



# FINDING LAS MALCRIADAS

**Getting to Know Erika L. Sánchez**

By Former Education Apprentice Elon Sloan

## Who is Erika L. Sánchez?

Erika L. Sánchez, author of *The New York Times* Best Seller *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, grew up in Cicero, Illinois, a suburb located immediately west of Chicago's Little Village neighborhood. The daughter of two undocumented Mexican immigrants, Sánchez describes her younger self as an avid reader, writer and an overall nerdy kid. Sánchez credits her teachers for fostering her passion for writing and seeing her "weird interests" and encouraging them. She fondly remembers one teacher who assembled packets of poetry for her to read, gifts she's kept since her youth. This support from her teachers led her to pursue a career in writing, and eventually she found her voice as a poet.

## A Poet First

Writing *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* was a new kind of endeavor for Erika Sánchez, who had mostly written poetry in the past. In her poetry Sánchez uses lyricism to paint carefully crafted images. In her recently published book, *Lessons on Expulsion*, Sánchez paints images of young people growing up near the border in Mexico and young women traversing Chicago's many environments side by side. Descriptions of young women as they learn to deal with violence, sexism, and new experiences of sexuality are common throughout her poetry. In *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* Sánchez brings together many perspectives on what life is like for young people. The novel feels like an expansion of some of the moments captured in Sánchez's poetry and it similarly feels informed by her experience of growing up as a child of undocumented Mexican immigrants in Cicero.

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## The Novel She Wished She Had

Sánchez's love of reading as a student led her to notice gaps in the works she had access to as a young person. She felt like she was unable to find very much in classic or young adult literature which reflected her own experiences back to her. She recalls "I wanted to see myself in literature. As an avid reader, I looked everywhere. Where were all the messed-up Brown girls? Las malcriadas? The Latino weirdos?" (Malcriada is a word in Spanish which can be translated as "badly raised girl". It can mean spoiled or pampered but it can also be used to say that there's something wrong or bad about someone's personality or way of being.) When she found Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* she loved it, but she felt like it was the only book she had which she could relate to. As well written as it was, it was also published the year she was born.

Sánchez's favorite writer is Toni Morrison, an author famous for writing about the historical experiences of Black women. One of Morrison's best known quotes is "If you find a book you really want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." After going through a time of difficulty with her mental health and her career in writing and publishing, Sánchez came back to that quote and took it as inspiration. She remembered her desire to read books which reflected her contemporary lived experiences as a young person. And part of what was missing from that picture for her was an honest depiction of the struggles so many young women of color face.

## Honesty in Experience

Sánchez wants *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* to be meaningful to everyone who reads it, but especially to young women of color. Sánchez said this about who she wanted her book to speak to: "Most important for me, I want young girls to feel like they matter. And that I see them. And that they are entitled to want more and to dream and to, you know, be who they are." The book includes experiences which can feel huge and insurmountable. From making decisions about sex, to understanding her family members' experiences of trauma, to dealing with serious mental health struggles, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* takes these big topics seriously and explores them fully.

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The commitment to tackling all of these topics in one story seems to come from Sánchez's own sense that teen girls of color need stories which affirm that their lives and their struggles are normal and navigable, even if that might not feel true. Many topics she writes about in the book are related to real experiences she had as a teenager and had to navigate without guidance. In creating the book she never had as a young person, Sánchez hopes to help young people who went through similar experiences as she did. She also hopes that learning through a character's journey can help people understand those experiences better even if they don't have them directly.

## The Importance of Being Not Perfect

Sánchez takes a lot of joy in her protagonist Julia's imperfections. When talking about her own experience, Sánchez said, "I think that's a common story for young women, that so much is expected of

them, and we don't always want to live up to those expectations. Sometimes, we're not what our parents expected, at all."

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Sánchez believes that an important part of telling stories to young people is telling stories which can reflect the complexity of their lives. Julia doesn't always respond to people in the most polite way, she sometimes makes unfair assumptions about people, and she often doesn't know how to handle her emotions. These qualities lead to relationship and communication challenges for Julia within the story, but they help readers relate to her through their own imperfections. Seeing Julia make mistakes and struggle but eventually figure out how to work through her challenges is one of the most effective ways Sánchez speaks to her readers about their own lives. At an event when asked what she wanted people to take away from this story she said this:

***"I just hope that, the way that I've been so influenced by books, ...others will be as well by my book. And I hope that even if it doesn't... change who they are as a person... it starts a conversation, or some sort of questioning..."***

- Erika L. Sánchez