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Q & A with Juleah del Rosario

By Patricia J. Murphy | Sep 25, 2020

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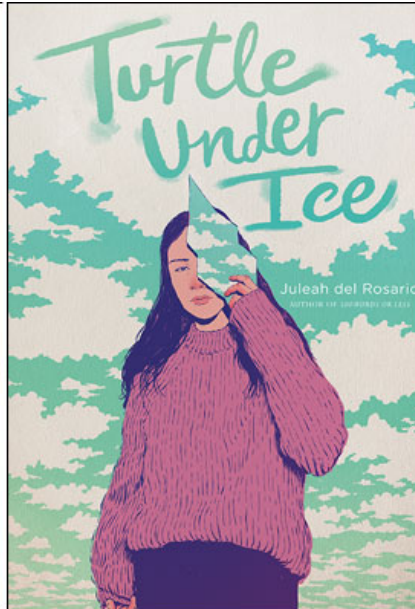
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Flor Blake



Juleah del Rosario is an acquisitions librarian at the University of Colorado Boulder, and the author of YA novels 500 Words or Less and Turtle Under Ice. By day she acquires titles and other materials for students and professors, and by night (and weekends) she writes titles in verse for YA readers. PW spoke with del Rosario about her dual roles as a librarian and an author, the places they intersect and influence each other, and how her love of turtles surfaced in her latest novel.

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PW Daily Tip Sheet

Can you tell us about your path to becoming an acquisitions librarian?

It was not my dream at first to become a librarian; however, I have always loved books. So, when I had the opportunity to work at the Bank Street Bookstore in New York City, I took it. I was amazed how by working at a bookstore you could help connect books to readers—and help them get what they needed. Then, later when I worked at an aerospace corporation acquiring resources such as airplane parts, I thought that I could combine these skill sets in some way, and decided to pursue a graduate degree in library sciences, and to become a librarian.



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This background and training also impacts my writing, because it makes me dig deeper for greater nuances of perspectives. While I am writing I don't necessarily have specific readers in mind; I do think about what I want my readers to experience, and if my novel is providing this. But, unlike getting a book for a student that can have an immediate, tangible result, when you're writing a book you don't have control of what happens when it leaves you. Because once it goes out into the world, it can be something else for someone else. Sometimes, however, I do hear about readers having a particular experience, a reaction to certain lines, or themes that resonate with them.

How do your Filipino and Chamorro ancestry influence your writing and find their way into your books?

It definitely comes out in *Turtles Under Ice*. My earlier perspective of writing about being of Chamorro descent was that it was too small of a community to include, and that people didn't know much about it. But now, I think readers want to see themselves, and other cultures than their own, in books. And it doesn't matter how large or small your community is. Reading about different cultures opens up the world to us.

Right now, there is a great need to acknowledge all sorts of readers, and to get all kinds of books with different perspectives into people's hands. We are seeing more of this, especially in young adult books. YA novels offer wonderful ways for authors to communicate about different cultures and perspectives, and for readers to learn about them. I am thrilled to be a part of this. I'm also happy to see more Filipino authors offering more holistic perspectives about the people and the community.

What was your inspiration for your novel *500 Words or Less*, and your recent novel, *Turtle Under Ice*? What do you hope your readers will take away from them?

I've always had an idea for a character who was morally fraught. I wanted to create a story with a main character and others who weren't making good choices and to see how they navigated these situations.

For *500 Words or Less*, the story involves a character who writes college essays for other students. I added having a mother disappear without explanation, and the traumatic ramifications of these two situations. I hope that my readers take away a sense of self-acceptance, that we are all flawed, and to understand that the choices we make and the things we've done that are wrong don't define us.

My inspiration for *Turtle Under Ice* was honoring having a sister and exploring grief of all kinds. Also, I have always loved turtles, and I learned about some that can survive under the ice in the winter and resurface in the spring. I saw this as a metaphor for grief, and I started writing.

What are you writing now? How has the pandemic affected your writing?

It's been a challenge since March with life being so different in every way. I can't write in verse right now because I think I'd be too critical of myself. So I have done a few things to free myself up. These include writing without any structural obligations, and trying to write short stories. With their quick beginning-to-end format, I have generated new ideas and don't feel pressure writing them. The stories have turned out to be mostly weird, contemporary realistic fiction, and are very different from what I normally write. Maybe they'll be a springboard to something longer that I might explore.

