



NoNieqa Ramos

202: Crafting Powerful and Authentic Characters

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hey, hey, word nerds, Gabriela here. Before we dive into today's episode, I wanted to preface this episode by mentioning that for the first time, I think, ever, we're going to have a bit of explicit language happening at the end of this episode, and I thought long and hard about whether we would bleep it out. But the truth is, this is a word nerdy podcast, and we talk about words because words matter. And in this particular circumstance, when we are talking about the language that will come up toward the tail end of the episode, we're actually talking about the words. So, it's sort of hard to talk about the words without saying the words. I just wanted to give you guys a little heads-up.

This may very well be the first and only time that we have an Explicit Language Rating on one of our episodes, but I just wanted to give you guys a heads-up so that you'd be aware if you are in a space with very small children, or you yourself are someone who doesn't like to listen to that type of language, just be forewarned that there will be a little bit of it towards the end of the episode. All right, let's dive into the interview.

Hello, hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes today are over at diymfa.com/202 because it's Episode Number 202. Now, today I have the pleasure of interviewing NoNieqa Ramos, who is an award-winning educator. In fact, she's currently at the school where she works, where she teaches and where her book takes place. She is a literary activist. She is a writer of "intense" young adult literature. I'm currently reading her most recent book, her debut novel, *The Disturbed Girl's Dictionary*, and it is awesome. That book is out now, and we're going to be discussing it today on the show.

Now, to give you an idea of what her writing is all about, Kirkus Reviews has called her voice "inimitably unique in contemporary teen literature." Booklist has called her "a voice to watch" with "exceptional writing and compassionate realism."

Her second book, *The Book of Love*, will be released in the fall of 2018. Nonieqa is a passionate supporter of the #weneeddiversebooks and #ownvoices movements. She lives in Virginia with her soul mate, along with a whole lot of pets, and yeah, it sounds awesome. I want to hear all about it, but anyway, welcome NoNieqa. It is so great to have you on the show.

NoNieqa Ramos: Thank you so much for having me.

GP: Why don't we just jump right on in? Can you tell us what inspired you to write *The Disturbed Girl's Dictionary* in the first place?

NR: What generally inspires me when I begin, is a voice. And so once I hear that voice in this case, Macy speaking, I'm almost having her transcribe her story to me. I don't start with plot and I don't



start with outlining, I start with a voice every time that I write. So, in this case, since I'm an educator, I'm hearing lots of voices. And I'm hearing lots of perspectives constantly.

I generally work in schools where we have several Macys, and that's generally what my passion is to work with kids who are from Title 1 schools or kids who are coming from environments where they're at risk. And so Macy is kind of this combination of some of those kids. And as far as her specific story is concerned, that evolved through the dictionary.

GP: I love it. It's so funny when you say that you start with a voice because as I picked up the book and as I was reading it, clearly the thing that comes through loud and clear is Macy's voice. Can you talk a little bit about, you mentioned how you hear these voices in the kids you work with and you have kids who have some aspect of Macy in them, but when you first started figuring out the voice that became Macy on the page, how did you explore that character? How did you get to know her?

NR: It's interesting that you say that because my experience in creative writing courses really led to me learning how to hear the voices that I hear, as funny as that sounds, but, yes, I hear voices.

GP: I know, right? Writers are just like, "That's what we do. We sit around talking to the voices in our heads."

NR: Yeah. It really, really is.

[laughter]

NR: I learned how to structure and rein in the wild horses. Basically, I started out, and I always will be first a poet. And so to me, I'm very in tune to language and cadences and what's communicated between the spaces of words, and hearing that I absorb.

The thing that I needed to work on as far as the craft is concerned is, okay, so, now, you've got this disembodied voice. We need to give it a body and scene and structure. And so I found that when I was listening—I think the key is oftentimes we don't listen, we don't let there be quiet and give space to the voice. Then I said, "Okay, how do I structure this? What do I do with all these stories that are flooding?"

That is why I decided to use, one of the reasons why I decided to use a dictionary, because I thought, "This character is not only trying to define herself, but she's also trying to sort of take over the idea of what language and story is supposed to mean." And so in doing that, I thought, "You know, I think I'm going to use the device of a dictionary." That is how I started to write what essentially were a whole lot of short stories.

