

**Harvard-educated Lorena Duarte is associate editor of La Prensa de Minnesota and a leader who is equally at home among Ivy Leaguers, immigration activists and poets.**



La Prensa newspaper associate editor Lorena Duarte translates a story about Minneapolis' search for a new police chief from Spanish into English in her Lake Street office. The story was written by associate editor Jose A. Aldea. JIM GEHRZ • jgehrz@startribune.com

## word slinger

By KAY MILLER • kmiller@startribune.com

**L**orena Duarte has been mistaken for an Ethiopian, Venezuelan, Colombian, Moroccan, Indonesian and Iraqi. But when people look into her face — that of the “generic brown woman,” as she says — Duarte hopes they see themselves.

The Harvard-educated Duarte, 29, is associate editor of La Prensa de Minnesota, the state's largest and most influential Hispanic newspaper, which her father, Mario Duarte, started 16 years ago. When the newspaper went completely bilingual in February, that was the fulfillment of one of her dreams.

Duarte, whose family is from El Salvador, also is a poet whose intensely personal work has become a powerful voice for peace, justice and the interests of the immigrant community. Last year the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Minnesota named her one of its “25 on the Rise.”

Today Duarte will wear

white as part of the national “Day Without Immigrants,” for which organizers encouraged Hispanic people to join a one-day boycott of work, school and commerce so that their economic clout can be felt in the larger community. Wearing white is symbolic of peaceful intent, Duarte said.

The next edition of La Prensa will be dedicated to the boycott with its front page and editorial page left blank except for brief explanations. La Prensa's Lake Street

office will be open as Duarte and her news colleagues cover the boycott, but its business staff will not be selling ads.

Still, Duarte is committed to getting word out about the Hispanic population's contributions to the state's economy and culture. Last month she joined thousands of people rallying at the State Capitol for immigrant rights. Many risked their lives to come here, she said. They are the adventurous, the entrepreneurial, the determined.



Rodrigo Sanchez-Chavarria, left, congratulates Lorena Duarte. Both are poets with Palabristas, a collaboration of poets who write about their experience, culture and language. JERRY HOLT • Star Tribune

“If you're forward-thinking enough to invest in their education, maybe they will become doctors, lawyers, engineers or CEOs,” Duarte said. “If you don't, that's a very good way of creating an underclass. They can fry up your burgers for the rest of their lives.”

No one knows how large Minnesota's Hispanic population is, but the Minnesota State Demographic Center estimated it at 193,200 in 2005.

**Duarte continues:** She represents a new generation of Latinos, she says. **E3** ▶

## New book from ‘Alex Rider’ creator

• Anthony Horowitz in town to discuss his teen spy novels.

By PEG MEIER • pmeier@startribune.com

**C**harlie Peterson, a 10th-grader at Coon Rapids High School, is a big fan of the best-selling “Alex Rider Adventure” spy series. Teens can relate to Alex Rider, he said, even though the character has many more adventures than real people do.

“He's starting to be one of my favorite authors,” Peterson said of author Anthony Horowitz. “With a lot of books, you get lost and don't want to read on. With his, you want to keep reading.”

Horowitz will visit two Hennepin County libraries Wednesday to talk about his new book, “Ark Angel.” The tale is a thrilling new chapter in the life of Rider, a 14-year-old elite spy in the British Secret Service.



**Anthony Horowitz**

Barbara McMillan, the library system's youth services librarian, said boys in middle school and older — even reluctant readers — gobble up the books because they're fast reads and full of action, with short chapters that end on cliffhangers. Librarians are putting them in the hands of boys who think they don't like to read.

The books have sold more than 4.5 million copies in the United States and consistently top the bestseller charts in the United Kingdom. Horowitz, 51, lives in London with his wife and two teenage sons, whom he admits envying for being young at an exciting time.

Horowitz's childhood was full of characters that seem to come from the pages of a Charles Dickens novel or a Brothers Grimm story. He grew up in north London — fat, starved of affection, underachieving and miserable, but surrounded by great wealth and status.

He was raised by nannies and surrounded by servants and chauffeurs. His mother, whom he adored, gave him a human skull for his 13th birthday. His mean-spirited grandmother was a “truly evil person,” he said. And the headmaster of his boarding school flogged the boys until they bled.

So he loved to read for escape and to write for fun. By age 11 or 12, he said, he had no doubt he would be a writer. At that time, his teachers had a low opinion of him, he said, and “books saved my life. I was able to escape.”

The first book in the Horowitz series, “Stormbreaker,” will be released as a movie in September. He wrote the screenplay and was part of the team that looked at 650 boys before casting Alex Pettyfer in the lead role of Alex Rider. Pettyfer is “a fantastic actor and very, very nice to look at,” the author said.

