

INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL ACOSTA



Beverly (Slapin): The Barrio San Gabriel (Sangra for short) and the people who live and work there in the late 1950s—Manny, his friends, relatives and extended family and neighbors, the pachucos, teachers and religious instructors, the shopkeepers, the people from other marginalized communities who have settled there, and those who are passing through, riding the rails, looking for work—are all real. What’s your relationship to Sangra?

Daniel: My maternal grandparents had met in San Bernardino where Grandpa was a railroad worker from Jalisco, and Grandma was the daughter of the owner of the boarding house where he lived. He had relatives in Sangra who had emigrated in the late 1800s from Jalisco. After their wedding they moved to Sangra, where my mother was born in the shadow of San Gabriel Mission. After World War II, my mom and dad moved in with my grandparents. So by the time I was born, our family had already sunk deep roots in Sangra. Many of the neighborhood kids were cousins!

I spent my childhood living in that house across the street from the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks. When I was about 13, my parents and my sister and I moved to our own house on the next street. After graduating from eighth grade I entered a Catholic seminary, where I stayed for the next five years. This period provided a physical and emotional distance from Sangra, and allowed me to see other neighborhoods and meet boys from other places. My preparations for the Catholic priesthood presumed my attending college, a given I probably would not have presumed for myself had I stayed in the neighborhood.

For me, Sangra was usually a safe place, and although there were dangers to be aware of and avoided, such as drug addiction and alcoholism, my parents were loving and affirming, and I had a bevy of tías who doted over me.

Our young narrator hangs out on the roof with his friends, peeks at girls' chichis, hurls oranges, avocados and rocks at passing trains, astutely notes and comments on micro-aggressions from white people, and also tells how sometimes the Mexican kids get to return the favor. I especially like Manny's story about how one of his friends would sell homing pigeons to white people—the same pigeons, over and over. Yet, Manny and his friends also sometimes root for the white “good guys” in the movies who shoot the “Mexican bad guys.” Everything about Manny and his friends is real, even their occasional typically teenage cognitive disconnect. In characterizing Manny and his friends, how did you come to achieve this balance?

Most Mexican Americans raised in Sangra were born on this side of the border, and Manny and his friends are confident in their second-generation American identity. They're very different Mexicans than those in East LA, which tended to be more of a neighborhood for recent immigrants. By the late 1800s, Mexican neighborhoods like Sangra had sprung up along the SP rail lines across southern California; and Mexican neighbors of Sangra were well-ensconced in their communities. These Mexicans were proudly US citizens: the men were quick to enlist in the military after the start of WWII, and many were decorated for their heroism in combat.

These “settled” Mexican Americans often looked down on recent arrivals from Mexico for their bumpkin-like behavior that reflected poorly on them. They differentiated themselves from the “recien llegados,” criticizing them, for example, for letting their babies run around without clothes on.

Although Mundo sells homing pigeons to the white kids, it wasn't a particular desire to get even with them for their prejudices. Rather, Mundo simply took advantage of kids who were naïve and loose with their money.

Mexican "good guys" like Elfego Baca, Zorro, and the Cisco Kid were few and far between, so when the choice was the "bad Mexicans" or the "good white guys," the Mexican kids here rooted for the "good white guys."

On reflection, I think that the only times my friends and I didn't take our American identity for granted was when the white kids would remind us that we weren't as "American" as they were. As a kid I could go to my white friends' homes to play, but their parents never allowed them to come to our neighborhood. That always troubled me.

Why did you decide to have Manny's matter-of-fact bed-wetting become a thread in the story? Every morning, he gets up, strips his bed, puts the wet sheets in the laundry room, and takes a shower. It seems to be no big thing. No one (except his cousin, Cruz, who shares his bed when Rudy returns home) calls it to his attention. I saw, towards the ending, that he was surprised when he had not wet the bed.