And so I decided in that evolution, "Okay, so, do I want to be linear and tell a story with a traditional narrative arc?" And I decided, no, that's not going to work with a character like Macy, not at all, you know? And so I thought, "Okay, how else do I do this? What in the craft would assist me in making this project real, taking the voice out of my head?" And I said, "So, Macy is a poem. Okay. I want to structure in this dictionary." I said, "I'm going to keep this device because it stopped being a device and started becoming part of the story itself."

GP: It's interesting also, and the dictionary device is definitely one of the things I wanted to dig into during this interview, because there's so much going on there. But one of the things that I thought was so interesting, right, is that we're moving through the dictionary from A to Z, and every chapter, just for the benefit of our listeners, every chapter has some word that is being defined or redefined by Macy in that chapter. It's usually the chapter is about her grappling with what does that concept



really mean? It's interesting because usually it involves that concept being flipped on its head in some way. Either her definition of the idea is different from what we would expect it to be, or she grapples with it and comes out on the other side with a new definition for herself, or what have you.

There are different ways that she tackles it in each chapter, but what's interesting is it also creates an expectation for us as readers that every time I got to a new chapter, I'd be like, "Ooh, what's it going to be this time?" What's the new redefinition going to be? And so, it kind of also creates that hook for the reader to kind of keep us moving forward to see how these words are going to, like, what's the punchline? How does the word fit into this particular chapter?

Can you talk about the mechanics of building this? Because I have to imagine there's got to have been some method to the madness to get from A to Z and not get lost somewhere around, like say, the letter K. How do you do it? How did you do it?

NR: You describe it perfectly because there's this complete madness in the beginning, in the sense that I'm hearing the language she's going to use, I'm hearing the voice, I've got the impetus. I know that I've made this decision that my book is not about Macy necessarily coming to a conclusion, the sense that we need, what character wants, character goes for, what character wants, character somehow achieves. It was really not what was pulling it through.

What you're describing is exactly what I was trying to do in the sense that all of these smaller links lead to the big picture. So, yes, it was extremely challenging to still create a sense of rising action, you know, the traditional want/suspense. I want internal momentum. I want the story to carry itself. But yet still, there are these pieces that you have to put together.

I think originally, I wrote a much bigger book. And I think that's pretty typical that we write much bigger books, and we have to decide what is the most important parts that contribute to what we're trying to do. And so I think after making this much bigger book, where there were all sorts of chapters that are not included in there, I decided, I said, "Okay, ultimately, I need to know where is this going to lead without actually knowing exactly what was at the end," which sounds very bizarre. [laughs]

GP: Mm-Hmm.

NR: But I like to work with a more kind of natural organic process, light outlining, more of a kind of an overview in this book, that's necessarily the case in every book that I write. And so in deciding what I needed most to communicate what I wanted most, that's where I pared down the story.

I think craft-wise, I would say, write everything if you need to write everything. [laughs] Know your character inside and out, write specifically just to get a sense of how your character would respond to something, put your character in a situation and let them roll, you know, let them drive that scene, even if you don't feel like that's necessarily what's going to be in the final product. Sometimes we just have to have more than we need.

I think that that doesn't necessarily mean clutter. It's not necessarily all about, "Well, I'm going to write a bunch of trash or garbage." We need to write trash and garbage, but I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about, we need to write to evolve our character. We need to know everything. We know what they drink, what they eat, how they act, how they behave. And in that sense, you can get a sense of where that character needs to go.

And so after that point where I said, "Okay, now, I get Macy myself. I understand her. I understand what's going to happen, what she's going to make happen and what needs to happen." So, it's not



as tidy as a traditional kind of outline, which again, I do use, but again, the key for what to do, how to do this, would be create exercises in which you let your character play.

