

Latinidad – May 2007: Journalists as Authors

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Please forward to fellow writers, both published and pre-published. Thank you!

1. Saludos

Journalists can be an editor's dream author—they often come up with book ideas that are commercial and timely, they tend to write quickly and well, and they may have connections in the media that could help promote their books. If you are a journalist with a book idea but no idea what to do with it, know that your job gives you an enviable edge. If you want advice on how to make the leap from journalist to published author, check out this month's Q&A with Hector Tobar, the Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and author of the gorgeously written *Translation Nation*.

Helping Latino writers get published,

Marcela Landres

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2. Q&A

Hector Tobar is a Los Angeles-born author and journalist. The son of Guatemalan immigrants, he is currently the Times' Mexico City bureau chief. After covering the 1992 L.A. riots, and contributing to the Times' Pulitzer for Spot News coverage, he left the paper to pursue a Master's in Fine Arts in Creative Writing at UC Irvine. He is the author of two books: "The Tattooed Solider," a novel and finalist for the PEN USA West Award for fiction; and "Translation Nation: Defining a New American Identity in the Spanish Speaking United States". He is the winner of the Inter-American Press Association Award for feature writing for his coverage of South America's troubled democracies. Hector has also written for the *New Yorker*, the *Nation* and other publications. For more information, please visit <http://www.hectortobar.com/>.

Who or what inspired you to become a journalist?

I was out of college and floating around San Francisco doing odd jobs in childcare and social service agencies when I happened upon a giveaway community newspaper called El Tecolote. The paper had a small ad saying it needed volunteer writers. Up to then, I'd written some pieces of college newspaper and leftist newsletters, but had never given a thought to be a journalist. Well, I showed up at El Tecolote's offices, wrote a couple of stories, and got the journalism bug. When El Tecolote got a grant to hire a full-time

editor, I got the job: at \$9 per hour, the first time I'd ever been paid to write. I was 24 years old.

*You have an MFA in creative writing from UC Irvine and you've published a novel, **Tattooed Soldier**—did your journalism background make the switch to fiction easier? If not, why?*

Journalism taught me several things that have aided me in my career as a book writer. First off, just being published on a regular basis and being read teaches you the power of the written word, and gives you a general sense of what is effective writing. Then there's the discipline of meeting deadlines, which just about wipes out any notion of ever having writer's block: when you work for a newspaper, you write or you're fired. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, journalism taught me the power of being a professional witness, of trying to convey in words the experience of witnessing. I've been fortunate to work for publications that valued that skill. Journalism took me out of my scholarly shell, and brought me into contact with people. It took me to places I might never have gone: from neighborhoods in my own hometown, Los Angeles, to far flung places like Iraq and the Falkland Islands. When I sat down to write my first novel, I had a lot to say, I had seen many dramatic events unfold, I had met unforgettable characters: those experiences made my first book possible.

At the same time, writing literary fiction, or literary non-fiction, requires rewiring your brain from daily journalism, which is essentially an exercise in a kind of superficial and ephemeral writing that just doesn't work on the bound page.

Who is your agent and how did you meet him/her?

I quit the L.A. Times in 1993 after I was accepted into the MFA program at UC Irvine. I was a few chapters into my novel *The Tattooed Soldier* when our professors suggested we MFA students submit a manuscript to the Squaw Valley Writers' Conference. Virginia "Ginger" Barber, a legendary New York agent, saw my manuscript there. I chickened out and didn't attend the conference but Ginger called me up at Irvine and said she would be interested in seeing the rest of my book when it was done. She became my agent and sold *The Tattooed Soldier*. After Ginger retired, Jay Mandel, an agent at her agency, became my agent. Ginger eventually sold her agency to the William Morris Agency, where we are now. Jay sold *Translation Nation*.

When you are working on a book, what is your writing ritual?

I'm a morning person. Three or so mornings a week, after the bus has picked up my kids at 7:05 a.m., I try to get in an hour and a half of writing. When I was writing my last book in Buenos Aires, I would write in the early morning, print out what I had just written, and then work on editing while on the train on my way to work. When a final deadline is looming, I might sneak in an hour or two of revisions in the afternoon, but that time is generally less productive for me. These days, I keep a notebook too for the novel I'm writing. The notebook is a catchall for the scraps of paper on which I've written ideas:

phrases, characters, snippets of prose. When I'm deep into any project, I'm basically thinking about it all the time, and you never know when an idea will come to you. Several ideas have come to me when I've been washing the dishes. And since human memory is a tricky thing, it's important to scribble it down quickly.

What advice would you offer to a Latino who is contemplating a career in journalism?

I think if you're going to work in journalism, it's important to put yourself in a situation where you have good editors. If at all possible, try and work for a publication you actually enjoy reading. Journalism remains, unfortunately, a deeply segregated profession, so you'll probably rarely encounter a Latino editor no matter where you work.

What advice would you offer to a Latino journalist who has a book idea s/he wants to publish?

Book writing is a hard road, filled with disappointments and challenges. Seek out the commentary of other writers, readers. The trick is to listen to the comments of others while retaining a strong vision of what your voice is and what you're trying to accomplish. A writing workshop is a good place to start. MFA programs are good because you get a degree and you learn about the business: in a good MFA program, you'll make initial contacts with the literary world. And by all means read as much and as widely as possible.

