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# Q & A with Juliet Menéndez

By Patricia J. Murphy | Feb 22, 2021

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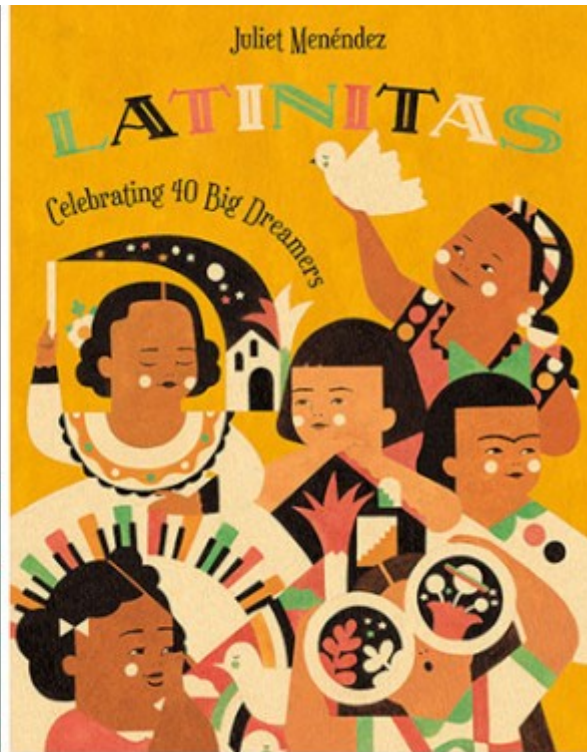
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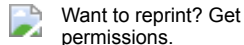
Guatemalan American author-illustrator Juliet Menéndez's debut book *Latinitas: Celebrating 40 Big Dreamers*, features profiles and childhood portraits of 40 influential Latinas, following them from their early footsteps to making their dreams come true—and history, too. Menéndez is also a passionate educator—a

former dual/bilingual language, art, and Spanish teacher in a variety of settings—as well as a Paris-trained designer, illustrator, and painter. Today, she spends her time sketching, painting with her favorite watercolors, and dreaming up her next children's titles. PW spoke with Menéndez, who lives in Guatemala City, about how she initially created *Latinitas* especially for her students but hopes these profiles and portraits will dare readers of all ages and cultures to dream big.

## Can you tell us about your time as a teacher and how it has influenced your writing/illustrating *Latinitas* for middle graders?

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I began my teaching career as a NYC Teaching Fellow and taught in elementary schools in Upper Manhattan as a dual/bilingual language classroom teacher for children in first, third, and fifth grades. My students were mainly Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Mexican. I found that I needed more materials that referenced their unique cultures, so I created snippets and stories about my students with images that looked like my students, and this led me to creating the illustrations that would become my book.

After some time in the classroom, I went to L'Institut Supérieur des Arts Appliqués in Paris. I ran out of money after my first year and never got to finish my degree, but I stayed in Paris to teach art in a bilingual, i.e. French and English, program with middle and high school students.

When I returned to the States, I started teaching art part-time, so I could have time to create books. I worked as an art teacher in Catholic schools, pre-k through eighth, in Upper Manhattan, and was a Spanish teacher through the Global Language Project.

As an art teacher, I taught all kinds of art spanning different countries and continents using diverse cultural references and influences—from Latinx, African, Islamic, to Indian. I also taught different techniques—collage, painting, printmaking, and sculpture and exposed my students to the art and the artists in their own communities. I wanted them to have a solid base and well-rounded art experience.

While teaching Spanish, I created a curriculum that taught the language through both historical and cultural lenses, and aligned it to Common Core Standards for math, science, and social studies.

For example, I taught shape names through the lens of architecture in Argentina by integrating the historical influences of different immigrant groups; ecosystems in the Sierra Nevada through the lens of the only Indigenous group that was never conquered by the Spanish, the Kogi in Colombia; and transition words in storytelling by using one of the only surviving Mayan texts after the Spanish conquest, the Popol Vuh.

Researching and creating this curriculum allowed me to teach my students about different cultures, cultural movements, to show them the reason for speaking Spanish—and to introduce them to the beautiful people and culture.

### It sounds like the seeds for *Latinitas* were planted early on in your career. What was the initial spark to actually begin?

While creating stories and illustrations for my students where they could see themselves, I got the idea that I might like to illustrate and write a book someday. And then, when I walked through the halls of my school, I would see posters depicting people like Ben Franklin, Martin Luther King Jr., and Salvador Dalí. I wanted to see posters that showed individuals that looked like my students, that represented their backgrounds, and that were people they could look up to—and that they could see themselves in. So, I started creating posters depicting strong Latinx women as children.

But I couldn't stop there. Creating these posters for my students inspired me to write the stories behind them. That was when I started digging and creating the collection that would be the beginning of *Latinitas*.



Juliet Menéndez at work.

**You seem to be a champion for representation and inclusion by placing both at the forefront of your teaching and writing. Can you talk about why that matters to you so much, and why it should for all of us?**

At any age an inclusive environment is important, but it is especially important in early childhood as learners start out to find their place in the world, where they can see themselves—and all of the possibilities for them. When children can see an extremely wide variety of possibilities, this allows them to imagine a huge range of things that they can be.

For me, it's not just about seeing yourself represented, it's about knowing how important it is for you to be there: that your culture's contributions have been and are essential. It's seeing someone who is like you who has made amazing accomplishments through history, and that you can do this, too. These things help children find a place, and a purpose. This is the whole idea behind—and my hope for—the book and the readers.