GP: I love that. That's so brilliant, and there's so much in there. I want to unpack what you just said, because there are a lot of things we need to underscore here. First one that I thought was just brilliant and something people don't talk about enough, is the idea that, oftentimes, people think when a writer is writing within some sort of device or frame that somehow the frame dictates the story. And yet, you captured it so well by saying that there's still that same rising action, that same emotional through-thread to the story. There's still the climax. There's still those moments of the inciting incident and whatever you want to call them in sort of traditional plotting goes, right? That still happens. The device doesn't make that stuff go away. The device just gives that stuff a shape.

What it sounds is almost like you created all this raw material, but then to fit it within the device, you were kind of sniping and shaping and shaving a little off here and moving a little over there, and kind of helping it to fit within the frame as opposed to like the frame dictating what you created in the first place.

NR: Absolutely. This is a learning process. I feel that every project that I undertake is a new learning process, and I'm going to ever evolve. I've always felt that way with my work. So, to give credit, with my agent, we had conversations. I'm comfortable with her. My agent respects what I'm trying to do. I think that we can find that in a person. It doesn't have to be a particular person. It doesn't have to be an agent. It doesn't have to be any particular person. And so with her, she kind of also helped discuss with me, okay, how is this taking shape? How can we best actualize what we're trying to do?

And so through that, I actually came, a new character grew. My original draft started without Velvet. As it evolved, I realized there's something missing, and so a whole—So, usually, it's the idea of killing your darlings. In my case, we needed another person to be born. So yeah, exactly, I think that also the idea that your character to me dictates what happens. If you read Macy, nobody's dictating anything for her.

GP: That's an understatement. [laughs]

NR: Exactly. So, I kind of feel like a story, even though it may be traditional or you want to follow a traditional arc or you want to not—whatever it is, the character has to be powerful. It's not that we have to like her. Macy is not always very likable. As you know, sometimes she does things that you just want to strangle her, but she should be someone health enough to elicit an emotion. I have to say that no matter what readers' opinions have been of Macy, there's always a strong reaction.

GP: Let's dig into that, because there are a couple of things I also want to unpack there. One of them is this idea also of how you were talking about how the character's actions sort of drive the story. One of the things that I love is that there's no real explanation at the beginning of who Macy is or what's going on or even the device of the dictionary. We just kind of just jump right on in with the letter A.

Part of it that's really interesting is that it puts a lot of the responsibility on the reader to figure out what's going on. It took me a while to figure out that like, "Wait a minute, Macy is not eating very often or ever," and then she mentions, "Oh yeah, I'm doing this hunger strike thing." And at first I'm like, "Is she serious? What's going on?" But all of a sudden, you're sort of putting the pieces together and you're having this feeling of the character coming together. And it's like the character still exists fully, it's just that we, as the reader, just haven't figured them out yet. And to me, that's really exciting because it keeps me wanting to read so I can see who these characters become.



Can you talk a little bit about that trust of just dropping your reader on the first page of the story and trusting that they're going to follow the breadcrumbs and figure it out? Because that's got to take a lot of guts, honestly. Like, that's scary to do that.

NR: It's scary, and it's sometimes exhausting. What you're saying is exactly the kind of rollercoaster I'm going through, but I believe in it, I believe in my project. And so with this particular work, it's considered a bit experimental for exactly what you've already described perfectly. I think a few things come to my mind.

The thing is, yes, I did have a contract with the reader in that, I was expecting them to do a little work. I think that oftentimes when it comes to works, literary works, by persons of color, the idea is that we expect whoever we are as the reader, it to be handed to us and we don't need to do any work. My experience especially as an educator, is that if it's a person who is not a person of color, AKA a white person, then we accept that there might be some work involved with the text. [laughs] And so, yeah, or we might need to puzzle and stress and decipher and unpack and deconstruct. But so, there's that kind of bias that I, first of all, think needs to know and passionately believe needs to be removed. Let's work a little bit for what we're reading sometimes, and take value in that. I think a lot of the readers that I've experienced because I do—I am insane, I read my reviews. I've been told don't ever.

[laughter]

NR: I read every one. And so for my readers, whether it is that they love, love, love, or whether they're frustrated, it's this exact thing, "You expect me to work?" Oh, and then the lightbulb goes off when they say, like Macy's lightbulbs, "Wow. I'm in this now. I'm in Macy's perspective, her frame. I'm in her body." Macy's mind is mirrored in the style of the writing. She's not going to give anything to you. And this person, this Macy, this character, the person that you meet in reality, would never give that to you. You would have to work to get past things.

