

## Q&A with C.I. JEREZ

author of

# AT THE ISLAND'S EDGE

**Q. Is there an author that's had a big influence on your writing? How so?**

A. Yes, my overall writing has been most influenced by Jodi Picoult. I discovered her books in 2009, introducing me to the multiple points of view writing style. I remember how impressed I was by her ability to create unique voices and perspectives for each character. Her stories tend to have an interesting question at the center of a controversial topic, and she does a great job exploring all sides of the argument. Most importantly, I think Picoult tells powerful stories that explore important issues. That's critical to my storytelling. I want to tell bold and powerful stories that entertain and make readers ponder things from a new perspective.

For **AT THE ISLAND'S EDGE**, Robert Dugoni has been highly influential in my writing. In January of 2022, I read *The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*. It was the first book I'd ever read by him, and I read it the same month I decided to pursue writing full-time. I was so incredibly inspired by the character Sam that I began to dream about creating a little boy who wanted his story told, too. That little voice turned out to be Teó, Lina's son.

Serendipitously, I came across Bob a few months later at a conference in NYC and told him about the story I was writing. He autographed my journal and encouraged my journey. Nine months later, that manuscript earned me an agent and eventually a book deal with the same publisher that published Bob's book and inspired this whole thing.

I will always be thankful for the magical spark of another author's story. You never know what it might ignite.

**Q. Why do you think your agent and, soon after, your publisher were so eager to publish AT THE ISLAND'S EDGE?**

A. I chose a topic that I was deeply passionate about. My passion for these characters and the book's themes made me very conscientious about framing the story. It also forced me to challenge whether or not I was going "deep" enough in the writing. Constructing a novel about something vitally personal shifts your efforts in all the best ways. If you want your reader to experience the topics/ideas/places you're passionate about with the same interest and importance you place on it, you'll put your heart into the words. I think that shows up on the page.

There were also two unique hooks for this book. First, we've had minimal insights about women in combat on a large commercial fiction scale. Kristin Hannah's *The Women* began to change that. However, until recently, all the post-combat stories in books and Hollywood have centered on the male experience.

I also think that while we've had some fantastic Puerto Rican artists in mainstream American entertainment, we haven't had much exposure to life on the island itself. I'm seeing that shift. People are interested in having diverse experiences when reading.

Both things make the novel timely by offering an up-close view of topics that haven't been all that visible before.

**Q. Your bio highlights Irish, Puerto Rican, & Cuban parentage. What made you choose Puerto Rico as the setting for this book?**

A. I've lived and/or worked in Puerto Rico on three different occasions for a combined total of five years. That gave me firsthand experience of the island in a way I can't claim for Cuba or Ireland. With a debut novel, I wanted to lean into what I knew. I needed that sense of intimacy and familiarity to deliver my promise to the reader, and I felt I had that with Puerto Rico.

Also, when I was thinking about ways to help Lina on her journey to healing, I kept returning to the magic of this little island and how happy and accepted I felt each time I made its shores my home. The people on the island were almost universally full of love and kindness.

I wanted to take an opportunity to show unique and differing perspectives about the island, that it isn't just a tropical vacation place, but so much more. Having Eli's, Lina's, and even Dolores's perspectives gave me a perfect avenue to explore cultural pride and present a new place in many different ways.

**Q. What was it like joining the Army in 2005, knowing that we were heavily engaged in two individual wars—Operation Iraqi Freedom & Operation Enduring Freedom?**

A. It was terrifying, especially because when I raised my right hand and swore to die for my country, I had two young daughters at home who were 9 and 3 years old. I spent almost 12 months away from them in training before I was assigned to my first duty station. And there were times I thought I'd get sick from the heartbreak of missing my children.

It is a spiritual calling when you're a parent and sign up to join the military during wartime. I made the decision to join after graduating college, when the wounds and memories from 9/11 were still fresh in my mind. I felt a deep calling to be a part of something bigger than just my individual purpose. I had always wanted to wear a uniform and stand for something important, and after finally graduating college, I heard about the Officer Candidate School program, and it felt like it was the right time to do it.

What could be more important than defending people's right to freedom?

When I decided to pursue military service, I understood the risks I was taking and the sacrifices that could be required for me and my daughters, but I also knew that if they were faced with the worst-case scenario of losing their mother at war, then they would always understand the power of courage, the importance of one's willingness to give everything for what you believe in, and the power of being a woman who believed in following her dreams no matter where they led. These are principles that I still wish for them today now that they are grown women navigating their own individual journeys.

I think the OIF/OEF Veterans across all branches have a deep sense of unity and pride within our ranks. We all had a job to do. We all trained to support the mission one way or another at installations in the U.S. and around the world. We have the memories of a very united country that rallied together in the fight for freedom and the protection of our nation. These are realities I will always carry in my heart and memories that have given me a sense of purpose and meaning in a unique and special way.

