



***Merci Suárez Changes Gears***

Written by Meg Medina

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Merci Suárez is a sixth-grade student in South Florida but most importantly is a member of the very tight and proud Suárez family, a Cuban-American family who lives together on the same street in three little houses. Merci lives with her mother, papi, and brother Roli. Her Tía Inés and twin cousins live in one of the casitas and her Lolo (grandfather) and Abuela (grandmother) live in the other casita. They go from house to house as if each were their very own, sharing food, games of

dominoes, and other rich day-to-day experiences.

Merci seems comfortable or even passionate about most of her life at home with the exception of watching her twin cousins. They are terrors and she does not like the responsibility. She realizes, though, as she goes to a new private school, that maybe she should not be so proud of her casita. Merci has been given this extra responsibility of babysitting the twins because her beloved Lolo is battling Alzheimer's. Merci is also unable to try out for a sport that she loves because of this responsibility. It is clear throughout the novel that family comes first and there is no arguing with that. The bond and love among the family is untouchable and representative of what familia means to so many Latinx people.

The story takes place as Merci begins attending Seaward, a private school, where she is one of the few students with a scholarship and so is not of the same socio-economic status as most students. Seaward has strong academics which is very important to her parents but as a sixth grader, not so important to Merci. The socioeconomic status of the other students forces her to feel "less than" and sometimes lie or want to cover up her life. She feels as though she needs to compete with other students when they talk about vacations and weekend fun. By the end of the book, she realizes the value of all that she has right on her street and within the casitas.

There are opportunities throughout the book for Latinx girls to connect with the feelings and experiences of Merci. Though they might not be from the same Spanish-speaking Cuban culture and connect to the food at El Caribe, a store where her aunt works, they can find many other connections to validate their experiences and emotions. Merci recognizes throughout the story that others will be given the benefit of the doubt before she is and sharing her feelings about this can help students of color realize they are not alone in similar situations. Merci wishes that she had money and a new bike like several of the girls

but her family does not have the money, so she has to work and save. This again is a validation in the story that can serve students as they go to school among privileged students with whom they compare themselves. Lastly, Merci has an unbelievable bond with Lolo and she shares the pain she feels as Alzheimer's affects him, their relationship, and the entire family. Her love for him and the pain she feels is also something that students can feel. Whether that pain is because they left their grandfather on the other side of the border or because he has passed away, it demonstrates that it is acceptable to grieve as people and situations in life change.

*Merci Suárez Changes Gears* can be paired with other books written for young adolescents and particularly the Latinx community such as *The House on Mango Street* (Sandra Cisneros, 1991) in which another young Latinx girl is creating who she is and who she will be. Another possible pair is *Esperanza Rising* (Pam Muñoz Ryan, 2002) in which Esperanza shares the feelings from a young Latinx perspective of living in a new country and grieving. These books can help young ladies who are underrepresented in literature across the United States feel empowered.

Meg Medina is a first-generation Cuban American. She grew up in New York with her mother and sister, speaking both English and Spanish in her home but mostly Spanish with extended family. She has won many awards, including the Newbery Medal for this book. She continues Merci's story in *Merci Suárez Can't Dance* (2021). Meg's books are fiction but reflect different experiences that Meg has lived and seen. For more information, visit her website (<https://megmedina.com/>).

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