

S4 — Episode 1 — The Street Belongs to Us

Goldstein, Tara and Friesen, Doug (Producers). (2021, Sept 1). [Audio podcast].

Tara talks to Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, at the Faculty of Education, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.

Tara: Hello, and welcome to Season Four of Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada, the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations. Toronto is covered by Treaty 13, signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands. In Toronto, Ontario, and Canada, we are all Treaty people who need to work towards responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action. Today, Karleen Pendleton Jiménez is here to talk about her new intersectional gender diversity middle grade book *The Street Belongs to Us*. *The Globe and Mail*, a top newspaper here in Toronto, ranked it the number one kids book to come out in the Spring of 2021. Here's what they said: "A powerful middle grade novel that not only explores Mexican American identity, but movingly explores the complications of family relationships, friendships, and gender identity." Karleen! Welcome to Gender Sexuality School. We're so happy to have you here.

Karleen: Thanks so much, Tara. I'm really happy to be here. And I love that you're featuring this book on your program.

Tara: You had a very successful book launch. And we had a chance to hear you talk a little bit about the book here. But for our listeners who haven't heard anything about the book yet, can you tell us a little bit about *The Street Belongs to Us*? What is it about?

Karleen: A, it's about a lot of different things. But let me just tell you, like, the way the book started, was this vision I had of, and I didn't have any plot or anything, I just had this image. And so, when I was a kid, the street where I lived, or the street where I lived, was on a bend. And so, cars went really fast, you know, and sometimes you got hit, sometimes your animals got hit, and sometimes the buildings got hit. Anyway, it was kind of dangerous, and we had to, like, be really careful. But then this one summer, they were going to put sidewalks in. And so, they tore up the street. And the tearing up was actually more exciting than the sidewalks, but anyway. And that summer, when it was torn up, none of the cars could come. And it was just like this big muddy wonderland, you know, and we loved it, we had so much fun. And it was like that feeling of taking over the street, which now I guess, you know, I get excited about during Pride or, you know, like protests, you're like, yes, we've taken it over, there's something powerful about that feeling. And you had that mixed in with, like, the kids were the ones that had the power. And, and then it was just fun, like, because you could do all these adventures. I thought, oh, I want to— I want to write a kid's book about that time. And so that was the idea. But it wasn't much of a plot. So, it actually took me, like, I don't know, like over a decade, to come up with a plot that went along with that. And the other pieces I wanted to get in were like my, you know, my life and my childhood was very much like people not being able to tell whether I was a boy or a girl and the, I don't know, at that time, you know, that being really awkward or uncomfortable or upset or— not with my friends, but the adults more— and I'd written a children's book, a picture book, like, 20 years ago now. And I thought, Well,

what about that age? Like there's nothing at the kind of middle grade level that I knew about. I mean, I'm sure there are a few. But at the time, I thought, oh, you know what? Why don't I try writing a book for that age? You know, and maybe at that time, my step kids were that age, and now my own kid is that age. So, I had kids to like, interact with a lot and, you know, new kind of, you know, what, I don't know, knew a bit about that sensibility. I mean, I think most of it still draws on my own experience of feeling that age, but it really helps to have a kid there. So, I wanted to write about that experience of gender diversity. And I don't know, and also very much about— it's kind of an ode to my grandma, who came from Mexico and just was a nonstop storyteller. And so, I grew up like that, right, with her just telling stories all the time. And the rest of us in the family would— even now if we see each other, "Okay. But then this happened!" We're still recounting her stories and working on them, you know, and feeling them. And so, I just thought I want to put her with us in our house. And the other thing with her was she was dealing with Alzheimer's or dementia. And so she was, she was always forgetting. And I thought, you know, but that, like, taught me a lot as a kid growing up, you know, like that kind of patience. And I don't know, not just patience, but like, knowing the world's like that, that the story comes over and over again, and that it's not, you know, there's nothing certain, right, like in her world, things could be anything. And they were usually from 80 years ago. So that's a kind of learning that the kid does growing up with that. There's a lot of things. I feel like, you know, another book will be more about my mom, this one is— my mom is there, but she's, you know, very busy. Yeah, she's very busy, which I think is accurate. But, you know, that doesn't do her justice. It's, it's more about the kid and the grandma. I will say it, you know, it's the novels. Like, a lot of the relationships are very autobiographical, and some of the circumstances, but a lot of the plot is created. So, oh, and also, I should say, it's, the other thing that I thought of right from the beginning, was that it had to be on that street. And it had to be between two kids and their love and friendship for each other. Right. And when I was a kid, like, I, all my friends were boys, and I feel like, yeah, we were just like, boys, and we all like, just love each other deeply, you know, almost more so than after puberty, like you could just have, like, boy love for each other, you know? So, I wanted to try to capture that kind of, like, intense love between boys, I guess, you know, in an ode to, not ode, but like, a riff? I don't know, off of Stand By Me. Like, when I saw that movie, I was like, yes, that's, that's right. That was like such a passionate love between boys. And I totally got that. And I mean, I know some people watching, they're not that— they don't like that movie that much. But when I saw it, I was like, yes, that— I really want to write my own kind of, you know, boy love book. So that's, that's in there, too. That's probably the main thrust of the book. Anyway.

