Isabel Quintero [00:00:00]:

When you censor by omission, not even telling kids that these books exist, right, or this information is out there is that you're creating like a false world for them, a false reality where the only experiences that are valid are the ones that they get to see or that other people, grown ups tell them are real. The only feelings that are valid are you are the ones that the adults in their life tell them are valid.

Chisa Uyeki [00:00:30]:

Welcome to the Mount San Antonio College podcast. I'm Chisa Uyeki, a Mt. Sac professor and librarian, and I'm pleased to be your host for this season. Our goal is to keep you connected to our campus by bringing you the activities and events you may not have time to attend to share the interesting things our colleagues are creating and innovative ways they are supporting and connecting with Mount SAC students. Join me as we explore Mount SAc to bring attention to book banning as an equity issue. The Mount Sac Library and Mount Sac Equity center collaborated to host Isabel Quintero, the author of a girl in pieces Gabi has been challenged and banned from libraries in the United States. I'm Chisu Iweki, and on this episode of the Mount Sac podcast, you'll sit down with myself and Isabel Quintero for a conversation about Gabi and the power and healing effects of writing and sharing stories, particularly the stories that have been pushed to the periphery. Book challenges, at their best may seem to come from an attempt to protect, but they are actually an attempt to control, to control others reading and beyond that, others thoughts and knowledge. But the reality is not reading about subjects doesn't make them go away.

Chisa Uyeki [00:02:02]:

Without access to books that speak to the authentic reality of lives, which include addiction, homophobia, sexual assault, or the impact of unattainable, white centered standards on girls of color, we are still left with addiction, homophobia, sexual assault, and unattainable, white centered standards, but without the solace, solidarity, or opportunities to build self understanding that can be found between the covers of books. And we also miss out on the joy, empowerment, and stories of love and success. We encourage you to read books that have been challenged or banned. Both the library and the multicultural center have collections of banned books for you to explore. We hope you will delve into the lived experiences of people like and unlike yourself, and we celebrate and honor the lived experiences of persons whose stories have been hidden or pushed to the periphery. It is my distinct pleasure to have this opportunity to speak with Isabel Quintero, author of a Girl in Pieces. You are an award winning author, but you also have a lot in common with our listeners both students and professors, including having taught at a community college or multiple colleges, working as an elementary school, library tech and your inland empire. Born and raised, I am.

Isabel Quintero [00:03:35]:

Yes, I have been all those things.

Chisa Uyeki [00:03:38]:

So I wanted to start by asking you about when you were Gabi's age, what you were reading, but also, how did you find your favorite books?

Isabel Quintero [00:03:47]:

When I was Gabi's age, I was obsessed with John Steinbeck, and I loved John Steinbeck. I read of Meissen men in freshman year of high school, and his writing, the way he described California, just really pulled me in. And so I read a lot of John Steinbeck, but I also read a lot of horror, a lot of Stephen King and poetry. Maybe that's why I liked Steinbeck's writing so much, because there was so much imagery, there is so much, so much description, right? Like, east of Eden is one of my favorite books, and I haven't read it in a while, but I used to read it every year and it's very long and very descriptive, and I love that because it really puts me in the story. But my love of writing, of literature, came way before that. But in high school, it was sophomore year, we readdeze. Miss Agard had us read ee Cummings. Anyone lived in a pretty hot town.

Isabel Quintero [00:04:44]:

And if you read the book, there's a bit in there about that, right? About reading that poem and just realizing, oh, you can do more than just end a sentence with a period. You can do so much. And poetry can be this. What else can poetry be? What else can language be? And so I just started reading a lot of stuff like that. You know, currently I'm agnostic, but at that time I was very involved with my church youth group. And so I was reading the Bible a lot, but I was reading it through a lens of poetry and literature, which was not always received well in the church group, because that means I had a lot of questions.

Chisa Uyeki [00:05:24]:

We actually have a class here that is Bible as literature. Oh, yeah, right. It sounds interesting. So you mentioned a teacher just now. Was that a high school teacher?

