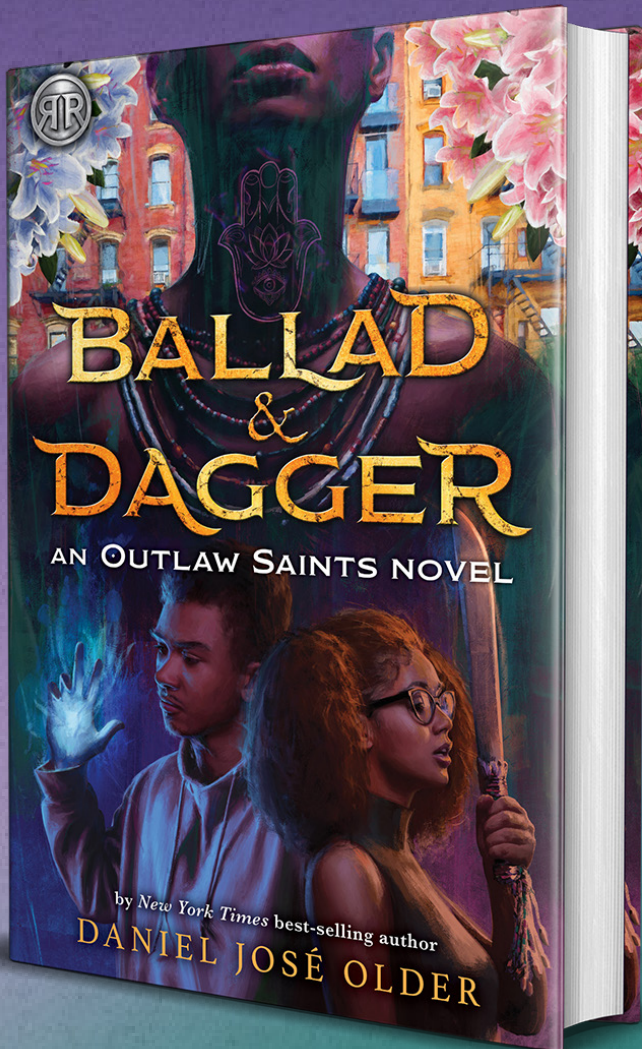


# OUTLAW SAINTS NOVELS

*by New York Times best-selling author*

## DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER



RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

EDUCATIONAL GUIDE



# Educational Approaches to the Outlaw Saints Novels

## Classroom Library

Include the Outlaw Saints duology among high-quality young adult literature in your classroom. Incorporate these novels in a fantasy collection or text set, a compilation of varied resources with a similar theme or topic.

## Vacation Reading

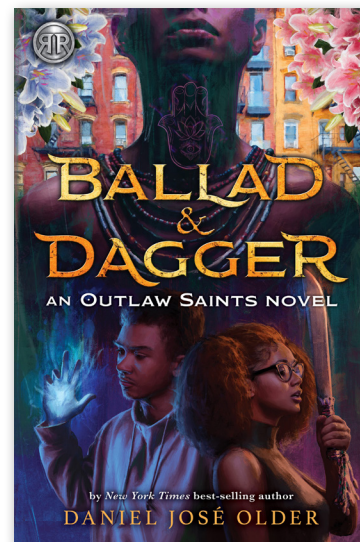
Assign Outlaw Saints as an independent reading project. Students read at their own pace while keeping a literary response journal to record thoughts, drawings, questions, and quotes. After reading, students respond to the text by completing an item from a multidisciplinary choice board (see page 7).

## Book Club

Choose Outlaw Saints as a series 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

Hook books are works of fiction that engage the reader and introduce them to a nonfiction topic or theme. Introduce Outlaw Saints to launch studies of colonialism, community, and immigration.

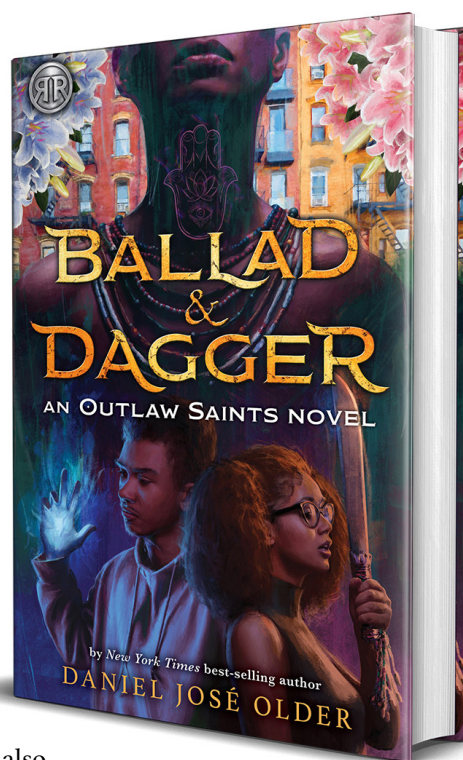


## About *Ballad & Dagger*

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 Sefaradic 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.



