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Hi, my name is Geraldo Cadava, and welcome to season 2 of Writing Latinos, a podcast from Public Books.

We're back for more conversations with Latino authors writing about the wide world of *latinidad*. As always, some of our episodes are nerdy and academic, while others are playful and lighthearted. All offer thoughtful reflections on Latino identity, and how writing conveys some of its meanings.

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Now, for the show...

Gerry: Our guest today on Writing Latinos is Melissa Mogollon, the author of a new novel called *Published* by Hogarth.

Oye is a family drama, but one that's full of humor and absurdity. This could probably be said of most family dramas. It's set during and after Hurricane Irma, which struck the Caribbean and Florida and other parts of the Southeast in 2017. In *Oye*, there's the hurricane outside and hurricane like turbulence within the family as well.

The novel unfolds as a phone conversation between two sisters, but we only hear one side of the conversation. As they talk, they learn a good deal about their family and also about themselves. Mogollon is a Rhode Island based writer. She received a PA, excuse me. She received a BA from George Washington University and an MFA in Fiction from the Iowa Writers Workshop.

Oye is her first novel. Melissa Mogollon, thank you so much for joining us on Writing Latinos.

Melissa: Thank you. I'm so excited to be here.

Gerry: So, Melissa, your novel was set during and after Hurricane Irma, which struck Florida in 2017 and then moved further into the Southeast.

And I was wondering, just to get started, why did it feel important to you to set this novel? Or let me ask it differently. Why did a hurricane seem like an appropriate backdrop for the novel you wanted to write in *Oye*?

Melissa: no one ever asked about the hurricane. So it's exciting.

I think I wanted something that immediately like set the stakes pretty high for the reader and my characters of This thing that we're all supposed to be worried about. And this thing that's looming. I liked, I liked the feeling of this dangerous thing looming. cause there's just so much fertile ground you can do with that with like, and especially right away, you know, this is where we are.

We're running from hurricane get in line reader because things are about to get, potentially good or bad. so I liked that feeling. That was just an exciting feeling to play around with and write. And then I also really liked the thought of almost giving the reader something they were supposed to be worried about, and then coming out with this other thing that really is the problem, which is a very, you know, that's, that's not rare.

That's, you know, typical, um, in a lot of books. And so I thought that was, It's exciting and especially mirroring the, like you said, the hurricane inside and the hurricane outside. But I liked the aspect of running also, his family is quite literally running from the hurricane in the beginning. Um, which I think mirrors a lot of, you know, their approach to a lot of their more emotional problems as well.

Gerry: Yeah, it's true. I think the family is running, running from a hurricane, but they're running from each other in certain ways, running from themselves as well. That's really interesting. And I think the, you know, yeah, the hurricane and, and running from it. I mean, it, you're right that the drama surrounding a hurricane pretty quickly gets, you know, replaced by all of the other drama that's about to unfold.

the other thing that felt kind of really unique to me about this is just the fact that it's a phone conversation, but readers only hear or read one side of that conversation. And so I wanted to know, you know, what you thought it meant to you that we only hear one side of the conversation.

Melissa: I think As a writer, a lot of the choices I make, it's very based on my instincts. What is fun for me? What is exciting? Let me play around with this. And then later when I sit with it, I, and I asked myself like, why was this so exciting? I started to realize that one, I always wanted a sister for sure.

And I wanted to almost like gift myself the experience of having this person I could call and talk to and just. And it was just vent, vent, vent for through a lot of stuff that I went through, um, in my own life. And I wanted to give this character, which would have been a much younger version of me going through a lot of it.

this other person that she could call and take out everything, you know, her frustrations, her joys, her curiosity, all these things. so that was probably like a therapeutic exercise for myself. And then I realized also that in South Florida, and especially in a lot of Latino families, I know like often we are just.

Speaking at each other and whether it's shouting or singing or just demanding things. and especially intergenerationally, like we miss a lot of conversations or sometimes we're talking almost not to each other, but above each other under each other sideways. And, I realized that I was becoming obsessed with this kind of one way flow of communication because there actually is no conversation happening at all.

A lot of times, um, immigrant families. Um, so I thought that was, an interesting thing that, that almost emerged after the fact.

