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Q & A with Ernesto Cisneros

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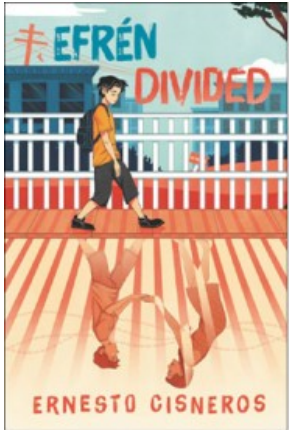
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You could say Ernesto Cisneros is in the middle of everything. He is an award-winning middle grade author and a middle school language arts teacher in California. He was named a PW Flying Start in 2020 for his debut novel, *Efrén Divided* (*Quill Tree*). The novel, which won the Pura Belpré Award earlier this year, puts main character Efrén in the middle of the immigration crisis and readers in the middle of a memorable family drama. Cisneros spoke with PW to share how his early life experiences, teaching, and writing intersect, and why he places students and readers smack dab in the middle of his life.

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Can you tell us about what and where you teach, and how long you've been doing it?

I currently teach eighth grade Language Arts at Mendez Fundamental Intermediate in Santa Ana, Calif.—and I'm in my 26th year in the Santa Ana Unified School District. My current school is in the same place where a parking lot used to be. It was there that I learned how to ride a bike, drive a car, and grew up. Needless to say, I really know the neighborhood well, and I have always felt that it was my school because it's in my neighborhood.

What's the best part about teaching Language Arts?



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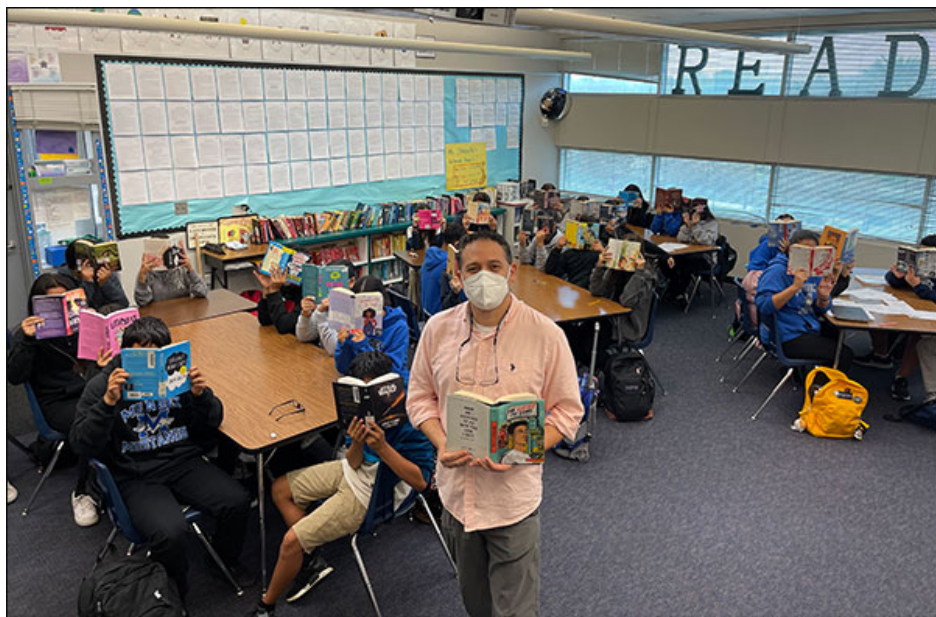
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Language Arts encompasses all aspects of life. When my students and I look at literature, I never know where the conversations will go or the topics we'll be exploring together. It's limitless! I especially love how my students make connections to the literature and identify with authors. I am with "my people" when we're reading literature, and have a lot of fun talking and nerding out about books. I do feel like my students are the real experts reviewing literature. With all of the insights they have given me through the years, I'm learning as much from them as they are, hopefully, learning from me.

What is so special about teaching middle school vs. other grades?

Although I taught second grade for four years prior to teaching middle school and enjoyed it, I wanted to teach in the older grades because I felt that those were the defining years for me as a kid. I hoped to make an impact if I moved to the upper grades. Sure, sometimes I miss teaching reading to the little ones, and reading picture books, but I find it extremely rewarding teaching eighth grade students who are about to embark on their high school years.

It's nice to play a part helping them learn some of the necessary skills that they will need to succeed in high school—and beyond. Middle school is a monumental time in a young person's life. Looking back at the same time in my own life, I was trying to make sense of the world, and I was looking to adults for the answers. Today, I see them doing the same things.



Mr. C. always loves to see his students' noses in a book. Photo by Shirley Gonzalez, one of Cisneros's current eighth graders.

What do you hope your middle school writers will learn from you?

I believe that if my students can research and write papers and respond to literature, they will succeed in high school *and* college. And that's what I push my students, many from Latinx households, to aim for. I want to make sure they are prepared for the rigors of higher education, especially those who may have some language barriers. So, when my students and I look at our curriculum standards, I tell them that I'm *not* going to teach them to write like eighth graders, I *am* going to teach them so that they can walk into a high school class and hold their own alongside seniors. I do this by working very closely with each of them offering one-on-one writer workshops during class, while focusing on their strengths and weaknesses, and helping them learn how to revise their work.

