

BOOK REVIEW

Undoubtedly Smart and Undeniably Brown: The ChicaNerd in Young Adult Literature

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ChicaNerds in Chicana Young Adult Literature: Brown and Nerdy.
By Cristina Herrera. New York City: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 176.
\$44.05 (e-book). \$160.00 (hardcover).

In *ChicaNerds in Chicana Young Adult Literature: Brown and Nerdy*, Cristina Herrera theorizes a new Chicana identity, the ChicaNerd, who relishes her intelligence and interest in traditionally “nerdy” subcultures and who utilizes this identity as an avenue for self-actualization. Central to *ChicaNerds in Chicana Young Adult Literature* is Herrera’s assertion that “[n]ormalizing Chicana intellectual curiosity and love of learning ... is a resistant strategy that attempts to undo the common script of adolescent Chicanas as ‘at risk’ and their families as uncaring about education” (3). Herrera’s reparative work in this monograph is twofold. On the one hand, she seeks to dispel the notion that Chicanas cannot be nerds; on the other, she challenges the typical coding of a nerd as male and white. By centering her analysis on fictional Chicanas who are intellectual and engaged, Herrera addresses a subsection of Chicana youth literature that is typically unaddressed. In the introduction to this volume, Herrera rightfully notes that scholarship on Chicana young adult literature is sparse (though, importantly, she does give a nod to key names in the field like “Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez, Marilisa Jiménez García, Larissa Mercado-López, Isabel Millán, Tiffany Ana López, R. Joseph Rodríguez, Phillip Serrato, Amy Cummins, and others” [13]). Oftentimes, children’s literature scholarship ignores the presence of Chicana novels and Chicana

studies typically does not stray into the territory of books for young readers. Thus scholarship on nerdiness in Chicana young adult literature is a field in which Herrera is both a pioneer and one of the only inhabitants. By eschewing typical tropes in Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x young adult literature like immigration or assimilation, Herrera's work in *ChicaNerds* is groundbreaking and immediately necessary.

Herrera establishes the theoretical framework of the ChicaNerd in the introduction and first chapter of this volume. While maintaining the scholarly rigor of her framework, Herrera also humanizes the ChicaNerd. Herrera tells us from the introduction that she is a ChicaNerd herself. Though she is clear that this is a work of scholarship, not autobiography or nonfiction (141), its practical implications cannot be denied. As a pedagogical tool, *ChicaNerds* functions as both an exemplar of engaging and accessible literary analysis and a resource to redress notions of Chicana students as unacademic. Herrera recalls her own experiences with discrimination in school settings, as well as those of her current peers, as an impetus to turn to literary representations of ChicaNerds. According to Herrera, the ChicaNerd identity is rooted "around the qualities of feminism, community support, and agency" (6). That is, the ChicaNerd utilizes her nerdiness as a means to assert herself. This power and agency is especially important for young women because they are often conscripted to the home. Herrera directly addresses domestic space in these novels by tying the ChicaNerd to her maternal influences. Herrera claims that she "[does] not necessarily prioritize this element in the ChicaNerds' development," but nevertheless, "all the texts [she explores] pay homage to the maternal relationship's significance to Chicana adolescent academic achievement and smartness" (49). Herrera explores a wide range of mothers in these novels, from those who hold tight to cultural reproductions of the patriarchy, to those who are themselves ChicaNerds. This emphasis on the maternal lineage of

nerdiness is one of the most compelling elements of this book. By exploring mother-daughter relationships, even if they seem to superficially bar the young Chicanas from fully actualizing their nerdiness, Herrera reinforces the ChicaNerd's distinctly female ethos.

Herrera's analytical chapters each focalize a single Chicana young adult novel. These texts range from well-known contemporary texts like *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika Sánchez and *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero to older texts like Jo Ann Yolanda Hernández's 1997 book *White Bread Competition*. Interestingly, Herrera also includes a novel by Ashely Hope Pérez, who is not a Chicana (though her protagonist is). Herrera spends a significant portion of her introduction explaining the rationale for the texts she has chosen and why Pérez's is included. I assert that this nuanced discussion provides transparency in scholarship and is an excellent practice to follow. Each of Herrera's case studies likewise provides the same honest and thoughtful care to the source material. The chapters are organized by case study and are relatively formulaic, with Herrera typically first establishing the young Chicana protagonist's individual nerd interest and identity, then discussing their maternal relationships and how mothers impact the ChicaNerd identity; finally Herrera typically closes each chapter reiterating that, despite many barriers (particularly those that are domestic/patriarchal and racist), the ChicaNerd persists and is able to cultivate agency and autonomy not in spite of her nerdiness, but through it.

Herrera's ultimate goal is to illuminate the ways these "novels insist that we expand and challenge existing ideologies around intellect and intelligence," and to insist that this new epistemology be grounded in being Chicana, hence Herrera's subtitle of *brown* and nerdy (140). It is vital to Herrera's theorization

and application of the ChicaNerd that both elements of this identity be equally represented. She explains, “I have coined the term ‘ChicaNerd’ to argue how these young women voice astute observations of their identities as nonwhite teenagers specifically through a lens of nerdiness” (4). Herrera does not just deftly balance the Chicana and nerd identities in this analysis, but she also provides a compelling and cogent marriage of the two. What’s more, Herrera bridges Chicana studies and children’s literature through the figure of the ChicaNerd. Though such an undertaking could easily become inaccessible, Herrera’s writing throughout is clear and precise and individual chapters could be easily atomized from the larger collection as is necessary for further scholarship or in the classroom. Ultimately, *ChicaNerds in Chicana Young Adult Literature: Brown and Nerdy* forges a new and necessary path in Chicana literary analysis.