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Talking with Meg Medina

Meg Medina's work examines through the eyes of young people how cultures intersect. Although her stories depict what is unique in Latino culture, her themes of responsibility, family ties, and fostering girls' self-esteem are universal. Her protagonists are girls who, confronted with dire circumstances, learn to rely on their own strength. In 2014, Medina's young adult novel, *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, was the 2014 Pura Belpré Author Award winner. For her picture book, *Tía Isa Wants a Car*, she was named the 2012 Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award winner. In March 2014, she was included in the CNN 10, a list that recognizes visionary woman in America. The first American citizen in her family, Medina was raised in Queens, New York, by her mother and a clan of *tíos*, *primos*, and *abuelos*, who arrived from Cuba over the years. She grew up immersed in her extended family's storytelling, and she credits them with her passion for tales. From her home in Richmond, Virginia, Medina shared her thoughts about writing for young people and the ways that stories build communities.

BKL: You used to write for adults. How did you switch to writing for young people?

MEDINA: I enjoy writing for children and young adults. So far, the stories that I have wanted to tell are suited for young people. They're tales of the outsider, of finding inner voice, and of family struggle. To me, those are the signature concerns of growing up. Still, I can't say I won't ever write for adults again. If the right story came to mind, I'd be happy to do that, although I suspect that the world of adult literature isn't quite as fun and hopeful as the world of children's literature.

BKL: Your family left Cuba during the revolution. How are your family's story and legacy reflected in your own stories?

MEDINA: For my family members, leaving Cuba meant leaving behind loved ones and leaving behind their identities and all they had worked for in their lives. Their early years here in the U.S. (when I was a girl) were difficult economically and emotionally. One thing that helped was their fondness for telling family stories. I think this reminded them of who they were before they came here. It was also a way to keep me connected to our culture and to our extended family.

I use bits and pieces of my family's stories in every book that I

write. Sometimes the stories are fairly close to the actual tale, as in *Tía Isa Wants a Car*. I did have an aunt named Isa, and she did buy us our first car. Other times, I combine little pieces of the facts with my own invention to make something new, as in *Milagros*. What I try to celebrate in all of my books is the warmth and complexity of Latino families—especially the strong women who often lead them.

BKL: In your novels *Milagros* and *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind*, you employ magic realism. Can you talk about your affinity to this form? Have you been influenced by other Latino writers?

MEDINA: I am so fortunate to have been influenced by so many Latino authors and their beautiful work. Julia Alvarez, Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda—the list goes on. Magical thinking is part of that literature, of course. The interesting thing is that I write in English. I consider myself bicultural like many students in our classrooms right now who are English-dominant Latinos. I wanted to introduce those students to magic realism—a beloved form in Latino literature—via a language that they could understand. It is my way to help them celebrate our literary heritage in a new context.

BKL: You write picture books and novels. What do you consider the challenges and advantages of each form?

MEDINA: Picture books are sometimes difficult because of all of the constraints. You have to write for two readers—the adult and child. You have to tell a large story in only 32 pages and with vocabulary that is easily understandable but never dull. That's very tricky business. It's a joy when you unlock it, but getting there sometimes can be tough.

Novels, of course, are tests of endurance. You are continually raising the stakes for your heroine, and, frankly, sometimes I get them in such a jam that I can't think of how they're going to get out of the mess! I haven't written a novel yet where I've sailed through the manuscript without at least one core meltdown and crisis of faith. Somewhere around page 130 I am convinced that it's terrible and that I will never finish. But somehow the solution does reveal itself. Such a mystery!

BKL: In *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, you show how for the victim of bullying, the fear of violence can be as devastating as violence itself. Did you experience bullying yourself?

MEDINA: Yes, I did have my own tangle with a school bully, and it looked a lot like chapter 1 of *Yaqui*. Even today, I hate to remember that experience and all the ways it changed me. The novel is, of course, largely fictionalized. Piddy is a bit like who I was, but mostly she has her own style. To create Piddy, I used pieces of the old me and pieces of young people I see today. What was most important to me was representing the effects of bullying as honestly as I could and not offering any easy solutions. The impact of being bullied can't be overestimated, and it extends beyond school to all areas of a person's life.