Isabel Quintero [00:05:35]:

It was. It was. It was sophomore year, Miss Brenda Agarden. And she actually went to my book release for Gabi. I invited her. I didn't know if she'd remember me or not. You know, teachers, we have a lot of students and so we remember faces sometimes, but names is hard, you know, and it had been a while since I'd been in high school. So thousands of kids later, you know, I email her and I ask her.

Isabel Quintero [00:06:00]:

She's like, I remember brown hair, right? And she said, I remember, of course, and I told her, and I invited her, and she showed up. And so that was really special.

Chisa Uyeki [00:06:11]:

Is there some of her in Miss Abernard?

Isabel Quintero [00:06:14]:

Yes. So that is what Miss Agard looked like. You know, she had long gray hair. She wore flowy clothes. She smelled of cigarettes. She always had, like, a patch, like she was trying to quit smoking. But I remember some of the students saying they'd seen her smoking in the car, you know, during lunch and stuff. And so how much she loved poetry and literature and how much she wanted us to love it, but, like, presented it as something we could fall in love with.

Isabel Quintero [00:06:47]:

Right? Not like shoving it down our throat, like, this is what you must love. But seeing her, you know, standing on her desk, like, reading poetry or, you know, having us reenact antigone, that brought it home for me, at least when.

Chisa Uyeki [00:07:03]:

I was reading the book. And the character as an educator, I loved seeing an educator who was championing the love of stories. And I was really struck by this idea because I've been thinking so much about banned books week, how much more there is to access than just having it on the shelves. Right. And that in the story, this teacher gives the students confidence to engage with poetry, and that. That is such an important part of it. So I was really struck by that from the book.

Isabel Quintero [00:07:35]:

Oh, thank you. And there's also parts of my, you know, college professors in there. Doctor Gilco Gomez, Doctor Julie Pagle, who passed away a couple years ago with my poetry teacher. And just the way that I saw how educators could be those champions and how much it meant to me and to other students to have our professors show up at our readings, I would have probably written Gabi, but I don't know how much my belief in myself or how long it would have taken, or maybe even if I would have written it, if. In that first intro to poetry class with Julie Pagle, if she hadn't been so encouraging, you know, because I turned in some poems for workshop, and she said, oh, isabel, you've been in a lot of workshops. And I said, no, this is my first one. And she said, you need to be published. And I believed it.

Isabel Quintero [00:08:28]:

I believed it. And she was so encouraging and such a wonderful person.

Chisa Uyeki [00:08:33]:

That's so powerful. When you were writing it, were you imagining and intending for it to be read by high school students?

Isabel Quintero [00:08:40]:

Yeah, it was. It's a young adult book, so it was for young people. Gabi turned ten today, and so I was thinking a lot about Gabi and how Gabi really is. Like, the character is like Isabel if she had confidence at that age, like, if she didn't get scared of boys and run in the bathroom. Right. Like, it was with confidence and with a little bit more support, like, what could happen, right? And so I wanted to imagine that truth for young people. And so, yeah, it's always been, you know, the dedication is for young people, and I've always thought of young people when I wrote it.

Chisa Uyeki [00:09:19]:

So we were just at a smaller event, and one of the students mentioned how important the book was to them. And I'm curious about other readers you may have heard from and the kinds of things that you hear from them.

Isabel Quintero [00:09:34]:

I get a lot of different reactions, but I mostly get, this is, like, the first time I've seen myself in a book, or this book that young students said earlier was actually something that a young man who was in a book club that I spoke with a few months ago with an incarcerated youth, and it was all boys book club, and they read my book. So I was like, I don't know how this is gonna go, because it was all boys, and it was one of the best discussions about the book that I've had. They were in it. It resonated with them. And one of the boys said, you know, I have sisters, and this book really helps me understand, like, what they go through, because I see a lot of what's happening to Gabi, happening to my sisters, and I didn't know they could feel this way. And so that has been great. On the flip side, I've had young women come up to me and say, did what happened to Cindy really happen? And when I say, well, it did not happen to my best friend, but I do know young girls in high school who it happened to, or young or women my age who have told me about experiences. Cause that happened to me, and that is always hard.

