

August 25, 2019

Los Angeles, CA

RE: [REDACTED]:
[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]:

Thank you for sharing your fantastic memoir with me. The angst of finding your paths in life as a Latina, daughter, sister, and woman in [REDACTED] showed through clearly. I was raised in East LA during the same time periods focused upon in your book. It was clear to me that many of the highlighted events helped hone your writing and storytelling skills. Your truth and honesty showed through loud and clear.

No one can tell your story better than you. As a reader, you had me hooked, only wanting for more. In order for me to share my experience as a reader, and make recommendations for potential edits, I will break the following letter down into three parts: **plot overview, characters, historical and setting details, scenes, and title.** After our conference call, and listening your your goals, my hope is to help you turn what you feel are “personal essays” into a novel many people can relate to, regardless of race or sex. All of the components are there—it is now just a matter of expanding and refining the beauty you have created.

Other than your final chapter “[REDACTED],” your memoir begins and ends with family. While family and community are significant themes throughout the memoir, I personally interpreted the book as a story about finding who you are as a person and Latina within those confines. Your struggles with family history, relationships, education, death, and perceived personal weaknesses all showed through clearly. Given your personal struggles, I applaud you on writing a novel that, while at first glance, appears to be female-centric— is actually more universal. The additional themes of fighting for racial equality, protesting an unjust war and finding family acceptance will of interest to the greater readership. Bravo.

Plot Overview

The memoir opens with a brief history of your grandparent’s and parent’s life in Mexico prior to your birth. The themes of struggle and the cultural roles of female and male are central to this chapter. These themes continue on past Mexico as a new life is established in Los Angeles, [REDACTED], and your mother takes control of the lives of each family member. This introduction sets up an overview of the past and foreshadows events to come in the chapters ahead.

Chapter Two, “[REDACTED],” covers the period of [REDACTED] life when her brother, [REDACTED], enlists to serve his country during the Vietnam War. There is conflict established between [REDACTED] and his parents on why he has chosen to volunteer, and how the community in East LA views the war

8/25/19

Page 2 of 6

and the participation of their family members. You are allowed to attend the march against the war, which quickly turns into a riot, due to racial conflicts with the police. We are introduced to the religious traditions and the creation of altars to pray for both the living and the dead.

After the war, ██████████ begins her path of education and understanding how she is perceived as a Mexican American in many of the private schools she attends. She struggles to find acceptance until she enrolls in the ██████████, and ultimately into ██████████. While she finds some acceptance on campus, her family still does not recognize her educational path. She returns home to East LA and enters into ██████████ to try and get her parent's approval. When she meets her future husband, ██████████, she once again finds a lack of acceptance by her parents. They caution her not to marry him, as he will not be able to provide for the family. ██████████ ultimately marries ██████████, has two boys, and comes to realize after the death of his father that he has been unfaithful. She struggles to save her marriage, and ultimately, her faith as a divorced woman.

After her failed marriage, ██████████ is forced to deal with the suicide of her brother, ██████████, and her family's desire to sweep his suicide under the rug for religious reasons. She gains some strength as a writer and activist, and begins to find her creative role each year, heading up the "Day of the Dead" remembrance at the ██████████.

The memoir ends with the care and ultimate death of her father. ██████████ reflects on the strength of her father and what she has learned from him over the years. Her final chapter, "██████████," is a recap of who she believes she is now as a mother, daughter, sister, aunt, friend, cultural worker and community activist and how the past has influenced each of those areas in her life.

A lot of territory is covered in 143 pages. To a degree, it felt to me, the reader, as if this was a first draft. I wondered why a lot of the names and details were eliminated. While that was clarified during our video conference on Monday, I do wonder, however, if there is a way for you to tell this story with either more transparency or as a work of fiction. There are many valuable lessons you have learned over the years, and the recap at the end, while good, doesn't necessarily strengthen the memoir. Instead, it leaves me as the reader with more questions as to why names were left out, and important moments in life (██████████) were glossed over. Holding back, even to protect others, may not allow you to reach the emotional connection you want with your reader. I wondered whether it would be best to either wait to finish this memoir until you can fully tell your story—or to rewrite it in such a way that your life, and the life of others, is fictionalized to protect individuals while they are still alive. Does your ██████████, or could it be a teacher or trusted employer? This is your work of art, and the blend of truth and fiction may be an interesting aspect to explore. The story still could be told with some degree to accuracy, but the settings changed, so your family is protected. The message of how this affected you, and ultimately formed who you are today can still be delivered.