**Q. This novel tackles some heavy topics such as Post Traumatic Stress and using alcohol to numb the symptoms. How many of your ideas came from what you saw while in service?**

A. A lot of it. At least eighty percent of the soldiers I served alongside deployed in support of OIF, OEF, or both. For the soldiers under my responsibility, it was my duty to lead them, know them, look out for them, and help guide their careers. This means I often saw their struggles and their unwillingness to admit to those struggles. That only lasted until things usually got out of control, or they were battling severe depression symptoms and needed to get help before it was too late.

I don't think there was enough focus on the transition home after a deployment war. My husband was part of the fifteen-month extension in 2007. He worked 12-hour days, seven days a week, for the entirety of his deployment in the country. While he never turned to substances or alcohol, the transition back was hard on him and our family, and there were experiences and conversations during that time that I locked in my mind in order to write an authentic story down the line someday.

**AT THE ISLAND'S EDGE** is that story.

It was also important to me to have multiple post-war veterans serve as beta readers. I've been blessed by the general consensus that while this book shows some of the many faces of PTSD, the portrayals are honest and accurate.

**Q. Lina's son battles Tourette's Syndrome, is that a condition that was close to home for you? If not, why did you choose this condition?**

A. While I have not raised a child battling Tourette's, I do have a child within the close ranks of our family who has been diagnosed with a neurological condition. I have watched his parents manage his diagnosis with love, patience, and acceptance, and it has inspired me on a very personal and profound level. Not having experienced this type of diagnosis directly, I chose a condition that affects many families but that would also allow me access to thorough research and the ability to gain perspective directly from the voices of the children navigating their symptoms. I found that Tourette's, like most neurological conditions, presents differently and requires a unique and tailored approach for each child to manage in a way that works best for them. I was incredibly inspired by my research on the resilience and strength of children affected by this condition. I knew Teó would give me a way to honor those kids and educate people, in a very general way, about what Tourette's could be and how much an amazing fictional mom could love her son with such grace.

**Q. Eli's background is a unique choice for a novel based in Puerto Rico. How did he come about, and did you have any doubts about how he'd fit into the overall dynamics?**

A. I had the pleasure of living in South Carolina for three years while my husband was stationed there. Understanding that I planned to make this a deeply personal and authentic novel, the character from the continental U.S. I wanted to plant in Puerto Rico had to be a character I could thoroughly connect with.

There is so much richness to the culture in "The South." In many ways, the culture I immersed myself in while living in South Carolina had strong commonalities to Puerto Rico. So, I had no doubt Eli would "fit" seamlessly with Lina and her family and the island way of life.

My specific experiences and background gave me insights into both places, and it would be a shame not to leverage that, especially when I wanted Eli to be a point of view the majority of my readers could easily relate to.

Recognizing that most of my readers may not be familiar with Puerto Rico, I wanted to offer a complete island experience. This was why I chose to highlight three unique perspectives. We have Lina, who has left and returned to the island, Dolores, who has never left, and Eli, an American expat who has chosen to make Puerto Rico his home despite lacking traditional family ties to the island. I think each perspective is uniquely beautiful, and each one adds to the story in its own way.

**Q. How have your own personal experiences, either in service or elsewhere, impacted your writing?**

A. I used to wonder why my life was full of so many twists and turns because, at times, it was pretty exhausting. As a military spouse, I had to keep my chin up each time we moved. That was never easy because each place was so different from the last. I also had these high-profile jobs in multiple industries, and every time we moved, I had to get a new job. In one season, I was learning about the regulated medical device manufacturing industry; in another, I was focused on warehouse safety and successfully running millions of square feet of warehouse operations across the US. These experiences have allowed me to serve on global teams, travel internationally, and work closely with people of all ages and backgrounds.

As a writer, I realize now what a gift all of that was! Over the last twenty years, I have filled the bucket with material for diverse, robust, and interesting stories.

My identity as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, soldier, mentor, employee, and more has helped me shape my characters' inner thoughts and struggles. I've been out in the field with my soldiers and listened to what a tent full of young military men talk about at night when they forget there's a woman in the space. I've been in the executive board rooms where I'm the only woman in the room and the only minority. Those experiences have given me very unique insights into worlds I would never have seen and experienced otherwise.

I feel incredibly blessed that all my personal experiences have given me pages and pages of ideas for so many books! I pray for the chance to write each and every single one!

**Q. How do you hope your novel will inspire Latino and minority communities?**

A. First and foremost, I hope my novel helps a wider audience see the real beauty of Puerto Rican culture. Puerto Rico is so rich and vibrant. After reading this book, I hope readers will want to book a trip and experience it for themselves. The island's economic environment is highly dependent on tourism. So, go and visit the beautiful Island of Enchantment!

I hope my novel inspires people to read more. I was very intentional about writing a story that grappled with heavy themes like combat and post-traumatic stress but didn't sensationalize any of it. I kept the story focused on the inner struggle, the family dynamics, and the power of home and place so that anyone could read this book and focus on the heart of the message.

For my Latino readers, my novel is a mirror that reflects our stories, struggles, and triumphs. It offers a positive and authentic representation of who we are. I hope that by engaging with these stories, readers will feel a sense of connection and pride in their heritage.

Ultimately, whether it's through promoting literacy, fostering a love of reading, or inspiring a call to military service, I will be proud if my book helps someone embark on a beautiful journey.