Gerry: Yeah. It's like a cacophony you're right. It's not there's, there's a little listening and uh, lot of shouting. That's right. So it's even in the title Oh yeah. And I was wondering like, you know, that's a demand.

Listen to me, hear me Did you have a particular character in mind that's making that demand?

Melissa: I think definitely if it's Luciana saying somebody listen to me, but also I liked the title as an instruction to the reader as well from, you know, the universal narrator or myself or anyone just saying listen, like you're going to literally listen in this novel.

So it's kind of double meaning there, but I think it's, I think of Luciana as the one who's begging to be heard in this novel. Yeah.

Gerry: And why don't you tell us a little bit about Luciana? Who is she?

Melissa: Yeah. So Luciana is the protagonist of the novel. She is 18. She's a senior in high school and she's kind of on the precipice of adulthood.

So she has a lot of your typical anxieties that come with your final year of being a kid in a way. and so she thinks she's starting off this year With a plate full of things already. her sister and her best friend who is her sister is away at college. She feels misunderstood in her family. She doesn't really fit in at school.

just a lot of traditional teenage angst. So we start that off, um, and she's very close to their grandmother. So they have a very, almost sister like relationship. and then hurricane comes. And then hurricane number two comes in a way and things just kind of disrupt what she thought her last year was going to be like.

So, um, we get her perspective the whole time She's a very angry girl, rightfully so. Um, but she is, she loves her grandmother more than anything and she loves her sister and she is very funny.

Gerry: She is very funny. I was wondering what kind of considerations were involved in you deciding to have Luciana be the protagonist instead of her sister who was away at college.

Melissa: Mari, I think I'm too close to Mari as a person to enjoy having her be the protagonist. Like, it was, it was, I know I have two brothers. I don't have sisters. And when I went into this, like I said, I thought I was writing this to give myself an older sister.

But really what happened is I created this very, unhinged, weird, amazing, credible, liberated little sister of my dreams. Like I, I, I love her. I love her so much. I wish she were a real person. And so she just became so fun to like, Throw things out to see how she would react. and, and I, I loved how angry she was and I loved how, even though she was so angry, she wouldn't say any of it, you know, it was a lot directed just to her sister and a lot of frustrations and, and watching her kind of go on this journey to finally maybe land in a place where she could even begin to explore herself was very rewarding for me really to like watch her land there.

so Maddie, I also liked she's doing her own thing. She left, she had her turn doing this. She's exploring herself in different ways. it was, it was, I was more interested in Luciana.

Gerry: I don't know that this is a particular Latino thing, but I think a lot of families deal with this dynamic of, you know, there's, there's the one sibling that is close to the family home and taking care of things and overseeing things. And then another is kind of off doing their own thing, probably experiencing their own amount of guilt for not being more present on the ground.

Maybe I'm, I'm, I can say this stuff easily, because this certainly happens in my family, too. But I'm wondering, you know, usually that dynamic, it gets coded as like, the person who's there on the ground is the good person. Yeah. person, you know, for whom family is important and family really matters. They're, they're making the right decision.

And the person who's far away is kind of like out of touch with what's going on, on the ground. But do you see it that way? I mean, it's like, is Luciana like the good, the good sibling for being there and the one who's kind of far away, the bad sibling

Melissa: No, I would say Luciana's almost handed that role of like, you're the one here.

So you're the one who needs to do this. And she's like, I didn't want this. And I don't know what to do with this. And I've never even had this role. So I don't know. I'm, I'm busy. I'm figuring out who I am as an 18 year old. And I think that frustration in general, Is mirrored with her receiving a lot of this like intergenerational stories and histories and trauma or stuff like what am I supposed to do with all this information?

all these unfulfilled hopes and dreams from these people in my family. Like what am I? So what am I supposed to do with them? she's probably is supposed to be like the goody two shoe, very involved, responsible daughter who's, And being the communicator, but really, she's like, I didn't ask for this.

And also I don't think they want me to be the one talking.

Gerry: So,

Melissa: yeah, it was fun to flip that.

Gerry: So, you had mentioned earlier on that her abuela, Abue, Is, you know, one of her favorite people on earth. So why don't you introduce us to grandmother, who is not your stereotypical grandmother.