Isabel Quintero [00:10:45]:

But it's also like, wow, they trusted me to share that with me, this thing that they saw themselves so much in my work that it was so real. I have people often, you know, like, my dad is an addict, or my mom's an alcoholic, or, you know, that's what I get most. And that is, I think, the first thing I was thinking about when I wrote this book. You know, addiction. Addiction is huge because it rules your life, right? And when you're a kid, more so because you have no say in where to go. And so when I talk to kids, I let them know, yeah, it sucks to have a parent who's an addict, like, it's not your fault. And when you graduate, you know, if you can go. You can go.

Isabel Quintero [00:11:29]:

You know, you got to take care of yourself, and you're not responsible for your parents. Those stand out at times that people reach out to me and let me know.

Chisa Uyeki [00:11:38]:

It really resonated with me, the complexity of Gabi's love for her father. I think we don't always see characters with that level of depth when we're looking at addiction and how conflicting it was for her. I think that that was portrayed in such a beautiful way. I read in your author's statement about that. There was a young woman who came to a reading and told you that your book had helped her heal. And I was wondering if writing helps you heal.

Isabel Quintero [00:12:08]:

Yeah. There is a quote that I'm butchering from Flannery O'Connor, and she says, I write so I can know what I'm thinking. Right. Something like that. Look it up, because that is definitely not it. Like, I feel like, yeah, that's. You know, I mentioned earlier that I analyze everything, right? That's just the way my brain works. I have to break things apart.

Isabel Quintero [00:12:30]:

My son's dad gets frustrated when we watch movies because he's like, just enjoy it. Just enjoy the movie. I can't. I have to. I can enjoy it. The part of me enjoying is, like, breaking it apart, I think with things. Like, with Gabi, I broke a lot of things apart to then try to see how they put them back together or how they were put together. Right.

Isabel Quintero [00:12:54]:

It gives me a view of, like, the stuff that is personal to me or real or autobiographical as much as that is, but also to organize, like, what I thought about those things, right. And it is healing. If you haven't read the book, they're the spoiler I'm about to give. So shut off. Shut this off if you don't want to hear the spoiler, but. So Gabi's dad dies, right? He dies of an overdose. And I always get the question, did your dad die? And he's thankfully still with us. But when I was a teenager and even into.

Isabel Quintero [00:13:29]:

Well into my adulthood, not until a couple years ago, and even now sometimes, right. My fear was that my dad was going to die because he'd be gone for days, and I would imagine him in a park somewhere, dead, a drug deal gone bad in his car, mugged. Just all these thoughts would come into my head. There were times when my mom would get scared and she would have me call hospitals to see if he was in the morgue. Like it was. That was my childhood, right. And so I don't know how to explain it. But having Gabi's dad die really helped with that fear a little bit because it happened, you know, and that was hard to write.

Isabel Quintero [00:14:13]:

That scene was hard to write. And I spoke with friends who had lost their parents and people who were willing to be vulnerable about those feelings with me, to write that section because I wanted it to be real, because there are real young people who lose their parents all the time to drugs, to addiction. Right. And so, like, after writing that, like, it just. I felt a little bit lighter in regards to that.

Chisa Uyeki [00:14:41]:

So.

Isabel Quintero [00:14:41]:

So we can help heal. It's not therapy, but it helps heal.

Chisa Uyeki [00:14:44]:

As you know, we've asked you to speak today as part of our band book month events. And one of the things that I keep thinking about and that we've been talking a lot about, and you mentioned, you know, in California, it's different than other places. I've been surprised that the numbers of titles banned are high here as well, in part because we're seeing, like, a coordinated effort towards banning books. When you're talking about, you know, all the issues that are talked about in the book, and then I think of high school students who don't have access to that. What can be gained? And, like, what? At the last event, we heard the student talk about how much they appreciated the book. I'm wondering sort of about your reaction as an author in thinking about the kids who don't have access.

