



# BALLAD & DAGGER

AN OUTLAW SAINTS NOVEL

by *New York Times* best-selling author

DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Disney·HYPERION

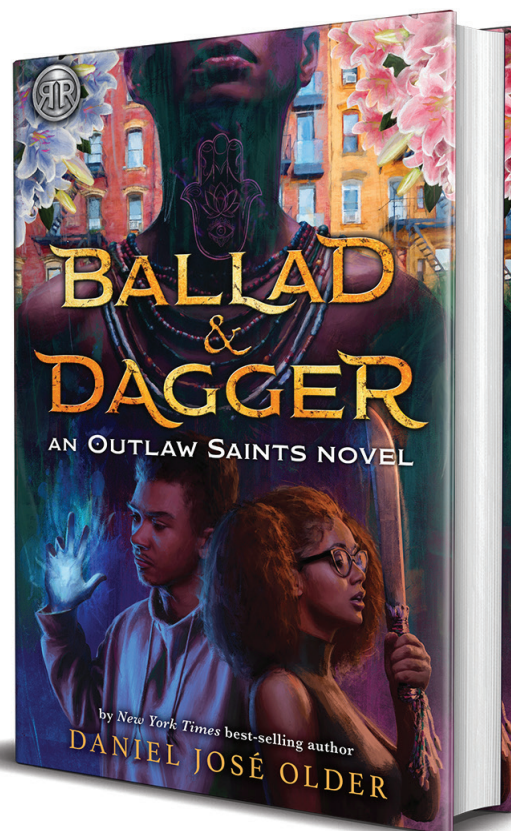


## About the Book

Almost sixteen years ago, Mateo Matisse's island homeland disappeared into the sea. Weary and hopeless, the survivors of San Madrigal's sinking escaped to New York. While the rest of his tight-knit Brooklyn diaspora community dreams of someday finding a way back home, Mateo—now a high school junior and piano prodigy living with his two aunts (one who's alive, the other not so much)—is focused on one thing: getting the attention of locally grown musical legend Gerval.

Mateo finally gets his chance on the night of the Grande Fete, an annual party celebrating the blended culture of pirates, Cuban Santeros, and Sefaradi Jews that created San Madrigal all those centuries ago.

But the evil that sank their island has finally caught up with them, and on the night of the celebration, Mateo's life is forever changed when he witnesses a brutal murder by a person he thought he knew. Suddenly Mateo is thrust into an ancient battle that spans years and oceans. Deadly secrets are unraveled, and Mateo awakens a power within himself—a power that not only links him to the killer but could also hold the key to unlocking the dark mystery behind his lost homeland.



## Educational Approaches for *Ballad & Dagger*

### Classroom Library

Include *Ballad & Dagger* among other high-quality young adult literature in your classroom. You can incorporate this novel in a fantasy collection or in a text set, a compilation of varied resources with a similar theme or topic.

### Vacation Reading

Assign *Ballad & Dagger* as an independent reading project. Students can read at their own pace while keeping a literary response journal to record thoughts, drawings, questions, and quotes. After reading, students can respond to the text by completing an item from a multidisciplinary choice board (see page 6).

### Book Club

Choose *Ballad & Dagger* as a book for students to read together to encourage deeper analysis and conversation. Assign book club roles for more focused, guided reading or encourage autonomy with student-led planning and discussion. Questions and assignments in this guide provide support, in addition to student-generated discussion questions for their peers.

### Hook Book

A hook book is fiction text that grabs the attention of the reader and introduces them to a nonfiction topic or theme. Introduce *Ballad & Dagger* as an engaging fiction novel to launch studies of colonialism, community, and immigration.

## Pre-Reading Activity

- Spend time reflecting on your identity. How would you describe yourself as an individual? Consider your identity in different contexts and among varying groups of people in your life.
- What factors have contributed to building your identity and your place in your community?
- In what ways does your identity change as you move between different environments?
- How has your identity changed over time? Were the catalysts for these changes internal, or were you impacted by external people, places, or events?
- Analyze the ways these factors have intersected to form your self-concept.
- As you read *Ballad & Dagger*, consider Mateo's development as a character. How does Mateo grow as an individual and as a member of a larger community? Pay attention to both internal and external factors that contribute to his growth.