An illustration from *Latinitas*.

each of these women. Maybe someday I will. But, for now, I found a real value in putting the stories together, in chronological order—creating a sense of history, a feminist history. I thought that this would allow the reader to see how the stories unfolded and built on one another.

**How did you choose the 40 Latinx women with such a broad representation of cultures, backgrounds, and professions?**

To start, I chose to focus my energies on Latinx women because many of the stories I read had them on the sidelines, and relegated to footnotes, when they were incredibly important and central to history! So, I decided to focus on Latinx women whose stories were not being told. I also thought about what professions I wanted my students to learn about. I looked at the women's inspirations and accomplishments, and whether they were people that I would like my students to look up to, and if they were "beautiful" people. I defined "beauty" as people who saw the light in others and brought that same light to their lives and the lives of others. I wanted to tell the stories of women throughout history who uplifted their communities and wanted all women to advance.

**Can you expand upon your hopes for readers, and the diverse landscape at large?**

I want my readers, whether they are Latinx or not, girls or boys, etc., to feel a place in the narrative, a purpose in their own lives, and to become a part of the story. I'd like them to think this is their story, your story, and my story. We are all part of this world and this narrative. And, because of this, there will be many more stories—their stories. I want my readers to realize that all of the *Latinitas*'s contributions are part of who we are today.

As for the diverse landscape, I hope that my book can show a range of the many Latinx cultures across the U.S. and in Latin America, and spark an interest in the readers to want to learn more about these women and these cultures. I included my extensive bibliography at the end of the book so they can learn more about the *Latinitas*. Additionally, I hope that there will be more stories and books written about these women, and interest in their work.

**How did you decide to make *Latinitas* a collection of stories vs. individual books?**

I was actually first interested in making small books about

To do this, I read everything I could find about them. It became a magical scavenger hunt. I wrote letters to people, discovered rare books, and located pages from a dissertation. For Susana Torres, the architect, I was able to interview her. Her support for the project and my research, and her own childhood story, inspired the way I would approach each of the stories.

**On top of the 40 Latinitas profiled in your collection, you also included 11 others in your back matter, and a generous bibliography. How did you know when to stop researching and start writing?**

I definitely found myself in a rabbit hole of research at times. But, as I researched these women, I knew I was done when I *felt* connected to them, understood on some level where they were coming from, and felt like I knew why they did what they did. I knew that if I felt this connection, I could transmit it to the reader.

As a teacher, I've always been able to find things in what I teach that fascinate me, and then figure out how to fit them into the Common Core Curriculum Standards to share this passion and transmit it to my children. With this research, I was also able to do that in my writing.

**Who and what inspired you in your childhood? What were the seeds that made you take the leap like the *Latinitas* to become an artist and a teacher?**

I grew up in a family of artists all around me. My father is an architect, and my mother is an artist. It was natural to have all kinds of paints, paper, markers, pens, and architectural pens around me. I so wanted to use my father's architectural pens, but I could only look at them. So, I had a lot of artistic influences that helped plant seeds in me as a kid.

As for the teaching seed, I had a neighbor, Mrs. Oltman, in the U.S., and when I was growing up she offered to teach me piano in exchange for "good company and a cup of tea" at the end of each lesson. I wasn't a great piano player because I had a problem reading the music, but I had a good ear. To help, she would play the music for me, and I learned that way. And this continued for many years. Later on, she even found me a piano from a retirement community that was giving it away. She loved piano so much that she made such a huge effort to share that love with me. That ability to transmit something that you love so much to someone else is what I learned from her. I try to do this with my writing, illustrating, and teaching. It was such a gift to me that she showed me.

Like Mr. Rogers once said, "A great gift of any adult to a child, it seems to me, is to love what you do in front of the child. Let them catch the attitude that that's fun. Because you know attitudes are caught, not taught."

Mrs. Oltman also taught me not only to share what I love with others, but also to make a contribution to others in your community. This affected me in a way that I wanted to be just like her.

These early seeds gave me the sparks to take my own leaps, the opportunities to discover the things I wanted to do, and the doors to many wonderful things—like the *Latinitas*! Thank you, Mrs. Oltman!



**Once a teacher, always a teacher. Are you currently working with kids virtually? Do you have any plans to continue teaching and/or working with kids in the future?**



Yes, you are right! I love teaching, and I will always be a teacher. Most recently, while living in Antigua, Guatemala, I was volunteering with public school children to help supplement their literacy and art curriculum. Also, prior to the pandemic, I was planning a series of literary workshops for the national library in Guatemala City. But, unfortunately, the workshops have been put on hold. When it is safe to return, I look forward to getting back into the classroom again. Until then, I have some virtual visits lined up with Page Turners Make Great Learners, an Open Book Foundation, and Novel Neighbor. These visits will be my first time teaching virtually. I'm very excited!

**Do you have any advice for other teachers or librarians who might dream of writing stories inspired by, or to inspire, their students?**

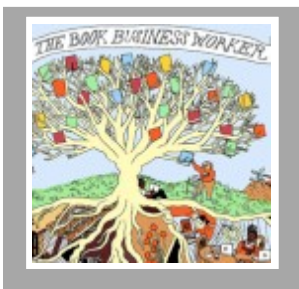
I would say to write what they are the most passionate about, to read to discover what affects and moves them, and to see if they could do that in their own writing. I'm still figuring it out.

**What's next for you? Is there a sequel to *Latinitas* in the works?**

I am currently working on illustrating two new books. One is written by April Pulley Sayre, and the other is written by Margarita Engle. I'm also working on my first picture book that I am both writing and illustrating. There is no sequel to *Latinitas* in the works yet, but you never know.

***Click here to read about Juliet Menendez's publishing journey, including finding an agent and publisher for Latinitas.***

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