Tara: When I was reading the book, I was particularly struck by the relationship between the grandma and your protagonist, because I think there are lots of kids who are living with grandmas or parents, even, you know, who are experiencing dementia. And it's really beautiful the way that, you know, the grandchild takes in the stories and finds a way to integrate the grandma's stories into the present moment. Right. And one of the things that happens for the reader is you get a lot of a Mexican American history via the grandmother's stories, which is a whole other layer and joy of reading the book. Right. So, I think the work you did around the relationships between all of the characters, but particularly between grandchild and grandmom, was, was, was superb. I really enjoyed that.

Karleen: Thanks. You know, I'll just make a note to that too, like, where I grew up, it was about 70% Mexican. And like maybe 20% white and maybe 10% Asian, you know, anyway, and it was a classic thing of, you know, most of the teachers in the school were white. And we never read anything about Chicano history, like, or Mexican American or Mexico, you know, nothing like, except for like, you did a weird dance on the, you know, Cinco de Mayo, which isn't even a Mexican holiday, it's only the holiday of a certain town. So anyway, you know that, and then I went— I went to university, I majored in Chicano studies. So certainly, you see the Chicano studies person in this book. I was so you know, that's, that was one of the things that, you know, kind of brought me to curricular consciousness, political consciousness of, what does it mean to be from a place where it's never written about, the place and also the people, and like, and what, you know, how does that harm us? And not only for me, but you know, actually, I mean, maybe another book, but especially for my mom, like being like, completely cut out of that. And then getting, getting to university and realizing like these massive, you know, events from the Chicano movement happened, like right near where I grew up, like, right about the time of my birth, and nobody, you know, like, it was never mentioned. I mean, neither was Malcolm X. I remember getting to university and seeing a picture of a guy. And I, who is that? Who is that person? I think more like, with the biopics we get, we have more maybe, you know, history almost, even if it's not the best history, than when we were kids, because they just, that was just not a part of any of it. So.

Tara: That was part of our schooling. So, related to that Karleen, who do you hope will read this book, and why do you hope they'll read it?

Karleen: Who do I hope will read it? I hope everybody will read it! I have a few, I have a few groups, I guess I'm thinking of. Right now, I see with my kid, and, you know, like the TikTok community, the YouTube community, everybody that I learned about, like, I feel like— and I'm not saying that homophobia and transphobia are not still there, they are totally there. But what I don't think I've ever seen before, is like such a massive, like, push by kids to, like, make gender more flex— flexible, and more like, not just flexible, but accepting gender diversity, you know, and my kid is all the time telling me all the different genders there are now, you know, you know, like, she told me the other day or you know, like, I don't know, like a month ago, she goes, Oh, okay. So, um, you know, you know, I say, "I'm butch". And she'll be like, "Oh, well, that's, that's not an identity. That's a presentation." I said, "No, it's, it's an identity, it's an identity." And then she says, "Oh, okay." And then she says, "What is that?" I said, for me, it's like feeling like a man and a woman together, like ever, you know, and then a boy and a girl, and as a kid, like, that was always -- it to me, it was very, when I learned the word trans. I'm like, "Yes, that's totally trans." And, and then she goes, "Oh, no, that's non-binary." And I was like, "No, no, because I feel, I don't feel like neither. I feel like both!" And she goes, "Oh, well, you're bigender, then", you know, and I did not teach her any of these words! She's teaching me the words. And there's a flag for every one of them, you know, and she shows me the flags, too. And I was like, wow. And I think, okay, that's my family. But it's not just my family, because all of our friends are doing it too, and from conservative families. And there, they've got like, 50 new words for gender. And it's so exciting and interesting!

Tara: Learning amongst themselves, right?