## 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.

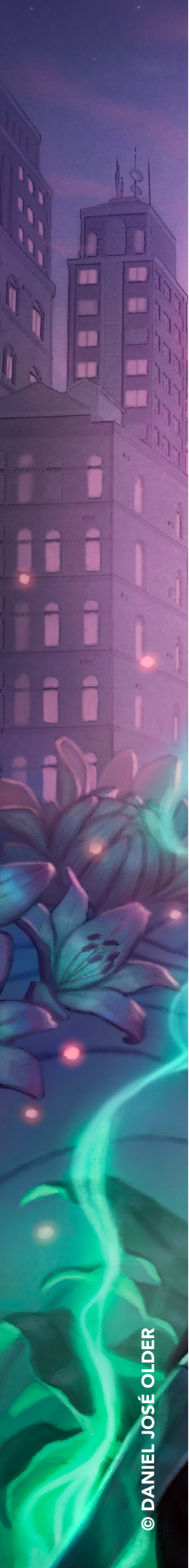
Students can note or sketch important plot points, questions, curiosities, descriptive language, personal connections, reactions, or emotions. Allow for choice in note taking to reflect students' personal learning styles, including literary-response journals, highlighters or sticky notes, voice memos, 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 discussions.

- 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.
- Mateo admires Maestro Grilo Juan Gerval as a personal and professional hero. At the start of the book, Mateo wonders if “he’ll realize I’m destined to bring our music to the world along with him” (p. 6). The author foreshadowed the intertwined destiny of Mateo and Gerval, and how their shared love of music would change the fate of San Madrigaleros. Analyze Mateo’s relationship with Gerval throughout the text. Consider themes of trust and power.
- Tía Lucía speaks to Mateo with layered meaning. He often returns to her urge to listen—“escucha.” What did Tía Lucía 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.
- 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 Destroyer impact her relationships? How would her community view her differently if they first knew of her identity as Creator?
- 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?







- When community members gather at Tía Lucía'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?
- 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?
- Do you believe that the Cabildo is an effective form of leadership for San Madrigaleros? Analyze the efficacy of the council. Do you believe the governing body and its procedures are still functional and beneficial? What government reforms would you put in place to increase productivity and fairness, and limit corruption?
- 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 Lucía, 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?
- 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.



A vertical illustration of a city at night. In the background, several tall buildings with glowing windows are visible against a dark sky. In the foreground, a large, stylized plant with broad, green leaves is shown. A bright, glowing green light emanates from the plant, creating a vertical streak of light that runs down the right side of the image. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and the vibrant green of the plant and light.

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Discuss the novel as a coming-of-age story. Analyze the development of Mateo's identity, and the intersection between the identities of Mateo and Galanika. Was Mateo's fate completely destined, or did he play a role in creating his destiny? What other factors influenced Mateo's evolution? Consider his relationships, culture, community, and important events. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support your analysis.

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## 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 empower 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, Galeranos 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 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 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 Galeranos 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.

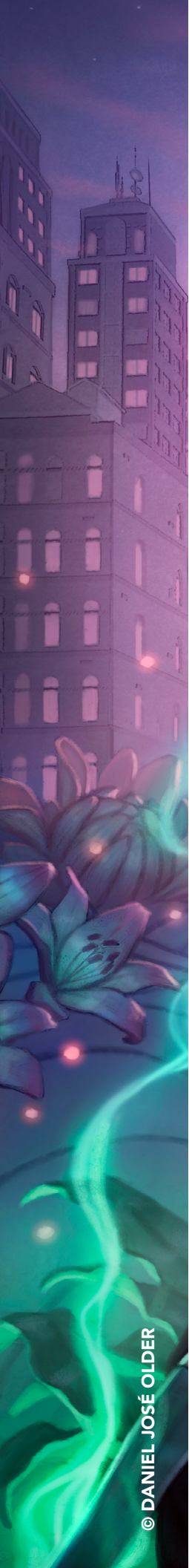
Bonus: Write an original poem inspired by a part of the book that excites you!

