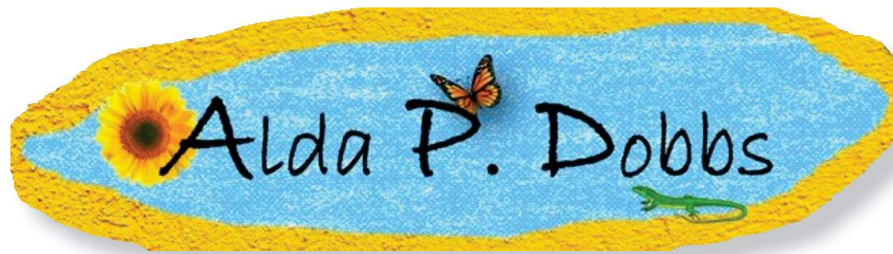


THE BAREFOOT DREAMS OF



interview by PJ McIlvaine

Working odd jobs might not be the best way to write. But it certainly worked for debut author Alda P. Dobbs, for those experiences, like a fine Mexican tequila, infused her characters, settings, and stories. But the greatest influence of all on her writing was her beloved great-grandmother, whose emotional tales of the struggles and hardships she endured during the complicated 1913 Mexican Revolution and later, as a refugee in America, fueled Dobb's middle grade historical novel *The Barefoot Dreams of Petra Luna* (Sourcebooks, 2021), initially written as an article for a children's magazine. Dobb's writings have won various awards including the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund Award, the Joan Lowry Nixon Award, and the Sustainable Arts Foundation Grant and she's written articles for *Highlights Children's Magazine*, *Guideposts*, and *La Prensa* newspaper. Born in a small town in northern Mexico, as a young child her family later moved to Texas. Dobbs is passionate about connecting children to their past, their communities, different cultures, and nature in her storytelling. She now makes her home in Houston with her husband and two children. When not writing, she enjoys walks, biking, dancing, reading, and sleep (don't we all), and her favorite movie is *Contact* (one of mine as well). Keep up with Alda's upcoming events and news at www.aldapdobbs.com



nut seller. How have all these odd jobs helped and informed you on your writing journey? What job did you like the least? The best? Is there a job you wish you would've tried and didn't?

ALDA P. DOBBS: You're right, I've had numerous jobs, but I truly believe each one has had an impact on my writing. Every person I've met, interacted with, or observed during those jobs has fueled my imagination for stories, characters, and settings then and now. I've liked all my jobs, though some were more challenging than others. I'd have to say sawing concrete cores outside in 100°F plus weather for hours was rough. However, each concrete slice took about 10 minutes to saw off, so there was plenty of time to let the imagination flow.

My favorite job was at the wax museum, right across from the Alamo, because I met so many people from all over the world. Many were extremely friendly and always happy to give me detailed answers to my "Where are you from?" questions. I learned foreign words and began a collection of coins from different countries, which led to an intense appetite to travel and discover cultures different from my own. Something I've always wanted to do is be a storm-chaser, like the professional ones on TV! I did a little storm-chasing on my own long, long ago, but it'd be really cool to have one of those big, heavy steel cars with all the gadgets.

PM: What were your writing influences growing up?

PJ McILVAINE: According to the biography at your website (www.aldapdobbs.com) you've had quite the background, everything from lab technician to a pea-

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Was reading a big part of your life as a child? What was your favorite book as a kid and why?

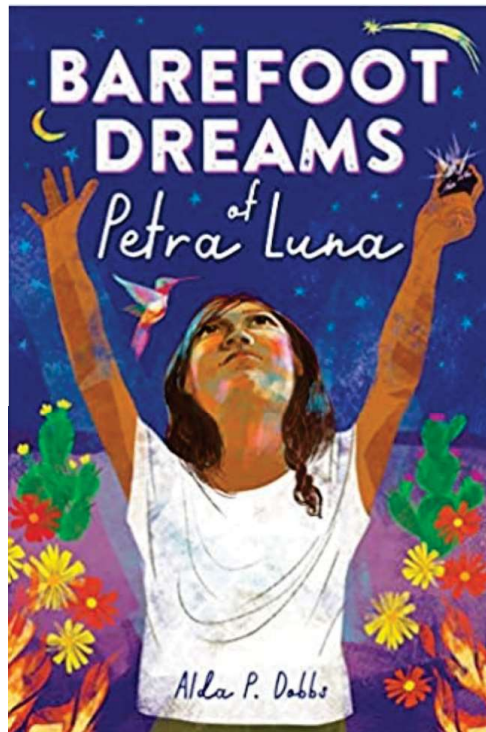
AD: As a child I never kept a journal or wrote much. English was my second language and it took me years to learn it. I believe that may be a reason why I was a reluctant reader growing up. I rebelled against English due to my frustrations from learning it. What influenced me as a child most were the storytellers in my family and being a constant observer of people and nature. The first book I ever read cover to cover (at age sixteen) and that became my favorite, was an old copy of J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* that I found riding on a city bus coming home from work. That book forever changed me. I was in awe because it was me and my angst on those pages. Even though I was a Mexican girl from south side San Antonio, struggling to help my single mother, and Holden was a yuppie white boy from the northeast, I was Holden Caulfield. After reading it, the urge to tell my own stories was ignited.