So, that being said, the reader still needs that rope. And so the language is one way that Macy's uniqueness and her voice are part of what says to many readers, "I need to keep listening to her. I need to—" She's almost a mystery to unravel. So yes, I did definitely take a risk.

My publisher definitely took a risk with a less mainstream type of book, but I think that we need to have flawed characters. We need to have characters that are Macy difficult. The book gives you the access to her. I think the ultimate key is to know that you're going to get access to her little by little. That moment for you, may be on page 10. That moment for you, for some readers, was on page one. But yeah, I think we need as readers to say, "Let's take a minute to decide, am I going to invest in this book and really get to know a character who's authentic?"

What do we mean by authentic characters? The authentic characters aren't usually—You know, think about people. Do people usually hand themselves over? Yeah, I could have definitely made—I could have taken out all the grammar issues with Macy's way of speech, I could have done a whole lot of things to make it easier, but then it wouldn't have been Macy.

GP: What's interesting too, isn't that also, in my mind—Like, to me, it's a sign of respect to the reader that you are giving, you're challenging them. Like, as writers, we're bringing our A-Game, and then we're challenging the readers to rise to the occasion.

I related to Macy because even though I came from very different circumstances, but that kind of desire to challenge the people who were educating me in my life, was something that I held very

strongly to. I mean, I was known in college for marching into professors' offices and demanding my money back because they weren't giving me hard enough work. Some professors thought that was hilarious, and some of them did not take too kindly to it; and that was reflected in my grades. But at the end of the day, there was always that, you know, there's always—

I feel the same way with my students, you know? Like, when a student really does bring their A-Game to the table, and I'm like, "All right, I'm going to challenge you." And then they come back and they're like, "Yeah, challenge me." That's exciting from an educator's perspective.

I think the same thing is true from a reader's perspective. Like, when we feel like the author is bringing their A-Game and kind of forcing us to rise to the occasion, not because they're being stuffy or being condescending—because there's a different sort of challenge, that's, sort of, in my opinion, more obnoxious; when it's sort of the stuffy condescension kind of challenge. Like, "let me make this so oblique that I can sound smart and you sound stupid," but this is not what this book is.

This book is like, "Let me challenge you to step outside your comfort zone and actually engage as a reader." And that to me, was really exciting because I'm like, I'm thinking also of the teenagers reading this book and thinking like, "Holy cow," them holding this book and being like, "Whoa, I'm in it now," like you said. That to me is exciting. I would love to see the reaction of kids reading this book, as they're reading it, because it's got to be magical.

NR: The thing that you're also making me think of is for every, even for the grownups, as you know, with YA, it's for the children, but the grownups are reading it as well. I've had many educators or persons who have dealt with children in special education or educators who have dealt with specifically children who are emotionally disturbed, feel just totally validated, but also inspired because they're doing the good. They feel that it's an accurate representation, and they also feel that it's a call for us all to step up and to talk about how we better serve these kids, how we better grow and blossom these kids. The idea being, right now, why do we only have one rose in the concrete? Why do we not have rose bushes? Why is there always an expectation that there's going to be the one kid who survives? Why can't we make a better—Why can't we make those numbers better?

So it's, as far as the kids are concerned, that's the Number One magic: sitting in a classroom, as I have, and watching kids say to me, "How did you talk like this? How do you sound like this?" [laughs] It's almost an accusation. How do you know we talk like this, you know? I sit there and I say, "Because I listen," and you wrote me in the book, you know? Yeah, there's nothing more beautiful and magical than that. And in addition, having those educators saying, "These are the kids I work with and you're speaking truth." So yes, that's the absolute epitome of what I, you know, you revel in.

But at the same time, it's all so difficult because if I create a Macy, I'm also going to have those people saying, "What the hell?" [laughs] "Who is this? What is she saying? What is she doing?" I've had people be angry and actually, "Macy, could you stop making such stupid decisions?" You know? And people, I have to tell you, often don't address my book by the title. They address it by her name.