Was there a teacher who helped or inspired you while growing up?

In high school, I had a teacher, Mrs. Saxton, who changed my life. She called me out, made me accountable, and cared enough to intervene. She made sure that I didn't slip through the cracks. Without her help, I probably would not have gone to college and my life would be completely different. I often wonder why I didn't have a teacher like her before.

How do you think these early learning experiences impacted your own teaching, and writing?

When I see my students going through things at home, I take a moment and I don't worry as much about Language Arts test scores, but focus more about the overall wellness of each student.

Kenny Brechner
Bear Is a Bear

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BESTSELLERS

View by genre:

As an author, I try to write about topics that are authentic and meaningful, and things I went through to help kids make some sense of the world. I didn't have the best childhood and cannot change that. However, sharing those experiences gives me power over them. I want to empower my readers to make good out of bad situations.

I feel like books are like manuals. We aren't born with them, but hopefully we find ones that help us through life. This is the reason why I created the character of Efrén ("a friend") in *Efrén Divided*. I wrote him as a reminder to myself and other teachers to teach the whole child. I even keep a copy of my book on my desk (face down) as a visual reminder of how I can have the most impact in my students' lives. This reminder and self-reflection has allowed me to remember why I became a teacher, and it has helped me become a better teacher.



Cisneros back in high school. He keeps this photo on his desk at school to remind him of what mattered to him at that age.

In addition to encouraging you, how have your students inspired your writing?

My writing is truly fueled by them. While I started writing YA, it wasn't until *Efrén Divided* was published that I realized this. I've been teaching middle graders for over 20 years, and my level of expertise is working with that age group. So, it would make sense that I would be at my best writing for them.

I feel that's the purpose of middle grade books. They teach, entertain, and they can also expose readers to new experiences and help them process the world around them. I feel truly honored to play a small role in writing books where readers can see themselves and their lives in my books, and get something out of it. If that "something" can help them in any way, that's an added bonus.

We do a lot of creative writing, and I am often intimidated reading their work. I am an adult trying to write as a middle grade student, and I have to "catch" the right language and voice.

Again, they are the experts. They are living what I am writing about. Many write fantasy, but they channel their personal lives and experiences in their writing, and I get to see inside the lives and worlds of my students. It is through their writing that I build connections with my students.

These connections help me to stay aware of the topics and things that matter most to them. I also learn voice. In addition, I pick up their terminology—it's the only thing that I borrow from them. Oftentimes, they'll say "Mr. C., no one uses that word anymore!" My students are my editors, too. They are teaching me and I welcome their opinions.

How did you choose to write about the immigration crisis in *Efrén Divided*?

I think it chose me. It was 2016 during the very heated elections and there was lots of fear and miscommunication. With all the rhetoric that was going on, my students were legitimately fearful. So, I wanted to write something to highlight these difficulties, and the struggles and the lives of immigrants, and to showcase that we are not bad people.

That same year, I had three students whose parents were taken away in the middle of the year. They were still finishing homework, being respectful, and doing everything they were asked to do. Talk about resilience! I don't know how they were doing it. Because of them, I felt obligated to write that story. I wanted to tell the story for them, and to let them—and others—know that they are not alone in this plight and that they have an entire community of allies supporting and looking out for them.

While writing this story, I felt like I was dictating it. It seemed like the story was writing itself. I am normally a very slow writer because I am a teacher and a parent. But, it only took six months for me to write. It hasn't happened again. I wish it would. I think it was because I wasn't creating a new world or unfamiliar characters. And I knew what needed to happen because it was happening all around me. My goal was to make these characters and families familiar to readers, because in life, it's easy to dislike people you don't know—and difficult to dislike people when you take the time to get to know them better.

- 1** **Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Book 16**
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- 4** **Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (Minalima Edition) (Illustrated Edition), 2**
J. K. Rowling, Author, Minalima Design, Illustrator
- 5** **Cat Kid Comic Club: From the Creator of Dog Man**
Dav Pilkey, Author, Dav Pilkey, Illustrator

Can you tell us about your upcoming book and current work-in-progress?

My next book, *Falling Short* (Quill Tree, Mar. 2022) is more lighthearted than *Efrén Divided*. It's about self-acceptance, defying toxic masculinity, and the feeling of not measuring up. It is also a relationship book. One of the characters doesn't connect with his father, which is something very personal to me. I see a lot of these things in my students' writing. And, while I cannot address these topics in my teaching, I can in my novels. Writing allows me to have conversations in my books with my students that I wouldn't normally be able to have with them.

My current work in progress is a collection of short stories that highlights, affirms, and celebrates the Latinx culture and experience.

What are your hopes for your books and readers?

My greatest hope is that my books resonate with my readers. I don't worry about sales or awards. I care about the readers, especially the kids. I receive all kinds of letters from children about *Efrén Divided* and their stories. As I shared, I wasn't a reader growing up—I didn't see a purpose in reading. But, I hope that my readers do see a purpose, that my books can be an escape, a coping mechanism, and offer experiences and valuable advice. I also help that they help them to navigate their lives and feel empowered. I wrote these books with a lot of heart.

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