Melissa: No, she's certainly not.

Yeah. So the grandmother in their novel, they call her Abue, which is short for Abuela or Abuelita. And she is not your stereotypical grandmother at all, or Latin American grandmother really, but, um, she's their grandmother. And she does function almost like the third sibling sometimes. I found that in writing, I was like, she almost feels like Luzana's other sister.

In the way that there's extreme intimacy, extreme closeness, so much. Trust and admiration. Luciana kind of thinks that Aue puts like the stars and the moon and the sun in the sky for

her. And she almost feels that Aue's counterculture in a way that so is Luciana. Like there's, there's something that she sees Aue do that she does not see her mother or her sister do, which is almost pushed back against a lot of these, uh, gender norms, or stereotypes that she feels people want her to be like.

I think she sees her grandmother as almost a different version of her. And so, so they are very close. So when, when Aue has to deal with an unfortunate medical diagnosis, um, Luciana is the first one to try to be there for her, to protect her, to understand and, be her confidant.

Gerry: And the medical diagnosis kind of becomes the point of departure for slowly uncovering all of these intergenerational traumas and understanding a lot of the.

backstory of Abue that kind of made her how she is. And I don't want, I want readers to go buy the novel and discover all of this for themselves. But I'm wondering if you can describe some of the kind of, childhood, early experiences, maybe not childhood, but like young adult experiences that Abue lived through that made her the person that she is.

Melissa: Yeah, so Aue is probably hyper independent. She is in her mid 70s. She lives alone. Um, she doesn't live with Luciana, but she, she has her apartment and she almost like, doesn't want to be a grandmother. She, she's close with her grandchildren, but she's Kind of rejects stereotypical notions of being grandmother.

I wouldn't say she's like particularly very warm or nurturing She's not trying to impart wisdom or her history either Instinctually, she does share a lot of her history almost as a response to a lot of the crisis that they're facing

Aue is the oldest of her and her sisters and the family goes through, unfortunately, a tragedy that kind of puts Aue in a particular role in the family, um, that they have, she has to kind of shift into a different role and this leads to her developing, yeah, almost like a caretaker role.

And she does develop this hyper independence, Due to some other factors that I won't reveal, but it, she does take on a very particular role within her family, which then translates to how she moves through the rest of the world in her life and how she does wear their grandmother role. And, and the advice she does want to give her own grandchildren and of how to put yourself first sometimes or speak for yourself or rewrite your own story if you need to.

So yeah, definitely a lot of parallels between them. they both in a way, Luciana and her grandmother, both in a way get asked to live their life for others.

Gerry: Exactly. And I think in, you know, I see this in the relationship between Luciana and Mari, too, where In a lot of ways, in the dynamic between, these family members, there are a lot of, like, repressed desires and what, um, you know, all of the ways in which, later on in life, they kind of act on these repressed desires and, you know, one of the ways in which Abue is not your typical grandmother is that she, I, I think, I mean, It felt to me like a departure from the stereotypical Abuelita is that Abue has fake breasts.

Melissa: Yes.

Gerry: Like butt implants when she's in the hospital because of her unfortunate medical diagnosis. Her abdomen is bloated and she says that she can't even suck it in anymore. and so You got her. Yeah, this is like not My, you know, impression of a stereotypical Abuelita. So,

to you, what was the relationship between these, like, early childhood or adolescent or young adult traumas that Abue experienced and then a decision to go get fake breasts and butt implants and just think about sucking it in all the time?

Melissa: so this is actually an element that I didn't, I didn't press, you I'm almost like I cut the wound, but I didn't like stick my finger fully in, in the book. It was definitely Aue's modern day interpretation, iteration in her body, in the book, who she is in the present day, who we meet is certainly a product of a lot of the pressures she faced as a young woman and her options and her choices as a young woman growing up at that time in, in the part of Colombia that she was in.

and, You know, what did a lot of women do at that time in Columbia is they, they really focus on their physical appearance because they needed to find proper husbands who would provide stability and finances and be good dad to their future children. That I feel is still present. I mean, I am Columbia and my family's Columbia.

