

Definitely DOMINGUITA

★ The Knight of the Cape ★ Captain Dom's Treasure ★

By Terry Catasús Jennings

Judy Moody meets Netflix's *One Day at a Time* in this first book in a new chapter book series featuring a young Cuban American girl who creates adventures based on the classics she read with her beloved Abuela—can Dominguita become a noble knight?

All Dominguita wants to do is read. Especially the books in Spanish that Abuela gave to her just before she moved away. They were classics that Abuela and Dominguita read together, books her abuela brought with her all the way from Cuba when she was a young girl. Since Abuela had to move away from Mundytown, the books help Dominguita feel like Abuela's still with her.

One day, however, the class bully makes an accusation—Dominguita reads because she has no friends. Not so, says our heroine, although it's true. She is reading *Don Quijote* because she is studying to be a knight. The bully ridicules her. "Girls can't be knights!" he says. The rest of the book is Dominguita's *I'll show you!*

Having adventures worthy of being a knight is not easy. But Dominguita does find classmate Pancho Sanchez, a stalwart squire, and together they rescue a new girl in town, Steph Williams, from a bully. The adventure climaxes with Dom and her crew tilting with a giant—the windmill at the Holland House Restaurant.

Lucky for Dom, as she is fighting the giant, she spies a toddler who got away from his mother and is heading for certain doom. She rescues him. Her knightly crew's picture makes it to the local newspaper. She's sure that the bullies will trouble them again, but when they do, the crew can point to that picture to shut them up. And, best of all, she now has friends with whom to have more adventures.

About the Author:

Short Bio:

On September 11, 1961, Terry Catasús Jennings landed in the United States after a short flight from Cuba. On September 12th, she was enrolled in seventh grade in an American school. Her family, including her father who had been jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion, was now in a free country. The only catch for twelve-year-old Terry was that she could count in English and recite the days of the week and the months of the year, but not much more. Often being the only Cuban in her school—even through college—Terry knows what it's like to be the new kid on the block. She is delighted to have the opportunity, with *Definitely Dominguita*, to portray a typical child of immigrants—no different than her peers—other than she loves the classics (like Jennings did as a child) and thinks Cuban food rules.

Longer Bio:

On September 11, 1961, Terry Catasús Jennings landed in the United States after a short flight from Cuba. On September 12th, she was enrolled in seventh grade in an American school. Her family, including her father who had been jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion, was now in a free country. The only catch for twelve-year-old Terry was that she could count in English and recite the days of the week and the months of the year, but not much more. Often being the only Cuban in her school—even through college—Terry knows what it's like to be the new kid on the block. She is delighted to have the opportunity, with *Definitely Dominguita*, to portray a typical child of immigrants—no different than her peers—other than she loves the classics (like Jennings did as a child) and thinks Cuban food rules.

As a child, Terry dreamed of being an author, but she was dissuaded from a writing career and instead majored in math and physics at the University of Richmond, in Virginia. She worked in finance for many years. Once her children were born, she stayed home and became a very committed volunteer. Terry decided to give writing a chance once her kids reached high school. The first essay she ever submitted—about teaching her daughter to drive—was published by *The Washington Post*. Since then, she has published other newspaper and magazine articles and written a weekly humor column for *The Reston Connection* newspaper. She wrote educational content for the Smithsonian Science Education Center and internet sources. Then, she advanced to writing award-winning science and history-based nonfiction books for children. With *Definitely Dominguita*, she has fulfilled her dream of writing fiction for children.

What Terry loves about working on the *Definitely Dominguita* series is revisiting books she loved as a child and imagining a modern, but similar, adventure for Dominguita and her friends. Most fun was creating the mythical suburban town of Mundytown—a fun place full of caring characters—where Dom and her crew have freedom to roam.

Terry lives with her husband in Reston, Virginia and enjoys spending winters hiking and biking in Southern Utah. She enjoys visiting with her four grandchildren and often encourages them to bring their parents. She is a member of SCBWI and the Children's Book Guild of Washington, DC.

