

The BiblioFiles: Christina Diaz Gonzalez

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hi, this is Dr. Dana. My guest is Christina Diaz Gonzalez, and today we'll be talking about her book, *Moving Target*, and its recent sequel, *Return Fire*.

When we first meet Cassandra Arroyo, she is living in Rome, Italy, with her father, a nomadic art history professor. Her biggest problems are raising her grade in world history and not quite daring to skip class. However, her world is turned upside down when her normally placid father drags her to the car and, during the ensuing high speed chase through the city, confesses that Cassie is the target of a secret organization called the Hastati. Her father is wounded before he can explain any more, and Cassie must continue on her own.

She soon discovers that she is connected to the Spear of Destiny, an ancient object that can shape destiny when wielded by a marked descendant such as herself. What's more, very powerful and ruthless people want to make sure she never finds it. Cassie and her friends are quickly caught in a relentless, high stakes game of hide and seek as they try to unravel riddles and clues, some of which are hidden in ancient books and paintings, to find the spear and save Cassie's father.

Moving Target and *Return Fire* are fast paced, with plenty of twists and turns to keep you eagerly turning pages. Diaz Gonzalez keeps the action so realistic, it's like you're on the run with Cassie and her friends, narrowly making escapes and wondering whom you can really trust. There are also a whirlwind trip through the art, architecture, and culture of Italy, from the beautiful mountains, to hushed, underground chapels.

In addition to the *Moving Target* books, Diaz Gonzalez has written *A Thunderous Whisper*, a book set in Guernica during the Spanish Civil War and World War II, and *The Red Umbrella*, a story of a family being torn apart during the Cuban communist regime. The latter was named an American Library Association's Best Book for Young Adults. Christina Diaz Gonzalez, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Thank you so much for having me.

DR. DANA: Your first two books were historical novels. The *Moving Target* books have some history, but in some cases, it's going back to the Renaissance and way before. Also, they take place in contemporary times. How did these books come about?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Whenever I'm writing a book, I always like to find somewhat obscure little nuggets of information, pieces of history, that I may not have been aware of or that I believe my readership wouldn't be aware of. And usually, the stories take a life of their own

from those small moments. For *Moving Target* and *Return Fire*, it was all based on a trip I did to Italy. I was in Rome, and I happened to be on a tour for the Vatican.

And I learned something about the Spear of Destiny, that it was this object that had this legend surrounding it. And that little nugget of information stayed with me, just in the back of my head, marinating, I say, for a couple of years, until I came across another piece of information while I was writing one of my historical fiction novels, *A Thunderous Whisper*. And I discovered that, much like the Indiana Jones movies, Hitler would send out these Nazi expeditions to find biblical relics. And in the Indiana Jones movies, you had the Ark of the Covenant.

DR. DANA: Whoa, really? [LAUGHING] That's--

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: [LAUGHING] You had the Holy Grail. That's where *Raiders of the Lost Ark* comes from. But there was a third object that Hitler was obsessed with, which was the Spear of Destiny, that little story I had heard about when I was on that tour in Italy. And it just sparked an idea of, well, what if this spear really did have this legendary power? And what if it couldn't be wielded by just anyone? It had to be someone connected to that Roman soldier who first held it.

And the story started taking a life of its own, and I basically created my own legend around it. So it all began with a little nugget of information of historical fact that just blossomed into its own idea. So even though the story is fiction, and it's of my own creation, it always has that nugget of truth and history to it.

DR. DANA: So there really is a Spear of Destiny?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: So there really is a Spear of Destiny. When I was on the Vatican tour, they mentioned that it was in the vault underneath the Vatican. And it's a spear that's connected to the Roman soldier that is called Saint Longinus. And there's a huge statue inside the Vatican commemorating that soldier, who ended up converting and becoming one of the Catholic Church's early saints.

DR. DANA: Cassie's dad is an art history professor. And there are many references to clues based in old books and art. What was the research like?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Really, I went back to my actual visit to Rome, and then I just started looking into Roman architecture and trying to find connections, one leading to another. I might find something in one of the classic masterpieces by Caravaggio. And that would lead me to the story of, well, what was Caravaggio's life really like? And that might lead me to the Knights of Malta, which I had already referenced, and I could see a connection.

And it was almost like just working on a jigsaw puzzle, where one piece would somehow magically fit with a prior piece. And I could start seeing the picture develop. And by the time I had laid out the whole story, I could see how these individual pieces could be completely connected and really show a complete picture of what I was imagining.