## As-You-Read Activity

Create a multilingual dictionary as you encounter words from varied language origins. The people of San Madrigal draw from English, Spanish, and Hebrew, in addition to other languages encountered throughout their shared history. Build a multilingual dictionary of words and phrases that stand out to you. Consider the etymology, context in the text, and any inferential or double meanings.

## Discussion Ideas & Thinking Points

Encourage students to annotate *Ballad & Dagger* as they read the text. Annotating promotes active reading, an increased memory of details, and a deeper understanding of the story. It also prepares students to write about or discuss the book. Students can note important parts, questions, curiosities, descriptive language, personal connections, reactions, emotions, or draw quick sketches. Allow for choice in note-taking to reflect students' personal learning styles, including literary response journals, highlighters or sticky notes, voice memos, or reading and annotating on digital platforms. Use these thinking points as a first step, but encourage students to prepare their own questions for more meaningful discussion.

1. *Mateo is awakened as Galanika, the Healer. How does Mateo heal himself, his family and friends, and his community?*  
**Discuss both literal and metaphorical meanings of the word heal. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support your ideas.**
2. *Tía Lucia speaks to Mateo with layered meaning. He often returns to her urge to listen—"escucha." What did Tía Lucia want Mateo to listen to? How does Mateo use her words of advice throughout the novel?*  
**Do you think this advice was helpful? Provide examples.**
3. *We are first introduced to Chela Hidalgo during the murder of Trucks. As the story develops, we learn that Chela was awakened as the Destroyer, and later discover that she is also the Creator. Discuss the unifying themes of creation and destruction. Evaluate the impact of the author's choices regarding how Chela's character was developed. How does her identity as the Destroyer impact her relationships? How would her community view her differently if they first knew of her identity as the Creator?*
4. *In an ancient manual from San Madrigal, written by Mateo's ancestor Archibaldo Coraje Medina, the kameros are encouraged to be seen and not heard. "Sea espíritu . . . be like a spirit, let the light pass through you" (p. 8).*  
**Describe how these ancient words continue to impact San Madrigal today. Has this way of life been helpful to the San Madrigaleros? Why or why not?**



5. When community members gather at Tía Lucia's in celebration after the communal lockdown, Mateo describes the atmosphere as "bursting at the seams with love and laughter, and it feels like a hot bath after so much separation and silence" (p. 293). The reunion was reminiscent of the global pandemic lockdowns and its ongoing effects on society.

**How has the global pandemic affected you and your community? How have you stayed connected to others during this time?**

6. When the people of San Madrigal lost their island, they created a neighborhood in Brooklyn. How did the diaspora community keep their customs and traditions when they moved from their homeland?

**In what ways do you and your family maintain your customs and traditions?**

7. Do you believe that the Cabildo was an effective form of leadership for San Madrigaleros? Analyze the efficacy of the council. Do you believe the governing body and its procedures were still functional and beneficial?

**What government reforms would you put in place to increase productivity and fairness, and limit corruption?**

8. As Mateo strengthens his healing powers, he learns how emotionally and physically draining it can be to care for others. With the support of Tía Lucia, Mateo realizes the importance of self-care, taking time to cleanse, reflect, and regain his strength. The more intense care he provides for others, the more important it is for him to recharge.

**Discuss a personal experience that was physically and/or emotionally taxing. Did you create space to care for yourself? What are some practical ways to care for your emotional and physical well-being so you are able to be present for others?**

9. What role does spirituality play in *Ballad & Dagger*? How do the characters use spirituality to find meaning and connection in their lives?

**In what ways does religion guide characters' thoughts and actions? Provide examples.**





In *Ballad & Dagger*, Mateo begins his journey toward self-discovery feeling like an outcast among his peers, stating he is “much happier vanishing into the shadows” (p. 8). By the end of the novel, he is thrust into the spotlight and embraces his role as the Healer, and a leader of the people of San Madrigal.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.





