

A REVIEW OF *TAÍNA: UNA NOVELA*.

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Taína: Una novela by Ernesto Quiñonez, is the author's third book. The protagonist is a teenager named Julio who is half Puerto Rican and half Ecuadorian like Quiñonez himself. He comes from an East Harlem background, and dreams of going to college. He has good grades. But he believes that Taína, a young woman who is pregnant, has had some sort of immaculate conception. Other people in the community shun Taína and her mother, who are almost never seen. But not Julio. He not only believes her, but he begins to kidnap dogs from rich neighborhoods (he and his friend claim to find the dogs and return them for a fee) in order to get the money to give Taína things she wants. *Taína: Una Novela* (2019) makes strong statements about how social justice, individual determination, education, and compassion can overcome urban poverty.

The young girl who supposedly got pregnant by some divine force is hardly a Virgin Mary. She is mean, foul mouthed, and pretty much disgusting. She and her mother are selfish. Taína does have an amazing voice though. Taína's meanness and isolation are part of what draws Julio in. A part of him apparently likes to be commanded for a good cause. These two women are not mean out of nowhere, as community abuse and isolation have driven them mad. Poverty and deprivation have caused selfishness. Quiñonez makes an excellent statement on how environments shape people. Taína, a young woman with an amazing voice, could be a much better person in a different community and under different circumstances. Her life has been destroyed by patriarchal attitudes that punish the woman for having a child out of wedlock.

This book also covers many of the themes Quiñonez dealt with in his earlier books *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango's Fire*. The main difference in *Bodega's Dreams* gentrification had not touched Harlem. In *Chango's Fire*, gentrification was just starting to come. In *Taína*, it's a part of life in Harlem. The protagonist of all three books is Julio, and he is a young man set for the time in each book. In previous books Julio essentially seemed to become interested in college at a later age, as professional pressures weren't as big in East Harlem in the past. With gentrification already here in *Taína*, Julio has had to step up his game and is preparing to apply to Princeton University. There are troublemakers in Julio's

school, but far less so than the characters in Quiñonez's earlier books *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango's Fire*. While New York City has a long way to go in reducing violent crime and poverty, things are much better than the 1980s and 1990s in neighborhoods like East Harlem.

Julio's goals are individualistic in this book. He wants to go to college. He gets good grades. He comes up with a scam to give Taína the things she needs. Quiñonez's Julio has changed considerably in this book. All of his novels to date have a protagonist named Julio. Julio in *Bodega Dreams* was involved with someone who wanted to use crime and politics to elevate the entire neighborhood of East Harlem. There isn't this kind of group identity in *Taína: Una novela*. Julio's goals are individualistic. No other person is responsible for the fate of an entire ethnic group or community. Excessive identity politics is a trap that some minority writers can fall into in the context of literature and academia. Gangsterism doesn't have much of a presence in this book, as it was expected to have a huge presence in literature or films written by minorities twenty or thirty years ago. But *Taína* was published in 2019, in a different era in which Quiñonez himself has moved up in the world and it shows in his writing. He has been a professor at Cornell University for years, and he is working on the screenplay for *Bodega Dreams*, which will be filmed.

A good thing about the book is despite Julio making a mistake, he is not demonized by the writer as irredeemable. He's a smart kid. He did do something bad, and he suffered consequences by getting arrested. Luckily, he didn't get locked up, but he clearly was going to move forward towards his plans for Princeton. One of his teachers supported him due to his grades, despite the women whose dogs he kidnapped all pressing charges. A first-time offender like Julio typically gets ACD, which erases the criminal record provided the defendant stays out of trouble for six months. It's important that Julio was not made to be irredeemable. It's not good to kidnap dogs in order to scam the owners out of money. But no one was harmed. He didn't directly rob anyone. Had he assaulted people in order to get the money, he would have made him a much more malevolent figure and the reader instead of rooting for his future would want him to do time in prison.

Quiñonez also deals with the lack of diversity in education in New York City. In public schools most of the teachers are white, but most of the students are not. Extensive recent research has shown that disparaging attitudes from teachers can be damaging to many students, with lifelong consequences to the point where it is called the school to prison pipeline. While damaging educators are shown, positive supportive educators with obvious social justice backgrounds are shown as well. The same teacher who implores the women not to press charges against Julio was

one who took his class on field trips to museums downtown, and she was writing his letters of recommendation for the university. Quiñonez makes a statement on how compassion and interest from educators can mold children from marginalized communities and help push them towards a better future.

As for *Taína*, Quiñonez deals with how women are marginalized for having children out of wedlock and even more so if they are poor. It's ambiguous in the novel on whether a boy she talked to was the father of her unborn child, or if it really was an immaculate conception. Magical realism elements abound in this book, far more than in Quiñonez's previous two books. But it's not really important how the child was conceived. What matters here is how the community treated a poor girl and her poor mother because the daughter had a child out of wedlock. Taína and her mother at first are disparaging towards Julio, who is one of the very few people willing to talk to them. This is out of fear. They don't trust him, given how horribly they have been treated. But as time goes by and he doesn't hurt them, and as he stands up to them, they behave better towards him. Magical realism is used by Quiñonez to deal with mental health issues.