DR. DANA: One of my favorite things about these books is that they're a mix of adventure and history, which means that you get to learn all sorts of cool things. For example, there are really mirror churches built underneath above-ground churches?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Yes. Those are the little secrets that I love finding. And I really do find a lot of those by just doing research and keeping myself open to the possibilities of my story being somewhat flexible and incorporating real things. So when I was writing the story for *Return Fire*, I knew that I wanted them to be going towards the Amalfi Coast. I had visited the Amalfi Coast and stayed there and fell in love with the region. But I needed some type of secret that even I was not aware of when I when I was there, because I love finding out secrets about locations.

And in my research, I discovered that one of the secrets of Naples was this mirror church, which I had never even heard of. I didn't know they existed. And thanks to the internet, I was able to get so much information and see so many pictures and videos of other people who had been there. So even though I personally hadn't been there, I could use the images and research of others to really develop that moment in the book. And just like that, with the keyhole at the Knights of Malta complex, that also exists within Rome. So it was fun to find these little nuggets of information that most people aren't aware of when they even visit these cities, and really incorporate them into the story.

DR. DANA: Is there really microscopic writing across the eyes of the Mona Lisa?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: That is what my research revealed. They found out that there was this tiny, tiny microscopic writing, although not everything has been worked out, but yes. So lots of unknown facts are out there.

DR. DANA: Cassie finds herself in the center of a powerful ancient society called the Hastati. The Hastati are extremely secretive and at times, ruthless. Along with the hidden clues, at times, it feels like a bit like a conspiracy theory. How did you start building the story behind the Hastati?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: I really wanted to have this secret organization where they are pretty ruthless, but I wanted to give them a deeper mission. While I was writing it, I kept trying to come from the point of view of the Hastati, of being entrusted with protecting the spear. And that is your life's goal is to protect the spear and make sure it never falls into the wrong hands.

And I kept imagining what would happen if that is your life's work, that is your mission, and you lose the spear. And now if everything you were about was protecting the spear, and you can no longer protect the spear, the second monumental decision would be, well then, we have to protect the world from the spear's power so that some unsavory character won't start destroying the future.

And so there would be two choices. Find the spear, and if you can't, then the radical idea of destroy and eliminate anyone who could use it. And so that's where the Hastati find themselves, having to protect the world by making sure no one can use the spear if it's found. And

unfortunately, there are casualties and innocent bystanders to their radical idea, which is putting Cassie in their crosshairs. So that's where my idea for the Hastati came from, an organization that intends to do good, but must do some evil in order to complete their mission.

DR. DANA: I feel the first part of the story is reserved for discovery and pursuit. We know about the spear and what it can do. But it's not until Cassie finally finds it, that she has her first experience with it. And it infuses the story line with something that's almost supernatural. Would you be willing to read this scene for us?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Oh, I would love to.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce the passage by saying that, after quite a few challenges, Cassie finally unravels the final clue and finds out where the spear is hidden. It's also important to note that Cassie has been instructed not to touch the spear.

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Absolutely. "The path to the garden was lit by small lamps, but otherwise the area was shrouded in darkness, with tall cypress trees providing cover from any prying eyes. The area had neatly trimmed hedges and a concrete bench at the far end that overlooked the city of Rome down below. I thought about the poem.

*In the garden of my heart
A dagger found its mark
Slicing through the cross's core
Casting me to the dark*

The dagger in the second line of the poem was probably code for the spear, but what did it mean to be slicing the cross's core?

'What cross?' I whispered, spinning around and not seeing any crosses in the garden. I gazed out past the rooftops of Rome. Even at night, the city lights showed several churches that had domes or bell towers with crosses perched on top. Could the poem be sending me to one of them?

My heart fell. There was no way I'd find the spear in time to change my father's fate if I had to go to all those churches.

No, there *had* to be another answer.

I stood on top of the bench to see farther out. I had to find another clue. A sign pointing me in the right direction.

But there was nothing.

Maybe if Asher and Simone helped. As I was about to jump off the bench, I noticed the pattern of the hedges in the garden. When looking at it from above, the shrubs formed a perfect Maltese Cross, and in the center, where the four wedges met, was a stepping-stone much darker than all the others.

The cross's core cast in the dark. That was it. The spear had to be buried there!

I jumped off the bench and cut through the hedge to get to the center. Dropping to the ground, I grasped the edges of the flat stone and pushed it to the side.

I dug down into the moist soil. About four inches down, a piece of blue velvet poked out from the ground.

It was here! I'd really found it!

Clawing at the ground faster, I uncovered a small bundle of velvet that had been lying only inches beneath where people walked every day. Lifting it out of the ground, I unwrapped the cloth to reveal a somewhat tarnished, ordinary-looking spearhead.