## Post-Reading Activity

In *Ballad & Dagger*, the high school characters demonstrate exceptional strengths in a wide range of disciplines: Mateo is a gifted musician, Chela possesses great physical aptitude, Maza is technologically adept, and Tams has strong interpersonal skills. Much like the characters in the book, all students have unique strengths and skill sets that can advance their learning. One way to encourage students to build on their talents and interests in the classroom is to offer a multidisciplinary choice board.

Multidisciplinary choice boards offer an alternative to standard assignments and empowers students to choose how to show their understanding of a text. This freedom encourages learners to be more responsible, accountable, and independent in their learning. Students may choose an assignment that speaks to their strengths, interests, or preferred learning style.

Educators can also pull activities from the board to assign to the whole class or a book club. Assignments can be modified to accommodate individual needs.

### WRITE A LETTER

Taking on the perspective of Mateo, write a letter to his parents explaining the events that transpired. Include textual evidence as you analyze key events through Mateo's lens. For example, include new relationships with central figures in Mateo's life and critical information he learned about the history of San Madrigal. Consider Mateo's complex relationship with his parents and their belief systems as you craft the tone of the letter.

### COMIC STRIP

Create a comic strip to retell a major plot point in the story that serves as a catalyst for Mateo's character development.

Demonstrate your understanding of Mateo's growth through original dialogue and artistic design.

### PODCAST INTERVIEW

Imagine you host a podcast and are interviewing a character from *Ballad & Dagger*. Write an introduction for the character, including why you chose them. Generate a list of conversation topics and questions you plan to discuss. Write anticipated responses to the questions based on the character's actions, emotions, and dialogue in the novel. Bonus: Record your podcast with a friend!

### SOCIAL ACTION PROJECT

The world of *Ballad & Dagger* includes diverse and complex characters, with unique linguistic, religious, and cultural identities living together as one community. In spite of their differences, San Madrigaleros are undoubtedly committed to bettering their community, although some disagree about what is in the best interest of the people.

Identify a social issue in your own community. Research the issue—talk to local officials and community members, read news sources on the topic, collect data to inform your understanding.

Explore solutions and write an informed action plan.

Take action!

### NEWS REPORT

Take on the role of a journalist in Little Madrigal. Craft two news articles: one created before the events of the Cabildo vote and one created after. Include background information about the governing body and the important players in the election. Profile both candidates and their vision for the community.

Reflect on the election process and the events that followed. Carefully consider the role that the media plays in politics. Reflect on the importance of reporting during the transfer of power. This may take the format of a print article, video clip, or radio broadcast.

### ART AND RELIGION

Throughout human history, art has informed religion, and religion has informed artistic expression. The cultural history of San Madrigal is a unique blend of three cultures, all of which believe in three original spirits: Madrigal, the Creator; Okanla, the Destroyer; and Galanika, the Healer. At the end of the book, we learn that the Creator and Destroyer are one, and there is a third dark spirit—Vizvargal—that is worshipped by some. Choose one spirit and create a visual interpretation based on the author's description and its importance in the story. You may create a sculpture or a painting, or use a medium of your choice. Add a museum plaque to your work that includes your name, medium used, and information about why and how the piece was created.

### CREATE A PLAYLIST

Music is central to the way of life for San Madrigaleros—flowing off rooftops, guiding religious ceremonies, and setting the mood of grand celebrations. Mateo describes finding home through the intricacies of Galerano music. The blend of Sefaradic melodies and Caribbean and West African influences creates a unique musical sound.

Spend time listening to the genres of music discussed in *Ballad & Dagger*. Create your own playlist of songs that reflect the sounds that influenced kameros. Include a rationale for why you included each song. Consider the diaspora of Little Madrigal on the streets of Brooklyn and how this move to NYC may have added new musical sounds. Bonus: After studying the genres of music, compose and record an original song to include on the playlist!