“More girls will be turning on to the books,” Horowitz predicted happily.

Peg Meier • 612-673-4489

### HOROWITZ TALK

**When and where:** 1 p.m. Wednesday at the Southdale Library, 7001 York Av. S., Edina, and 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Ridgedale Library, 12601 Ridgedale Dr., Minnetonka.  
**Who:** Kids in grade 4 are especially welcome, plus their parents and siblings.  
**Cost:** Free.  
**Info:** 952-847-5900 (Southdale) or 952-847-8800 (Ridgedale).

**To hear Lorena Duarte perform her poem “Generic Brown Woman” in both English and Spanish, as well as two additional poems and a brief narrative on the poems, visit [www.startribune.com/a1258](http://www.startribune.com/a1258)**

**A monthly look at important anniversaries, Web search, E2**

**How to finance a new stadium? Uncle Al has a plan, E10**

### MINDWORKS

## Kids in and out of ‘in groups,’ say cliques stick

• Love them or hate them, they probably are here to stay.

By MARIA ELENA BACA  
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**C**liques exclude, belittle, dehumanize and divide schools, but they are a necessary evil that give students structure, identity and a place to belong, according to Mindworks writers.

For May, we asked, “Every school

has cliques. When you look around your school, what factors do you see that bring people together and set them apart? Gender? Income? Race? Interests? Something else? Why do you think this happens, and what's the impact of these divisions? What would it be like to attend a school that had no cliques?” About 2,200 students responded.

Few students voiced strong opinions either in favor of or against cliques. Instead, most chose to describe the divisions in their own schools. Some themes were universal. Rich, attractive or athletic kids occupied the top of the popularity heap. Smart kids, skateboarders, goths, geeks, druggies, troublemakers, nerds and drama students revolved around the edges. In some schools, cliques form among racial

and ethnic lines; in others, those delineations didn't matter.

Some described cliques that seemed to be unique to their schools: “Hicks” at Foley High School, “the Mob” at M.W. Savage Elementary School, foursquare players at Mississippi Elementary School in Coon Rapids and the “Harry Potter” clique at Farmington Elementary School.

**Mindworks continues E10** ▶

# word slinger

◀ DUARTE FROM E1

Projections are that the number will reach 296,000 by 2025. They come from Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico and other nations throughout Central and South America.

"I represent the generation of Latinos who can shape-shift and navigate in both worlds," says Duarte, who shifts effortlessly between English and Spanish, calling "Spanglish" her favorite language. "It doesn't matter that I don't have an accent. People will always ask, 'Where are you from? No, where are you really from?'"

**Private schools to welfare**

In El Salvador, the Duarte family was solidly middle-class and well-educated. Lorena attended a private school and was cared for by maids. However, the family was distantly related to Jose Napoleon Duarte, who later became El Salvador's president but as founder of the Christian Democrat Party was out of favor with the government at the time. And as civil war raged in 1982 Lorena's brother Manuel, then 14, narrowly escaped a kidnapping attempt.

Frightened, the family moved to Minnesota that year. Duarte's aunt, Maria Elena Calderón, was permitted to sponsor siblings as permanent legal residents under the law at that time. They, in turn, brought their families and became citizens.

Her mother, Esperanza Duarte, who had been an accountant, worked hard to get American credentials for the occupation. Mario worked part-time at odd jobs, at the Wilder Foundation and in communications at Centro, a nonprofit Hispanic social service agency, before starting La Prensa with the goal of bridging connections to the larger Twin Cities community.

But first, the six-member Duarte family lived for six months in another aunt's basement, until they moved into low-income projects, Torre de San Miguel Homes — "the Towers" — on St. Paul's West Side.

At 5, Duarte already could read and write in Spanish but knew just four words of English. "I spent the first three weeks of first grade crying because I didn't understand a

word," she recalls. By year's end, however, she was fluent in English and was in the top reading group.

Living on welfare in the projects was a huge culture shock for Esperanza, who desperately wanted to go home. Over the next five years she and Lorena bounced among Minnesota, El Salvador and Florida, returning finally to Minnesota when Lorena was 10.

"I understood from a very young age what real poverty was — kids going through enormous, stinking trash piles to eat and families living in corrugated metal shacks. I understood real violence and bodies on the street," Duarte said.

She was the only person of color in her international baccalaureate classes at South St. Paul High School. By the time she graduated, she had changed schools 11 times.

"If you were to look at that," she said, "you would have predicted I would have ended up pregnant at 15. In spite of the fact that I went to Harvard, I beat a lot of odds to get there."

