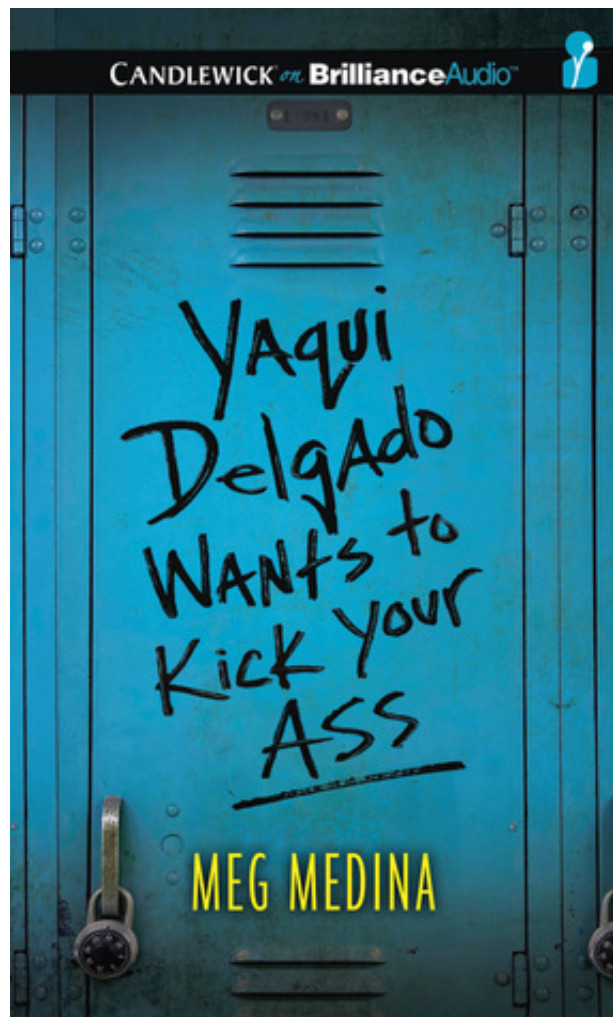


Review: Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass by Meg Medina



One morning before school, some girl tells Piddy Sanchez that Yaqui Delgado hates her and wants to kick her ass. Piddy doesn't even know who Yaqui is, never mind what she's done to piss her off. Word is that Yaqui thinks Piddy is stuck-up, shakes her stuff when she walks, and isn't Latin enough with her white skin, good grades, and no accent. And Yaqui isn't kidding around, so Piddy better watch her back. At first Piddy is more concerned with trying to find out more about the father she's never met and how to balance honors courses with her weekend job at the neighborhood hair salon. But as the harassment escalates, avoiding Yaqui and her gang starts to take over Piddy's life. Is there any way for Piddy to survive without closing herself off or running away? In an all-too-realistic novel, Meg Medina portrays a sympathetic heroine who is forced to decide who she really is.

Unsurprisingly, I was drawn to [Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass](#) by its title -- I immediately wanted to know who Yaqui Delgado was and why she had it in for the protagonist. Also, you don't often see a young adult book with a title that contains the word "ass."

This is Piddy's story, however -- Yaqui, despite being the antagonist, is an unseen presence for most of the book. Rather than simply telling Piddy she wants to kick her ass, she has one of her friends deliver the titular threat. Most of her subsequent appearances are brief -- when Piddy is hit with a carton of chocolate milk at lunch, she locks eyes with Yaqui and instantly identifies her as the perpetrator; when Piddy's favorite necklace is snatched off her neck in the hallway, she glimpses the back of Yaqui's head as she walks away. As the bullying worsens, Yaqui becomes less a person than a monster lurking constantly in Piddy's imagination. More page time is devoted to Piddy's relationships with other characters, namely her overbearing mother Clara and Clara's free-spirited best friend Lila.

Clara and Lila are polar opposites, and Medina creates an interesting contrast between the two women and the different ways they've influenced Piddy. Clara is quiet and polite where Lila is outgoing and vivacious, Clara listens to Bach and plays piano where Lila listens to salsa records, Clara abhors "loose" women where Lila wears tight-fitting dresses and attracts men everywhere she goes. In other words, Clara does everything she can to defy stereotypes associated with Latin people, where Lila seems to embody them. It's Clara who pushes Piddy to do well in school, but it's Lila who encourages her to have fun, and in whom she confides about Yaqui's bullying.

As Piddy becomes increasingly preoccupied with Yaqui, her grades start to slip, hurting her already strained relationship with her mother. She's afraid to tell Clara she's being bullied because Clara will come to her school and make a scene, and given her school's lax disciplinary system, things will likely end up worse for Piddy than Yaqui. Additionally, Piddy's always been curious about her father, but her mother refuses to tell her anything, so she has to learn from Lila why her father was never a part of their lives.

Bullying is a touchy subject, and this book handles it extremely well. Until the very end, I was convinced that there was a more complex reason Yaqui was targeting Piddy than the ones hinted at early on, but if there is, Medina never reveals it. Initially, I was a bit disappointed, but I've since concluded that this was the right choice -- the story is told in first person from Piddy's perspective, and a deeper exploration of Yaqui's character and her motivations would require a different book entirely. Having Yaqui off-page for most of the book makes Piddy's fear more palpable, and the brutal scene in which they finally come into direct confrontation is more disturbing than it would be if Yaqui were a constant physical presence.

I appreciated Medina's commentary on the sad truth that schools often don't do enough to prevent bullying. Piddy's school claims to be a "bully-free zone," but at one point Piddy lands herself in Saturday detention for erasing a homophobic slur from a classmate's locker, which offends the school officials more than the slur does. The way the school ultimately responds to Yaqui's bullying

of Piddy is disappointing, but not unrealistic.

The psychological effects the bullying has on Piddy are very believable and heartbreaking -- she starts out relatively happy, but gradually becomes fearful, angry and withdrawn, shutting out everyone except Lila and Joey, her neighbor and childhood friend. Joey's story parallels Piddy's, but he's in a much worse situation; eventually, romance blooms between them. The romantic subplot doesn't feel tacked on, rather, it develops naturally from the comfort the two find in each other, and it ultimately helps Piddy decide what kind of person she wants to be. It's worth mentioning that Joey is the only major male character in this otherwise very female-driven novel.

I enjoyed the various glimpses into Latin culture -- in particular, Latin dances plays a major role, and Spanish words are sprinkled throughout the book. Piddy also provides a poignant description of Clara's immigration from Cuba and how her experiences differed from those of people immigrating from other countries. Medina tackles the issue of racism as deftly as she handles bullying by showing how Latin people are punished both for fitting stereotypes and not fitting them.

The subplot about Piddy's father felt a bit lacking to me, but otherwise, I have no complaints about this book. With its well developed characters, honest approach to a sensitive topic, and powerful themes of culture and identity, *Yaqui Delgado* is well deserving of the accolades it's received.

Rating: 4 out of 5 stars