

Latinidad - Fall 2015: Kirstin Valdez Quade

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BEFORE YOU SEND IT OUT

“Marcela is a tough, but devoted, editor and teacher with a strong point-of-view. She’s exactly what an author needs, before sending his or her baby out to a dozen or more readers—or maybe thousands, if you’re lucky—who are just as tough, but don’t really give a damn about your bundle-of-joy. Give the kid a break. Listen to Marcela, even—or especially—if you hate what she says. You and your progeny will be better for it.”

—J.F. Roach a.k.a. John Faunce, author of *Lucrezia Borgia: A Novel*

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1. Saludos

Short story collections are the Jan Brady of literature while novels are Marcia. Novels may boast the lion’s share of attention, but short story collections offer distinct pleasures: a diversity of characters; revelatory endings; and (since a collection is often a writer’s debut) an introduction to a striking new talent. One example of such a talent is Kirstin Valdez Quade, author of *Night at the Fiestas*. If this is the first time you’ve heard of Kirstin, I assure you, it won’t be the last. To learn more, read the Q&A below.

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2. Q&A

Kirstin Valdez Quade is the author of *Night at the Fiestas* (Norton), which received a “5 Under 35” award from the National Book Foundation. She is the recipient of the Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer’s Award and the 2013 Narrative Prize. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Narrative*, *Guernica*, *The Southern Review*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, and elsewhere. She was a Wallace Stegner and Truman Capote Fellow at Stanford University, where she also taught as a Jones Lecturer. In 2014-2015, she was the Nicholas Delbanco Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan. Beginning in 2016, she will be an assistant professor at Princeton University. For more information, visit <http://www.kirstinvaldezquade.com>

Q: There is a lovely kaleidoscope of characters in *Night at the Fiestas* who seem connected by the act of seeing. For example, Maria won’t let go of her vision of Nemecia, Margaret sees the characters in her art more clearly than

the people in her life, and Ofelia suffers from the ojo. Are you drawn to characters who are observers who are perhaps not self-aware? Or do your characters choose you?

A: You're absolutely right that I am drawn to characters who are interested in the world—just as with the actual people in my real life, I'd rather spend time on the page with characters who are thoughtful and observant, who notice the people and events in their lives and comment on them in ways that are funny or original or otherwise compelling to me. I get to know my characters by noticing what they notice.

And while I like to write about characters who are self-aware enough to think about and question their own motivations, characters' blind spots are as revealing as their insights. For instance, in "Nemecia," Maria thinks she's telling the story about her complicated and traumatized cousin, but she's actually telling her own story: the story of how she's devoted her life to preserving this dark episode in her family's history, the story of how she's been so focused on the wounds of the past that she's cut herself off from love and connection in her adult life.

Q: As a creative writing teacher at Stanford and the University of Michigan, what tried-and-true advice have you shared with your students?

A: The advice that I share most frequently with my students—and that I think about myself—is the importance of noticing. Curiosity and openness are the most essential traits in a writer, and they can be practiced. I ask my students to keep a notebook and write down something interesting every single day: an anecdote, an image, a factoid, an overheard conversation, some observation about the world around them. Partially it's an exercise in looking for material, but more than that, it's an exercise in seeing. I've done this myself for years, and I find that when I fall behind in my notebook, I see less. The world actually becomes a less fascinating place.

Q: Teachers often learn from their students. Have your students informed your writing, and if so how?

A: Particularly at the undergraduate level, my students are really open to taking risks with their work and playing on the page. These are skills that, when I began to publish and identify as a Writer, slipped away from me for a time. As I began to take my work more seriously, the work itself began to feel deadly serious, and, as a result, some of the joy seeped out of the process—and the quality of my work suffered, too. The prose felt overworked and leaden. My students remind me that at root, writing is about play and exploration and asking questions, and I'm incredibly grateful for that reminder.

Q: Many aspiring writers are not necessarily familiar with the groundwork that precedes publication. Could you describe your journey from unpublished writer to acclaimed author? For example, if there were rejections along the way, please share as that may be heartening for some of my readers to know :-)

A: Oh, god, yes! Many rejections! Rejection is such an ugly word, and sounds so painful, but it doesn't have to be. I approach it as just part of the writing process. Getting rejected—and then bouncing back—is a skill that takes practice, just as, say, writing effective dialogue takes practice. Certainly rejection can sting, and it's important to acknowledge that sting—and then move on. A friend of mine makes sure that she always has a story out with a journal so that even in the face of a rejection she has something to hope for. For my part, I tend to focus all my anxiety on the writing itself, on making sure the story is as developed and polished as I can possibly make it, so that by the time the story goes out, I have very little anxiety left.

