

Almost a Woman



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Esmeralda Santiago

By Dr. Margaret (Peggy) Ellington

To read this introduction in Spanish, click [here](#).

For the casual reader, labeling an author's work according to his/her upbringing, surroundings, or culture allows the experience shared by the writer to be neatly packaged into one of several marginalized categories. The writer becomes the "other," a wordsmith on the periphery of American life who leads the reader to know—based on the author's voice—another place, another time. For less skilled writers, these labels not only indicate who they are, but also who their audience will be.

It would be easy to label Esmeralda Santiago by such means. Both her name and her first book, **When I Was Puerto Rican** (1993), do the work for the audience. But just as Toni Morrison's novels move far beyond a re-creation of the experiences of Black women, and Pat Conroy's works transcend narratives of southern white males, Santiago's writing defines her as more than just another writer whose Puerto Rican childhood and Brooklyn adolescence limit her or the stories she shares. Santiago wants her "readers to come to my work through their own interpretations." And she readily admits never knowing "how readers will react to the writing, but my goal is always to tell as good a story as I can in as accurate a way as possible. Still, I expect my readers to do some work as well. I want them to have to think about what they've read. Perhaps that comes from my work as a documentarian."

In **Almost a Woman** (a 1999 Alex Award winner), her sequel to **When I Was Puerto Rican**, Santiago gives the reader numerous opportunities to think and interpret as she brings to life the inconsistencies of adolescence for a pseudo-immigrant in Brooklyn. Because she is the oldest child, Santiago becomes the voice for her brothers, for her sisters, and most importantly, for her mother, Mami, who depends on her eldest child to interpret the family's needs while protecting the family's dignity. Throughout the book, Santiago appears to be caught between two languages, two cultures. It is a story that ostensibly places her and her recollections outside the typical American experience. Yet readers will find more to identify with than to separate from in Santiago's latest memoir. For whether the standard of measurement is culture, socio-economics, family composition, or level of education, a majority of readers, and Americans in general, more often place themselves outside the mainstream than centered inside. These are the very readers who have felt pulled between being called to fortify the family while simultaneously being representative of it.

Because Santiago is more than a Latina writer, and the American reading public continues to defy any precise definition, the stories she tells weave their way into the hearts and minds of readers everywhere. In **Almost a Woman**, Santiago's home is filled with characters as are most American homes; her family carries the mantle of being non-traditional and dysfunctional as do most American families, and her attempts to outwit her over-protective mother mimic teenagers of yesterday and today. It is for these reasons that Santiago's work is carving a place in mainstream American literature. Her voice is the voice of today's majority because it is the voice of an individual who finds herself at least slightly out of sync. It is a nonstandard voice whose dialect and diction create an environment that invites us as readers to celebrate our differences while simultaneously rejoicing in our similarities.

Other works by Santiago include *America's Dream* (1996); *Las Christmas: Favorite Latino Authors Share Their Holiday Memories* (1998), co-edited with Joie Davidow; and *Las Mamis: Favorite Latino Authors Remember Their Mothers* (due out April 2000, Knopf), co-edited with Joie Davidow.

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