BKL: *All your books have strong girl characters who grow confident and learn to imagine themselves outside of the roles that their families or society prescribed. Do you consider yourself a feminist writer?*

MEDINA: I am a proud feminist and always have been. To me the word has no negative connotation whatsoever. It's about celebrating girls and their inner strength. I can't even imagine writing a book that doesn't include young women taking charge of their lives.

BKL: *Another common theme in your books is the main character's strong family ties. Tía Isa Wants a Car is dedicated to an aunt of yours. Are any of your other characters based on people in your immediate family?*

MEDINA: It depends how you define "based on." I combine different qualities of people in my life to create new characters. For example, my parents did divorce in real life, and I did not know my father for many years. This separation from a father comes up in *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, though for very different reasons.

BKL: *Your first two novels are set in almost fairy tale-like settings. Then, in Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass, you put Piddy in a very realistic contemporary situation of being bullied by another Latina. What does this shift signal about your development as a writer?*

MEDINA: I'd like to think that it suggests that I'm willing to take risks and try new things. But it could just as easily suggest that I'm still learning and am unsettled. Either way, I'm not worried. Writing is really an ongoing exploration for me. That's what keeps it fun.

BKL: *A talk at an antibullying event at a Virginia middle school was cancelled after the principal refused to allow you to reference the title of (or show the cover of) Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass. How did the controversy affect you?*

MEDINA: Initially, it was hurtful to me. I've spent most of my life in service to young people—as a teacher, a parent, a community volunteer. It was hard to be told that something I had done was in some way below the moral code of a community. But the positives of the experience by far outweighed the negatives. There was a groundswell of support, and let me tell you, there is nothing more galvanizing to librarians and dedicated teachers than the threat of censorship. I received so much support from everywhere, particularly the National Coalition against Censorship. I did see a spike in sales, but mostly I saw a spike in interest and support for offering books that dare to speak about children's experiences as they are and not as we'd like them to be.

BKL: *You were recently included in the CNN 10 list of visionary women. In addition to writing, you also speak at schools; work with REFORMA, the ALA's affiliate group that focuses on library services for Latino youth and families; and develop your Girls of Summer project. Can you talk about those activities?*

MEDINA: The CNN 10 list was a wonderful and unexpected honor. It's true that I design or get behind a number of projects that support reading and story as a way to make communities better. It stems from my belief that writers are citizens in their communities and that we have an important role to play in connecting people to literature and to creating connection through these stories.

To that end, my friend and fellow Candlewick author Gigi Amateau and I founded Girls of Summer, a curated summer reading list of 18 books for strong girls. We are in our fourth year. Essentially, it's a blog where we review the books—some new, some old; from picture books to YA novels—that we feel speak to the experience of diverse girls. Every Friday, one of the authors joins us on the blog via a post. But the best part is the live launch party in Richmond, Virginia, where Gigi and I live. Almost 200 mothers, grandmothers, teachers, librarians, authors, and book lovers come to the Richmond Public Library to see us unveil the list, get door prizes, and enjoy free ice cream. It's a lovely partnership between us and the public library on behalf of girls and the people in their lives who love them and believe in them.

My other projects often have to do with raising the profile of multicultural books and meeting the needs of diverse readers. I visit lots of schools, and I talk about writing from the Latino perspective. Even now, in 2014, the number of titles written by or about people of color is a disgrace. I want to use my visibility to improve that—and to connect with all readers.

BKL: *What are you working on next?*

MEDINA: I have a picture book due out next year called *Abuela, Mango, and Me*. I'm excited that Angela Dominguez is the illustrator. She won a Pura Belpré Honor this year. The initial sketches are lovely. And I just submitted my manuscript for my next YA novel. It's historical fiction, set in New York City in 1977. As anyone who survived that year in NYC will tell you, it was hellacious. High crime, near bankruptcy in the city, a serial killer . . . and disco! I've put 18-year-old Nora Lopez in the midst of it all. Stay tuned!

Sampling Medina

The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind. 2010. 256p. Candlewick, \$15.99 (9780763646028). Gr. 7–12.

Milagros: *Girl from Away.* 2008. 288p. Holt, \$17.99 (9780805082302). Gr. 4–7.

Tía Isa Wants a Car. Illus. by Claudio Muñoz. 2011. 32p. Candlewick, \$15.99 (9780763641566). PreS–Gr. 2.

Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass. 2013. 272p. Candlewick, \$16.99 (9780763658595). Gr. 8–11.

Monika Schröder's third novel for middle-grade readers, *My Brother's Shadow*, was published in September 2012. Visit her at monikaschroeder.com.

Common Core Connections

The following are suggestions for sharing Meg Medina's books in the classroom—and implementing the Common Core State Standards. You can find more information about the standards at corestandards.org.

In the Classroom: In Meg Medina's *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind*, people in the tiny village of Tres Montes believe that 16-year-old Sonia Ocampo has miraculous protective powers since her birth coincided with the end of a terrible storm. All her life, villagers have asked her to pray for the sick or missing, pinning *milagro* trinkets on her shawl. Sonia knows that she doesn't have special powers and increasingly feels the burden of carrying everyone's hopes. She moves to the city to work for a wealthy woman, but when she learns that her brother has disappeared, she realizes that she cannot leave her past or family behind easily. The expectations of Sonia's family and community bear heavily on her. She and her brother want to leave the village's poverty and its peoples' old ways behind.

After students finish the novel, ask them to reflect on their own family's expectations. Do students experience them as burdens, as motivations, or both? Irina Gomez and Señor Mason have low expectations for Sonia. Discuss with your students what happens to one's self-esteem if teachers or parents question someone's abilities. Next, discuss the elements of magic realism in the book, asking students to point to specific examples. Finally, prepare a character arc for Sonia with your class. Point out Sonia's choices and how her decisions change, referring back to the text for clear examples.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.3.** Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.6.** Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1.c.** Pose questions that connect the ideas of several speakers and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant evidence, observations, and ideas.

In the Classroom: The unnamed narrator of Meg Medina's *Tia Isa Wants a Car* lives with her aunt and uncle in an apartment, while other family members still live far away. Tía Isa and Tío Andres send most of the money they earn back home, accompanied by notes and pictures “so Mami can see how I've grown,” the narrator says. Even though money is tight, Tía Isa wants to save up to buy a car so that she can drive to the beach. While Tío Andres reminds Isa that they are not rich, her niece eagerly embraces the dream and finds several creative ways to earn money. Spanish phrases are sprinkled throughout the text, and lively illustrations in warm pastels enhance this story about family and responsibility.

Students who have recently moved to the U.S. and still have close relatives in their home country may relate to the “helping money” Isa sends to their family. How do students feel about that tradition? Start a discussion about families living apart. Point out Tía Isa's description of her dream car (“the same shiny green as the ocean that lapped under my car”), and

ask students to find other similes and metaphors in the text. Write this quote from the book on the board: “Sometimes it's hard for good things to happen.” Discuss with students their own and their family's dreams and the importance of a plan and patience in pursuing it. Use the book together with other titles about saving money, such as *The Money We'll Save*, by Brock Cole, and *Start Saving, Henry*, by Nancy Carlson.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.3.** Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.1.b.** Build on others' talk in conversations by linking their comments to the remarks of others.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.4.** Tell a story or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking audibly in coherent sentences.

In the Classroom: At the start of Meg Medina's *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, new student Piddy doesn't even know who Yaqui Delgado is when she first hears the message in the book's title. Because of Piddy's accent-free speech and light skin, she doesn't really fit in with the Latino students, and her developing body draws more unwanted attention from boys at school. She has her hands full trying to balance her honors classes with work at the neighborhood hair salon, and she also wants to learn more about her father's identity. When Yaqui's harassment escalates, Piddy starts to skip school, and soon she can't leave the house for fear of running into Yaqui.

This powerful story provides lots of material for classroom discussions about bullying, but it also explores other issues of interest for teenage girls, such as female body issues and solidarity or lack thereof between girls. Invite students to discuss Piddy's situation and her choices. How does she find “the new me” and become “the girl tough enough to face Yaqui”?

In a written response, students may relate their own experiences with bullies at school. Or divide the class into small groups and ask them to prepare short skits reenacting scenes from the book and discuss and perform alternative scenarios for Piddy. As a further exercise, students could read Jennifer Hubbard's *Until It Hurts to Stop* and compare how that novel's protagonist, Maggie, and Piddy each deal with the dread of bullying.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.3.** Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1.** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3.b.** Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3.d.** Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.