For years I didn't think about publication at all. I focused instead on reading and writing and getting a sense of my range and the kinds of stories I wanted to tell. It was really important to me that I give myself the space to learn the craft without the pressure of thinking about the publishing world. I still keep the two aspects of the work very separate. I write at my desk and do business-related tasks in the living room.

Q: Who is your agent and how did you meet him/her? If you don't have an agent, how did you come to be published by Norton?

A: My agent is Denise Shannon, and she's wonderful. I met her when she reached out to me after an early story appeared in *The New Yorker*. She came highly recommended as she also represents my graduate school advisor, the extraordinary writer and teacher Ehud Havazelet. I feel incredibly lucky to have found her!

Q: If you knew then what you know now, what might you have done differently when seeking publication of *Night at the Fiestas*?

A: Throughout the process I asked for advice from friends and mentors, and they shared their own experiences with me generously. If I could do it again, I might ask even more questions!

Q: In contrast, what was one really smart choice you made that you recommend to other writers seeking publication of a short story collection?

A: One thing I am grateful for is that I took my time with the writing. (Nearly ten years, actually, which might be too much time!) But by the time I sent the manuscript out, I knew I'd done as much as I could with the stories and that the manuscript was my best effort. Not that it was perfect—it wasn't, and it went through lots more revision later—but it was as good as it was going to get in my hands alone.

Q: Do you have upcoming publications or events that my readers should have on their radar?

A: I am taking some time away from teaching, and I'll be spending the next year working on my novel and traveling for book events. In the near future, I'll be at the Brooklyn Book Festival (September 20), the Southwest Festival of the Written Word (October 2), the PEN/Faulkner Gala (October 5), and the Texas Book Festival (October 16-18). I'll also be visiting several universities to read and speak with students.

3. Comadres and Compadres Writers Conference

What: Comadres and Compadres Writers Conference

The 4th annual Comadres and Compadres Writers Conference will provide Latino writers with access to published Latino authors as well as agents and editors who have a proven track record of publishing Latino books. We invite you to join us as a sponsor, advertiser, and/or attendee.

When: Saturday, October 3, 2015

Where: The New School, New York, NY

Who: Cristina García, author of *King of Cuba*, will serve as keynote speaker. Panelists include agents and editors who are actively seeking Latino writers. For more details regarding the conference program, visit <http://lascomadres.com/latinolit/2015-ccwc/>

Testimonials:

“The Comadres conference is a wonderful, supportive place to grow as a writer. The organizers are warm and welcoming, and the editors and agents are generous with their creative insight. Everyone at the conference is clearly eager to bring forward Latino voices. Because of this focus, I find I spend less time explaining Latinidad and why it is important to me, and more time delving deep into the craft of writing. Through the conference, I met both my agent and the editor who later acquired my first picture book which will be published by Lee & Low Books. Best of all, I connected with other writers. The writers I met at the conference span the diversity of the Latino community, and share my passion for writing and children’s literature. Attending the conference has become a tradition I look forward to every year.”

—Emma Otheguy

“I’m a huge fan of this conference! I pitched my book project to two agents, one of whom later offered me representation and succeeded in getting me a book contract with Kyle Books, a small publisher based in London. I couldn’t have done it without the Comadres and Compadres Writers Conference. Overall, it was a really inspiring, action-packed day, and I would highly recommend it to any writer who wants to network and learn more about the craft.”

—Lesley Tellez, author of *Eat Mexico*, <http://www.lesleytellez.com/>

“I am thrilled to tell you that as a result of my participation in the Comadres and Compadres Writers Conference, I have an agent, Diane Stockwell from Globo Libros Literary Management. She sold my book to Johanna Castillo at Atria Book, a division of Simon & Schuster. I’m so grateful for the conference and for everyone involved. It was worth every penny.”

