

Negi Comes to Life on the Screen: An Interview with Esmeralda Santiago

In this interview, the author and screenwriter discusses her focus on creating a balance between the reality of her memory and the interpretation of her life on film.

Q: Esmeralda, what were your reservations, if any, about turning your memoir into a film?

A: My biggest reservation...was my concern that [the film] would be authentic and not be "Hollywoodized." Already, my life and the lives of the people that I love have been transformed in the process of writing a memoir about them. Once you take that transformation and transform it further into a film, there's always the concern that you will lose more than you gained. That was one of my main concerns: that the story told on the film be as authentic to the life that it represents as absolutely possible.

Q: What were the most difficult challenges in adapting the book to film?

A: The most difficult challenge...was the actual writing of [the film]. I am, by nature, a person who loves the long form. I love books--the bigger the better. By its nature, a screenplay is form of short hand in literary terms. One of the very difficult things for me was taking these scenes that were lived in real time and transcribing them into film time. Film time is more compressed and a lot faster. In essence, you are really taking not just scenes but entire years of your life, and it goes by in a flash. That was really difficult for me to conceive of, and then, later on, to try and do.

Q: Was any of it fun for you?

A: The experience of being on the set was interesting and educational for me. I learned a lot about how movies are made. I learned about what a screenplay should be, and it is very interesting to me that screenplay writers are the last people that are wanted on a set. In fact, being on a set is the absolute best way to learn how to write scripts, because you see how it happens. You see how scenes need to develop--you see the process. The most fun for me was actually learning about the process of making films. I can't say that everyday or every minute was fun, because it was a lot of work, and it was very concentrated and emotional work for me; but I do feel, at the end of it, I knew a whole lot that I didn't know when I started.

Q: What aspect of the adaptation process did you enjoy the most?

A: I'm really a little surprised by this, the constant use of "enjoy." I don't think this process is enjoyable for me. It is a very big challenge, and, I suppose that I enjoy challenges, so that part of it is enjoyable. But, I think the whole experience of taking your life that was lived in Spanish, writing about it in English, then going on to adapt it into a film that has to recapture the Spanish, then trying to communicate that with actors, many of whom don't have Spanish as a first language, [all that] was a very big challenge. It was a very difficult thing. I cannot say that I enjoyed it. I can say that I did feel that I learned a lot and that I am a different person because of it. I really have seen an aspect of popular culture that I never expected to see. And, that has taught me a lot about how to see movies.

One of the most positive things that happened in filming **Almost A Woman** was this sense of family being built by the cast and the crew. I think, because the film was about an experience that has never been seen on television or in the movies, and that is the everyday life of a Puerto Rican family. All of a sudden, the actors, cast, and crew, everyone was so involved in making sure that this be a family, that it read like a family, and that it appear like a family. That was the commitment that everyone showed. It was really wonderful and a very positive aspect [of the process] for me. It is very important to the authenticity of the film experience that the family seem like a family. There are moments in it that are perhaps not important

by Hollywood standards important, but are absolutely crucial and essential by the standards of humanity, of what a family is and does with one another.

Q: It's very unusual for a writer to be present, more or less, throughout the filming. How would you characterize your role on the set?

A: I think it is unusual for a writer to be on a set. Mostly because there is a well-defined hierarchy on a set, and a writer--once you have given your screenplay--does not figure into that. I believe that my presence on this set added a lot more than it took away. I was able to ensure that certain things didn't happen that [otherwise] could have happened had I not been there, and I am talking specifically about the authenticity of the look of the film. I was very conscious that the actors who spoke Spanish did so with as close to a Puerto Rican dialect as they possibly could, given the fact that most of them were not Puerto Rican. I was very instrumental in bringing things to the set that weren't there, and weren't even in the script. One example being this: the very lovely scene between Tata and Don Julio when they dance in the middle of a family discussion. I think those kinds of things are ones that I added because I was the writer and not just because I was the person who lived the story. It was a dramatic moment that was necessary in the film to show the relationship between two people who are important in the film and who have a much smaller role to play in the arc of the story development.

Q: How did you participate in the design of the film? What were your reactions to the production design, especially the three apartments, when you finally saw them on the sound stage?