And when we go back to Columbia, I feel it so much. Um, this like hyper fixation on the physical appearance.

So there is this like fixation of like our self worth in general is really tied to our physical body. And I mean, so much fat phobia, so many like messed up body standards in the, in the Latino community in general, but specifically to me and my experience growing up as a Colombian immigrant in Miami. and so I, I, I want, it's almost like I was the extreme, the a product of what potentially like that does to your psyche.

Like I'm not saying everyone who gets a butt implant, is trying to compensate for something or making up for some sort of childhood trauma, but definitely our way, I would say whether she makes a connection or not, certainly her beauty is her power. she feels that later on in life and I would say it would be a lie if I said it wasn't a lot bleeding in from her childhood.

Gerry: and she has, she has a sister, in the same way that Luciana and Mari are sisters, I thought when I read the book, they're almost like two pairs of sisters here.

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Gerry: So there's Luciana and Mari, who you've told us about, but there's also Abue and her sister. So what can you tell us about Abue's sister?

Melissa: Yeah. So Aue has three sisters, there's four of them in total. And the one sister that makes an appearance in the book is Luisa. And she returns, for, To help the family kind of deal with how his medical diagnosis and, you know, whether she's welcomed or not as a different story.

And I, I won't give away more of that either, but it, her arrival is definitely monumental because it hadn't happened in a long time. She hadn't seen her sister in a long time. She hadn't seen our way in a long time. and so her arrival kind of also means the arrival of their history. And that's kind of when some of the history starts unraveling.

cause she starts reacting to things. She sees Aue in the present day and suffering in certain ways that remind her of other sufferings that Aue has had to go through and she kind of can't hold it in and starts, just like every classic Bia, I feel like it's like, I'm not going to say it. Okay. No, I'm going to say it.

And it kind of starts, emerging into the narrative. And then Luciana, yeah, she, she becomes a recipient of a lot of these secrets and histories. And so I was sister is like almost like the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end, I don't know, but yeah.

Gerry: And did you, when you were writing these two pairs of sisters, did you kind of think of them?

living kind of parallel lives, you know, like there's this intense dynamic between Abue and Luisa and this intense dynamic between, between Luciana and Mari and Is, is the dynamic between each of these sets of sisters kind of the same? I mean, are they kind of playing off of each other's repressed desires, opportunities that some have, opportunities that the other one lacked?

so are they kind of living parallel lives in some ways?

Melissa: Yeah, definitely in some ways. I think when I was editing and revising and I myself was seeing a lot that I hadn't seen when I was just creating, it caught me off guard. How much, how many parallels existed between, you know, the grandmother and her sister and then our protagonist and her sister.

And I thought that it, there was so many parallels and mirrors. It was almost like creepy and crazy to see that emerge. And I think I was just instinctually and intuitively writing and I'm not shocked that, um, That almost those sentiments and like, so much of the source of frustration for both Aue and Luciana with their sisters is actually really similar.

so it was like really crazy to see in a fictional family, like see trauma be passed down through generations. Yeah.

Gerry: the granddaughters, Luciana and Mari, they're only kind of like learning about these earlier traumas among their grandmother or between, um, Or that their grandmother and her sister experienced, they're only learning about that, uh, you know, as the novel progresses, but they're all, they're always kind of like reenacting the dynamic, even if they didn't know about it.

So I guess part of what I'm wondering is like, what does that say about our ability or inability to overcome the trauma of the past town?

Melissa: Like, the missing, the missing link right there, right, is Elena, is the mom in between them, so it's like, I guess she's almost, in a way, the conduit. She is the conduit, literally, but, you know, she grew up as the daughter of Aue, probably saw a bunch of stuff, felt some stuff, and that impacted the way she was raised.

And so then that's how we see all these parallels between those two generations. But you're right. They don't know these stories until the point of time of the novel. Yet they've made all these choices that almost reflect very similar upbringings. Yeah. It's almost spooky.

Gerry: And what are some of the ways in which Luciana rebels against the family that she's inherited, what are some of the ways in which she acts out? I want to talk about sexuality, I think,

like all the ways

in which, um, You know, she feels like her mom does not accept her sexuality and she kind of acts out about that.