### LITERARY LANGUAGE ANALYSIS

The author begins each section of the book with a poem. The figurative language offers insight into the characters and history of San Madrigal, although the language is open to interpretation. Choose one poem to analyze. Determine the meaning of words and phrases, including figurative and connotative meanings. Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. Bonus: Write an original poem inspired by a part of the book that excites you!

### REVISIONIST HISTORY

Historical revisionism consists of revisiting sources with new perspectives or data that may alter the understanding of a historical period or event. The history of fictional San Madrigal boasted freedom from persecution, slavery, and colonial rule, until Mateo and his friends uncover historical texts that share a dark history of the island hidden by a select few in power.

Revisit an actual historical event that sparks your curiosity. Gather at least three reliable information sources on the event—analyze primary source documents, read articles, or listen to historical podcasts.

Create a multimedia presentation analyzing the historical event and ways in which it is understood and taught. Assess the strengths and limitations of each source. Provide alternative interpretations of an event and ways we view the event that have shaped our current reality. Consider your own biases in interpreting the event.



## What Comes Next?

Mateo learns that his ancestor Archibaldo Coraje Medina, an ancient kama composer who worshipped the dark lord Vizvargal, was involved in San Madrigal's dark and hidden history. As the *Outlaw Saints* story continues, how do you predict Mateo will reconcile his family's involvement in colonialism? How will his role as the Healer impact his actions moving forward?

## About the Author

Daniel José Older is a *New York Times* best-selling author and story architect. He has published fourteen novels and numerous short stories and essays, and he is a regular comics writer for *Star Wars: The High Republic Adventures* and *Marvel*. He won the International Latino Book Award and has been a finalist for the Kirkus Prize, the Mythopoeic Award, the Locus Award, the Andre Norton Award, and the World Fantasy Award. You can find his thoughts on writing, read dispatches from his decade-long career as an NYC paramedic, and hear his music at <http://danieljoseolder.net>, as well as on YouTube, @djolder on Twitter, @danieljoser on Instagram, and @danieljoseolder on TikTok. He lives with his wife and son in New Orleans.



Watch Daniel José Older and Rick Riordan talk *Ballad & Dagger* here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfX7ZmSgoRo>

