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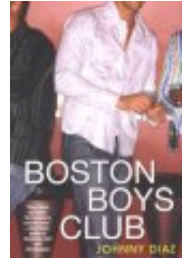
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INTERVIEW

Interview: Chica Lit, Meet Johnny Diaz and *The Boston Boys Club*

Written by [Lisa Alvarado](#)

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A staff writer for *The Boston Globe*, Johnny Diaz covers Boston's colorful neighborhoods and Hispanic issues. Previously, Diaz was a reporter for *The Miami Herald* where he shared in the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the federal seizure of Elian Gonzales and its aftermath. MTV *Real World* fans will remember him as the "gay guy's boyfriend" from the Miami season. In *Boston Boys Club*, his first novel, Johnny Diaz follows a trio of friends as they search for that perfect guy at the most happening bar in Boston, the Café Club.

I caught up with Johnny as he continues to juggle being a successful journalist and preparing for the national debut of his novel. Come back next week for a review of *Boston Boys Club*, summer read season is just around the corner.

Talk about chico lit and its place alongside chica lit... What connection do you feel with writers like Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, and the chica lit movement? Who are the writers that influenced you, and what about them/their work clicked for you?

I believe chico lit is the guy's chica lit. Just as Latinas look for themselves and their stories in contemporary fiction, so are their gay brothers, cousins, and amigos. We want to see ourselves reflected accurately and positively. Latino readers of gay fiction want something that goes beyond what we've read countless times before: the gangbangers, the big and strong old-school macho guys, the sexy hot Latino gardeners to have sex with, and the stereotypical flamboyant drag queens. We're more than that just as Latinas are more than housekeepers and Spanish-accented sexy bombshells. What about our stories that speak of friendship and the struggles with being accepted not just in your own family and culture but in your own social group? What

about our stories that show how we're constantly swaying and thriving in a bicultural bubble? We often speak two languages because of our parents and we travel back and forth in between cultures, 24-7 and I haven't seen many recent novels by a gay Latino writer that speaks to all that, especially from an American and Hispanic point of view.

I feel a strong kinship with Alisa Valdes Rodriguez and her chica lit movement. For one, I was a college intern in Living/Arts at *The Boston Globe* when she was a writer here. (She was my unofficial mentor and she would often read my copy and give me advice before I filed my stories to my editor. I sat next to her and I think I used to her annoy with questions about where to eat and dance.) I feel what she does now as an author is what she was did as a journalist, telling our stories, informing and enlightening readers about our culture and backgrounds and how diverse and rich we are. She broke a lot of new ground in Boston and in Los Angeles and in mainstream journalism. She always inspired me to do the same. (I actually have her old job here at *The Globe*.) When I read *The Dirty Girls Social Club*, I wanted to do a guy's version of that, hence *Boston Boys Club* but with not so many main characters, just three guys and how a gay Cuban-American adapts to a sometimes staid town like Boston.

So Alisa has been a big influence on me as well as authors such as Nicholas Sparks and William J. Mann. Some fellow writers frown on Nicholas Sparks because they say his writing is hokey and full of cliches with his simplistic stories, but they ring true and bring a romantic escapism for the reader. William J. Mann is a fellow gay writer from Cape Cod and he has written books about the gay party circuit. His novels have been the closest thing I've read to good gay fiction that speak to the everyday struggles of dating and relationships. But again, none of his characters are Latinos, hence another reason for writing BBC. I wanted to write something fun and positive about being gay and Hispanic today. I want people to read my novel and walk away with a good feeling about gays and Latinos in general, like they know understand us a little better.