Published Work:

Gopher to the Rescue! A Volcano Recovery Story (2012)

Narrative non-fiction picture book

Sylvan Dell Publishers (Now Arbordale Publishers)

2013 Outstanding Science Trade Book – National Science Teacher’s Association (NSTA) and Children’s Book Council.

2013 New Books for Missouri Students

2014-2015 South Carolina Book Awards Program Selection

The Women’s Liberation Movement: 1960-1990 (2013)

Non-fiction

Mason Crest

ALA’s Amelia Bloomer Project Recommended Feminist Literature 2014-2015

Sounds of the Savanna (2015)

Narrative non-fiction picture Book

Arbordale Publishers

NSTA Recommended

Bank Street Center for Children’s Literature—Best Children’s Book of the Year

Keystone to Reading Elementary Book Award List

Magnetic Magic (2016)

Narrative non-fiction picture book

Arbordale Publishers

NSTA Recommended

Vivian and the Legend of the Hoodoos (2017)

Narrative non-fiction picture book

Arbordale Publishers

Educational Content for The Smithsonian Science Education Center.

Articles in *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Long Island News Day*.

Weekly humor column for *The Reston Connection*, in Reston, Virginia.

Additional Information about writing the book:

The Knight of the Cape is a chapter book with Latinx protagonists. And it is a book about a strong girl who sets out to prove a point. Third graders Dominguita and her friend Pancho are both Cuban-American kids who live in typical American households and have exciting adventures. They rescue a girl, Steph Williams, who becomes their friend. The only thing which reminds the reader of Dom and Pancho's heritage is their love of Cuban food. The book reminds young readers that, regardless of our heritage, we are all the same. The humor in the book connects to readers, no matter what culture they embrace. Readers identify with Dom, who sets off on grandiose crusades just to be brought back down to reality by her two friends.

My father was a great Don Quijote fan. I often think that being a writer is a little like being Don Quijote, always chasing the impossible dream. One day, the idea of a kid who pretended to be Don Quijote showed up in my head. What if I had a Don Quijote-like protagonist? A child who loved nothing better than reading, who read stories about knights, and had knightly adventures that really never turned out well? Don Capote! Capote means cape, in Spanish. Don Quijote was the Knight of the Sad Face. My protagonist could be the Knight of the Cape! The first working title was *Don Capote and Sam Short Pants*.

When I ran it by my grown daughter, she was scandalized. "Where's my feminist mother? It has to be a girl!" Why didn't I think of that? But Don Capote was a perfect name—a perfect boy name. Eventually, Don became Dom Capote and eventually morphed into Dominguita Melendez (after my mother's family) who could not only be the knight of the cape, but also captain Dom (Treasure Island), and Sherlock Dom and . . .

The interesting thing about Don Quijote and Dom Capote was that they both failed spectacularly—if Dom hadn't been gifted with a runaway toddler, she would have been an utter flop in the eyes of the class bully. Both Don Quijote and Dom eventually transitioned from fantasy to reality and came to understand and accept themselves as they are, including their shortcomings and failures. They both recognized the value of love and friendship.

A funny circumstance that happened while writing *The Knight of the Cape* was that I felt very comfortable in my knowledge of Don Quijote. When Dom finds what she believes is the golden helmet, just like Don Quijote did, my text called it the Golden Helmet of Membrillo. Turns out that membrillo is what my father had for dessert at home in Cuba. The true name of the prized helmet, which I found while looking for a picture of it, was the Golden Helmet of Mambrino. When I fessed up to my editor, she insisted Dom must also make the mistake in the book. She does. Pancho calls her out.

Additional Questions and Answers:

When did you become interested in writing?

I've wanted to write since I was a young child. I wanted to be like Jo March, in little women. I even lived in a house with an attic for about a year and went up to the attic to write. I wrote a few very forgettable stories as a young girl. But in eleventh grade, my English teacher singled me out in front of the class for writing words she "knew" could not be part of my vocabulary in an assigned essay. She accused me of using the Thesaurus because I was Cuban. I hadn't, but I was humiliated. I had signed up for her creative writing class my senior year and I took myself out of that class. I eventually decided to major in Math in college. My math teacher, Mrs. Vaughan, had always been supportive and she believed in me. I ended up attending her Alma Mater, the University of Richmond.