I remembered Asher's warning about touching the spear. I'd promised not to do it, but this was an emergency. The last thing I wanted to do was become bound to it for life, but if this was the only way to save my dad, I'd do it.

My hands trembled.

No one had to know that I'd used the spear. If it worked, I promised myself, I'd never use it again.

'Get it together, Cassie,' I whispered. 'You were born to do this.'

There were no instructions on how to make it work or how to choose a different destiny; I just had to go with my gut and hope for the best.

I took a deep breath and wrapped my dirty fingers tightly around the spear. Its metal was cool to the touch. *Please, I prayed, let this work.*

I waited, but nothing happened. Maybe there was too much dirt for it to work. I ran to a nearby fountain and rinsed my hands and the spear, then wiped it dry with my shirt.

I tried again, rubbing it as if it were Aladdin's lamp, wishing for my dad to be healthy.

Still, nothing happened.

A sinking feeling formed in the middle of my chest. Brother Gregorio had said that only one person could be bound at any given time—and they'd been using Tobias to trap the power. Maybe he still had it. Or maybe I wasn't who everyone thought I was. Either way, it meant that I wasn't going to save my dad.

It was over. I had failed.

I slumped to the ground... defeated. I tried so hard to be brave, but now I could feel tears starting to run down my face.

Opening my messenger bag, I shoved the spear inside. Just as I was about to drop it in, I felt a slight tingle, like a small current, hit my fingertips. At first I thought it was my cell phone, but I didn't have one with me. My heart raced. I clasped the spear harder, afraid to let go.

There was a blinding light, like I had stared into the sun. I wanted to cover my eyes, but I couldn't move. It was as if I had been removed from my body, so I was no longer sitting next to the fountain or in the compound or anywhere in Rome. I was somewhere else, in neither darkness nor light, but surrounding me there was a vast stretch of nothingness. It was the strangest sensation. It felt like there were limitless possibilities, only I couldn't see any of them.

Then, like a vacuum sucking me down into existence, I was back inside my body. My eyes were closed, and my breathing had slowed down. The blood coursing through my veins made an incredibly loud whooshing noise in my ears.

Faces and images flew all around me.

Focus, I told myself. You need to find your father."

DR. DANA: When she touched the spear, I was expecting fireworks. Instead, it doesn't work for her immediately. Why did you decide to write the scene that way?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: I wanted to have her feel that sense of failure of everything being lost. Because many times, we put all our energies into one thing, and it doesn't quite work out for us, at least not in the beginning. And that's the emotion that Cassie was really feeling at that moment, that she thought all her answers would be right there for the taking. And it doesn't work.

And it doesn't happen to her right away, because someone else has that power. And it's not until she is right at the moment where she feels all is lost, that there's that glimmer of hope. So I enjoy taking the reader along with my character on that journey.

DR. DANA: Which main character did you develop first, Cassie, Simone, or Asher?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Definitely Cassie. Cassie was the character that really popped into my head almost fully formed, as most of my characters do, and pretty much insisted that she had a story to tell, a pretty incredible story that not many people would believe, and this is what happened to me. So that's usually how I feel that characters come to me, that they already experienced their story, and they want to share it with me for me to share it then with the world.

So Cassie was the first character that really was the one that became fully developed. And then Simone blossomed from Cassie. And Asher came into play really as I started writing the story. I did not know Asher until I began to sit down, write the story. I knew certain key elements of the story, but it wasn't until I started writing, that Asher really came into existence.

DR. DANA: I love the interaction between the three of them. [LAUGHING]

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Yeah, it is fun. And it's nice to see their different personalities and how they each approach a situation very differently.

DR. DANA: The books are full of action-- car chases, narrow escapes, helicopters, explosions. What is it like for you to write action sequences? Are they very technical?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: It's really fun. I love writing action sequences. It's one of my really favorite things to do. And it's probably because I love action adventure stories and movies and TV shows. And it's technical in the sense that I try to make sure that the images I'm seeing in my head come across on the page. And it's as fast paced as what I envision. That's the technical aspect of it. But really, it's something of just trying to take the reader into my own imagination.

DR. DANA: What are you working on now?

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Oh, I am actually working on more action adventure. I am slated to write one of Spirit Animals books. The Spirit Animal books are—each book is written by a different author, although it's the same four main characters and it's a continuing adventure. So I will be writing book number seven in The Fall of the Beast spin-off series of the Spirit Animals. So I'm actively working on that, and very excited to be doing such a high-stakes action adventure novel, as well as I'm writing a graphic novel. So that's putting me into a different genre, which I'm very excited about as well.

DR. DANA: Christina Diaz Gonzales, thank you so much for joining us on the BiblioFiles today.

CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ: Thank you so much for having me.

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