



AN INTERVIEW WITH CARNEGIE WINNER ELIZABETH ACEVEDO

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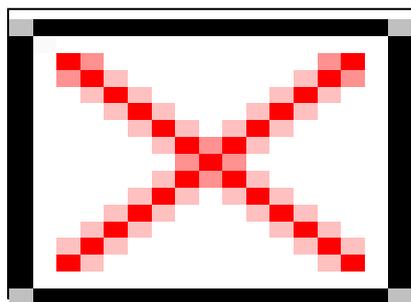
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An interview with the 2019 **Carnegie Medal** winner

*Elizabeth Acevedo is an Afro-Dominican poet and performer, a National Poetry Slam champion and a best-selling, multi-award-winning author. Her debut YA novel, **The Poet X**, won the 2018 National Book Award for Young People's Literature, the Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Fiction, the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Prize for Best Children's Fiction, and has just been awarded the Carnegie Medal. Imogen Russell Williams interviewed Elizabeth about her win for Books for Keeps.*



Congratulations on winning the Carnegie! How do you feel about it?

I was a little bit stunned - and I was excited to realise that the book has appeal in a space that I never imagined. To have started getting emails from children all throughout the United Kingdom, who I wouldn't have imagined could find kinship with this book, has been ? a lot!

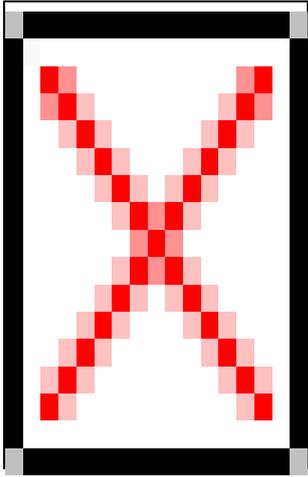
What were your first encounters with poetry ? the ones that got you hooked?

I didn't know formal poetry until I was older, but I grew up in a household that played a lot of music, ballads and torch songs; and both my parents are from the Dominican Republic, so I grew up with that language. I grew up going to church, and I think a lot of the iconography in my poetry, and the first parables I ever knew, the first metaphors, were biblical. But for me, it was really hip-hop ? it was listening to rap and seeing a familiar story told through song that made me want to write.

And how and when did you start writing poetry yourself?

My earliest memory of song-writing was when I was five. I had an upstairs neighbour who my mother would leave me with when she was going to work, and I think I got on her last nerve. So she would convince me to sing to her plants ? she would tell me ?They'll grow if you sing to them? ? I think it was her way of keeping me occupied! But I was so young that I didn't have the ability to memorise yet ? so every day I would be so upset because the song I sang

yesterday, I couldn't remember the words. That's the first time I can remember needing to figure out a way to solidify the language so that I could return to it: "One day I'm going to learn how to write, so I can do that."



Like your protagonist Xiomara, you're a New Yorker, and the daughter of Dominican parents. How much did you draw on your own experience in creating her story?

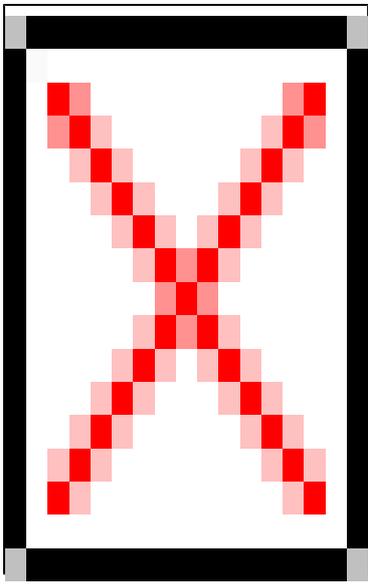
What does it mean to be proud of your body, but also incredibly ashamed of your body? What does it mean to have those first hints of desire? Where maybe you want to explore them, but you're also so afraid of what it would mean to give anyone access to your vulnerabilities? There are all these stereotypes about Latinas, and Dominican women, and they're not rendered in literature with nuance, so I wanted to explore some of those things. For me it was: What are the memories I remember thinking that made me a weirdo? And that made me ashamed, and that made me feel like I didn't belong, and that I was bad, I wasn't a good girl? And what would it mean to depict a character that showed that? So it's not necessarily biography in terms of the plot? The things that happened to Xiomara did not happen to me. I was caught kissing on the subway, it wasn't great, but I did not have to kneel on rice! It's emotional truths, rather than plot points.