Julio's mother also talked about the forced sterilizations done to Puerto Rican women. It's clear these women were marginalized due to being poor and due to racial and ethnic considerations, as most Puerto Ricans have varying obvious degrees of African and Taino ancestry. This was a horrific abuse of Puerto Rican women, and it was an attempt at genocide. Obviously, had Puerto Ricans not resisted the sterilization of Puerto Rican women it would have ended with no more Puerto Ricans. The genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of people of African descent are often talked about in regards to American history. Abuses done to Puerto Ricans are not, and Quiñonez does an excellent job in bringing these abuses up. Peta Ponce, a Black Puerto Rican spiritualista, herself has had the operation done to her because she was considered ugly and because she was Black. This was obviously a massive human rights violation and was simply wrong. Julio's mother whispers to him about the other women who have had the operation.

The African elements are most strongly represented by Peta Ponce, the spiritualista that Julio pays to bring from Puerto Rico to deliver, Usmail, the son of Taína. Taína and her mother feel that it's better for her to give birth at home and not in a hospital. People of African descent strongly influenced the language and the culture of Puerto Rico. These spiritual elements come from West African religions and they typically play a strong role in all of Quiñonez's books, as do both Pentecostalism and Catholicism. The characters often use their religious beliefs in order not only to survive, but also to pull themselves out of poverty. In

fact, the belief that Taína is telling the truth of her immaculate conception and her mother's desire to have Peta Ponce act as her midwife drive the story.

Peta Ponce is an old witch in the *Obscene Bird of the Night* written by Jose Donoso. Due to menopause, she and the old women she lives with are unable to conceive and therefore unable to propagate or continue their community. She gets a man to have sex with Ines, a woman young enough to conceive, so the community of old witches can have a child. Sadly for them, the boy is deformed. Obviously, Peta Ponce in *Taína: Una novela* is named after this Peta Ponce. Taína's Peta Ponce also has spiritual or magical powers and is sterile. But she acts as a midwife to help facilitate the birth of pregnant women. These old witches are symbolic of dominating old women. They are essentially old matriarchs, who can no longer have children and who seek to control younger women by dictating who the father of the child will be, what circumstances the child will grow up in, and they often intend to take the child for their own purposes. The young woman is just a means to an end. These dynamics really do play out in real families, for example grandmothers may take advantage of a poor young woman's instability to take the young woman's child and raise the child as her own. That essentially was happening in *Taína: Una novela*. Taína's mother isn't encouraging her daughter to go to college, have a career, or do anything that would enable Taína to become independent of her. She sees Usmail, Taína's baby as hers to control. Taína's mother obviously gets income from the government, but she does not refer her daughter to a social worker who could give her therapy or guidance. Fear is used to control her daughter, and by extension her grandchild.

This book also incorporates a lot about the dreams of immigrants. Julio's father is from Ecuador. His mother is from Puerto Rico, technically a part of the US, but not on the US mainland, and not an US State. One could consider both of his parents immigrants, and Julio is certainly a first generation New Yorker. His parents dream that he will do well and go to college. Moving to New York was a sacrifice for them, and they made it work well enough to give him a platform to do other things. Like many poor new arrivals in New York, they struggled at low paid working-class jobs and they moved to a neighborhood that was an ethnic enclave, East Harlem, with lots of other Spanish speakers. Newly arrived immigrants, particularly the working class, are likely to move to neighborhoods in NY and other large cities to be around people who speak the same language as they do. Julio's binational heritage is likely typical of teenagers in the neighborhood now. In the 1960s, to be Latino in NYC meant one was Puerto Rican for the most part. Changes in US immigration policy allowed large numbers of other Latinos to move to the United States, to the point where New York now has lots of Mexicans, Central Americans, and South Americans, and Dominicans are

the largest Latino population now. There are many Latino youth with one parent from one nation, and one parent from another nation.

People like Julio are increasingly the face of America. It should be pointed out that anyone born in America is automatically an American citizen. Latinos are now 18 percent of America's population, and this is substantially larger than African Americans at 12 percent. The population growth among Americans is mostly among Asians and Latinos. The Black/White dichotomy presented in the media is actually dated, and not the future of the United States or the world. The story of Julio is very much the story of America, and certainly a significant part of it. It's really important in literature and in other media for the public to get a full picture of the life of Americans. The literary canon in America cannot be just books written by dead white men who died centuries ago. To get more students to read, more books need to be accessible and with characters they identify with. *Taína: Una Novela* and Quiñonez's books are certainly a wonderful fit to the literary canon in America, as the society struggles with addressing various social issues including dismantling barriers to socioeconomic mobility among marginalized populations.

In showing Julio's plan for college and Taína giving birth, the book shows growth and transition that immigrants go through as they struggle for socioeconomic mobility. Yet they keep aspects of themselves, evidence in the strong beliefs in the African based culture so prevalent among Puerto Ricans. Other new arrivals to New York have gone through similar. *Taína: Una novela* is a quintessential immigrant story.

WORKS CITED

Quiñonez, Ernesto. *Taína: Una novela*. Vintage Books, 2019.

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