Do you have any advice for librarians to use as a springboard for their own writing?

First, I would tell them that they already have a wealth of personal experiences for stories. Their daily interactions alone, especially for those who work in public or school libraries, surround them with new ideas and people every day. Libraries offer great environments to stir curiosity and creativity—the entry points to writing!

Next, I would say to hone their writing skills by sitting down and doing the work. It's hard work to write something. Nora Ephron once said, "The hardest thing about writing is the writing." Writing can be full of self-doubt and struggle, especially when you start a new project and face the blank page. So you have to push through, because everyone has stories to tell.

***Turtle Under Ice* by Juleah del Rosario. Simon Pulse, \$18.99 Feb. ISBN 978-1-5344-4295-5**

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When I got my first job as an academic librarian at Ohio State University, and now, at University of Colorado Boulder, I discovered how much I love to engage with the students, faculty, and staff. I feel lucky that I found what I wanted to do, and that I am in the right place.

What do you do as an acquisitions librarian? What are some of the challenges with the pandemic?

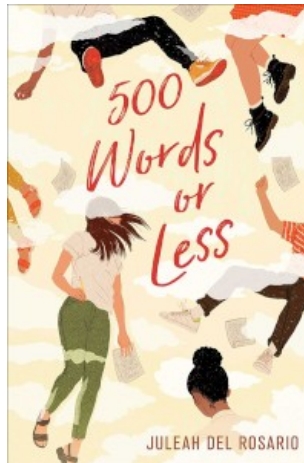
My responsibility is to buy all of the books and other materials for the university. It is about connecting the right books to the right people, and getting the right materials into the right hands. The biggest challenge with the pandemic is securing many different e-books and digital resources. With classes being remote, there are many different e-books needed, and not every publisher has every title in e-book format; and there's a greater need for DVD, video, and streaming access.

With all of this responsibility, how did you start to write not one, but two novels?

I've always written, and I started when I was a teenager. But I never attempted to write a novel or longer pieces until after I finished library school. And, after reading many YA novels in both college and library school, I started writing my "first book." Although this book sits in a drawer, I learned a lot from writing it. But I learned even more when I connected with a critique group that was part of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Once I joined this group, and became part of a community of writers, these things solidified my being a writer.

How did you decide to tell your two novels in verse?

I started *500 Words or Less* as a regular novel, not in verse. But when I finished, it wasn't the novel that I wanted it to be. I had a strong vision for it, and hoped it would be more emotional. So I read lots of verse novels—*Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, etc.—and tried writing it in verse. My critique group responded positively to what I shared with them. So I rewrote the entire manuscript in verse, and it became an entirely different book. By looking at a different way to express myself, the story became what I wanted it to become.



When writing *Turtle Under Ice*, verse worked again for me, and my writing evolved. I became more interested in creating vignettes, moving the story chronologically, and then jumping around from moment to moment.

Verse allows me to see what is working, what isn't working, what is important, and what is dragging down the story. And the use of the white space on each page allows my reader to rest and absorb the emotion and experience.

It sounds like you could use a little white space or rest in your life. How do you balance your dual careers?

The demands of my library job can be challenging, especially more recently as I previously shared. So when I'm at the library, I'm *at the library* I don't think about writing. I am good at compartmentalizing.

As for my writing, I do most of it in my off hours, mostly mornings or weekends, or if I can take a week off or go on a writer's retreat for a specific project or deadline. When I write, I find it freeing. I often write in short, intensive bursts, and I don't write every day. Sometimes, I may write every morning for one project and that works, but it can also be draining. I can't force it. With my latest novel, *Turtle in the Ice*, I would never have written it without these bursts.

You seem to balance these roles well. Can you tell us how they intersect and/or influence each other?

With students, I am helping them get the materials they need—textbooks for a class, research for a dissertation, etc.—that book that could save them money, support their ambitions, and change their lives.

It's also my job as a librarian to show students multiple contexts, especially on the university level when students need multiple sources and wider lenses to see how knowledge is created and whose voices are represented or not in these sources.

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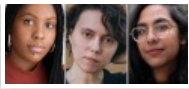
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