

Chica Lit: Multicultural Literature Blurs Borders

by Marie Loggia-Kee

With chick lit, it's all about the attitude: Think of the original *Diary of Bridget Jones*, a tell-all of the dating life of a singleton. Chica lit takes that sass and combines it with culture.

Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, author of the genre-setting bestseller *The Dirty Girls Social Club*, quickly dismisses the term "Latina lit." That's not what her novels are. They're *Chica lit*. "There has been a rich tradition of Latina literature out there, most of it quite literary and heavy. Chica lit, by contrast, is bubbly, fun, irreverent, modern, and fashionable," Valdes-Rodriguez says. "I think of Chica lit as being like the *Seinfeld* show, whereas traditional Latina literature is more like *ER*."

In May 2006 Valdes-Rodriguez joined Mary Castillo, author of *Hot Tamara: What's Life Without a Little Spice*, among others, in Miami Beach at the first Chica Lit Club. While Valdes-Rodriguez usually sets her novels on the East Coast, Castillo captures the essence of Los Angeles. Together the two authors are helping to define a new genre of writing.

When Castillo submitted her manuscript for publication, editors told her the same thing over and over again: "It's not Latina enough." Often Chica literature breaks the traditional roles and forges a new identity; the protagonist of the new fiction is not just a woman of Latina heritage, she's a strong, and strongly identified, Latina-American woman.

In *Hot Tamara's* closing notes, Castillo said that she learned more about herself and her heritage while working on the book:

Writing *Hot Tamara* was a journey for me to realize how much of a Latina I really am. In my family we didn't speak Spanish or even identify ourselves as Mexican. I was a fourth-generation American on my dad's side, who happened to be Mexican. ("Avon's Little Black Book on Mary Castillo," cited in *Hot Tamara*)

Castillo and other writers reach a segment of the population eager for role models that reflect some of the realities and obstacles they face in real life. Authors such as Valdes-Rodriguez and Castillo touch a growing mainstream population that often relates to more than one culture.

Industry Trends

One way to distinguish the direction of the publishing industry is to look at what the major houses solicit. Chica lit is showing up on the request list. Selina McLemore, a former editor at HarperCollins Publishers who now acquires for Harlequin, credits not only literary writers such as Isabel Allende and Sandra Cisneros for changing the voice of the literature, but contemporary writers such as Valdes-Rodriguez and Castillo as well.

"We're seeing fiction that is truly intended for the commercial market," McLemore explains. "These writers and books are a reflection of the way Latino culture

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has become, in the last ten years, a much more accepted part of mainstream pop culture, as has been proven in music, movies, and TV."

Rather than assimilating her characters into mainstream culture, Valdes-Rodriguez notes that they and their stories reflect the lives of her readers. "I had no idea my work would resonate with so many people—more than half a million books sold to date," Valdes-Rodriguez says. "Again and again I hear that my work has affirmed the life choices many Latinas have made, like college and a professional career, choices that none of us have yet seen reflected in the mainstream media very well."

Cultural Identity

The recently published anthology *Border-Line Personalities: A New Generation of Latinas Dish on Sex, Sass and Cultural Shifting* explores the concept of self-defin-

ing that surfaces in many of the Chica lit novels. Michelle Herrera Mulligan, one of the anthology's editors, said that her mother accused her of not staying true to the culture. "Even though I'm half white," she said, "I thought I'd bridged the gap between my mother and me. If I didn't fit into her world, where did I belong?" (xxvi). Through the process of putting together the anthology, Herrera Mulligan said that the contributors developed a "pathology of being Latina" (xxx):

We realized that ultimately, it is up to us to decide if we are Latina, to individually determine what the term means. We grappled with the implications of this on our greater cultures, and argued about the word's ability to entirely define us. At the end of this process, we realized that no matter how loaded, conflicted, and difficult the term may be, we are Latinas. Through heritage and by choice. (xxx)

Hot Latinas

Rather than falling victim to the traditions of its readers' heritage, Chica lit forges new ground. The female characters in the literature follow their dreams and take on new roles: Women can be strong, and they don't have to be dependent on or subservient to a man. McLemore says that current stories are "more reflective of real Latina women."

"We're not just maids anymore, nor the salacious vixens of telenovelas," McLemore explains. "These stories often reflect the lives of first- and second-generation Latinas who have grown up in the United States, who may or may not even speak Spanish. They are about blending cultures, living in what can sometimes seem to be two very different worlds."