### 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, 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 worshipping the dark lord and perpetuating colonialism? How will Mateo's role as the Healer impact his actions moving forward?

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## About *Last Canto of the Dead*

Two gods turned teenagers wage simultaneous battles in the Caribbean and Brooklyn in this breathless sequel to *Ballad & Dagger*. Healer. Destroyer. Creator. Mateo Matisse and Chela Hidalgo are not just two teenagers in love—they're powerful gods in human form. Powerful enough to have saved their Brooklyn diaspora community from the wrath of an ancient enemy and to have raised their once-sunken native island of San Madrigal from the sea. But soon they discover that their problems are far from over.

On the shores of San Madrigal, two creature armies are battling for survival. And on the streets of Brooklyn, a once tight-knit community is divided, with two sides at each other's throats. But worst of all, a heartbreaking prophecy rips these two young lovers apart, sending Mateo back to the city, where cops are now patrolling the streets, and keeping Chela tethered to the island, where chaos and death lurk around every corner.

Healer. Destroyer. Creator. As gods, their powers know no limits. But as teenagers—separated, desperate, grieving—what will become of them? And what will become of their people? Join their battle and witness their love in this thrilling conclusion to the epic saga that began with *Ballad & Dagger*.



## Pre-Reading Activity

Reflecting on *Ballad & Dagger*, what were the notable themes and lessons in the novel?

Create a timeline of *Ballad & Dagger*, retelling the important events and how they connect to the overarching themes.

How did Mateo and Chela grow over the course of *Ballad & Dagger*? What challenges did they face, and how did they address them? Compare and contrast their experiences as teenagers turning into immortal gods.

What challenges must be addressed in *Last Canto of the Dead* now that Mateo and Chela have accepted their role as gods and leaders on the newly risen island of San Madrigal? Will they be able to undo the systems of oppression upheld by Archibaldo to find freedom for themselves and the Galeranos?

## As-You-Read Activity

The author uses a dual narrative to tell the story of *Last Canto of the Dead*. Consider the effectiveness of this writing strategy while annotating and note taking. Analyze how reading through the lens of both Mateo and Chela impacts your experience as a reader.

Keep in mind:

### Character connection

- Consider the two main storytellers as well as returning and new supporting characters.

### Pacing

- How do the dual narrators build momentum and mystery? Find moments of tension brought on by misunderstandings and varying perspectives.

### Complexity

- In what ways does the dual narrative broaden your understanding of events or sway your viewpoints and opinions?



## Discussion Ideas & Thinking Points

Use these thinking points as writing prompts or discussion starters. Encourage students to also create their own questions for more meaningful discussions.

- “Tía Lucía taught me how to clean, about the power of intentionality. You have to release the things that have a hold on you, the work of this world, other people’s crap” (p. 21). Mateo’s aunt often shares advice with layered meanings. What is currently holding Mateo back? What does he need to release? How does releasing that which holds you down create space for healing? Discuss the meaning of this advice for Mateo.
- When Chela discovers the prophecy that they cannot be together, she makes an assumption about how Mateo will react to the information: “But I’m sure Mateo will take it to heart, fall away from me, do the ‘right’ thing. That’s who he is” (p. 45). Do you think Chela made the right decision in withholding the information from Mateo? Why or why not?
- “You think a place is just a place? Don’t be naïve, child. A place is also its people, of course” (p. 49). How do Mimi’s words to Chela affect the choices she must make as the Creator and Destroyer of San Madrigal?
- “‘Todas las cosas que eres, sélas. Sélas enteramente. Esa es la única manera de ser.’ *All the things you are, be them . . . Be them entirely. This is the only way to be*” (p. 64). Chela wonders if her uncle Si understood how important these words would be, and if she has ever fully been all the things she is. Do you think it is possible to embrace all sides of oneself at the same time? How do you balance the different parts of yourself?
- Mateo is appalled when he finds Vedo using a spiritual text to redeem himself and his actions: “Is this kid really using Madrigal’s creed to be a safe house for the persecuted? To justify his worship of an actual demon?” (p. 90). Can you find examples in current events in which two opposing groups use the same religious text to justify their viewpoints and actions? Discuss the importance of evaluating public speeches using a critical lens.
- In chapter eleven, the relationship between Mateo and his father becomes contentious after political disagreements. Family dynamics can become complex when there are fundamental differences in beliefs. Do you think that Mateo and his father were communicating effectively? What advice would you give to Mateo about navigating this situation?
- How does Odé Kan earn Chela’s trust? Cite examples of how her words and actions build a strong relationship in a short period of time. Examine the importance of Odé Kan’s support in building Chela’s confidence and ability to utilize her powers.
- Archibaldo gains power by harnessing the fear of the Galeranos and the fear of the dead to create the army of bambarúto. Analyze the relationship between fear and power, and how leaders may capitalize on the fear of a group of people to gain control.
- “Creation work is too hard with this much pain” (p. 287). Consider Chela’s struggle to use her powers of creation while she is in physical and emotional agony. In what ways can pain hold you back? Discuss how pain can affect your creativity and how your creativity can impact your pain.
- “*It wasn’t the power of our magic that destroyed us. . . . It was the artillery. The guns. The enemy. That’s what killed us. . . . Our mistake wasn’t using our powers or joining forces; it was waiting too long to fight back*” (p. 342). Explain how Anabela’s story affected Chela and her understanding of her own story.