A: Before the film began, I had several conversations with the production designer. He had done a lot of research on his own. He had looked at photographs, and, because he is Latino himself, he had a certain vision of what these apartments were like. I also sent him a fax with very explicit memories of what the apartments looked like as I remembered them in terms of my mother's choice of decoration options, such as her love of little figurines and the curtains everywhere, which are very typical descriptions of my mother's spaces. Once I got on the set, it was amazing, because I think that the art department did an absolutely magnificent job in making these apartments look exactly the way they might have looked in the early sixties. It was very moving for me to walk through these spaces and kind of revisit them. Even though they were created, they felt familiar. I think that there were moments when we had to discuss some of the details. They might have been working from their artistry and their research, which is really wonderful; but, I was working from memory--they were very respectful of that.

Q: What's your opinion of the casting, and, specifically, how do you feel about Ana Maria Lagasca?

A: When I first saw the take that they sent me of Ana Maria, she looked so much like me that it was startling. They had the audition, and she was wearing the dress that she wears in the final scene, so there was a sense of the sixties, also--of the period. It was absolutely shocking to see someone who looked so much like me and was going to be able to play me at a very young age. She was born, in Puerto Rico, of a Filipino dad and a Spanish mother; but, she hasn't lived in Puerto Rico, and, as far as I know, she hasn't been there since she was born. She really didn't have the background of having walked upon those roads the way that I had. She tried very hard to work with the dialect so that she could sound Puerto Rican, and, I think she succeeded, for the most part. I think she really made a very big effort to get the dialect right. I was very, very impressed with the commitment she showed. I was very impressed with how eager she was to get it right...that was important to me, and I really appreciated it.

Q: How about Wanda De Jesus?

A: I think I cannot imagine anyone better to play my mother. Wanda De Jesus captured the essence of who Ramona Santiago is. The interesting thing is, that of all the actresses we looked at, she looks the least like my mother physically. Wanda has this sort of sultry, Sophia Loren look, and my mother is a little bit lighter skinned, and her features are different; but, the looks--the gestures, the way she carries herself, the way she speaks, [the times] she smiles and when she doesn't--all of that was absolutely Ramona Santiago. To me, it

is such a masterful work, because she has never met my mother. [She got] this from reading the book, from talking to me, and from the work that she did as an actor to prepare for this part. She really knows who this woman is, and she really created a character that represents our experience. I will forever be grateful to her for that. I think, it is much more important that she be representative of Puerto Rican women than of my mother in particular.

Q: What is your opinion of the casting of Miriam Colon as Tata?

A: I just loved her in the role of Tata, and, from the beginning, we had really hoped that she could do the part because she physically looks like her, and we thought that she could also convey not only the seriousness of who she was--this very deep character--but also the sense of humor. She just did that so well: one little look from Miriam, and you're just giggling. She really was able to capture that woman, who she is, especially for my family and me who knew Tata until just about ten years ago. I remember the very first time that I met with Miriam, just before she was to start performing. She said, "I know this woman. I have known many women like this, and I have waited to play a woman like that." And, it definitely showed in the performance.

Q: What was your personal relationship with Ana Maria, and did you help her find her way to the character? If so, how?

A: Ana Maria was very eager to please me in the way she performed the character. One of the discussions we had was, she had to find Negi in herself. She had to find her in the written material, and she had to find the character in the script. For me, really all these actors, I wanted them to take the characters and make them real to themselves. There's no way that you can duplicate my sister Alicia, for example, or my mother, or Tata; but, what you can do is take them as archetypes of other people, and that's what I was trying to convey to Ana Maria. I think, from just trying to be me, she found a way to be herself in that character; and, that's what is important, I think, for me as the writer and also for her as an actor, to make that character her. I can see a little of myself in her performance, but I also see a lot of Ana Maria, and I also see a lot of the director--how the director conceived of the part. All that is what goes in to the making of a film. That's why I really don't take it personally if a gesture she makes is not like mine. I think, as long as it is true to the character she is creating, that's what is important. I think Ana Maria did a very nice job creating the character of Negi.

Q: What was it like to see the scenes from your family life played out on the film, and how do you think your family will feel about the way they're portrayed?