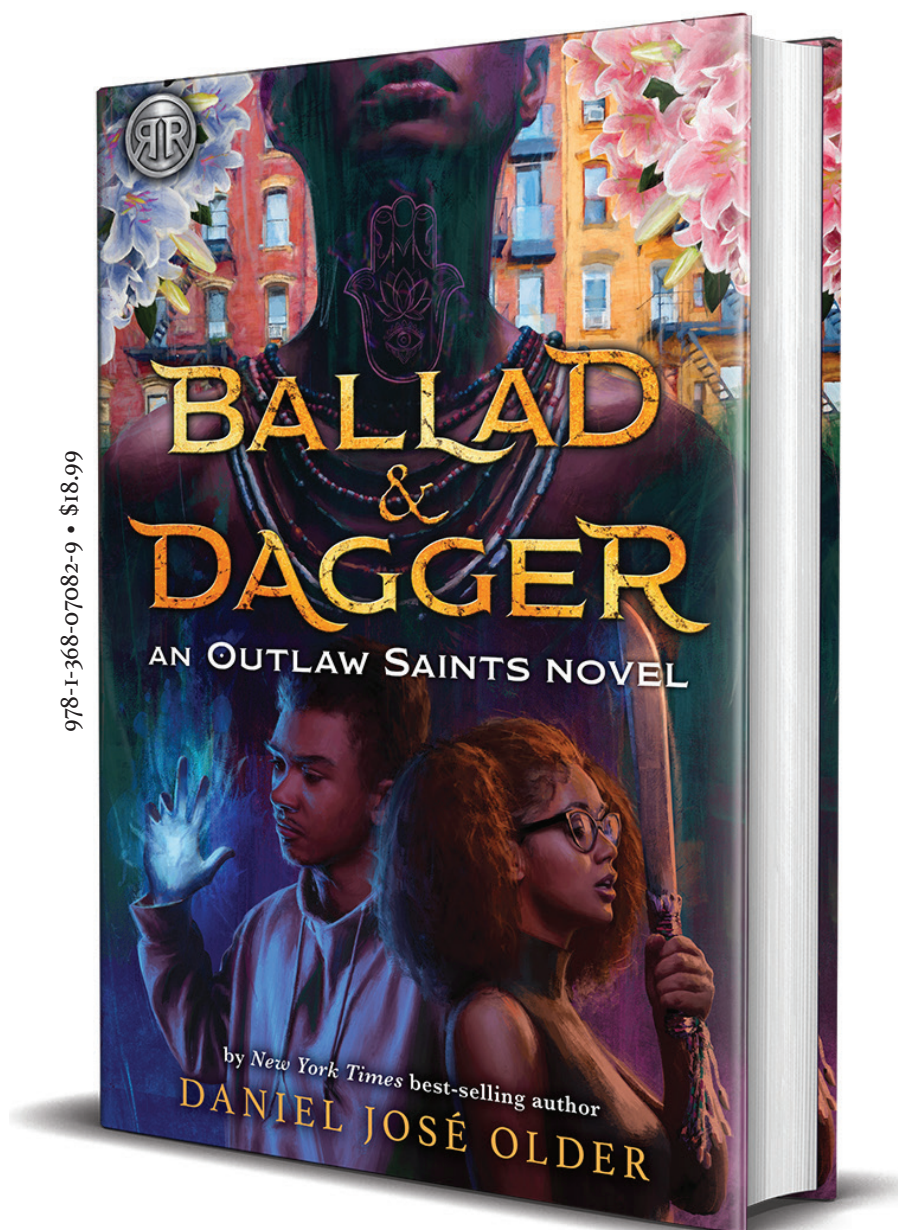
## Author Q&A

- Q:** At the beginning of the novel, Mateo says he feels like a tourist in his own community. He does not feel like he is fully noticed or accepted among his peer and neighbors, or within his culture. What message do you want to send to readers who connect with Mateo's feelings of loneliness?
- A:** On the one hand, loneliness is a very real part of everyone's journey, and—somewhat ironically—I want readers to know they're not alone in their loneliness. On the other hand, like with fear, loneliness has a way of feeling like it's everything when we feel it—the whole world. And even in our deepest depths, there is more to each moment than loneliness, than pain. So what I hope is that this story will help young people pause, breathe, confront their feelings, and—without disregarding them—see that there is also a huge, complex, beautiful world beyond those feelings. I also know that insider/outsider status can be such a fraught and scary thing to grapple with—there are no easy answers; sometimes there are no answers at all—and I hope Mateo's journey in *Ballad & Dagger* engages readers in a deep conversation about that and helps them navigate it with a new language.
- Q:** Do you identify as a creator, destroyer, healer . . . or a combination of all three?
- A:** I think every writer, every artist, has to be, on some level, all three. On a very straightforward level, a writer must create, pulling characters and worlds and magic out of the ether, and we must destroy—cutting away the parts of the story that don't need to be there, the details of the world that don't belong, the extra word in a sentence that adds nothing. And finally, stories have the power to heal us as individuals, to make us feel less alone, to help us confront our fears, to help us grow and become more empathetic and compassionate. And in so doing, they heal the world. All of that speaks to the incredible power of storytelling, and it's why we have to story responsibly. As anyone who has studied medicine (and any Galerano) will tell you—the same thing that can heal us can destroy us.



This guide was written by **Samantha Lazar Buckley**, a proud former NYC classroom teacher and current education consultant. Samantha now works on a wide range of curriculum development projects and educational programming. She enjoys helping children connect with books and gain access to the world through literature. Samantha filled her classroom library with authentic stories written by authors of diverse backgrounds—what she feels is a key component of any high-quality education setting. Samantha was born into a loud Jewish Italian family and is busy raising her own brood of young children—all of whom are avid bookworms—in Madison, Wisconsin.

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