***Boston Boys Club* will no doubt be popular as queer fiction in the LGBT community, but it also has the appeal of Bushnell and *Sex and the City*. Not to give anything away, but BBC has a strong thread of friendship as well as romance and sexuality. What do you that says about where we are in the culture wars, i.e. gay reality not a "subculture" anymore, but popular culture.**

I find that if you write about universal themes (strong friendships, sweet romances, and the longing for intimacy) that they will transcend labels and be part of popular culture as opposed to a subculture or a specific niche. I know my characters are gay and one of them is Hispanic but their stories will resonate with anyone who has had issues with committing to a relationship, helping someone with has his own addiction issues or chronicling the challenges of being a newcomer in a new home and job. I describe the book as a *Same-Sex in the City* because men and women of various backgrounds related to that show, even though it was about four straight women and their search for Mr. Right. I hope that readers who pick up *Boston Boys Club* will relate to one of the characters, even if they are gay or Hispanic. My guys are all looking for love,

and themselves and aren't we all in our own way?

On a related note, in your opinion, what do you think Latin culture had to offer the LGBT community and vice versa, and ultimately what do those communities bring to the "larger" body politic?

The Latin culture has offered us a rich tradition of storytelling. Our tradition is about sharing, being passionate and proud about who you are and what you do. We're all storytellers, from our abuelos y padres. I remember growing up in Miami, listening to my dad tell my sister and I stories about Cuba or he would pretend to be the voice of one of my sister's dolls to keep us entertained on long drives to Disney World. There is a long tradition of this among many famous gay Latin writers, from Reinaldo Arenas and Elias Miguel Munoz to Cuban poet Richard Blanco. You read their books and poems and you can hear, taste, smell, and see the results of those passed-on traditions of storytelling.

And by sharing their stories, they also contribute another layer of the Latin experience – the gay experience, which has often been something you know but don't talk about. They've written about their tight-knit upbringing and struggles of being gay in a machismo mundo to being ostracized at times from a culture that is so often warm and embracing yet so cold and shunning with it comes to homosexuality.

As a journalist and novelist, do you experience one kind of writing as different than the other? For me, writing poetry feels very intuitive, very much a right brain activity, where fiction writing seems almost exclusively left brain. Does this resonate for you, and if not, how would you describe how your work develops, how it's linked?

That's a great question. I find that my writing for *The Boston Globe* is very left-brain and somewhat serious. I am writing with a pair of handcuffs on because the story is not about me, but about the person, the topic or the issue. I funnel the facts and the information from my notepad and do my best to write them into a clear and concise article that flows. I feel I have to keep my personality — my voice — at bay to tell the story for the newspaper. Sometimes, I struggle to keep my first-person observations out so that the article is completely third-person but sometimes, a personal insight or observation surfaces and I get away with it.

Writing fiction is pure pleasure for me. It's my creativity unleashed and it doesn't feel like work at all. It's feels more like art, something you do because your spirit guides you – calls you – to do it. When I write fiction, I feel I can take those proverbial handcuffs off (the ones from above at the newspaper) and let my voice run free and wild. When I write fiction, I feel like someone running in a boundless field of sawgrass or someone swimming in the middle of the sea. I don't where I'm running or swimming to but I am having fun exploring, seeing where the journey takes me. So yes, fiction is very "write" brain for me. :)

Where do you see yourself as a writer 10 years from now?

I see myself smiling and writing, sharing my stories with others as a writer and telling other people's stories as well as journalist. And hopefully, I'll still be bopping around New England and South Florida in my little white Jeep Wrangler to find those stories.

Tell us something about yourself not in the official bio.

I'm addicted to the six-inch Veggie Delite sub (no mayo, honey mustard por favor) from Subways sandwich shops. I eat one daily for lunch, plus two chocolate chip cookies.

[Lisa Alvarado](#) is a poet, novelist, and performance artist. She is the author of *The Housekeeper's Diary*, a chapbook based on her work as a domestic, and *Reclamo*. Her first novel, *Sister Chicas*—co-authored with two other Latina writers—was released in 2006 by NAL/Penguin Books. She also shares her views and literary criticism on *La Bloga*, *AmoxCalli* and *The Flipbook*. [Drop her a line](#), she loves conversation.

Comments