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In the opening of Castillo's debut novel, *Hot Tamara*, the protagonist forgoes the traditional values of settling down with the "right" guy—by her family's standards—in order to pursue her dream of working for an art gallery. Like Tamara, the characters of Chica lit are not necessarily disrespectful, but that doesn't mean that their elders see them as respectful. In *Hot Tamara*, Tamara's mother expresses her feelings about modern girls:

"You're so self-centered that you can't see how your idiotic decisions hurt everyone around you." Her mom's voice cracked. "We do these things for you because you can't. You're making a mistake, and as far as I'm concerned, I want nothing to do with it. You want to move to L.A.? Fine. Go. There's nothing for you here, and when you fall on your face, don't bother to come running to us." (72)

But Tamara is willing to go against the wishes of her mother and pursue her interests. Rather than taking the safe choice, this Latina embraces the diversity within her own heritage and the wider culture that enables her freedom.

Described by *New York* magazine as "the Hispanic version of *Waiting to Exhale*" (on the back cover of the book), *The Dirty Girls Social Club* also breaks through the multicultural barrier to address stereotypes about identity and gender roles. *The Dirty Girls* follows six Latina women who come from different cultural backgrounds. Lauren, the opening narrator, is a Cuban woman who learned Spanish for a reporting job; Amber is Californian Mexican; Usnavys is Puerto Rican; Rebecca aligns herself as "Spanish," not "Mexican"; Sara is Cuban; and Elizabeth is a black Colombian. Valdes-Rodriguez shows the cultural diversity of the characters' milieu in her descriptions, but although all of these women hail from a different heritage, they are still considered "Latina" women.

While Valdes-Rodriguez says she's very much in touch with her own heritage, she admits that she learned much while writing her novel. "I'm not Colombian, but for Elizabeth's character, [I] had to learn about Colombia. In that sense, writing has broken down a lot of barriers for me," she explains. "I think all writers should stretch to include people whose backgrounds are different from their own. Just because I'm Latina doesn't mean I speak for all Latinas. We are a diverse group. The books that succeed will be those that reflect this diversity."

Fiction also touches on some of the same language and terminology issues addressed in the nonfiction anthologies; even though the women are "Latinas," they don't truly know what the word encompasses. In *The Dirty Girls Social Club*, Valdes-Rodriguez writes, "Nobody knew that we had no idea what a Latina was supposed

to be, that we just let the moniker fall over us and fit in the best we could" (34).

In a recent interview, Castillo said that the new Chica fiction doesn't necessarily get pigeonholed into the "often hard-to-find Latino" section at Barnes & Noble. Instead, her readers vary from those who happen to be Mexican Americans to those who are not. At its heart, Chica fiction touches on a reality shared by many cultures. While the market has seen changes with the acceptance of a more "mainstream" Latina lit, Castillo implied that there is still a way to go.

"I think they need to be honest portrayals of Latinas in all their cultural, racial, and economic diversity. Readers aren't dumb and they can sniff out a faker and stereotypes," Castillo said. "This is where authors and publishing houses can experience some tension. A friend of mine was asked to make the title of her new book 'more ethnic.' That is not only confusing to us authors, but

also a bit demeaning. How much do you want to bet that Janet Evanovich isn't asked to make her titles 'more white' or 'more New Jersey'?"

Chica lit shows the main characters not only embracing their culture, but also accepting the diversity that comes along with it. Rather than following the traditional roles imposed within the Hispanic culture, writers such as Castillo show that sometimes a woman's got to stay true to herself.

"Chica lit is filling a void in commercial women's fiction in the United States and elsewhere by portraying Latinas as diverse, modern, funny, smart, educated, independent, and professional," Valdes-Rodriguez offers. "Many of my Latina readers also enjoy Sophie Kinsella and Jennifer Weiner, so in a sense it's not imperative that a reader identify with the ethnicity of a character. Many of my readers, too, are not Latina at all. The most important thing a writer can offer readers is believable characters who are fundamentally human, flawed like the rest of us.

"It is the universal appeal of character that hooks readers," she continues, "regardless of the racial, cultural, or ethnic background of the reader, writer or characters. That said, it is of course important for people to feel like their own life is somehow validated and accepted in

popular culture."

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