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Q & A with Torrey Maldonado

By Patricia J. Murphy | Nov 23, 2020

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Torrey Maldonado is the author of two critically acclaimed middle grade novels, *Secret Saturdays* and *Tight*. His latest title, *What Lane?*, was named by Oprah Magazine as one of the “Best Books for Discussing Racism,” and the New York Times listed it

as one of the “14 Antiracist Books for Kids and Teens Recommended by BIPOC Teachers and Librarians.” Maldonado is also a beloved veteran middle-school social studies teacher in his hometown of Brooklyn, N.Y. PW spoke with Maldonado about how books changed his life as a student, how his early educational struggles influenced

him to become a teacher, and how his life, his teaching, and his students inspire his writing. He also shared why he wishes he had read his latest novel as a Black Latino tween and teen facing racial inequality for the first time, and hopes it helps Black children, and kids of all colors, to turn the world around.

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How did books change your life as a student?

My mom was the only mom who I knew in our entire housing project with a library of books. It was such an anomaly that friends would come over, look at the library, and ask, “What is that?” So, early on, I learned to love books, and was sometimes bullied because of this. It wasn’t easy being a Black, Latino, bookish boy in one of the toughest housing projects in the nation. But, my mom was “my rainbow in my cloud” (Maya Angelou) and taught me many valuable lessons and quotes (Angelou’s and others) including that life was tough—but books are strong enough to smash the chains that hold us back.

One book in particular, Ezra Jack Keats’s *The Snowy Day*, had a huge impact on me. When my mom showed me the mom and boy in the book, I thought that she was playing a “Jedi” magic trick, and I said, “Look, Mommy, that’s me and you!” She smiled and said, “Well, that’s not you or me, but this *is* us—and that’s our neighborhood!” It was my first memory that there was magic in my

hard neighborhood, in my home, and in me. She also performed another magic trick—convincing me that we had this magic to inspire others.

How did your early educational experiences impact your young life and set you on your trajectory to becoming a teacher?

My mom and our library of books started me on my educational path. These books supplemented my learning with stories that centered marginalized peoples. I was able to see my family, my community, and myself in books, and the way that our world should be.

Unfortunately, my elementary school and my teachers didn’t center missing voices, have diverse books, or share stories that loved our community—and I unplugged real hard. As I now say, “If books don’t love readers, readers won’t love books!”

As a result, I was held back in third grade, and was almost held back again because nothing changed. But my mom fought hard, stood up against the school system, and went to the district demanding that I be transferred out and given a shot. My new school’s principal took a great interest in me. He learned from my mother who told *everyone* in “our village” how I loved books and writing, and that I was a writer. So, when he met me, he shook my hand and said, “I know who you are. You are a writer, you’re bookish, and you don’t like to show it in this neighborhood because you get bullied for it. But, at this school, I’m going to make sure you feel comfortable!” Years later, he and other educators there chose me—*me*—to be Prince Charming in my school’s *Cinderella* play and it changed me. I saw how kids rise to the expectations you set for them. Looking back, these were moments when I experienced the transformative nature of education.

Who and what ultimately inspired you to become a teacher?

Of course, I have to single out my mother—my first teacher—and the principal and the teachers at my second elementary school. These people and “my village” in my neighborhood encouraged me to love books, to never give up, and to write. It is because of these people and experiences that set me on my journey to become the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college. I would go on to earn a degree in sociology with a focus in education at Vassar College.

While in college, I was invited to work with a prison program, and a summer teacher-training program with Marian Wright Edelman's Children's Defense Fund called Freedom Schools. I saw firsthand in these programs, again, that it takes a village to impact lives, and to teach. And, it all came full circle. I found my true love—teaching!

I didn't teach right away. I worked near Wall Street chasing the American Dream to make money. Two things tipped me into teaching. I was invited to speak at a career day at a school in Brooklyn. That inspired me to return to education, and I applied for a conflict resolution job in our nation's largest victims services organization, Safe Horizon. As a conflict resolution staff developer, for three years, I worked with K–12 kids, which led to my being invited by the former Chancellor of NYC public schools to teach in the middle school I almost attended. And I've been teaching middle grade social studies there for over 20 years.

When and how did you transition from teaching to writing?

I never really transitioned from teaching to writing because I've always written poems, stories, and articles. I've also always believed that at the heart of amazing teaching is the same thing that's at the heart of amazing writing: and, that's storytelling.

It was around the time I was writing a magazine story about the men in my life and how their level of commitment to me helped or hurt my relationships, that one of my students came to me to talk about his father leaving; and he started to cry. This hit me so hard. Because my own father was in and out of my life, I felt like that boy, and I had an epiphany that I was writing for the wrong audience, and from the wrong perspective. I had to write for that boy, and from his perspective.

So, how did you begin writing this way?