A: In the filming, there were moments--especially when I was not looking at the scenes on the monitor, but when I was looking at the scenes as they developed--in which I was very, very moved and touched by what was going on. It did feel like I was a little fly on the wall watching myself and my mother, or myself and my siblings, in a particular family scene. Those moments were really moving to me; yet, I was still conscious that I was there to do a job, so I couldn't really feel them completely or live them as completely as I might have. There was this mixture of wanting just to be there enjoying the moment and having this other part of me that was on a job, having to make sure that things happened in the way that I thought that they needed to and be helpful to the people who were counting on me to be helpful. In terms of how my family reacted, two of my sisters, Delsa, and Edna, looked at an earlier cut of the film. It was really wonderful, because they saw it in a way that I couldn't. They could enjoy it: for instance, in one scene where Ana Maria is dancing around the apartment, the moment they saw that, [they said], "that's you, that was you--you used to do that all the time." It was really wonderful that those moments were real to them, since they were there, and they had observed them. It was the same thing with [the time] when my son went on the set and watched Wanda in a scene with the three young actresses who play Negi, Delsa, and Norma. He just watched the scene, and, when it was over, he says, "Oh my God, it's her." When I said, "Lucas, she doesn't look anything like she does," he says, "Oh, she looks like her there." It was that idea that, emotionally, the actors were able to capture the characters. And, that was so wonderful for me to see, because I couldn't distance myself enough to enjoy that part of it until it was all over, and I went back to think about it.

Q: When you wrote the memoir, did you worry about your family's reaction to what you wrote? If so, how did you deal with that, and were those worries you had during the making of the film?

A: During the writing of the memoirs, especially the first one, I was quite worried that my family would be upset--that they would be offended, that they might feel badly that things we don't even talk about among ourselves were being discussed in a book that would be read by total strangers. The most wonderful thing to happen to me after I wrote the first book, **When I Was Puerto Rican**, and especially after **Almost A Woman**, was that my family was so incredibly understanding, generous, supportive, encouraging, and grateful that I had written these books...that I am actually talking about an experience they think is important to talk about, even though we don't have the possibility or opportunities to speak about them in any way that isn't painful.

The film is a different thing. When I began to write the script, the first couple of weeks of just...trying to decide what stories to tell in the film were very painful for me, because I felt much more exposed. I think it's because I was imagining actors actually acting these scenes out. When you write a book, it's a very intimate experience between the writer and the reader. It's one person with one person. A film is many people with many people, and so, I really felt much more naked in that whole expression of my memoir. There was a part of me that was really uncomfortable with that, and it was difficult for me to write the screenplay imagining this huge audience out there.

Q: This is a very personal story, written in a very personal form: the memoir. Was the basic material changed as a result of the collaborative process of making a film?

A: One of the things that everyone knows, I hope, is that a film is very different from a book, even if it is based on a book. It has to be different, because it is a different form; and, in a way, as a literary writer, I really feel like a film cannot do justice to my book. The reason I'm writing a book is because the experience of the book is different, and, if I wanted to be a filmmaker, I would have written a screenplay. The other side of that, of course, is that a screenplay allows you to do things that a book doesn't. That is, to dramatize scenes in a very, very complete way and to give the scenes a different weight. Yes, one of my biggest concerns with this film, in particular, is that people will look at the film and think that they have read the book, when, in fact, this film is very different from the book. That's what I had to do: I had to really let go of the book to be true to the film.

Q: Name a few scenes and tell me just how you feel about them.

A: One of the scenes that I think really stands out, or two of the things that stand out, are the scenes in the clubs: first, the community center and then the dance club and that whole sense of people just having a good time, enjoying themselves, expressing their culture physically, which is what salsa dancing is all about. I really wanted to make sure there was dancing in this film, because it is a very big part of the life of my family...not necessarily of the life of every Puerto Rican family, but definitely a big, big part of *this* Puerto Rican family. I think another scene that comes to mind is the scene on the street, where Negi comes out of school, she's all made up, her skirt is hiked up over knees, and she looks very different from the way she did when she left the house. Mami's reaction to that is first to be angry, to try and spank her; and then, that whole dignity issue comes up, and she gives her a lesson. It's not just about Mami wanting to control Negi but teaching her something about her culture, which, like it or not, is true, that she's telling her something that is very important to her, that does convey a cultural value Negi had forgotten. I think that scene is really important in conveying a lot of the cultural values of the film and, again, of my family in particular.

Q: What is the lesson that Negi forgot?

A: The lesson Negi forgot is that Puerto Rican girls don't behave that way. She forgot it, because there was the pressure to be like other girls, and, in fact, I remember that--that being a very big part of my first couple of years in the United States, was trying to walk the very, very thin margin between what was acceptable

for a Puerto Rican girl and what was acceptable for a non-Puerto Rican girl. I constantly had to make those choices and live with them, because once you make a choice, you're basically bound with that choice, and that was what my adolescence was all about. Being very conscious of those choices, having to constantly make them, then having to decide whether this is the right choice or not....