3. Upcoming Workshops

WHAT: The Wordsmitten Writing Workshop will give you the tools to research your topic for a manuscript, write a compelling query letter, find a literary agent, and discover great tips for writing your book proposal. In addition, editorial consultant Marcela Landres will meet with writers one-on-one and review up to ten pages of their manuscripts. Advance reservations are recommended.

WHEN: Saturday, June 9, 8:30am - 4:30 pm

WHERE: Feather Sound Country Club, 2201 Feather Sound Drive, Clearwater, FL 33762

WHO:

Margo Hammond, founder of the Festival of Books, famed co-author and commentator of the renowned Book Babes blog, and former book editor of the St. Petersburg Times.

Marcela Landres, editorial consultant, formerly an editor at Simon & Schuster, and creator of Latinidad, one of the 101 Best Web Sites for Writers by Writer's Digest Magazine.

Kate Sullivan, executive editor of WordSmitten Media, Inc. and www.wordsmitten.com, a digital media and print publishing company established more than seven years ago.

Lynn Wiese, literary publicist with Russell Public Communications and author.

Robert Plunket, Sarasota Magazine's senior editor,

Tom Valeo, existential memoirist.

REGISTER: Please visit <http://www.wordsmitten.com/>.

QUESTIONS: Please contact Kate Sullivan at
editor@wordsmitten.com.

Invite me to speak for your organization: <http://www.marcelalandres.com/Request%20a%20Workshop.html>

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

4. Resources

When you contact these organizations, please mention that you were referred by the Latinidad® Newsletter. Thank you, and let me know what happens.

LATINO NOVEL AWARD

Deadline: June 1

The Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of California, Irvine invites submissions of an unpublished full-length novel written in Spanish or English. For more information, visit <http://www.hnet.uci.edu/spanishandportuguese/contest.html>.

SHORT STORY COLLECTION AWARD

Deadline: May 31

The Flannery O'Connor Awards offer two prizes of \$1000 each and publication by the University of Georgia Press for short story collections. Both published and unpublished writers are eligible. For guidelines and more information, visit http://www.ugapress.org/info_aup_submitfoc.html.

LATINO PUBLIC BROADCASTING OPEN CALL

Deadline: June 4

An open invitation to independent producers to submit proposals for a public television program or series on any subject that relates to or is representative of Latino Americans. For guidelines and more information, please visit <http://www.lpbp.org/>.

LIT MATCH TEEN WRITING CONTEST

Deadline: June 9

A call out to young Brooklyn writers and for anyone ages 14-19 who has something to say about Brooklyn Underground. Wanted: Stories, poems, essays, spoken word, raps,

fiction or nonfiction, truth or imagination! For more information please visit <http://www.brooklynbookfestival.org/> and click on "Youth."

PAGAN FICTION AWARD & ANTHOLOGY

Deadline: June 24

BBI Media and Llewellyn Publications are pleased to announce the Pagan Fiction Award, intended to celebrate and encourage Pagan culture in the form of literature. First place winner will receive \$500, publication in PanGaia magazine, and inclusion in a Pagan fiction anthology to be published by Llewellyn. For more information, please visit <http://www.pangaia.com/Fiction.htm>.

\$10,000 LESBIAN WRITER CONTEST

Deadline: June 29

For emerging lesbian poets and fiction writers within the U.S. First place awardees and two runners-up in the poetry and fiction categories will receive cash awards. At least one grant will be awarded to a lesbian writer who is based west of the Mississippi River. For more information please visit <http://www.astraea.org/Main.php4>.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY CONTEST

Deadline: July 11

A prize of \$1000 and publication in Opium Magazine will be given for an autobiographical essay of less than 500 words. For more information, please visit <http://www.opiummagazine.com/>.

POETRY COLLECTION PRIZE

Deadline: July 15

Pearl Editions offers a prize of \$1000 and publication for a book-length collection of poetry. David Hernandez will judge. For more information, please visit <http://www.pearlmag.com/>.

PENGUIN SEEKS SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY EDITOR

Penguin seeks Editor to acquire science fiction and fantasy books for the Roc and Ace lists. Candidates must have at least 3 years of related experience in commercial trade book publishing. To apply, please send an agent contact list and acquisition list along with your cover letter, salary requirements and resume to jobs@us.penguingroup.com. Please indicate "Science Fiction and Fantasy Editor" in the subject line

THE LATINA SOURCE PODCAST

The Latina Source is a bi-monthly entertaining, inspiring and informative podcast on the craft of writing. Host Alicia Anabel is the founder and organizer of The NYC Latina's Writers Group. Produced by Latino Flavored Productions Inc., this podcast features interviews with publishing power players, book reviews, author interviews, tips, advice

and up-to-date information on what's going on in the world of publishing with respect to Latino writers. Listen here: <http://www.thelatinasource.blogspot.com>.

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CONSULTATIONS

I edit manuscripts, critique proposals and advise on how to launch and maintain a successful writing career. For a consultation please visit <http://www.marcelalandres.com/>, click on Services, and follow the instructions.

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"El latino is a walking embrace."—Hector Tobar, *Translation Nation*

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