because I am overwhelmed about it as an adult. And, so, I thought that I could introduce the subject matter in an accessible way by showing kids practical steps to help, such as cutting back on using plastic; and educators could use the book in their classrooms, too. It's not a deep dive, but inspiring kids to care about the planet, and to have a general curiosity about the world, is a start.

There also seems to be a physical resemblance between you and Stella. Is this coincidental or intentional?

I am guilty like many illustrators who put a little of themselves into their drawings. And I think that is why I am drawn to drawing Latinx characters in general. They are the faces that I grew up with. They are what I like to draw, too. They are also the faces I looked for in books when I was a kid.

With Stella Díaz you've created a diverse character in words and pictures. Can you tell us why writing Stella's story is important to you?

I definitely struggled as a kid not seeing anyone like me in books. And, now, like other children's book creators I meet, and with whom I speak with on diversity and #OwnVoices panels, we are creating books that we all longed for as children.

For me, it wasn't until college when I read *The Buddha Suburbia*, about a first-generation immigrant feeling lost and caught between two cultures, that I said to myself, "Wait, other kids felt this?" This is why I am telling Stella's story. It's also why when I am in schools doing presentations and I see kids who might be shyer than others, struggling with language—maybe having just immigrated from another country, and maybe feeling nervous or apprehensive, I make sure to tell these kids that it's okay that they feel timid or shy—but, they are not weak, that they are not alone in the way they feel, and they will not feel like this forever. They will be able to speak up and be—and feel more confident one day! Just like Stella (and me), they will grow and develop, and become stronger.

Can you share more about your hopes for your readers, and your thoughts on the importance of representation and diversity in books?

I hope to give my readers the opportunity to discover friends that are like themselves in books. It's just amazing when it happens. Again, it's something that I would have loved as a kid. I also think this is crucial—especially right now with how divided our country is, and how we categorize people into groups, and dehumanize them—that I show a character like Stella Díaz. She is a Latina, and she's Mexican, but she is more than these groups. She has her own personality and interests. She cares about others and the planet. I think that offering kids these kinds of images in books is incredibly important.

And, as someone who was shy, I wanted to represent a character that may be shy *and* can also be a leader. I want kids to know that leaders can come in all different shapes, sizes, and kinds of people.

Currently, I am mentoring an author who graduated from Parsons School of Design with an MFA in children's literature. She's trying to write books to capture the culture of Paraguay. She says that she hasn't seen any books about this culture, wants kids to see it, and hopes to create them herself. It just goes to show you that more Latino books are great, but we must show a range of Latinx cultures in books. The same is true for all diverse cultures. The more we represent different cultures, the better we will understand each other—and the more people will feel accepted.

Throughout Stella's story, you insert Spanish words and contextual clues for readers to use. Can you tell us your reasons behind this?

Well, Spanish is in some ways my first and second language. I grew up speaking English and understanding Spanish. I definitely worked hard on Spanish, and I've always been able to understand it.

When I got to school, I went to speech class because, like Stella, I had trouble pronouncing English words sometimes, for example “refrigerator”. And, other times, I was too shy to speak up because of my insecurity about whether I would say the word wrong or I didn't know a word.

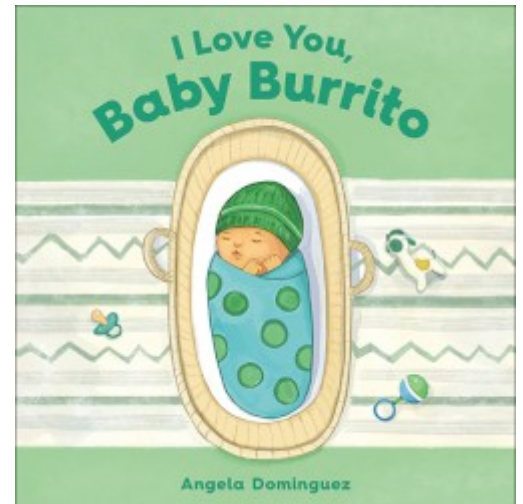
So, I wanted to use Spanish terms to show Stella's and my experience speaking both English and Spanish, and to give my readers a chance to learn new words in Spanish. I do offer clues within the text for my readers to figure out the words.

Even today, I struggle pronouncing some words correctly. In addition, I have a mild form of dyslexia that causes me to switch letters around, and I sometimes say words terribly wrong. I can laugh about it now, but as a kid it was embarrassing. Through Stella's story, I hope to show kids that this doesn't have to be embarrassing—and they are not alone. Stella and I experienced the same thing, and we survived!

Can you tell us about your upcoming picture book, *I Love You, Baby Burrito*? How did story come to be? What do you want readers to take away from it?

As a kid, I had experience being wrapped up like a burrito by my older brother; and I've also wrapped up my niece as a burrito once or twice. So, when my editor asked if I'd like to try to write a story about a baby burrito, I said, “Yes!”

Since this was going to be longer than my other picture books, and I didn't want it to turn into a demonstration on how to swaddle a baby, it took some time to get the right feel and tone of the story, and to nail it down. My hope was to capture the joy of bringing a new loved on into your home, for parents to share this experience with their children, and for young readers to share in this timeless tale of a loving, growing family featuring Spanish language and the Latinx culture.



Luckily, I was able to collaborate with my editor, who just had her first baby burrito. So, a lot of wonderful ingredients came together at just the right time to make this baby burrito love story.

What advice do you have for teachers and librarians who might like to write their own love stories for babies?

The biggest piece of advice I would give is to work a little at a time, and not to worry about the first draft, because real writing happens in the revising phase. I'd also tell them to read consistently, and to think about kids today for their inspiration.

Last, but not least, I'd also suggest joining the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. I first joined after graduate school, and it led me to my first picture book that I authored and illustrated, *Mary Had a Little Llama*. I created it for an illustration assignment for a conference. I shared it with an art director after the conference, and it was later acquired. SCBWI offers children's book writers and illustrators the nuts and bolts of the children's book industry, contacts to send their work to when they're ready to submit, and a community. We all need community!

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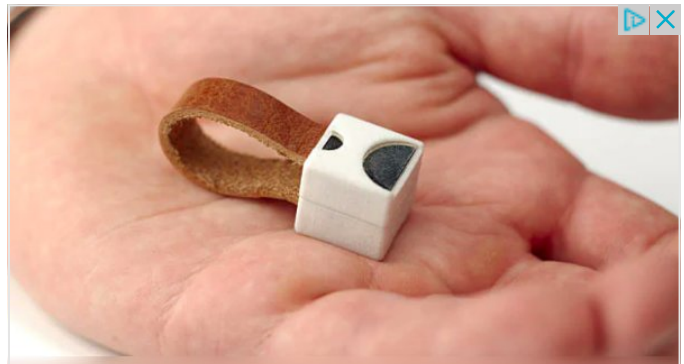




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