8/25/19

Page 3 of 6

Characters

There are many characters weaved into the fourteen chapters of this memoir. Of importance, however, are only a handful as I see it: ██████████. While many of the other secondary characters like ██████████ parents are named, some characters—who are very integral to forming who ██████████ is today—have no name. (██████████) I felt a distance to some of these individuals (such as ██████████ father and mother) given that you only refer to them as “my mother” or “my father.” This formality, and distance, may indeed be correct, but as a small child, were they “father and mother,” or was there a Spanish name used such as papá, and mamá?

I also wanted to know more about some of these characters. What did they look like? How did they dress? What did they sound like?

On page 77, we are introduced to ██████████ Armande. Other than stating he was “a fellow punk and visual artist,” we know very little about him. How tall was he? What were his features like? Some of these may be mentioned as time goes on in the novel, but it is important for the reader—right from the introduction of a character—to have the ability to image them in their mind. If by the time you get to describing them in more detail, the reader has envisioned them differently, you run the risk of losing that reader as they can no longer identify with the character.

The addition of description for all characters is one area that would help tremendously as you layer detail into your scenes.

One description for a character, however, that I felt was overused is “██████████.” The chapter “██████████” utilizes this description (or phrase) over a dozen times to describe your father. For me, it diminishes the impact for the reader. I would recommend finding other ways to describe his eyes, and only using ██████████ a few times as a description. One other description of the father on Page 120 refers to ██████████. I wondered if this was needed, or if there was another way to phrase this discovery? Joking about this may come off as a betrayal of trust between a father and his daughter (██████████) and runs the risk of turning off the reader. (Especially your male readership)

Historical and Setting Details

I mentioned at the start of this letter that I lived in East LA about the same time as you did. For this reason alone, I was hungry for more detail about the area. I wanted the names of the streets. I wanted to see the area once again as it looked in the sixties and seventies. For possibly the same need to protect individual identities, you did not include this detail. There is, however, so much physicality inspired by the culture, that helping a reader visualize that might strengthen your message. I also yearned for more historical information, especially when it came to the march and the Vietnam War.

8/25/19

Page 4 of 6

Page 8. We are introduced to East Los Angeles for the first time. Where in East Los Angeles was the small white bungalow? Would we discover that it is in the triangle you write about later on in the memoir?

Page 9. We find out your mother has been saving up tax return money to put a down payment on a house. Where was this new house located? What did it look like?

Page 20. You state, "Of the total number of soldiers sent, less than half were minority, yet African and Mexican-Americans made up more than half of the casualties coming back home." While it is not my place as a developmental editor to necessarily correct facts, I do feel that this one area needs clarification. The stats from the National Archives are as follows: Of the 58,220 casualties during the Vietnam Conflict, 49,830 were White, 7,243 were Black or African American, and 349 were Hispanic. It is possible that some did not classify as Hispanic, especially if they had surnames that did not necessarily appear to be Mexican. I predict the numbers were higher than the National Archives show, but given that this is on record, you may want to consider editing your statement on Page 20 to be historically more accurate. Even if you state that it felt as if half the casualties were Hispanic given how it devastated the families that you knew, it might read better and not trip up a reader such as myself that gets off on details!

Page 24. You write that the march took place along Whittier Blvd and ending at Laguna Park. Where did it start? Did your family have to walk far to get to the start of the march? What does Laguna Park look like? Was it big enough to hold thousands of protestors?

Page 26. As a side note, a newscaster, Ruben Salazar, was killed during the march. I don't know if this impacted your family at all, but if it did, how did you and family feel about that? Was there any blame on the part of some members of the community leading to the way the police had to use brute force to stop the march? As the reader, and especially given that this is a memoir, I wanted more details as to what happened to create such a high level of tension.

Page 45. You refer to East LA, but appear to limit it to the triangle between the 5, 60, and 710. Many native Los Angelians will argue what is truly East LA, but most all agree to areas that extend beyond the 710. I like the idea of narrowing down the living area, especially as it relates to the cultural and familial foundations. It may, however, be important to expand on the definition of East LA to not alienate some readers.

Scenes

Each scene in the memoir is well-written and kept my interest as a reader. I was, however, tripped up over some timeline issues, along with the repeating of events. I also found a few scenes that may be unnecessary.