## Post-Reading Reflection

In *Last Canto of the Dead*, Mateo and Chela begin their seven-day journey searching for answers from the past. At the start of each new day, the author begins with an excerpt from *The San Madrigal Book of the Dead*. On the seventh day, the journey ends with Mateo humming a new melody, a song he puts to paper and titles, *The San Madrigal Book of the Living*.

Discuss the Outlaw Saints series as a coming-of-age story. In the first novel, we joined Mateo and Chela on their journey from teenagers to immortal gods. In the second novel, they grow into their power as immortal gods and ultimately end as two mortal teenagers, however both have grown into their strengths.

Explore the development of Mateo and Chela throughout the series. Consider them as individuals and again as partners. What did it take for Mateo and Chela to fully embrace their power as individuals and their power as a team?

How have they reconciled with and released their own obstacles? How have they helped the Galeranos reconcile with and release generational trauma? Consider historical events, community relations, and family dynamics. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support your analysis.

## Post-Reading Activity

In the novel, Mateo searches for information about Galerano history in the remnants of Tolo's office library.

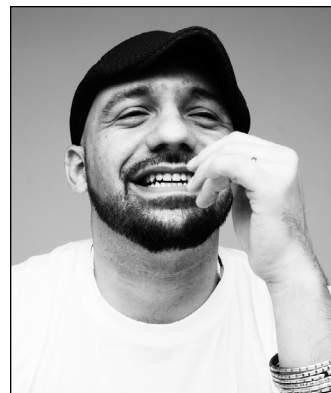
"Tolo did tell me once that Madrigal lore is famously interconnected—tidbits about sacred ceremonial procedures will pop up in margin notes of a bestiary; a single musical phrase forms the basis of a love song, a funeral hymn, and a children's lullaby; and on and on." (p. 220)

Cultural lore is a collection of traditions and knowledge held by a particular group. Conduct your own research into the lore of a cultural group with which you identify. Use multiple print and online resources to find three interconnected works; works may include as folktales, recipes, hymns, nursery rhymes, lullabies, myths and legends, or songs.

Analyze the ways in which the lore you selected are connected. How does each piece preserve and pass on cultural knowledge? How does the collection work as a whole to preserve and pass on cultural knowledge? In what ways do they impact your own traditions?

## 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 [DanielJoseOlder.net](http://DanielJoseOlder.net), as well as on YouTube, @DJOlder on Twitter, @DanielJose1 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:  
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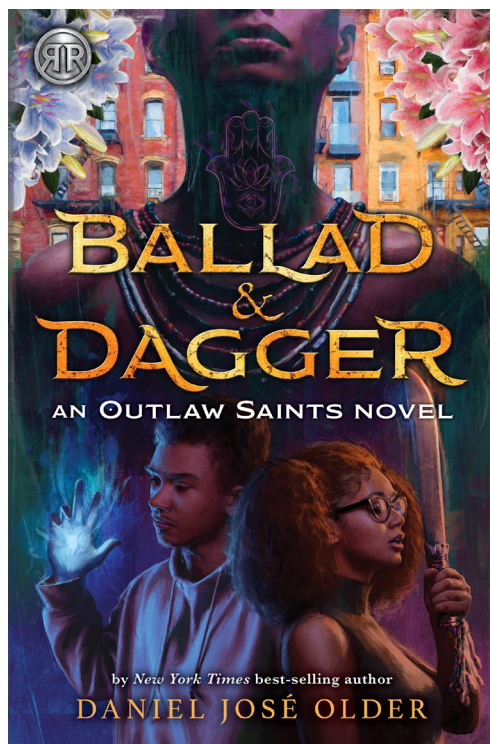
## Author Q&A

- Q:** At the beginning of the first book, 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.



This education 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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