GP: That's interesting too, because she's so ingrained in the book then that it's her; it's not the title. Like you said, it's not the title, it's her. You know what else is really interesting as you were talking just now about the rows in the concrete is, it hit me like a light—it was like this light bulb going off that, you know, even though Macy is disturbed and she's got the stuff that she struggles with, and it's clear from the page one that she's got a lot of challenges in her life, but she's not broken.

That to me, I thought was really important, because, again, I brought myself to this book, like this sort of teenage me, and I tried to engage with it as I would have as a teenager. I had some really dark

stuff happening when I was a teenager, and having that feeling of seeing a character on the page, very different from me, but who was dealing with dark stuff and who hadn't been broken and beaten down; like that she was still able to pick herself up. That to me is so powerful because a lot of kids out there, there's that assumption of like, "Oh, you know, you've got whatever special circumstance, that's it, like game over for you." That's not the case with Macy. I thought that was just so profound for me to see that on the page.

NR: Macy is a powerful character. One of the things that's important to me is that we show bad things happen, the dark things, the terrible things, the things that leave you just utterly infused and soaking with guilt and hopelessness. These things that have been inflicted on you, they are not you, as much as is what happens to Macy is just so soul-crushing is a word I've heard. She is in herself, a powerful soul, a resilient soul.

What we look at at the end of that journey, because it's one journey, is how she arrives at the end still whole, even though she may have cracks. What you're saying is what is the case for many children, as you've just described, this sense that, "I can still have a voice and stand up and be worthy and have opinions and challenge and have a trajectory for the future; even though I may not know what the hell it is."

And so I also think what's important is the idea of the figuring out. I think the expectation that we have, and that we need, is we need books for kids who struggle, end up in happy places at the end, and we need those. We need hundreds and thousands and millions of those, but we also need books that show that this is one part of the journey, you know. Foster kids come into your door; if you've ever fostered, I have; at the point where Macy's book ends. That's where they start. That's where you start at the next journey of reconciliation, healing, whatever that is. So, this is a very, like, there's so many tentacles to this, to what Macy is going through. So yeah, she is not broken. She has just begun.

At the end, it took me a while to write that ending, and to decide, where am I putting Macy? Am I going to leave her to be with her brother? You know, what is Macy's fate? The answer that I give is it's not yet determined, at least not in that book, but it is hopeful because Macy is still not eroded. Macy is still Macy.

GP: That's fantastic. You know, tying it back to, you talked about the language also and the language, the vernacular in it is such a huge part of (A) hearing Macy's voice and hearing the story through her voice; and then (B) also of like creating a sense of place. That's something I've actually been obsessing about a lot lately, because I'm obsessed with books that use language in unique ways.

And so can you talk a little bit about, you touched on it already, sort of the use of the slang and the grammar and changing things up. I actually thought it was incredibly subtle. I didn't think, like—I mean, I read *Push* by Sapphire, I read a lot of other books that use much heavier layer. You almost have to decode the language to certain level. This was not at that decoding layer. It was very subtle.

Can you talk about the decision-making process of how much vernacular to put in? You had to have made some conscious decisions, even though I'm sure some of it came naturally, but I have a suspicion that there was a method to the madness in this as well.

NR: Absolutely. So, first of all, as I described earlier, you let your character do and say what he or she or they want in the beginning. But that being said, as writers, we do have to somehow make even the most, whatever, abstruse characters accessible. With my decision, I had to actually look



and say, “Okay, there are certain parts of this that are ingrained and absolutely you can’t pull them out without unraveling the whole Macy.” And there are other parts of this that I might need to, I don’t want to say “tone down,” but I might need to refine to help the reader a little bit that really— They’re not something that it is a do or die on that hill, you know? And so I agree with you completely that there are books far more challenging than mine. I kind of find that hilarious because I’ve actually created a grammar debate.

