

ABOUT BURN BABY BURN

Burn Baby Burn by Meg Medina is a compelling, coming-of-age story about Nora Lopez, a Cuban American teen living in a city where residents are facing violence, racial tension, and housing insecurity. Nora faces turmoil on the streets of Queens but also increasingly at home, as she and her mother struggle to pay rent and keep her brother Hector's simmering—and sometimes physical—anger in check. Luckily, Nora has teachers that believe in her, a best friend she loves like family, and a cute guy just started at the deli where she works part-time. Even as her world falls apart and burns away, Nora learns to overcome shame and fear and move forward.

MEET MEG MEDINA



Meg Medina is the author of *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* and the picture book *Tía Isa Wants a Car*, illustrated by Claudio Muñoz, which won the Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award. Her young adult novel, *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, won the 2014 Pura Belpré Author Award. The daughter of Cuban immigrants, she grew up in Queens, New York, and now lives in Richmond, Virginia.

ABOUT READ BRAVE

Launching Fall 2018, Read Brave Saint Paul is a citywide, intergenerational reading program set around a common theme relevant to the city. The 2019 Read Brave theme is housing, a critical topic in Saint Paul where thousands of people struggle to afford housing.

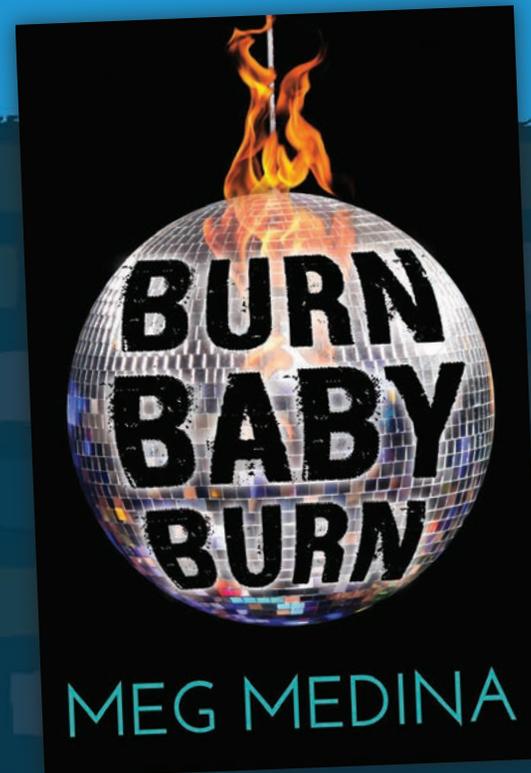
The city is faced with brave decisions to make about housing in our communities—decisions that start with deep conversations among our residents. When we all read the same books, we all have a common vocabulary, characters, and experience through which to engage in meaningful dialogue around challenging topics.

MORE READ BRAVE BOOK PICKS

- Nonfiction *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond
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- For Kids *Shelter* by Céline Claire
Yard Sale by Eve Bunting
Rich by Nikki Grimes
Crenshaw by Katherine Applegate

READING GUIDE

2019 FICTION PICK



ON YOUTUBE: 'HELLO' FROM MEG MEDINA

Scan the QR code with your phone's camera app.



Meg Medina will visit Saint Paul from February 19-21, 2019 to discuss her book and participate in a series of events free and open to the public, including at local schools.

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Read Brave is supported by the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund and the Katherine B. Andersen Fund.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



A CONVERSATION WITH MEG MEDINA

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE BURN BABY BURN?

Meg Medina: Sometimes we experience things when we're young that we never forget. As writers, those memories make their way into our work, one way or another. That's the case for *Burn Baby Burn*. I was 14 in 1977, a year that is larger-than-life in the collective memory of New Yorkers. It was Bonnie Bell lip gloss, disco music thumping, and women marching in the streets for equal rights. But for me, it was also watching my mother figure out how to pay the rent on a minimum wage salary. It was buildings in some neighborhoods being torched for insurance money. It was crime that was out of control everywhere you looked. And, of course, it was the daily horror of a serial killer who dubbed himself Son of Sam, prowling the streets to murder young girls and their dates.

I wanted to capture the dizzying mix of all of that violence and upheaval and to place a Latinx family in the middle of it all. It seemed to me a way to tell a slice of American history through a particular lens – the bicultural one, the immigrant one – and to shed some light on what that looked like.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE READERS OF ALL AGES TAKE AWAY FROM BURN BABY BURN?