Did you ever consider writing this story in prose, or was it always going to be a verse novel?

From the very beginning I leaned toward verse. Partly because I felt like poetry was a strength? I had been toying around with prose, but it didn't feel like I was ready yet? and also because I really wanted folks to be in her head; for it to feel inescapable, to collapse the distance between the reader and the character. And so much of a verse novel is interiority; it's not a big action-, plot-driven book; it's you sitting with the character as she feels. The best way for me to do that was through verse. But also, this is a character that in many ways is considered rough, and rough around the edges, and gruff, and angry. When we look at folks, we discount that they might have the most gorgeous language, that they might have amazing thoughts, that they contain poetry, simply because we haven't spoken to them. I wanted you to know this is a girl who people think does not have anything to say, and look at the things she contains.

You season your writing with Spanish words? sometimes translated, sometimes left for the reader to look up or to work out from the context. What effect did you intend that to have on your readers?

I wanted a young woman from a similar place as I was to be able to read this text and say "This is for me." And that means it being written in multiple kinds of language? there's slang, there's Spanish, all kinds of things, and I didn't want to translate those things too much. But also, I trust my readers; I trust that if you show up to the page, you'll do some of the work! I'm not going to spoon-feed. I had to learn, as a reader, to look a lot of things up, and I've read all kinds of literature that was completely unfamiliar to the daughter of immigrants from New York? not just American literature, but stories from all over the world, and I had to learn how to research. If I wanted the insight into the story that felt intimate, I would look it up, or I would use context clues, or I would say, "Well, this one word, I don't care if I don't know." I think I do want to challenge readers to have to make those choices, and not just get the easiest story I could give.



Though the poems in *The Poet X* read effortlessly, their cumulative impact is hugely powerful. How much time did you take in crafting and refining each one?

Well, the novel in its entirety took four years. I started in 2012 and I could not finish it until 2016; and then two years of editing with my editor – so really, six years to get it right. I write drafts quickly; but then I had to go back in and make sure the language was what I needed it to be. I had the story; now it was every metaphor, and what are the themes, now that I know what the whole story is? It was editing at the level of every single word being precise, and every repetition feeling purposeful, and every single line break, the way it's depicted on the page, to the last word I want you to end on, to the way the titles talk to one other across the book. I spent time really layering a whole different world, so that if someone stopped at just the language, then they would find merit in that alone.

How much of an impact has slam poetry had in shaping your work?

I grew up in the slam scene, and it was where I first really let myself be heard, and got to share controversial opinions on stage. This was the era of George W Bush, and I was fourteen years old, and had a lot to say about the US government and war, and also the neighbourhood that I was from and the ways that disenfranchised communities are treated. For me, that is the basis of myself – the self who was afraid of my body, in some ways, standing on a stage and saying "I'm now going to demand your attention." And so much of my writing has been a response to what that moment meant; to say "On my own terms, I'm going to have you look at me and listen." I think I've been trying to recapture that in a lot of the stories that I write for young people. But I didn't think of ***The Poet X*** as a slam novel, and I didn't imagine it was going to be performed or read out loud. So it's interesting to me when people see threads of slam in it, because that's not what I imagined when I was writing it. But maybe the heart of slam – what it means to say "I have an opinion, and you're going to listen to me for three minutes; I'm going to hold you hostage, and then I'm going to let you go" – that part, yes.

There are so many moments of great and small heartbreak in the book. Was there any part of it that you struggled to put into words, or did it all feel as though it just desperately wanted to be told?

It really did feel urgent. All these little memories of things that I had heard, that someone might have said – "Oh, my older sister said this happened to her" – all those things started surfacing. I've kept all of my notebooks since I was a kid, and even rereading some of my poetry and just the things that I felt, that needed language? Remembering those things, and offering them up to Xiomara if they fit – and some pieces didn't feel like they were in her voice or like they worked for the story, but there were just so many stories that wanted to come forth. The book could have been longer – I had to confine it some, because there was a lot that wanted to be said.

What are you working on now? Will your next piece of work be another verse novel too?

I have a novel in verse that I'm working on. It's a dual narrative, two different characters, sisters that don't know about each other: one of them in the Dominican Republic and one in New York City. Their father dies in a plane crash, and one of them inherits money; and that's how they learn that they have a sibling, that their father had a secret family, and how they have to learn about grief. I'm really excited for that story.

Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children's literature and YA.

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