**Injustice and the uniformity of love**

Today Duarte is full of her passion for poetry, planning for the future and juggling work even as she serves on boards of directors for Hispanic organizations.

She married last May 28 and is still giddy in talking about her Irish-Italian husband, Aaron Armstrong, who is getting a doctorate in anthropology at the University of Minnesota. In April they bought a bungalow in Minneapolis' Hiawatha neighborhood — a fixer-upper that they are filling with plants, sleek furniture, books and a few family treasures.

Duarte caresses a battered white table, scarred by generations of children, that belonged to Armstrong's great-grandmother.

"My grandma couldn't strap the old family table on her back and bring it with her. So we have very few things that are passed down to us." On her last trip to El Salvador, a great-aunt gave her two pieces of family jewelry. "To me, those are like holy relics."

She wears one of them, a gold ring with a square black stone, as a talisman to her po-

etry readings. Duarte performs barefoot, nearly dancing at times, as her hands word-walk through poems that are evocations of her life. For years she did not share her poems, which she calls "sad bastard" verse from years of feeling like a victim. She has a dark side. If she let herself, she said, she could easily sink into depression.

But at 25 she had an epiphany: "No, I have power over this. I have a choice in how my life goes. If I want to make things better for the Latino community I cannot just deal with Latinos. I cannot demonize anti-immigrant people. If I yell at them, they will not listen to me. And it's important that they listen, because people's lives are at stake."

She joined Palabristas ("Word Slingers"), a poet collective, becoming one of its most prolific performers. She started a program to teach poetry to high-risk Hispanic young people. Shy and studious as a girl, Duarte has emerged as exuberant, sensual, wise and cynical in her poetry. So alive are her descriptions of the cool feel of bougainvillea blossoms underfoot, the burn of a sniper's bullet and the tingling of flesh that they make listeners flush.

On a recent Saturday she performed at the University of Minnesota's Nolte Center for a gathering of writers, artists and friends at a "Celebration of Arts and Diaspora." She recited from memory her poem "Generic Brown Woman," drawn from the time an Ethiopian woman mistook Duarte for a countrywoman.

"If I am to be your generic brown woman, if I am to be your brown, blank slate, then let us talk about the geographies of injustice, the thoughts of the forgotten and the uniformity of love," Duarte pleads, her hands dancing and hips swaying to the rhythm of the spoken word. Later she reads the poem in Spanish, knowing it will make some in the audience squirm.

"Language is a powerful tool," she explains. "It makes people who do not speak Spanish understand for one brief moment what we felt like to be aliens and isolated in America."

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Lorena Duarte was born in El Salvador and immigrated as a child to Minnesota with her family.

**LORENA DUARTE**

**Born:** Lorena Esperanza Duarte Quesada. (In Latin cultures the mother's maiden name, Quesada, comes after the father's last name, Duarte.)

**Old soul:** "I've always been told I was an old lady in little girl's clothes."

**Four words of English she knew before coming to America:** chicken, hen, pen, pencil.

**Favorite language:** "Spanglish." She is equally fluent in Spanish and English.

**Vocation:** Associate Editor of La Prensa, bilingual community newspaper. Circulation: 10,000.

**Salvation:** Performs with the poets' collective Palabristas ("Word Slingers") at colleges, museums and restaurants.

**Secret to refried beans:** Saute an onion until it turns black; remove onion and fry beans in remaining oil.

**Favorite restaurant:** Pineda Tacos, formerly on Lake Street in Minneapolis, still operating in Plymouth.

**On marrying:** "I kept waiting for my life to be perfect and I realized what I wanted was right in front of me all the time."

**Favorite drink:** Whiskey.

**Passion:** Started VOCES ("Voices") program to help Latino youths express themselves through poetry.

**Favorite book:** "The Weight of All Things," by Sandra Benitez.

**Co-edited:** "Under What Bandera: Anti-War Ofrendas From Minnesota, Y Califas," a collection of antiwar poetry from 10 Minnesota and California Hispanic writers that was published on the first anniversary of the war in Iraq.

**Has offices with:** Her father and mentor, Mario Duarte, founder of La Prensa.

**On the cabinet in the office:** a picture of her paternal grandmother, Maria Luisa Duarte Maravilla. Says Lorena: "I feel like she watches over us and keeps us in line."

KAY MILLER

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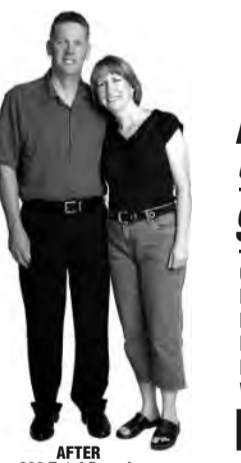
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