Karleen: Yeah, it's a, I think it's huge on TikTok, and I think YouTube too. And I thought, oh, my gosh, they're really shaking things up. And, and also, they're okay with them changing: "That's what I am right now. We'll see you next week." You know, it's not like a humiliating stage. It's like, no, I'm trying this out. And I'm, you know, I'm trying these pronouns. I'm trying— anyway, I thought, oh, my gosh, this is amazing. Like, I totally want to be in the middle of their conversation, you know, like to add my voice and, and, you know, like, I know, that when I was coming out, like, whenever I, I mean, like, like, one of the most profound books at the time was Leslie Feinberg's *So Much Blues*, and to find out there was all this history to this life was so important to me, like it, it may, like it was like, Leslie Feinberg had a huge influence on me, you know, and my thinking and, and I thought, Oh, well, you know, like, maybe I could be part of their conversation and show them an 80s version of it. And maybe it'll be meaningful to them, like, the historical stuff was to me, not to mention that, you know, I don't know if you noticed, but the 80s are totally back. Yeah. And she, you know, made me watch *Stranger Things*. So, we're like, hey, why not? You know, like, and even I had vaguer 80s things, but I made them like, way more explicit as a publisher. So yeah, you know, and aren't you glad? Because people really want to hear about that right now. The kids are really into it. So even last night, I'm like, kid goes, "There are these things called leg warmers, can you find those for me?" I know about them. I do know, and I will find them. I really want to be with the kids. The other group of kids that I really want to connect with are the Chicanitos. Like young Mexican Americans, because, again, like I grew up without any of that literature, and I just want to make a good book and, you know, that that people could have in the schools that is like about being a Mexican American kid, or in this case, like a mixed-race Mexican American kid, because there's a lot of those kids too that are like being told, you're not really one thing or the other, you're not, you know, you don't really count because you don't really look— you don't, you know, like I want to you know, give a place for all of those kids too, right? And then to be honest, like, I think it's, you know, very readable for adults. And so, I hope adults will pick it up, like I know, they've really, you know, picked up YA as an adult genre, too. So, you know, this is a little bit younger, but I don't know, from all reports people really enjoy reading it. So, you know, the big part is the, the adventure, you know, and so I hope, you know, like, what comes across is the adventure and the fun and the love and the relationships. And so, you know, like, one person told me, he said, he goes, "Your book is like, the opposite of like, the kid adventure book," and I go, "What do you mean, you know?" And he goes, "Well, I mean, it's not in that it has adventure and buried, you know, treasures and you know, mysteries. That's all the same. The thing that you flip over," which, of course, I'm doing this all unconsciously is, he goes, "most books are about the kids trying to show how they become more independent. And like, busted out in their independence. And your book is all about, how can I kind of connect more deeply in my relationships with my family? And everybody around?" And I was like, oh!!

Tara: That sure makes that happen. You don't have to, yeah. That's, that's, that's really interesting.

Karleen: I know, I was like, whoa.

Tara: That's a really interesting comment. Back to the point about adults enjoying it. Certainly, all of the adults at the book launch enjoyed it, I enjoyed it. And I'm thinking of all the teachers who begin to do a little bit of work around gender and sexuality inclusion in their curriculum. And they too need a story

that will help them connect to the kids who are doing such sophisticated work on TikTok, for example. Lots of the families in the LGBTQ Families Speak out project, talked about how schools have to catch up, you know, popular culture, and this generation of kids and families are living lives that are just so different than the lives schools think most people live. And I really do see, for teachers, this is a great book to introduce them to the gender conversations their students are having. And, and it's, it's elementary, as well as middle school, as well as secondary school teachers. So not only is it a compelling story for adults too, because of the relationships, which we've talked about, but because if you haven't done a lot of work around gender and sexuality before, because just like you said, it wasn't part of our education, I think the book kind of will help you transition into some of the conversations that the kids are having. Which is fantastic.

Karleen: Yeah, hopefully, you know, like, because it's the 80s too, you know, a lot of adults will, will be like, oh, well, you know, I remember that! You know, they're having the fun, at the same time that kids are having the fun, you know, because it's a kid adventure story. Right. So, you know, I mean, the other piece, I would say is that I think it's really also an ode to like, relationships with the land and loving the land. And it wasn't, it wasn't until and I know, they're just running around and shooting water, and they, you know, they probably shouldn't be shooting water in California. But anyway, because there's not a lot of water, but this was a few years ago. Anyway, my point is that they're really developing a love or this closeness with the land and— and I think questioning, like, why did they take the land and put concrete all over everything, including the streams, you know, and I, that, to me, is a very, and, like, First Nation, Indigenous Canadian sensibility that I did not have in LA at all, you know, and it's, so it's, it's another one of the Canadian books that's written via a— written about another country from Canada. And I think it really has, you know, like... Yeah, yeah, you know, it's, it's a Canadian sensibility, and, like, learning that I couldn't, that I had, because I came here, you know, because of the Indigenous scholars I've worked with. And even learning here when I first got here in the Native Centre, that they had buried all the rivers here and that's what made me, that was the first time I went, oh, what did I grow up next to you know, there's this wash thing, this like, concrete canal. Anyway, so it's got a hopefully, you know, like, that would be part of it too. Like it can be taught, you know, as an environmental book as well in like, how do you develop kind of like, kids', like, loving relationships with the land.