[laughter]

NR: Whereas, there are quite a few people, and that includes quite a few of my reviewers who see that that’s the poetry of Macy. In other words, the way that she speaks, her vernacular. There are others who find it difficult to decode. And so I guess it goes back to the fact that, goes back to one question as a writer: “Am I going to keep to the truth of what it is that I’m doing, even though it may not be easy for my reader?” And it’s something that I chose, and without doubt and fought for, and I’ve always fought for with my writing; with this book, in particular. Kind of said, “No, she’s going to speak this way, and this is who she is as a character, this is how she exists.”

So yeah, I did decide that even though that would maybe mean that some readers, as you said, would say, “Oh, it’s not as accessible,” that I would still go ahead and do it because I feel like you have to have integrity when you write.

I’ve never, ever written with the purpose of, “I have to write this thing that ends up in some certain publisher” or some kind of, to me, frivolous way of looking at success. To me, success is that you actualize your character. So, I feel like what I want to say as far as all writers are concerned is “Evaluate. What is your art form? What is your art?” If you’re writing because you have an art, a story to tell, so, then you fight for it.

I’m not someone who writes for trends and I would never advise anyone to do that. You write for the art that has been blossoming or growing with you since— Like me, I was writing as a child. So yes, I consciously decided, this is it.

Now that being said, one of the devices that I have in the book is using the letter F, so birthday is birfday, for example. And when I tried to conjugate that throughout the whole book, my editor and I decided that might be a little too inaccessible for readers, but when we decided, and I kid you not, we had a whole decision about whether to say birthday or birth-day, bathtub or bath-tub. I said, “No, this is how she speaks.” In fact, this is the kind of way that I grew up speaking, actually. And so I’m not willing to surrender that.

So yeah, I think that you have to decide when you’re editing, whether that’s with your peer group, your partner, whether that’s with your editor from your publishing house, your agent, whatever, what is it that you’re willing to change, because your story becomes better? You have to say, “Yes, you know, I’m open. What you’re saying is going to make my story better or is going to make my character stronger,” or whatever it is you’re trying to do. Or you have to say, “No, that’s you trying to make a more sellable story.” Or, “That’s not where I’m trying to go with that.” So, I think that we do need to consider that.

For me, integrity is above all when it comes to art. And so some of my books are going to be considered more experimental and some are not. The next one I’m writing really isn’t, but this one is. [laughs]



GP: I love that phrase; “That I wasn’t willing to surrender.” Just isn’t that encapsulate what it feels like when you really are passionate about something in your writing? It feels like to give that up would be a surrender, would be to like raise the white flag. Those are the moments that I think as writers, we need to kind of step up and say, “No, that stays in. That’s mine.” And then, like you said, there are other times where if it makes the book better, we have to let it go. But that’s a different beast.

You know, it’s interesting also, I think—I mean, this is just a theory I have, but I wonder if the vernacular had been more in your face and more like, sort of, big and bombastic, if maybe then, the debate wouldn’t have been as heated. I wonder. I don’t know because—

NR: No, That’s interesting. It’s interesting.

GP: —I think subtle is freaking hard, right? Like, being subtle is really hard, like doing enough that people pick up on it, but not overwhelming your reader with it is in some ways harder than just kind of going all-out and like just putting apostrophes and dropping Gs on -ing verbs and all that stuff. Like, that’s, in some ways, almost like—It might look sloppy, but it’s easy.

NR: Yeah. It’s funny because you’re really hitting on so many important points and because they’re all conscious things. So, when you’re reading a text, especially when a book is very well-reviewed, assume that the writer’s being intentional about this. I was intentional about everything in there. And so I really, really appreciate one of those readers who said, “This speaks to me,” or even many readers, “This is me.” But I also appreciate those readers who, like yourself are saying, “In many ways, this is completely not me at all, but I want to appreciate that there was some art and craft to this. There was some this and this.”

And so for example, there were like, I don’t know, 200 more F-words in that book that got excised. [laughs] You know, and I even debated, “Do I want to even have so many F-words in that?” We had a discussion with my agent, like, “Let’s count them up. Do we need these?”