It is also important to understand that my parents would not have approved of an occupation as insecure as writing. The combination of those two things steered me toward a more secure career. But stories never stopped rolling around in my head. When my children were of an age when their schools no longer needed me as a volunteer, I decided to give writing a chance.

What sparks your creativity?

What sparks my creativity is getting the idea of a character in a situation. I am often very creative while I am walking or riding my bike. Or working in the garden. I can work out dialogue and plot problems while I exercise.

How did your experience as a young immigrant shape your life and your writing?

As a young person, when I first came to the United States, I experienced some subtle and some not so subtle forms of discrimination. Those experiences, while nothing like what we see now, were hurtful. Trying to avoid discrimination shaped all my choices in my early life. I decided to learn English as well as I possibly could, assimilate and lose my "Cubanness" in order to be accepted. That need not have happened. I believe I can speak eloquently in both English and Spanish on the need to impress readers with the humanity of each of us. On how at our core, we are all the same. How the sum of small, thoughtless acts can change the trajectory of a life—never mind the impact of the systemic racism that afflicts our society.

What is most rewarding and/or challenging about writing children's books?

The reward is connecting with a reader and making a difference. My hope is to reach children and cement the belief that there are no "others." Dominguita is every child. Whether she is American, Cuban or the descendant of a purple popsicle, she loves and misses her grandmother, tries to manipulate her brother, flirts with disobeying her parents, loves sweets, has moments of brilliance and moments of sheer folly. She is just as human as any of her readers. She is just a kid who happens to live in a household where black beans and rice with a side of plantains are a staple.

From a craft standpoint I love seeing a story take shape and finally say exactly what you meant it to say. The challenge is writing in a voice appropriate for the age group.

When did you first realize that you were not thought of as equal to Americans?

I became a very good friend of the daughter of a Girl Scout leader when I first came to the United States. She invited me to join the troop. On our first camp out, I expected to share her tent. Instead, an African American girl and I were put in a tent by ourselves, by the smelly latrines, while all the other ten girls slept in two six-person tents. It became clear to us both that we were considered “other” and less than the rest of the troop.

Why did your family come to the United States?

An autocrat, Fidel Castro, was allowed to take power over the government of Cuba in January 1, 1959. He allowed no dissent, freedom of speech, or freedom of religion. He wrecked Cuba’s economy and became a puppet of the Soviet Union. At first, my father was not allowed to leave the country because he worked for the Cuban equivalent of the Federal Reserve System, but in April of 1961, he was jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion. People yelled for him to be executed by firing squad behind our house for the two nights he was in jail. Luckily, he was freed by Ché Guevara after three days. We came to the United States soon after that with \$50 for our whole family to begin a new life. We lived with one uncle for a while and a second uncle for a while longer. We were one of those families who lived twelve or fourteen people in the same house. My father finally found a job at the Richmond Federal Reserve Bank two years after we reached the United States. It was not at all at the level at which he worked in Cuba, but it allowed our family to thrive.

How long did it take you to write the story?

I began writing the first book in February of 2018, if I can trust the names of my files. My agent, Natalie Lakosil, was satisfied with it in February of 2019. It actually sold very quickly. I started the second book in April of 2018 and it was good enough also by February of 2019. The third book took a very short time—two or three months. But I sat and stared at the outline of the fourth book for months before I could really get going. Eventually, I wrote it in a couple of months as well. Having said that, I am still working on a novel I began in 2008.

What was the favorite line you wrote?

In *The Knight of the Cape*, there is a scene where Dominguita visits Kowalski’s grocery because Mr. Kowalski is known to be descendant from Polish nobility and has a sword with which he can perform a knighting ceremony. I love that whole scene. “The sword hung in a glass case under a sign for Pucker Pickles. The silver blade gleamed neon green. It looked magical. Like it had been placed there just for her.” Dom eventually keeps a 45 minute vigil over her armor between the parsnips and the rutabagas (Don Quijote didn’t last that long on his vigil either) and since Mr. Kowalski can’t find the key to the glass case, he ends up dubbing her with the metal pole he uses to close the shutters that protect his stores’ windows.