A: There's one thing about the film that I wish was different. That is, I didn't cry as much as Negi in the film cries. Crying was something that I did internally. Tears were something that were considered shameful, because the dignity of who you are is that you are supposed to understand and take this in and deal with it. Tears are a way of revealing your vulnerability to people who really should not see it...who have no business seeing it. That was one of the things I wish was different.

Q: What do you hope young people will take away from this film?

A: I don't write anything with any particular message in mind for the ultimate reader. I really write for what I want to get out of the experience of writing. That is one other thing that makes writing a screenplay different from writing a book. And, for a screenplay--especially in the case of something for Masterpiece theatre, of a memoir, of something that is going to be used for educational purposes--you do have to think thematically. You do have to think in terms of the arch of the story. You do have to think of what the audience is going to take away from it. I hope that what young people take from this film is that you can't give up; you can't give up. Not that you shouldn't, not that you ought not--but that you can't...that your very survival depends on not giving up, and, if they take that away, then all that I suffered hasn't been worth it. If they come out of it saying, "Oh, when you're 16, you should have a boyfriend, you should have a boyfriend." If they take that out of it, then I have failed, and it wasn't worth it. I really hope that a young person looking at this will see it is very important that they not forget that the choices they make are the choices they will have to live with, and so, the choices have to be good ones.

Q: Many young people want to be writer's, what advice do you have for them?

A: For anyone who wants to be a writer--young or old, Latino or non-Latino, male or female--the best advice I can give him or her is to read. Read good works. If you want to be a writer, you are not doing yourself a favor by reading junk unless you want to write junk. I think it is very important that, as a writer, you be challenged as a reader. Go to your library...just stand in the middle of the room...just head in the direction of one of those isles and find the book that is going to be hardest one for you to read. Begin reading it and read it all the way through, looking in the dictionary if you need to. Crying over the fact that you know you cannot follow Henry James' sentences and understanding what's at the end of them, knowing that you will learn something. I think you cannot be a writer if you are not a reader. You are your first reader--that's what writing is. You write so you can read, and, if you are not a good reader, you will never be a good writer.

Q: Do you have any suggestions for kids who want to keep journals, any hints on how to get the most out of the process?

A: I think it's very important for a writer to have a journal, because it helps you to develop your skill as a writer, whether you do it on a computer or whether you do it on a notebook--or, as I so frequently do when I find myself without something to write on, I'll be writing along the edges of a newspaper or a napkin, or on the bags from the grocery store. It's important to keep writing and to feel like a writer. One of the ways that I feel like a writer is, [even] on those days where I'm not able to write because either I'm traveling or life is just too crazy, if I write in my journal--I feel like I'm still a writer. It kind of keeps you in touch with your craft. It helps you to remember things...you might then later use in your other work.

Q: What is it about language that you would like to say in reference to this process?

A: I think one of the most important aspects of this whole project for me is not all the mechanics of writing a screenplay or all the mechanics of getting a film made, or any of the things that we talked about which

seem to me, really, to be secondary to the very basic idea that a film like this has never been made. What makes this film so unique and different is that, not only is it subtitled and a Masterpiece Theatre production, but also, it is that we are listening to a typical or representative Puerto Rican family living a very average life...speaking in their language, and that is a very big aspect of it. One of the things we see in the films that are being made in Latino life, [is that they don't have] Spanish speakers and are much more interested in, shall we say, the population at large. They don't want to use Spanish, because they're afraid it's going to turn off those viewers. For me, it was very important that the language be as realistic as possible. This film is not just about a young girl coming to the United States and kind of feeling her way through it. It's about a person learning a language, as well as a culture, and that's a really important aspect, not only of this film, but also of the experience of people who come to this country. We can't forget that, and we have to show compassion for that. I think the only way that we can be compassionate to that struggle is to see what a struggle it is. I don't think we are doing a service to Latinos, Asians, French people, Italians by showing people who are here as a first generation without hearing the language they hear in their heads. I think, we're not telling people how difficult it is to learn a language in addition to a culture, in addition to an environment, in addition to a climate--that, in fact, language is what defines all those things for you, and language is what ultimately changes you. I really fought for that, and that's important. I hope that it's a part of the teaching of this a book and of the film experience. We have to remember that this life was being lived in Spanish even as we're experiencing it in English.