Melissa: Yeah. I think Lusanna really tries to act out like she, she gets so worked up and she comes right up to the edge and she'll dip her toe in or she'll do something. but she really does not in the beginning of the book, at least, and through her journey, like doesn't, hasn't really found the courage to really go all in.

And I think that was really important for me to see. For me really to see her, for that to be an authentic portrayal of like growing up in a Latin American family with a lot of expectations and social norms. And like, yeah, you're not just, you're not going to shave your head one day and be like, I'm out.

You know, it's going to, it's going to be a lot of teetering. At least that's what it felt true to her experience. so yeah, I would say like Tinder profile and then freaks out because she sees someone she knows. So she wants to throw her phone in the lake. Like she's like, and she does get overwhelmed.

uh, Obviously often, I think it didn't make the final cut of the book a lot, but she, I had her skating a lot with her one friend. and it was like this almost a somatic technique for her to just feel movement and growth and like fluidity in her body that maybe it wasn't that she didn't really feel at all times.

Um, but yeah. I would say the hair thing towards later on in the novel becomes a point of pride for her. And she's very excited. She's always wanted to have shorter hair. So she may or may not do something about that. the way she dresses, but certainly the way she lashes out the most, I would say is when she's rude to her sister and her mom, when she finds little moments that she's like, actually, you're wrong.

Actually, I can see through this. Actually, this is about you. when she can point out any sort of, moment of selfishness, I think, with her sister and her mom. That's very exciting for her.

Gerry: That's interesting.

a couple more questions about the characters and then I want to ask a little bit about you as a writer at a boarding school and the kind of book writing editing process, but about the, characters.

Like what, what are the, what are the men in these women's lives doing? But what all along the way, you know,

Melissa: what role do men

Gerry: play in this? This is very much like a women centered story and the drama between women. But, but men kind of make appearances at some points.

Melissa: Totally, totally. And this is another thing,

I do realize the patterns and all these things. And that part is so fun for me. I do like discovering things, I guess, in a way later on. I honestly did not realize that, like, there was not a single male character truly in this novel until the end.

I was like, Oh my God, this is, that was not intentional. I was I mean, we haven't talked about this, but I, I, my own grandmother was my everything. I was so very inspired by my own relationship with my real life grandmother. I was so obsessed with her. And then I became so obsessed with Luciana, the character that I was just enthralled and I totally got tunnel vision.

And then I took it too far. Cause I only let Luciana talk the whole novel. so it, it was not intentional, but yeah, the men are definitely insignificant in this book to Luciana and Aue, their experiences. And because of that, they don't really, they're not really center stage, uh, with the exception of always history.

And they are pretty monumental to her in the way they shape the movements of her life.

Gerry: And I wanted to talk, you know, now this is a little bit about you as a writer because, um, it's become clear that like you're figuring a lot of things out as you're writing the story. Yeah. Like you're discovering new things about the characters and their dimensions as you're working, which,

I guess maybe I don't know a writer who has everything all worked out. but you're, you were figuring things out and it makes me wonder even like what the, what the kernel of the novel is that you wanted to write that kind of unschooled all of these things.

Melissa: I mean, I didn't even have a freaking outline. I'll tell you that. And I'm not gonna do that ever again. I learned so much with this first book that with my future books. I hope I don't do that. It is what this book needed. I just hope my next book doesn't need that. Um, but so, Oh, yeah, the novel started out as Oh, yeah, the short story, I wrote a short story for grad school for my workshop class, because I really wanted my classmates to one laugh.

And two, I wanted them to fall in love with a version of my grandmother that I created. And I honestly wanted to document my grandmother as much as I could while she was alive, because I just thought she was iconic. and so I wrote the story and. I was a short story writer. So the fact that the story just kept getting longer and longer and longer was new to me.

I've not had, never had that experience with writing or the story before. And then I thought maybe these people just don't want to shut up. I'm just going to keep writing them out. And then we were like page 80 page a hundred. I was like, okay, I think this might be, is it a novella? I don't know. And then, you know, it grew into this thing and it was, it was really fun to do that.