Were you a reader?

Learning to read in Spanish is not difficult. It is totally phonetic and there are only 27 or 28 sounds (don't hold me to that, but it's a very small number). I learned to read when I was three. My mother was sewing on her pedal sewing machine and I would ask her the sounds of the letters on the bubbles in the Sunday comics (Cuban). I remember that vividly. I read for myself from that point on, often staying under the covers with a flashlight to read. As I got older, my father, who was a banker, gave me an allowance. I can't remember how much it was. The only thing I had to do to earn it was to keep an account of what I spent on a green accountant's sheet. It was easy. Every Saturday I spent \$0.25 for the movies and \$0.05 for a Sugar Daddy which lasted the whole movie. The rest I spent on books. There was a bookstore about two blocks from my house and I would go on author binges. The owner of the bookstore often ordered the books that I wanted. It was easy to keep track of that.

Once Castro came and things got bad, my mother decided to quit work. She was a professor at a teacher's college, and she really couldn't NOT work. So she volunteered at my school. I was reading so much that she convinced the Mother Superior at my school to tell me that I should stop reading and instead have more friends. My books were my friends. Just like Dominguita.

What was the hardest part about editing?

The ending to *Captain Dom's Treasure* was difficult. All the ideas I had were terrible for a book which second and third graders would read. I loved the idea that Dom figured out the treasure was hidden on the roof of an apartment building. The villain also figured it out. First I had to raise a wall around the roof of the building, so they wouldn't fall off. Then I took off the finger in the villain's pocket that looked like a gun. Then I nixed the villain using Dom's weapon, a dandelion weeder, to push her to take him to the roof. I finally made it soft enough that, in my mind, I satisfied the two "angels" on my shoulders—Natalie, my agent on one side, and Aly my editor on the other. I was really happy with the ending. But it took Ali the longest time to get back to me on edits on that book. She was having problems with the ending. Ugh! I shot several alternatives, and nothing would work. But Aly was patient and without me even realizing it, she guided me to a great ending. It's a mystery, so I can't give away the surprise. The awful part is that really, I should have thought about that myself.

What are the other two books about?

In *One for All*, the three friends become musketeers. Using toilet plungers as their dueling swords, they try to right wrongs. When the dastardly Bublasi brothers try to interfere with a friend's quinceañera party, Dom, Pancho and Steph come to the rescue and the dastardly bullies end up all wet.

In *The Lost Goat of Tapperville*, Dom and Steph leave Mundytown for a long weekend in the little town of Tapperville. When Esther, the next door neighbor's goat goes missing, the girls, with Pancho on the cell phone, find the goat and solve the mystery of its disappearance.

In *Captain Dom's Treasure*, Dom finds a map stuck in a copy of *Treasure Island*. She and her crew figure out that the treasure is the loot from an actual robbery in 1967 and, if they find it, they plan to return the money to the rightful owner—the beloved Mr. Kowalski of Kowalski's Grocery. But someone else also knows about the robbery, all he needs to find the loot is Dom's map. Who will win the race?

How are the books like the classics that inspired them?

The Knight of the Cape is inspired by *Don Quijote*, (*Don Quixote* in English) a book written by Miguel de Cervantes in the early 1600s. Don Quijote is a man who, like Dom, likes nothing better than reading. People tell him he shouldn't read. Especially people in the church. But he doesn't pay attention. He imagines he is a medieval knight and sets out to look for adventure.

Don Quijote finds a squire named Sancho Panza, who keeps him real like Pancho Sanchez keeps Dom real. Like Dom, when Don Quijote rescued someone, he thought the tormentor would never come back. He tackled bullies and thought he'd won, like Dom, fighting Ponsi Bublasi.

Both Don Quijote and Dom fought giants that were actually windmills. Like Don Quijote, Dom failed to achieve most of her goals. At the end of their knightly adventures, both Dom and Don Quijote face the truth about themselves. But unlike Don Quijote, who dies at the end of the book after having set his life right, Dom goes on. With two new friends, she sets out for other adventures based on other books.