Isabel Quintero [00:15:32]:

Makes me mad. It's frustrating because it's 2024. Right. We still hear these false narratives about, you don't want kids to learn about sex because then they're gonna want to have sex. You know, and that one really bugs me, because we have the lowest rates of teen pregnancy that we've had. Like, the highest rate surprise was boomers, like, 1960s and fifties with the highest rate of teen pregnancies ever. Right? And people don't want to see that because people were forced to get married back then. Right? So then they had a family.

Isabel Quintero [00:16:06]:

Right. But it makes me mad, because when you censor by omission, not even to telling kids that these books exist, right, or this information is out there, is that you're creating, like, a false world for them, a false reality, where the only experiences that are valid are the ones that they get to see or that other people, grownups tell them are real. The only feelings that are valid are the ones that the adults in their life tell them are valid. So if you're a queer student, a queer young person your whole life, you're being told that that's not real, that that's a sin. That. That's disgusting. And there's nothing around you that tells you otherwise. How sad.

Isabel Quintero [00:16:55]:

You know, how very, very sad. Because when I was in third grade, I realized that I didn't only like boys, and so I didn't have language for it. And there was a lot of homophobia around me. And I remember trying to tell my mom when I was in high school and telling her, like, what would you do if I like girls? And she was like, I don't know why you're even asking me that. I don't have that problem. Why are you even asking? Like, just completely, like. And I was like, oh, just wondering. Right? And that was that.

Isabel Quintero [00:17:28]:

But because my mom. This is a good example. My mom has been forced to be exposed to young people, not with me personally, but with me, her daughter, but I. With young people she's known that are, like, queer. Like, oh, so and so's daughter is now married to a woman. Like, her perspectives have changed a little bit, even though, you know, when my friend, like, the character Sebastian is based on one of my good friends, and when he told his mom that he was gay, like, she lost it. And I was telling my mom, and she was like, but that's her son. That's her son.

Isabel Quintero [00:18:05]:

Like, I wouldn't. Even if I don't like it, I don't like, I wouldn't kick my son out, you know? But I've seen, like, a shift in her and how she sees things, and that's access, right?

Chisa Uyeki [00:18:16]:

Yeah.

Isabel Quintero [00:18:16]:

And meeting people. And if we deprive young people of the world outside of their own, then we are really limiting their worldview and hurting the rest of us in the process.

Chisa Uyeki [00:18:31]:

Thank you for that. So this is my last question. One of the things that we talk a lot about as faculty and staff at Mount SAC and working with the equity center is knowing that one of the things that really impacts student success is a sense of belonging. And there have been lots of studies done that show that. And so in your book, I think you are able to really connect with people who are the age of many of our students. So I'm wondering if you have ideas for faculty in the classroom, which you've been faculty in the community college classroom as well, in terms of ways to connect with students and increase belongingness.

Isabel Quintero [00:19:14]:

I think just being willing to learn about students.

Chisa Uyeki [00:19:18]:

Right.

Isabel Quintero [00:19:18]:

And talking to them like people and not numbers. I was speaking with Doctor Lara, and she was saying how Doctor Lara allows people to be themselves in the office. And I was like, yeah, that's awesome, because as long as you get the work done right. And he said, yeah, that's exactly what it is. And I think if we apply that to students, that makes a big difference and that we are understanding. You know, a lot of students, I think, have an idea of what this has been my education, what my experience, what education is. A lot of students have a negative view on education, and they see it as like, oh, my God, I gotta get this rich class done, you know? But if we meet them where they're at and make it engaging and exciting and relevant, I think that makes a difference, you know? You know, using books like my book, contemporary books in the classroom, rather than just the classics, like, just like basic stuff. And it seems, from what I hear and see on your campus, that you all are doing a good job with that.

Chisa Uyeki [00:20:22]:

We're trying.

Isabel Quintero [00:20:22]:

Yeah, doing a good job with that. So that's great.

Chisa Uyeki [00:20:26]:

Thank you so much. It really has been so wonderful to speak with you.

Isabel Quintero [00:20:30]:

Oh, thank you. Thank you for having me.

Chisa Uyeki [00:20:32]:

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