So. It started as a short story. it was 2017. It was Hurricane Irma had just hit my family. I wasn't there, but my family had had to evacuate and, um, my grandmother didn't. And so a lot

of that kind of the absurdity of all that and all those actions were really fascinating to me. And I really wanted to almost like crystallize the moment.

Gerry: Yeah, that's amazing. I mean, even if it did you have though, like the beginning and the end or like, Oh my gosh, no,

Melissa: I didn't even know. I mean, I'm not, I can't say anything else because I'll accidentally give things away but, you know, I had no idea where we were going. Truly, I didn't even know if the form was going to work.

I was waiting every chapter to get to the plot point or plot line that happened, where I said, okay, like, the jig is up. Like, this is, this is, This format is actually restricting you more than allowing you and so every chapter that I successfully like was able to one move the plot forward to still make it interesting and three like still almost like give purpose to the form.

then I was like, okay. And then we reached the end and it was shocking for me too, that it worked. So then, you know, a lot of revisions, a lot of editing, but I had no idea. I had no idea where Luciana was going or where I was going. And in fact, my own grandmother passed away in the middle of writing this book, which totally threw me for another loop.

Cause I was like, does that change What does that mean? Yeah.

Gerry: Well, did it? Can you say more about that?

Melissa: Not intentionally, but I realized I had a lot of the book was actually my own grief manifesting and that's why it wasn't really hitting for me at the end. I actually had Maddie talking and I realized that a lot of Maddie's voice and a lot of her narrative was like, My own grief.

And I thought this was so boring. So the second I pulled her out, I was like, Oh my God, thank God, she's not talking anymore. And it was just Luciana, it just totally came together and saying, and I was like, this is the story. And this was for me. So now I can delete the part for me and work on and build out the real story here, which is its own life with its own people and own feelings.

Gerry: it strikes me as very self aware that at some point you realize that you were writing. more about yourself and those two stories had to be separated. Yeah, it's really interesting. I think that, you know, in recent years, it's become more commonplace to see Spanish in a, you know, popular fiction, um, piece of popular fiction, a novel, in like, you know, American commercial presses.

I mean, not just in the publishing world, but in American culture too, you know, it's like a big deal when Bad Bunny speaks Spanish on SNL. I

Melissa: know.

Gerry: Um, so, What did the conversation with your editor look like about, you know, how to present Spanish, whether it needed to be translated for English language readers or not?

Or was it not much of a conversation?

Melissa: Well, before we even had the conversation, I had to talk to myself to be like, what do I want here? Because, and that is separate than what does the story want or what is authentic and true to the story. And I really wanted Luciana's voice to be in English for so many reasons, but primarily because that is her experience.

And a lot of like the humor that comes out and her experience is from being this like first generation growing up in the U. S. And Being living in the disconnect and the trenches of like being this different culture that is different than your parents or your grandparents. and so I really wanted her voice to be that, but I also wanted, I didn't, the grandmother wouldn't speak in English, really like authentically.

I thought she would be speaking in Spanish. And then I, I really sat for a long time and I was like, what we're getting is she's talking to her sister. So she's going to recount it in English when she remembers a lot of the conversations, the italic portions. She will likely recall it in English, even if it was received in Spanish.

So like, that's why so many of the conversations, all of them are really in English, even if the grandmother had said so much of it in Spanish, likely it's like being translated and regurgitated and Luciana's memory in English. Um, so once I was like, Oh, okay. Um, there probably isn't going to be a lot of Spanish in this.

If this is Luciana's story, there were moments that I chose that I felt. We're vital to be in Spanish for a plethora of reasons. Um, but I really wanted the chapter titles in Spanish because I like the idea of it being, you know, common sayings that you might hear from a mom or grandmother or aunt. and then the little circle around the chapter number was, that was the conversation where my publisher.

I mean, they, they were amazing. They totally took my lead on a lot. And they were like, is there a way we can include the English translations? Is that a conversation? And if you don't want to, we don't have to do it, but it might just bring more readers in, like, just clue them into the richness of the moment.

And I was like, what if we put it in a circle around the number?

Gerry: Baited. Yeah.

Melissa: I still can't believe that they. Let us print that. But yeah, that was fun.