Captain Dom's Treasure is inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, published as a book in 1883. It is the story of Jim Hawkins, a young boy who found a real treasure map in his family's inn. The treasure had been buried by the infamous Captain Flint. Flint's crew knew of the treasure and were eager to get their hands on it.

In this book, Dom is a mash of Jim Hawkins, the hero, Captain Smollet, who commanded the ship, and Squire Trelawney, who blabbed about the map, like Dom. Some of Captain Flint's pirates heard him and signed up to go on the trip. What they planned to do was kill Jim, the doctor, the squire, and the captain. Instead, Jim overheard Long John Silver, while napping in an apple barrel, like Dom overheard J.L./Juan Largo at the Holland House Restaurant.

In one chapter, Jim left his mates, like Dom. The doc in *Treasure Island* narrated the story just like Doc Steph in *Captain Dom* takes over the narration. Long John Silver, like J.L., was a charmer. He flattered Jim Hawkins and the squire and got them to believe he had good intentions.

In the end, Jim found Ben Gunn—a man who'd been marooned by pirates on *Treasure Island*. Ben Gunn found the treasure, and like Ben Gonzales in *Captain Dom*, didn't want it for himself. Jim had many misadventures, but like Dom, he was saved by his friends.

Although Long John Silver should have been turned over to be jailed, no one minded when he took a small portion of the treasure and escaped. Even though Long John wasn't always good, no one had wanted to make him pay. That's why Dom was happy with the ending of her pirate adventure.

One for All is inspired by *The Three Musketeers*, a book written in 1844 by French author Alexandre Dumas. Like Dom, Pancho and Steph, the real musketeers valued honor, and tried to help those in need. They often got out of jams by fast-talking and confusing people using just a bit of truth spoken with conviction, a skill Dom's musketeers use to perfection. In *The Three Musketeers*, there was intrigue, people who loved each other and people who were scorned by lovers. In *All for One*, the oldest Bubllassi brother—one of the town bullies—wrongly feels scorned by Leni Fuentes. She is the granddaughter of el Señor Fuentes, the musketeers' friend and costume supplier. Dom and her friends pledge to defend Leni and her quinceañera party, like the Musketeers pledged themselves to defend the Queen.

In *All for One*, Dom's musketeers echo the scene in which the Musketeers save the Queen's Diamonds. Dom's musketeers set out together to pick up and deliver the earrings el Señor Fuentes bought for his granddaughter. Along the way, they peel off to distract each of the Bubllassi brothers who seek to "borrow" the earrings using one to model balloon animals, another to hand out candy to well-behaved kids and the third to follow the wrong clue—allowing Dom to carry out the task.

They also dress up brooms in their own costumes to fool the bullies like the Musketeers did in the Bastion of St. Gervais. The Musketeers were able to get away from a charging horde. Dom's musketeers were able to get outside to spring the final trap on the Bubllassi brothers. Dom and her crew suggest the Bubllassis should be imprisoned in a tower far away, echoing the latter part of the musketeers' story. The most despicable villain in the book, a woman who plotted and ruined many lives was imprisoned in faraway castle, in a room high over the sea until a young man she enthralled saved her. She was caught again and ended up dead. In *All for One* the Bubllassis only ended up wet.

The Lost Goat of Tapperville is inspired by the story of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Arthur Conan Doyle, the most famous of the Sherlock Holmes stories. It was published between August, 1901 and March, 1902 in *The Strand Magazine*. The book came out that March.

Dom, like Sherlock Holmes, was antsy to solve problems. She also figured out things about people by just looking at them. They both wanted to get to the scene of the crime right away and became upset at people who erased clues by walking on them. Sherlock Holmes, like Dom did in the marsh, often fell or spilled something in order to take a look at a possible clue in detail without anyone realizing it.

The Lost Goat of Tapperville takes place next to a marsh that borders a meadow like the Baskerville's moor, it is hounded by terrible howls and Dom and Steph solve the problem by stalking the bad guys on the moor.

One thing which Sherlock Holmes often did, was to decide that he knew better than the law. For instance, if someone got caught killing a really bad person, Sherlock Holmes would give the criminal the opportunity to get away. It was a little like what Dom did in helping Marabella and Mikey get away with "borrowing" Esther to save the kittens.