At first, I didn't think that the voice of "kid speak" could be in books. I had never read a book that sounded like my students, the young me, or my family until my mom showed me the book *Drown* by Junot Díaz. It was the first time that I read a voice that had the sound, slang, and vernacular of young people. It was hip, fresh, and current. His voice validated the voice inside me that I had yet to share with the world.

As for writing from a boy's perspective, it circles back to the desire that I have as a teacher. I think the best teachers try to see things from kids' perspectives, to amplify their voices, to take the adult voice out of the equation. They ask their students, "What do you know?," "What do you want me to know about?," and "What conversations do you want adults to be a part of?" so we can create the most positive change for all people. With these questions, and their answers, I started to figure it out. The writing has to be real and relatable; and I need to say it the way kids say and hear things.

So, how did you incorporate the way kids say and hear things to create both musical rhythm and a frenetic pace in your novels that resemble graphic novels and comics?

It began when I was asked to develop an afterschool program to help kids who were failing and needed some re-routing. I developed a writing program and added athletics to help the kids physicalize—and then emotionalize. I had them running sprints, shooting baskets, doing jumping jacks; and then I gave them writing prompts. I discovered that the more physical they got, the more emotional their writing became, and the more they were sharing from their hearts. This experience taught me that if I was going to write for kids it had to be as exciting as physical activity, and be as thrilling as the action of video games, comics, and cartoons, and have that same type of energy.

How do you find the time to teach *and* write?

Most days, I teach up to six classes of sixth-grade social studies, and write when I find a few minutes here and there: early mornings, late nights, and school vacations. And, while I may not write every day, my teaching informs my writing every day.

Your books have a specificity and universality to them. Can you talk about how being in the classroom inspires you and your writing?

My writing is inspired by my students' school life experiences, and my own. But, none of my students will ever see any specifics of their experiences in my stories. It's important to me to protect their privacy. It's really the trends of tween and teen relationships and their dynamics that find their way into my stories. These are the things that happen with my kids every year, like fifth graders becoming sixth graders—trying on different outfits and seeing who they want to be, deciding on what friends they want to be with, which are the best for them, and the friendship troubles they have.

Being in the classroom, I get to see kids every day, and to see that our young people are everyday heroes. They are heroic in so many ways that are not spotlighted. Our kids are dealing with so much, especially today. Their resiliency is amazing to me. I want them to know they can be the change we need, and that they are the leaders we are waiting for. These are some of the reasons I wrote my latest novel, *What Lane?*

Can you say a little more about what went into writing it?

What Lane? is a crossroads coming-of-age story of a sixth grader, Stephen, whose internal and external lives collide on a complex terrain. He sees things he's never seen before. He starts to notice that his white friends are being treated differently, and he feels that his world is turning upside down. He tries to make choices, to be his true self, and to blaze his own trail to turn his world right side up.

At first, Stephen personalizes racism. He thinks it's only happening to him. So, he goes to his parents about how he is being treated. His dad has to explain it to him—to tell him how it has been going on since the start of the country. But, his parents don't have all the answers. Kids need to know that adults don't have all the answers, but together we can come up with some great answers.

This isn't just a book about a Black boy. It's also about young white kids at a crossroads where they can choose empathy or go backwards. It teaches kids to be allies to each other now—and when they become adults. When I was growing up, I wanted my white friends to see the world that they didn't live in. It's a book that says what I wanted and needed to say as a sixth grader, and as a parent, too.

The main theme of all three of my books is about the wide-eyed boy that I used to be until my eyes were opened. My friends and I needed these books when we were young. None of my Black, white, or mixed-race friends knew how to deal with racism. But, fortunately, I was able to turn my negative experience into an opportunity to help tweens and teens. I hope that my books allow kids of all colors to see themselves as superheroes, and that they give them the tools to help break stereotypes and to navigate complex emotional and social terrain.

Your books have earned numerous awards and other accolades. What does this recognition mean to you?

In my first elementary school, I was often told to move out of the way, that no one wants to hear what I have to say, and to keep dreaming when I said that I wanted to become a writer. When you are devalued like that, it causes you to devalue yourself. These teachers' attempts to dismiss and erase me caused a head-on collision. It took "my village" to repair me, to fuel me, and to keep me on my journey.

So, I believe the recognition for my books, and for me, reinforces and validates the people who told me that my voice mattered, that people will listen to me, and to keep on keeping on. These honors are also reminders that they were right—that the power of literacy, and sticking with school, would save me. Because of my mom, and all of the supportive people in my life, I was able to grow up to write, and to teach. It was truly a team effort passing "the ball." I was just lucky to be the one to catch it, and score "wins" for us.

What advice would you give to fellow teachers who might like to follow in your footsteps?

I would tell them to state their intention and their desire to be on this journey; and then, to map it, love it, do it! Do it because you can't see yourself *not* doing it. We all have stories worth telling. Stories that people need to hear—even the most embarrassing ones. You may like what you find. And, your readers might, too!

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