

Q & A with Francisco X. Stork *By Donna Freitas -- Publishers Weekly, 4/2/2009*

Francisco X. Stork's novel, Marcelo in the Real World (Scholastic/ Levine, Mar.) is about a young man with Asperger's syndrome who experiences "the real world" for the first time while working one summer at his father's law firm. So far it has garnered five starred reviews, and foreign rights have been sold in nine languages, including Spanish. Stork was born in Mexico and lived there until he was nine, when his family immigrated to the United States and settled in El Paso. He now lives in Boston and works as an attorney for a state agency that finances affordable housing.

Marcelo has a unique voice. How did you come up with it?

It's hard to describe creating a voice, because you just find it there. When I started writing Marcelo's journal, he was this young man that had a particular way of talking and thinking. I already had certain ideas about him, but the voice was kind of a gift. And once it was there, my job was to make sure that it was consistent, that I didn't stray from it.

Did you intend to write *Marcelo* for young adults?

I had published two books before this—one adult book, *The Way of the Jaguar* (Bilingual Review Press, 2000), and then a young adult novel, *Behind the Eyes* (Dutton, 2006). At the beginning, *Marcelo* was probably intended for an adult market. I was writing a story about Aurora, Marcelo's mother, and I got to 80 pages and the point where we were first dealing with Marcelo, her son. He became an interesting character for me. Aurora discovers a journal Marcelo has been writing and I decided to write a very little bit of it as an exercise—to write a journal as Marcelo would write it. Once I got going on it, Marcelo just took over and it was his story that wanted to be told.

Was Marcelo—who has Asperger's—inspired by anyone in your life?

It wasn't anyone in particular really, but a compilation of different seeds. When I was growing up in Mexico, I used to read about the lives of the saints—they provided a seed for Marcelo's character. Then there was a period in college when I worked in L'Arche, a faith-based community for people with different levels of developmental disabilities. In those days, autism wasn't a diagnosis used very much, but I am sure there were people who lived at L'Arche who were on the autistic spectrum. There was one girl there, Debbie, who had a lot of the same characteristic as Marcelo—she was very intelligent but also very shy and vulnerable, and had trouble communicating. But overall, for Marcelo, I was drawing both on my experiences at L'Arche and the images of saintly life I had as a kid.

Marcelo is fixated on God. Why?

Sometimes when people on the autistic spectrum are portrayed, their special interests become trivial. I wanted Marcelo to have a very important special interest, and what could be a more important special interest than God? But his interest in God also goes with his character and his voice and what he is like as a person. For someone that has his vision of life, of right and wrong—a *before the fall* kind of vision—it just seemed natural that Marcelo would have this interest in all-things religion. Religion is also a personal interest for me.

How so?

I've always read everything I could get my hands on about religion. I am a Christian and I try to follow in Christ's footsteps, but I believe that truth is not necessarily exclusive to one religion. Ever since I was a young man, whenever there is something I like to read, it's been something to do with the world's religions. One of the books mentioned in *Marcelo* is also one of my favorites: Abraham Joshua Heschels' *God in Search of Man*. And one little book I reread almost ever year is the

Bhagavad Gita from the Hindu tradition. Then there is obviously the New Testament, too.

You are a lawyer, and lawyers figure prominently in the story. How autobiographical is that dimension of *Marcelo*?

I think there is probably a *little* bit of Arturo in me—Arturo is Marcelo’s father and the hotshot lawyer in the book. But there is a little bit of Jerry Garcia, too, the lawyer who does all the pro bono work. I do not work in a law firm but a state agency, and I am more comfortable in a place like this than in a high-powered private law firm. I would say that *all* characters always have a little of the author in them. But in general, in the case of the lawyers, I didn’t put a whole bunch of myself into them. Most of the lawyers in the book are jerks, anyway, except for Jerry.

How did Marcelo land in Cheryl Klein’s hands at Scholastic, and what was the editorial process like?

By the time Cheryl got *Marcelo*, it was definitely a YA novel. Scholastic picked up the book with the understanding that there would be major revisions to the manuscript. And I would say that Cheryl and I worked on revising about half of the book—I rewrote half of it between the time it was accepted and publication. Originally, Scholastic liked the writing and idea, but there were some parts of the story that needed work—and they were right about this—that were necessary for good storytelling for a YA audience.

Were you surprised by the enthusiastic reception for your book?

It’s been fun. You kind of have to pinch yourself once in a while and I have to remind myself not to let get *too* excited. The subject matter is so unusual in some ways, to have a book with a main character with a special interest in God—a spiritual book—and so the positive reception has surprised me a bit. I always knew that it was both a deep book and a good story, but you always have a little doubt that others will see this as something they would enjoy reading.

I am very proud of the book. A lot of the response is due to Scholastic pushing it, and I really believe that it’s Cheryl’s handling of this—her editorial advice is what made it into a good story. People who have reviewed it have liked it. I don’t know how that translates into a readership because it’s my first experience with a book this well-received. I suppose it remains to be seen whether it will find a readership.

What’s next for you?

I just finished the line edits with Cheryl for a spring 2010 book—I can’t say too much except that it is very different than *Marcelo*. I felt like I was being challenged when I was writing it. I have one more book under contract with Scholastic—but I have no idea what that will be about.

Right now though, I am just happy about *Marcelo*. Someone asked me what I hoped people will take out of the book and I’ve thought a lot about that question. I want *Marcelo* to be real for people and a source of comfort, too. He is an unusual character and having him be real for people is a tremendous source of joy for me.