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Q & A with Monica Zepeda

By Patricia J. Murphy | Sep 27, 2021

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In a town teeming with “triple threats”—performers who act, sing, and dance—Monica Zepeda is a triple threat of the literary variety. She is a teen librarian at the Beverly Hills Public Library in Los Angeles County, a debut young adult author, and an award-winning screenwriter. Before beginning her third career as

a teen librarian, Zepeda worked as a segment producer for the reality television show Full Throttle on the History Channel, and wrote the screenplay for the independent film Collusions. Her first YA novel, Boys of the Beast, won the Lee & Low 2019 New Visions Award for new authors of color, and will be published in February 2022 by Lee & Low/Tu

Books. (Check out the cover reveal above!) *Zepeda spoke with PW about her role as teen librarian, and the journey she took while crafting what she calls “probably the most personal story I’ve written,” a cross-country road trip that spotlights family ties, generational trauma, and mental health issues.*

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How did you make a U-turn from reality television producer to librarian?

I had been working as a reality TV segment producer, and hit a dry spell. I was also doing screenwriting at the time, and that wasn't really going anywhere either; *and* I was planning my wedding. So, I took a little time off, and thought about what I wanted to do next. With my work as a segment producer, I did a great deal of problem solving, organizing, and planning. I also had worked as a bookseller for a time. I thought I might make a good librarian. So, I took a job as a “page” at a library before I committed to graduate school; and, then got my master's in library sciences.

What made you choose to work with teens and YA literature?

While in grad school, I read a lot of YA and loved it. YA has come so far since I was a teen, and I had read a lot of it on my own, too. Initially, I started working in reference, and then, when my current library was looking for a reference person with YA experience, I was fortunate to get the teen librarian job. I love the literature that brought me to this work.

Can you share specific experiences in the library that have validated your choice?

For the past three years, the last two years virtually, I've loved doing our high school book clubs—talking about literature with the teens, listening to their feedback, and understanding how their minds work as they're trying to find themselves, and figuring things out. The fact that I can contribute to all of this is amazing to me! I also enjoy crafting with our teens. The kids in our community are big crafters, even the boys. So every summer we have a big craft project [i.e. using things like duct tape, LED lights, etc.]. We like to change it up each year, put out a bunch of stuff, give some direction, and then let them go. Their creativity and energy blow me away!

Speaking of crafting, how did you start crafting your own stories? Did anyone encourage you along the way?

I've always been a writer. When I was around eight years old, I wrote stories and poems about cats, and my first screenplay two years later. It was a *Star Wars* rip off, but hey, I was 10! In my teen years, I started writing fan fiction for the *New Teen Titans* comics before there was such a thing. As far as encouragement, I do remember my teacher, Mrs. Sirney, telling me, “Monica, *you* could be a writer!” Her words opened up a possibility that I'd never considered until then. Writing was just something that I did... and still do.

How do you think being a teen librarian influences your writing?

Having access to teens in our Teen Zone (pre-Covid), I've been privy to their interactions, vocabularies, and interests. This has helped “middle-aged me” to stay current with their lingo and things that are “cool.” I've also been able to observe many of them growing and changing from sixth grade to high school, which is fascinating—and such a gift! And, of course, I read a *lot* of YA books. I receive all kinds of advance readers copies and keep track of popular series. I also ask kids for book suggestions, and order them for the teen department. It's my baby—and quite helpful when writing YA books.

Can you tell us about your debut YA book, and the road to writing it?

Boys of the Beast is about three strangers who also happen to be cousins, and who take a road trip after their Grandma Lupe dies. First, there's Matt, a Christian homeschooler and aspiring filmmaker who wants independence from his family while still keeping his faith. Second, is Ethan, gay and Jewish, who is crushing hard on a guy he met online and is

hoping it turns into something more. And, third, there's Oscar, who self-medicates because his father was killed during a school shooting. As they get to know each other, they challenge each other's viewpoints about race, religion, sexuality, class, and mental illness. Ultimately, the story is about learning to make oneself vulnerable.

It came about because I have many nieces and nephews and developed an idea for a story about cousins who were related but who were so different from each other. I wondered what if they didn't grow up together, and the idea just stuck. Soon after, I started writing notes and piecing together character backgrounds—my TV experience helped here. I had a rough idea where I was starting: with a car trip, and what generally was going to happen. In the midst of all of this, my mother got sick and passed away, and that put a stop to everything.

It was a long time before I could go back to it. Ironically, the story is motivated by the death of a grandmother, and a lot of big things happen in the book. When I returned seven months later, I took baby steps. Sometimes all I could do was 100 words a day. Once I got back into the flow, I finished the draft, got some feedback, and did another draft. I submitted the second draft to *Lee & Low's New Voices Award* in the fall of 2018. In February 2019, I learned that I won!

It sounds like you had your own emotional journey as you wrote your characters' journey. What kept you moving forward?

This book is probably the most personal thing that I've written. It seems the older that I get, the more I want to write stories that are personal to me. I wrote it because I have things to say, and I want to put them out there. And the situation with my characters was the best way to do this. I wanted to write messy and complex characters and have them interact in ways that would engage readers.

What are your hopes for your book--and your readers?

My greatest hope is that the book resonates with teens. When I wrote it, I was thinking about a book that speaks to boys and reluctant readers. I also hope the book helps readers learn more about mental health, and get mental health services when necessary. Ultimately, I'd like the book to help destigmatize and normalize discussions about mental illness, especially in the Latinx and Evangelical communities. In addition, my book addresses generational trauma in families. I wanted to show that all families are super complicated.

With your Mexican American heritage, how important is it to write a book with characters who share the same background, and publish it with a house that is the largest multi-cultural publisher in the U.S., creating books "about everyone, for everyone"?

I am immensely grateful that a publisher appreciates the story that I've written. It's my desire to tell the stories of diverse kids who are Mexican Americans they have their own stories that deserve to be told. It's important to me for this next generation of kids to see themselves, and know that their stories matter. Immigration stories are important, but I don't feel qualified to write them. Maybe if a character came to me and I felt I had to tell their story, I would do the research and write it. But now I have other characters in my head who want me to tell their stories.

Will these stories be books or screenplays?

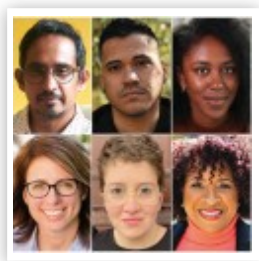
I want to do it all. As I told my friend who asked me to write the screenplay for *Collusions*, "Why not?" I'm not sure if it's fearlessness or stubbornness. It's just that I've been in the game for so long, I can't stop. I only want to write stories that are important to me. And, if other people appreciate them, that's a bonus.

Having worked in the entertainment industry, you get used to people saying, "no." But, you cannot dwell on it, or you're not going to move forward. Currently, I'm working on turning an earlier Lee & Low New Voices Award entry (which was rejected) into a graphic novel, and writing historical fiction loosely based on something that happened to my uncle in the 1930s and '40s.

Do you have advice for those wanting to follow in your footsteps?

The important thing is to follow your heart, and it will tell you what the most important things in your life are. Sometimes, life might come and punch you in the throat, and you might have to take time off to deal with reality for a while. But your heart will know when it's time to go back to it. I think that's why I've kept at it. My heart tells me, "Keep going!"

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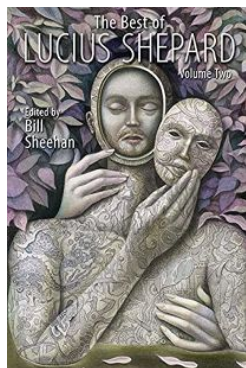
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