Page 16 – 17. I was confused as to the time frame of when your brother left for Vietnam, and when he gave you the red shoes. It appears he gifted you the shoes in 1964 when you were three or four years old. If that is correct, I was questioning how, on page 23, six-years later when you

8/25/19

Page 5 of 6

were nine years old that you were still able to wear those shoes to the march. Did you not grow, or are the time frames for these scenes not accurate? If you did not grow, this could be an important fact for the reader to know. It's as if time stood still while your brother was in Vietnam.

Page 82. We jump one and a half years from you being married on ██████████, to the birth of your first son on ██████████. It seems there is a lot unsaid that happened in those two years—especially as it relates to the relationship with your husband, and the creative side that you put on the back burner once your child was born. Is there something missing that the reader needs to know?

Page 84. Was the scene ██████████ necessary? Most readers know the mechanics of labor. Similarly, the scene on Page 85, discussing the APAG score for ██████████ (as it was mentioned about ██████████ earlier) does not seem to relate to the story. I would consider removing these or shortening the scenes unless they somehow tie into the theme or future events.

Page 87. You write about being invited to speak at a symposium on Chicano art in Mexico. This invitation seemed to come out of the blue. I would recommend strengthening your qualifications in earlier scenes, so this does not appear to be out of context. As a reader, I also wanted to know more about those activities and your leadership. I wanted to visualize the art.

Page 104. You write about your concern over “Catholic” interpretations of your divorce, due to their reverence for Holy Sacraments. Catholic doctrine is not subject to interpretation. (Unless, of course, you are the Pope!) You may wish to rephrase the concern over your divorce and how you will be perceived among those who view “Holy Matrimony” as a “Sacrament.” This also opens up the possibility for another scene, which you may want to consider expanding on at the end of Page 81, when we learn the date you were married. Did you get married in the Catholic Church? If so, a paragraph or two describing this, and the solemnness of the occasion, could add significantly to your concern about the divorce on Page 104.

Page 105. Was the church important to you as a child, and did that importance play into any concern you had about your divorce? If so, I recommend that more history along these lines be included at various points. Which church did you attend? What was the priest like? What did the incense in the church smell like? (Visceral reactions to the Church and its traditions along the way would help the reader understand how these played into the person you become.) The scene of staring at Jesus half-naked on the cross is a step in that direction, but something was missing for me as the reader. Were you ever devout, or did you hate going to church? What about your parents? Was it all just show and tell for you and your family? This scene doesn't jive with my experience of the religious devotion of the Hispanic community that lived around me.

Page 110. You identify ██████████ as “a gallery in East Los Angeles.” This was previously established. There are a couple of other examples of this throughout the novel. I would recommend removing duplicate descriptions such as these as they are not needed.

8/25/19

Page 6 of 6

Pages 109 – 118. This chapter is beautifully written, and in fact, feels completely different in style from the others. I would consider turning this into a short story and submitting for publication.

Pages 119 – 120. The story of ██████ in these pages, while emotional, feels like a repeat. Do you feel it was necessary for the reader to hear about him again, or was this written before other chapters? If that was the case, I might consider incorporating what you write about him on these pages into an earlier chapter. Throughout this chapter, you also repeat facts, such as on page 121: "█████, helped me build the desk that would become ██████ altar."

Page 130. The entire page is a repeat of what the reader already knows. This chapter also included the "██████████" repeats. I would recommend a close review of this chapter and editing.

Title for Memoir:

The title at first glance, doesn't appear to relate to theme, characters, or plot. It wasn't until you described, during our video conference, why you identify as an "Intellectual Chola" that it made sense. I recommend keeping this in mind as you redraft this memoir, and possibly building in more scenes that show the power of your intellect and how it has impacted your life and the life of others.

It may also be necessary to differentiate and define an ██████ vs. what society thinks of as a "Chola." I might reconsider the use of the title "██████████." There is a great deal of ██████ that you have experienced in life, but I don't see that turbulence as the central theme of the book. If it isn't, and I might be wrong, I may consider dropping the "██████████" heading and leaving the title of the novel as: "██████████." The use of one of these seems more powerful than trying to incorporate both.

██████████, congratulations on writing such a heartfelt and beautiful story. The plot is all there, as are the characters. I look forward to seeing how you develop each of these further. It has been an honor to read your memoir and to (hopefully) help you meet your goal of publishing this book before your birthday next year!

If you have any questions about the above, please don't hesitate to contact me.

With Respect,



Jerry Parent

jerry@jerry-parent.com

619-517-0804