MM: *Burn Baby Burn* is about a family really coming undone economically and emotionally, and about a city doing the same. But ultimately, it's a story of finding the strength and skills to survive that kind of violence. I want readers to see Nora's difficulties and to connect with what it really takes for her to advocate for herself and change her circumstances.

I also want young readers in particular to see that what they're living today had roots much earlier. There are through-lines of our history: the mistrust between communities of color and the police force; the struggle for housing and good paying jobs; the impact of poverty on people's health, including mental health; and the rage women and girls feel in the face of disparities and disrespect. I think the book creates a space to consider where have we improved and what's still left to be done.

WHAT MAKES YOU A "BRAVE" WRITER?

MM: I suppose I dare to name things that some people find unpalatable for kids. For example, I don't mind drawing a violent family the way it is. And I don't mind drawing the many ways that adults fail kids.

There are some adult critics who disagree, of course.

They feel that we ought to draw more positive and uplifting stories for kids. They point out that books like mine in some ways depress kids or draw a very dour view of the world that's unhealthy.

To that I say, sure, there are plenty of things to love about being alive on this crazy globe. But there are plenty of soul-crushing situations that young people carry around every day in secret. We can't abandon them. We have to let those experiences get shared or they kill us. In daring to name the hard things, I try to take away the shame and make things less lonely. If my books can do that for a reader, I've done my work.

IF YOU COULD SAY ONE THING TO THE YOUTH OF SAINT PAUL, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

MM: Saint Paul's youth has the largest poverty rate in your state...somewhere around a third of kids under 18 live in poverty. It's easy for kids in that situation to be so consumed with just getting by that they feel invisible and unimportant. They stop being able to imagine other circumstances for themselves. It becomes a dangerous state of mind.

So, to them, I say that your lives and your stories matter — and that you absolutely have power over changing the things in your lives that you don't like.

IN BURN BABY BURN, NORA AND HER FAMILY FACE THE THREAT OF EVICTION. HOW DO YOU THINK THIS BOOK CAN HELP PEOPLE TODAY TALK ABOUT HOUSING?

MM: Housing is a huge issue that's threaded throughout *Burn Baby Burn*. There is the constant struggle of Nora's family to make the rent on time—and all the ways Nora has to dodge the landlord when that's not possible.

And then there is my favorite character in the novel, Stiller. She's the head of the tenant group and is utterly fearless. She's basically in a constant war with the building superintendent—everything from getting heat on time to making sure nobody messes with their belongings in the storage room. And you better believe she knows the precise rules on who you can evict and when.

It's also Stiller who predicts what's going to happen to their Queens neighborhood over time. "One day only fat cats will live here," she tells Nora, who can't even imagine such a thing in her dumpy neighborhood. But, sure enough, here we are in Saint Paul and elsewhere. In New York, you'll pay a couple thousand dollars a month for a studio, if you're lucky. And who bears the brunt? The poor and working people.

1. How is your neighborhood/community like Nora's? How is it different?
2. Stiller knows her rights as a tenant in 1970s New York. Do you know what rights you have as a renter in 2018 Saint Paul? If not, how could you find out?
3. On page 153, Nora thinks, "I know I should say something to make Mima feel better, but I can't manage it. In fact, I'm angry at her. Shouldn't she be able to take better care of us? Isn't that what adults are supposed to do?" How does Mima see her role as a caregiver? What does Nora think she should do differently?
4. With Hector in the apartment, Nora doesn't always feel safe at home. What other reasons can you think of for why someone may not feel safe at home or why they may need to leave their home?
5. Stiller says "Nothing ends...There is only transformation, as ugly as it may be" (page 242). What are some of the transformations that are happening in the book? What transformations have you noticed in Saint Paul?
6. Part of Nora's paycheck goes toward her family's rent every month. Do you or anyone you know have to work to help your family with housing or other needs? How does/would that make you feel?
7. The people and places in Nora's neighborhood are an important part of *Burn Baby Burn*. Where do you see strong or weak community relationships in the story? Where do you see them in your own neighborhood? What effects do community relationships have, either in the story or in your own life?
8. Nora says "I am counting down the days to be done with high school so I can move out" (page 45). Would you want to do the same? Why or why not?
9. Nora and her family live their lives with a near-constant threat of eviction from their apartment. How does this worry impact their daily lives and the choices they make? What experiences have you had where you were worried about something?