PM: What inspired you to write Petra? Would you call it a memoir of sorts or homage? Is this a book that you felt compelled to write, that only you could've written? Did you experience writer's block or doubts while writing it?

AD: Petra was inspired by experiences my great-grandmother endured during the Mexican Revolution. They all told of extraordinary events and unbelievable trials. This story is a homage to both her and my grandmother because of the adversities they faced and the sacrifices they made to bring opportunity to future generations. It's also a memoir of sorts because I believe every author pours a little of themselves into their stories. I was compelled to write *Barefoot Dreams of Petra Luna* because it's a history that is not taught in books nor schools. One of the major challenges in writing the book was weaving in facts of the Mexican Revolution, a very com-

plex war, in a way that readers, and especially kids, could understand and grasp its severity.

PM: How long did it take you to write the book? How many drafts? Did it involve a lot of research re your family and the location? Was it difficult to blend reality with fiction into a seamless narrative?



AD: After three years of writing and several rejections on another manuscript, I began writing magazine articles, including some for *Highlights for Children Magazine*. The idea of Petra Luna came to me in 2013. The story began as a children's magazine article and then morphed into a picture book. A year later, during a writing conference, an agent suggested I turn my picture book into a novel. It then took another five years to complete *Barefoot Dreams of Petra Luna* and part of its follow-up book. In all I'd say it took about 6 – 7 drafts. I researched many things, even the most mundane, and some never made it into the book but it allowed me to know the characters and setting intimately. I researched the Mexican Revolu-

tion, desert plants, curanderismo, Aztec mythology, Náhuatl, music from that era, etc. I also printed out segments of Sanborn maps and assembled them together like puzzle pieces to let me know what streets Petra Luna had walked on. When I cross-referenced the map with old photographs, I could see buildings she came across and even walked into. I kept a timeline handy that followed actual dates chronicled in newspapers to help weave in the fiction.

PM: Do you see yourself in the main character, Petra? When did you know the book was "ready"?

AD: I do, I think I'm as stubborn and determined as she is, maybe not as much at Petra's age but I am now. Then again, I believe characters always carry a little bit of their creators in them. I knew the book was "ready" when I began receiving positive feedback and requests at conference critique sessions,

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and also when I began winning awards for my unpublished work. I also had trusted professional readers who told me they thought it was ready.

PM: What was the publication process like? Did you have input into any illustrations?

AD: So far, it's been amazing and eye-opening. It's humbling to know how many people work on a book to get it "packaged", printed and up on shelves. I've had the pleasure to work with amazing teams at Sourcebooks: editorial, art, and marketing and I must say, I'm very lucky. I was asked for my input for the book cover and the artist, John Jay Cabuay, did a phenomenal job in capturing Petra's spirit and strength.

PM: What is your writing routine/process? Do you write every day or when inspiration strikes? If you weren't writing, what would you be doing?

AD: I've never really had a writing routine (after 10 years of writing, I'm still striving to find one!). After signing my publishing contract, I've had to be more conscientious about writing time since I now have real deadlines. I've always been a night owl and tend to be more creative at night, but as a mother of two young kids, I've had to adjust my times.

PM: Do you have an agent?

AD: Yes, it's Ammi-Joan Paquette with Erin Murphy Literary Agency. I met Joan during a writer's conference in 2016. She read my book's first chapter and asked me to submit whenever I felt ready. We kept in touch and I'm glad we did because it took another three years before I submitted to her. She signed me up within a month and my manuscript went on submission right as COVID19 surged in New York City. It was a scary, difficult time but Joan did a great job and we sold the book in our first round!

PM: What tips or tricks do you wish someone would've told you starting out?

AD: I wish I'd known how busy the journey became once the contract was signed. Time appears to have moved at warp speed ever since!

PM: What are your writing plans/goals going forward? Do you have a pet project?

AD: Currently, I'm working on the follow-up book to *Barefoot Dreams of Petra Luna*, which is slated for Fall 2022. I'm also working on a couple of picture books, a middle-grade contemporary, and even a YA historical...stay tuned!

PM: How has your writing fared during the pandemic?

AD: I've had my ups and downs, just like many writers out there. It was tough homeschooling and having a husband working in a different city, but the silver lining of the whole thing was observing the strength in families and communities during a world-wide trial.

PM: Where do you see yourself five years from now, writing wise?

AD: I see myself writing in different genres, from picture books to young adult and by then I hope to have learned new ways to help bring literacy to disadvantaged communities and also find ways to help young writers hone their craft.