I wanted readers to know Manny as a kid for whom life is not easy; his bed-wetting is one more thing he has to endure without understanding why. And since it occurs when the night train rumbles by, it's become something the family has embraced—with no blame or demeaning—as just another routine to adjust to. As the narrator, Manny trusts the reader with this personal secret—it's another way of pulling the reader more deeply into his story. Only Manny's cousin, Cruz, threatens to tell everyone at school about Manny's secret, which, as it turns out, he doesn't.

Other characters have a complexity that will appeal to middle- and upper-grade readers. Uncle Rudy is one of them. Because his horrible war experience left him with traumatic stress, survivor's guilt, and drug addiction, he's come home a wreck of a man. Manny's father doesn't allow him to be around the children; Grandma loves her son and knows that he's in God's hands; and Manny is confused because he doesn't know the whole story. How were you able to see Rudy's falling apart as a result of doing what he had to do during the war?

In a way, Rudy longs to go back to a time when he was innocent—as Manny is now—before his life began to unravel. Manny connects deeply with the deeply-flawed Rudy; and Rudy sees in young Manny a pure, unconditional love he can't get from anyone else—not even his own brother or his long-suffering mother. When he returns home on parole with survivor's guilt and drug addiction, Rudy is not strong enough to fight the forces that are dragging him back down. He doesn't know how to live free.

Another character is that “son-of-a-bitch” cop, whom the community refers to as “the Turk.” He’s a small-town bad guy with a gun and badge and no conscience—an out-and-out racist who, as Danny says, “hates negros and Metsicans” and gets satisfaction from threatening, bullying and committing violence on people who can’t fight back. The gruesome scene in which he beats Manny’s friend’s brother to death—cried out for revenge, and I’m glad he got it. Who or what does “the Turk” represent?

The military and the paramilitary (or the police) enforce the “dirty work” of the community / state / nation. In a healthy society, the military only defend and the police administer the law equitably. In a dysfunctional society, the military and the police both serve the elites. In Sangra, “the Turk” enforces the boundaries of the disenfranchised minority community with varying degrees of ruthlessness. In the case of his stopping and harassing Betty for driving in the white part of town, it’s symbolic. In the case of his beating Lawrence Collison to death, it’s physical and symbolic.

Manny’s grandmother is one of my favorite characters. Strong, compassionate, humble and loving, she’s steeped in her Mexican culture and Catholic religion. Grandma sees washing the beans for the family’s daily meals—and laundering Manny’s wet sheets every day as well—as routine, not worthy of complaint. With her rosary almost always in her hands, she feeds and blesses relatives, neighbors and strangers alike—including any hobo who stops by. Grandma doesn’t abide being referred to as “Abuela,” but she’s fine with Manny’s respectful “a sus órdenes” when he addresses her. And when Manny’s father belt-whips him for doing something dangerous—an infraction Manny will never repeat—neither Grandma nor Mom try to stop him. Rather, they stand back, and, when the whipping is done, gently dress Manny’s wounds—and bless him, over and over. Did you have a model for Grandma in your own life?

Manny's grandma bears a close resemblance to my own grandmother, Manuela Ortega Sanchez. Manuela was a daughter of the son of a wealthy Mexican hacienda owner in Chihuahua. In the late 1800s and against her will, she and her single mother immigrated to San Bernardino. It was there that she met my maternal grandfather, a Mexican railroad worker from Jalisco, who was living at her mother's boarding house.

My grandmother was devoutly Catholic, educated by the German nuns at a San Bernardino Catholic school. She was able to read and write both Spanish and English, a rarity in that place and time! Grandma always carried the rosary with her and said it nightly, attended church services every day as well as Mass every Sunday, and related to me much like Manny’s grandma relates to him. She and my grandfather were highly-respected members of our Sangra neighborhood. In this culture (at least, then) the woman was the “queen of the house” and the man was “king of the outside,” and the roles rarely crossed these social lines. Manny’s family is like that.

Thank you. Good getting to meet you, Daniel! And I apologize for referring to you as a “promising young writer”!

Oh, I’m not in the least offended!