I had a group of kids that I was talking to about this book, who were completely immersed. These kids were all either emotionally disturbed, or had past criminal records, or were dealing with horrendous circumstances. And I just wanted to hug them saying, “Okay, so, I want to talk about the cursing, for example.” And they said, “So, tell us, talk to us about that. You sound like us, this is how we talk.” I said, “Well, listen, there are times when you drop in curses—“ And just speaking of the cursing, for example, is completely inappropriate if I’m sitting there and I’m having an interview; but there are times when the word “Fuck” is poetry. There are times when the word “Fuck” is the most apropos word you could possibly use.

And so I think what I did in looking at the subtleties is saying, what? what am I maintaining culturally? Whether cultural means her neighborhood, Macy’s family, her world, Macy’s planet—what am I doing as far as how she would really speak, how these kids really sound? And kind of balancing that out? So, yeah, I think, I chose to actually, as you’re hitting it right on, keep it a more subtle. And yeah, that’s because Macy is complex.

You know, as much as Macy is, you know, she’s not academic, but at the same times, she’s a brilliant character; as many of these kids that I come across are. They’re walking towards. They’re walking around every word of their mouth you listen to; and you’re like, “Wow, I wish I could record what you’re saying, because you’re going to be dismissed by so many people because you’re talking like that, but if you could just look past it.”



So, I think there's more subtlety to these kids than we give them credit for. I think that we assume it's all, like you said, bombastic and flip, and there's no intricacies, there's no permutations. So, I think by making those, I want to call attention to the fact that they exist in these kind of kids.

GP: I love that. That makes so much sense. I think it also kind of makes—it sort of makes the reader sit up and take notice too, to pay attention. And the fact that you're kind of grappling with both the subtlety and bringing out the subtlety in these complex characters who might otherwise be dismissed. It just comes together. My heart is like bursting right now from everything you're saying.

I want to turn it around, and also tie it into a little bit of a discussion on, #weneeddiversebooks and #ownvoices, because in your bio you mentioned that these are two movements that have been, you know, that you're a big supporter of, and clearly, I mean, both of those are represented in this book. So, can you talk a little bit about what your hopes are that this book will do? You've already touched on it, but what you hope this book will help to accomplish in making otherwise dismissed voices be taken seriously? What would you like to see? What changes would you like to see?

NR: So, I think, again, I definitely am a proponent of stories, novels, poems about marginalized persons being about happiness. There is a politics to happiness. Kids of color, marginalized kids of any kind whatsoever deserve to have stories that show that they can just enjoy life, that we don't force upon them responsibilities that no other kid has. And so, that I appreciate the beauty of that.

But in addition to that, and speaking to the kids who have Macy's situation or the kids who don't have her particulars, but they are dealing with darkness, like you've said, I want it to be appreciated that these are dynamic kids. What I want to present is that there is not one journey. Life actually isn't a narrative arc as we like it to play out in a book. And so Macy's ending to me is neither a tragedy or a triumph. She's still going. There's so much, she's just beginning.

I think when we're talking about how to serve these kids, there are going to have a whole lot of beginnings and endings. And before they get where they're going, and sometimes we're not even going to be able to tell where that's going to be, but that does not mean that we don't stand there along that path, you know, pass those freaking kids some Gatorade, man.

I mean, I feel like, you know, this idea at the end, that Macy is at this in-between place. I've had people ask me, "You going to write a sequel?" My answer is, "I already know her sequel, but she's going to have a lot of sequels." Even these kids have sequels. There's not an endpoint for the successful kids.

I think that's another point that I want to make. There's this idea that, okay, so once we save the kids or we help them save themselves, which is what I hope would be more the case that we're not thinking, I'm the one savior, because that's a lot of bullshit. That, well, there's a line, and they get past the line and they're done. And then we hopefully get them into a professional college and it's done. But the thing is, it's never freaking done.

Anyone who has been through any of these kinds of things, whether it's sexual abuse, whether it's being hungry, whether it's poverty, whether it's being underserved, whatever it is in that book that speaks to the readers, that speak to me, and send me these beautiful emails, or the kids that I talk to, or the teachers, whatever; that we need to say that they need that support forever.

