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A Latina Takes Center Stage in The Arts-Angels, a Rockin' New Book Series for Tweens

Tween girls--and maybe Latinas in particular--will find encouragement and empowerment to follow their artistic dreams through The Arts-Angels.

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When Gina Santiago, a 13 year-old with rock star dreams, gets accepted into the New York Academy of Arts and Talents as an art major, she soon puts together a band made up of fellow students: two dance majors, a drama major, and a voice major, and together they rock their destinies in The Arts-Angels, Track One: Drawn to You (245 pp., tpb, \$8.99).

"Gina is passionate about making music, the same way Nancy Drew was passionate about solving mysteries or Alec Ramsey was passionate about the Black Stallion," author of the series, Janel Rodriguez Ferrer, explains. "And I want to encourage young readers to pursue the passion in their own lives. Middle School and High School isn't always about boy-girl drama. And books for tween and teen girls don't always have to be about that. Not that The Arts-Angels doesn't have some of that—it does, of course—I just believe that in general, girls have so much more depth to them than popular culture gives them credit for. They are not all about shoe shopping and lip gloss."

Wendy Mass, author of bestselling book The Candymakers, as well as Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life, agrees. "The Arts-Angels offers a rare glimpse into a school where each student has some amazing artistic gift. It will inspire young readers to look for their own gifts, and then to fight for them. I can't wait to read more in the series."

Writing and publishing a book series for tweens has been the personal passion of Ms. Rodriguez Ferrer since she was eleven years old and was hooked on the Trixie Belden mystery series. The only problem with most series fiction--or even most of the children's fiction she read growing up (and still today), is the lack of multicultural characters found in such books.

In creating The Arts-Angels, Rodriguez Ferrer drew from her own childhood as a Native New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent (a "Nuyorican") growing up in Manhattan. "I wanted to create a character that reflected my own experience. I watched the same TV as the white kids did, but with some Telemundo thrown in. I listened to the same pop music on the radio, but to my father's tango records as well. I ate pizza and burgers and rice and beans. I attended Mass in Spanish—but didn't understand all of it. Too often Latino characters in books, movies and TV are straight off the island or speak fluent Spanish, or have accents. If Gina has an accent at all, it's a New York one."

Rodriguez Ferrer would like to see more Latinos and Hispanic Americans in other areas of popular culture as well, such as music. "I bet the average non-Latino American can count the names of the Hispanic rock and pop artists they know (who sing in English) on one hand: Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, Ricky Martin, Selena Gomez, Shakira.... This needs to change. Latinos have been the biggest minority community in the United States for some years now. Soon, we will actually be the majority of United States citizens. Meanwhile, This is not reflected in popular culture and media at all."

Rodriguez Ferrer makes it clear she doesn't want her main character to be an example for only girls of Spanish or Latin descent, however. "I want her to be an inspiration for all girls. I purposely made Gina the lead

guitarist, not the lead singer, not the bass player, not the drummer. She's a guitar hero—traditionally a very "male" role! She's also the creator and leader of the band.

"Through the Arts-Angels I want to send the message to young girls that they can not only step outside of the boxes society builds around them. They can break out of them! Break out and rock out!"

Janel Rodriguez Ferrer has been a children's book ghostwriter and an author of biographies for children and adults. You can learn more about Drawn to You and The Arts-Angels series at <http://www.theartsangels.com>.

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