Tara: Which is part of being, learning that is part of being Treaty people, which is how we opened up the interview. Karleen, would you be willing to read an excerpt of the book out loud for us? And I think our listeners would love to hear you read.

Karleen: Sure. Let's see. Do you have— do you— I could read about the gender stuff? Or I could read about the Chicano stuff, you just said for a few minutes? Do you have any preference?

Tara: Why don't you read a little bit of both; read us an excerpt that focuses on gender. And then read us another one that focuses on the Mexican identity because you talk about the book as an intersectional book, and that would be wonderful to hear both excerpts.

Karleen: I would love to. Okay, here we go. So, the protagonist, Alex, and her best friend Wolf are walking and Alex slips into the water and her shirt gets all wet. And she's just in the middle of puberty. So, she looks down and, uh oh, okay. So, so Okay, so her friend Wolf is laughing. He says, "You should have seen yourself full-fledged belly flop!" He giggles some more. I laugh with him for a bit. Then I look down and see my left nipple poking up a little and my right nipple puffing way out under my wet shirt. "Oh, no!" I exclaim and cover my chest quickly with my arms. Wolf pulls back, startled. "What's wrong?" My face goes red. "Nothing." "No, something's wrong," he says. "It's embarrassing," I answer. "More embarrassing than your belly flop?!" he asks incredulously. "Yeah," I answer with certainty. "Wow. Well, tell me anyway." "No way." "Look, you should tell me," he insists. "Why?" "Let's see," he says, holding up his fingers to count. "Number one, I'm your best friend. Number two, I just told you I threw the book at the principal. Number three, it's dark. And it's easier to tell things in the dark." "Okay, I see. But don't laugh." "Not a chance." I lower my arms and look down at my swollen chest. "What?" "Look at them," I say. "Look at what?" "Oh, come on. Can't you see how big my chest has gotten?" "Oh, wow. I hadn't noticed," he says, staring more closely at me. "I can see that one," He points at the right nipple. "Geez. Don't point!" "Oh, sorry," he says, lowering his finger. "How come one's bigger than the other?" "I don't know!!" "I didn't mean to make you mad," he says. "I was just curious." "I know. It's okay," I say, "I wish I knew more about what's happening to me." "Well, it's probably fine," he says, "they probably just grow when they're ready. I was reading about orangutan development during lactation. And they say that—" "I'm not an orangutan, Wolf!" "Yeah, I know. But they're primates like us. And there might be some facts that are helpful." He stops talking when he sees I have my hands over my face. "Wolf, I don't know what I am. If I'm girl or a boy, if I'll be a woman or a man or what." "So?" "Well, these are coming!" I point to my chest. "And then I won't be able to hide them. And I'll have to be a woman." "That doesn't make sense," he says, "we're animals. Some animals are boys or girls, and some aren't. And some change. It's not such a big deal. Like seahorses, when they want to have babies—" "Wolf! It might not be a big deal to animals, but it's a big deal to people." "Oh, yeah, you could be right," he nods. "What am I going to do?" I ask. "I'm not very good with people. So, I don't know what to say about them." He pauses to consider the situation. But I don't think a chest growing big automatically makes you a woman. It must be up to you. You decide to be a guy, then your chest, whatever it looks like, will be a guy's chest because it's yours. And if you decide to be a woman, logically, it's the opposite." "Really?" "I think so," he says. "Scientifically, it would be impossible for someone outside of your body to know what your body feels like inside. You're the only one that would have access to that data. I can find a library in Long Beach and try to get some more material on it though." "Oh yeah. I'd really like that," I say, standing up and brushing bits of leaves and dirt off my pants. Anyway, that's it, that's a piece about gender and also like, you know, just I love Wolf's character because I mean, the both of them, they just accept each other. You know, on their terms, right. Like, a lot of other kids didn't, you know, get along with Wolf and Wolf didn't, wasn't very good at interacting with people. But it just doesn't occur to Alex to be a problem. And Alex's gender stuff doesn't occur to him to be a problem. They're like, well, I don't know, you know, they're just very, like, chill, like, so. Anyway. And yeah, and that also, I think, came about like that, that took a lot of learning that, that took a lot of learning to get to that point to in my own kind of gender experience of going, like, "Hey, your body, like whatever you decide, that is gonna be it, you know, even if other people you know, can't deal with that". I'm not saying— I'm not trying to be naive, but in a sense, their naivety like lets them go there to like a much more radical and accepting place then, you know,