Even now as a successful person, and no way did I ever go through all these things that Macy went through at once, I've had bits and pieces of things. I think every woman has, to be quite honest. As



far as, you know, sexual abuse or any of those things are concerned, I don't know a single woman that hasn't been through some sort of pain. We need to say, how do we continue that chain of support all the way through? Even when there are kids in college, kids need that. They don't need it to never end. That kid becomes an adult, but these experiences are always with them. And so there's no end point. As you're saying, now, you're talking about, you know, personally, you. There's those things you're still coping with. So, no, you get them into college, we're not done; is what I want to say. That's not only it, that's not our only goal.

GP: It's interesting too, what you said that like, even for the successful kids or the successful grownups, there's no—I mean, as you were saying, like, y life doesn't follow a narrative arc, you are totally right. Like, the ending of life is death. So, really that's not a very happy ending, right? If we think of it in those terms, you know, birth is the inciting incident; death is the climax. Like, that's a pretty depressing story.

It's more like we have these stories within a lifespan. Like you said, it's like you kind of hop from one story to the next. I think you're totally right, that it is about having that ongoing support. And especially for kids like the ones in this story, who are going into these in-between spaces, but they need that continued support so that they can continue to thrive.

NR: Absolutely. You know, you'll just make me have a flashback. I have worked really hard in my life, so let's put it that way. I've had amazing human beings support me on the way, but I'll never forget when I went to my Master's degree at Notre Dame for the first time. I psychologically had just almost a complete, I had to go to counseling because I didn't know I was the only person of color. I was the only person who definitely came from my background, as far as the kinds of challenges that I've experienced, the way that I talked. I felt like I was like this tiny little dot, you know, if we do the aerial view.

GP: Yeah.

NR: You know, like a satellite view of the planet. I was like, I think I'm the only—Like, people would stare at me because of the way I was dressed at the time and I really did look different. Even at that point as someone who was like, yeah, I've made it, I'm standing on this campus. I got my crazy self over here. You know, my non-linear mess is standing on the grass of Notre Dame, and I feel like, I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do at this point. I don't know how to interact with these people who are so different from me. So, the point being that you carry it with you no matter what.

For good too, but also, it's not something that ends. I think community is obviously the answer. And certainly, there's huge movements everywhere to create community for all of us, but that didn't exist back then; I could tell you, we all know this for a fact. And so I think we want to reexamine what success means.

GP: You mentioned you have your next book coming out later this year. Can you tell us a little bit about what's next? Is there anything you want to share with our listeners that they can look forward to?

NR: I have a book coming out in 2019 as the publishing industry moves at the pace of molasses.

[laughter]

NR: But I've got 500 books in my head, and it just takes a while. It's a process, know that everybody who's listening, be patient, [laughs] or get a support group and a place for Primal Screens. [laughs] I'm like writing books so fast, I can't keep up with myself.



But to answer your question, the Book Of Love is the book that's coming out, and it's basically a story about young girl named Verdad. She is a Puerto Rican. She is someone who is coming to understand, I don't like the words "coming to terms," coming to understand her identity as a Puerto Rican, coming to understand her sexual identity. She falls in love with a transgender boy, and kind of trying to understand what that means, in terms of herself and her family.

So, it's basically about, sort of, that journey of intersectionality. In other words, that idea of hell no, there's not a straight narrative arc. I mean, so many books are about, well, the cultural experience, but you can't separate all these things out. Verdad, is her name, is trying to find her own truth; and through her relationships and through this romance she has. And so I'm really excited about that.

And then the other stuff that's coming out, I can't announce yet, [laughs] or my agent would be very cranky, but there are other things that will be announced, hopeful, in the next couple of months.

GP: That sounds super exciting, mysterious, but also very exciting. I always end every interview with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

NR: My number one tip for writers is do not be afraid, have integrity with your work. Your work is your art. Respect your work as your art, the same way that a famous painter would, you would respect the beautiful painting he has. That's, you're making art. You're making immortality. Know that about what you're doing.

GP: That's beautiful. I love that. I want to like frame that, and put it on my, put it above my desk. Thank you so much, NoNieqa, for being here today. It's wonderful to chat with you.

NR: Thank you so much for this opportunity. This is wonderful to speak with you as well.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing, and keep being awesome.