—Maritere Rodríguez Bellas, author of *How to Raise Bilingual Kids*, <https://www.facebook.com/maritererbellas>

For more info: Visit <http://lascomadres.com/latinolit/2015-ccwc/>

List of upcoming workshops: <http://www.marcelalandres.com/workshops.html>

4. Resources

HOW EDITORS THINK

"I read How Editors Think in one sitting and was engaged from beginning to end. It is well written, highly informative, and humorous—I found myself laughing out-loud in a few spots! Thanks for sharing the secrets of the trade."
—Mayra Lazara Dole, author of *Down to the Bone*

Inspired by my experience as a former Simon & Schuster editor, *How Editors Think: The Real Reason They Rejected You* reveals what it really takes to get published. For more information, visit: <http://www.marcelalandres.com/E-book.html>

TINDERBOX POETRY JOURNAL

Fee-Free Submission Deadline: September 30

Tinderbox Poetry Journal seeks to expand the definition of poetry. They don't have restrictions on form or content, and are interested in emerging writers. For more information, visit <http://www.tinderboxpoetry.com>

\$7500 POETRY PRIZE

Deadline: October 19

The Troubadour International Poetry Prize offers approximately \$7500 for a poem. Founded in 1954, The Troubadour is a writers' cafe which has attracted artists as diverse as Stanley Kubrick, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan. For more information, visit <http://www.coffeehousepoetry.org>

SEEKING GHOST STORIES

Deadline: October 31

The Indiana Review seeks submissions of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction for their Ghost issue and welcomes all creative interpretations of the theme, including how we excavate disappearance and loss in all its forms. For more information, visit <http://indianareview.org/submit/>

\$15,000 FICTION PRIZE

Deadline: November 1

The Catherine Doctorow Innovative Fiction Prize offers \$15,000 and publication by the Fiction Collective Two (FC2), an imprint of the University of Alabama Press, for a collection of short stories, one or more novellas, or a novel of any length. For more information, visit <http://www.fc2.org/prizes.html>

\$1333 CREATIVE NONFICTION PRIZE

Deadline: November 1

The Gabrielle Rico Creative Nonfiction Challenge offers \$1333 and publication in *Reed* magazine for a work of creative nonfiction up to 5,000 words in length. For more information, visit <http://www.reedmag.org>

\$10,000 NEW IMMIGRANT PRIZE

Deadline: December 31

The Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing seeks unpublished novels or short story collections. The winner will receive a \$10,000 advance and publication by Restless Books. Candidates must be either people born in another country who relocated to the U.S., or American-born residents whose parents were born elsewhere. For more information, visit <http://www.restlessbooks.com/prize-for-new-immigrant-writing>

MUSIC IN LITERATURE AWARD

Deadline: December 31

The Nicholas Schaffner Award for Music in Literature offers \$1000 and publication by Schaffner Press for an unpublished manuscript of poetry, fiction, or nonfiction that deals with music and its influence. For more information, visit <http://www.schaffnerpress.com>

ST. MARY'S MFA PROGRAM

Application Deadline: January 31

Saint Mary's College was recently designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution and they are eager to connect with the Latino community. The MFA Program in Creative Writing combines a studio writing workshop component with an analytical component, offering courses in the craft of writing in poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. For more information, visit <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/mfa-in-creative-writing>

SPANISH LANGUAGE WRITERS NEEDED!

Can learning Spanish be as delightful as watching a great movie? We think so! We're building a unique language learning app and need writers to create great content for it. If you can write dialogue that is funny, creative, and dramatic, and you're up for the challenge of writing for specific learning levels (beginner, advanced beginner, intermediate, etc.) on specific topics, we want you to write for us. You will earn royalties (with an advance) in a very lucrative market. For more information, email phil@larkwire.com

JUST PUBLISHED: CHICKENHAWK BY ARNOLDO LOPEZ, JR.

New York City's mean streets become meaner as the police hunt the crazed killer who is targeting young, male, Latino prostitutes. Eddie Ramos and his partner, Tommy Cucitti, are detectives in the elite squad known as Manhattan North Homicide. Eddie doesn't like cell phones or computers; he trusts paperwork, procedure, and his instincts. Tommy is tech-savvy and carries his cell phone like an extra limb. Things get complicated when politics and a crooked private investigator enter the fray. For more information, visit <http://cafeconlechebooks.com/chickenhawk>

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Please forward Latinidad® widely.

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“Short fiction seems more targeted—hand grenades of ideas, if you will.
When they work, they hit, they explode, and you never forget them.”
—Paolo Bacigalupi

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