Gerry: That's great. It's brilliant. And it's so cool because like, you know, I feel like the way that that often works in a text is that, you know, right after the Spanish, you'll have a parent, parenthetical that just translates it, which certainly makes it easier on the reader because it's right there, but to look at the circle.

First of all, I don't know. I mean, I noticed it. I don't know. I think people will probably notice that there's a circle there, but I don't know. You know, they have to work. Yeah, and it

Melissa: gives the Spanish title its moment and its solo moment, which is what we want. And my editor actually was the one who pointed that out.

She was like, this way, we just get the Spanish title. And then if people want more info, they can look. But otherwise, it's still just in Spanish.

Gerry: Yeah, that's awesome. I think that was brilliant. So, you are a teacher. What do you teach?

Melissa: This year, um, I'm in administration, so I'm not teaching this year. I'm doing a director role, which is a total new vantage point of schools.

But next year I get to teach creative writing, which I'm excited about. And then I'm going to teach this class called global studies. So

Gerry: I

Melissa: used to teach English here, but. They're letting me just do creative writing next year.

Gerry: Oh, amazing. I mean, amazing, amazing. And they're high school students, correct?

Melissa: They are high school, yeah.

Gerry: Yeah. Do they know how lucky they are to have such an amazing writer teaching them? I hope they do.

Melissa: I, that is very kind of you. the kids, they're very, they're very involved. They know all about Oye. They're very sweet. They're my big supporters. So I will say they're, they're very grateful and I love them.

So yeah.

Gerry: Did you workshop any of it with them? Did they get to read any of it?

Melissa: No, but my old students, when I was teaching English, I would always have them. We did writing Wednesdays. And so I would always be like, okay, you guys, I go missing. You wake up and I'm missing. What do you think happened? And then we would brainstorm a lot of those ideas because I'm really fascinated by like boarding school thrillers.

And so I, I was always trying to like farm them for ideas. I'm like, okay, does this sound good? Or does that? So, yeah.

Gerry: They, that was like an exercise where you force them to imagine your actual disappearance. That was the prompt.

Melissa: I was like, yes, you wake up, you come to this classroom, and I'm not there. And you guys are looking around, no one knows where I am, my keys are here, my car is here, you know, my apartment, my dog is there, like, right, what happened next?

Where do you think I went?

Gerry: Fascinating.

Melissa: Yeah. That

Gerry: is so cool. Had you been given that prompt somewhere else in life too? Oh, no, that was totally

Melissa: selfish. I wanted, I was like totally selfish research on my end

Gerry: I'm curious about this. It sounds like you've got a lot on your plate with just your, your day job.

I mean, where do you find time to write? How do you do it?

Melissa: I just moved back to Rhode Island in August. so this is my first year back at the school. I used to teach at the school a few years back, but I was living in LA before and I was writing and editing Oya full time. So I was like writing every day, which was awesome.

now that I'm here, my typical schedule is I write on the break. So Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring break and summers is really when I do a lot of my binge writing. And then on the weekends, if I do have time this year, I have not had, I've had zero time. I haven't written a single thing this year.

Gerry: a

Melissa: lot of is like, oh yeah, publicity stuff and, and a lot of this, which is fun.

Gerry: Yeah. And when you, uh, save your writing time for breaks, you don't feel like you lose the thread a little bit.

Melissa: Probably, but I think that's good for me. I think my brain, my brain requires a lot of breaks from the material because then I returned to it and discover a lot of things that I had no intention of putting.

True,

Gerry: true. Yeah, true. Um, fascinating. And thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. This was really Yes. Your book was really fun.

And the characters are great. And, you know, I think anyone, not just in a Latina Latino family, but I think a lot of, I mean, everyone has a family and I think that they will find so much of your, so much of your book relatable.

And so thank you so much for writing and thank you for joining us.

Melissa: Thank you so much. It's been a blast.

[MUSIC]

Thank you for listening to this episode of Writing Latinos.

We'd love to hear your suggestions for new books that we should be reading and talking about. Drop us a line at gerald@publicbooks.org

This episode is brought to you by Public Books. It was produced by Tasha Sandoval. Our music is "City of Mirrors" by the Chicago-based band, Dos Santos.

I'm Geraldo Cadava. We'll see you again next time.

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