when you when you are thinking about everybody's point. Okay, and then here's a, here's a little excerpt between a protagonist and her, her Nana, her grandma. So often she's telling stories about the Mexican Revolution, but in this moment, because of a question Alex is asked, she starts to tell her about the Chicano movement, which if you don't know about Chicanos, it's, it's kind of a civil rights movement. Or not kind of. It was a civil rights movement that came alongside the Black civil rights movement. And so that term, Chicano, is about like Mexican Americans who have leftist politics, and, and especially anybody that came from that movement, or were the students of people from that movement, which is my case, like a lot of my teachers and professors came from the Chicano movement. "What's the Chicano movement?" I ask. "Oh, oh, I forgot to tell you about the Chicano movement, that's terrible. I'm forgetting too many things, mija." "Don't worry, Nana," I reached to hold her hand. "I remember most of your stories. So that means we've got them safe in both of our heads." She smiles. "You're a good kid." I get embarrassed when grownups compliment me. So, I changed the subject as fast as possible. "What about the Chicano movement Nana?" "Oh, yeah," she takes a sip of her tea, turns down the volume on the TV, and begins. "Mija. Way back in the 1840s when the gringos stole a bunch of Mexico, they made a whole lot of promises to us. They said we would keep our liberty and property rights, but they didn't follow their own rules." "Like how?" "You know Dodger Stadium, right?" "Yeah, of course," I answer. "I love Dodger Stadium." "Well, that used to be Chavez ravine, which was stolen from Mexican Americans." She shakes her head sadly. "Your grandpa was so mad about that he resigned from his job with the city." "Wow," I say. "I didn't know that." "And Rosemead is full of Mexican kids. But how much Spanish have you learned at your school so far?" She asks. "None, Nana." I admit, "I only learned a few words from you." "We had a right to our language, but they don't give us a chance to learn it." She sounds angry now. "That's true." I feel sheepish. I wish I knew Spanish better so my Nana wouldn't have to be so upset. She resumed. "We started getting really mad that the gringos weren't keeping their promises. And also, that they could be really mean to us saying racist words and beating us up sometimes, kicking us out of school, not paying us enough money at work, deporting us. A thousand kinds of awful things." I lower my head. I feel kind of ashamed of the story she's telling. Even though I'm part Mexican. I'm also quite a bit American. It's like one part of my body was mean to the other. She sees my head down and says, "Don't worry, Mija. We're just getting to the good stuff." "There's good stuff?" I asked. "About 20 years ago, a whole bunch of Mexican Americans started fighting back, marching on the streets, striking in the fields and demanding better schools and jobs and all the rights we deserve. Some of the ones who were fighting for justice, even wore uniforms and called themselves the Brown Berets. And East LA, they put together free health clinics for Chicanos. And one of the leaders, Gloria Arellanes, graduated from Almani High." "Did anyone from Rosemead ever do anything?" "Oh, si," my Nana nods proudly. "Vikki Carr, the smoothest Chicano voice on the radio. She's ours."

Tara: Karleen, that was wonderful. Thank you so much. And it's so great to hear you read and bring the relationship between Alex and Nana alive. Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, thanks so much for joining us today. I loved hearing you speak about *The Street Belongs to Us*. And I loved hearing you read from the book. Dr. Karleen Pendleton Jiménez is the author of *Are You a Boy or a Girl?* and *How to Get a Girl Pregnant: Tomboys and Other Gender Heroes* and numerous short stories and essays. She wrote the award-winning animated film *Tomboy*, which was a film that connected to the children's book *Are You a Boy or a Girl?*, and has been recognized by the American Library Association and the Vice Versa Awards

for Excellence in the Gay and Lesbian Press. Karleen teaches Education, Gender and Social Justice at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. Raised in Los Angeles, she lives in Toronto with her partner and daughter. All right, that's our podcast for today. You can find this podcast at WWW.gendersexualitieschool.ca. This episode was produced with the support of the New College Initiative Fund and from Doug Friesen, who is a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Thanks to musician Kate Reid, sound engineer Lisa Patterson and musician Doug Freisen for creating the music that opens and closes the show. I'm Tara Goldstein. All the best.