



Celebrating the Moon Within

We speak with Aida Salazar, author of *The Moon Within* — a middle grade novel about a girl celebrating her first period with a moon ceremony.

Narration: Welcome to Feeling My Flo, where menstruation is an event that happens to all types of bodies. I'm Kamilah Kashanie. My pronouns are she and her.

The Feeling My Flo team talks a lot about our personal experiences with periods. And one of the things that's come up is how we first learned about menstruation.

Our producer Mia uses she/her pronouns. She's a total bookworm...so it wasn't much of a surprise to me how *she* first found out about it.

Mia Warren: It was a classic young adult novel called *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*.

Kamilah Kashanie: What's it about?

Mia: Okay, so it's about a girl named Margaret. And she's in the sixth grade and she's going through a lot of changes. So for example, her mom is Christian and her dad is Jewish, so she's trying to figure out her faith. And another thing she's dealing with is puberty and waiting for her first period.

Kamilah: Where were you the first time that you read it?

Mia: I was around eight or nine years old...and so that was five or six years before I got my first period. And I remember reading it on the way to school in the car and Margaret and her friends keep talking about a period, a period. But I didn't know what that was.

Kamilah: Did you ask anybody?

Mia: I think I tried to figure it out from context clues but I just couldn't get it. So I just asked my parents and they explained it to me. But the main thing about the book that made an impact on me is how Margaret and her friends are excited about getting a period. And it's written as such a rite of passage for them.

Narration: Judy Blume wrote *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* in 1970. And [in the fifty years since, the book has been banned regularly](#)...for dealing with subjects like puberty, religion, and — you guessed it — menstruation.

When we started looking for other young adult books about menstruation, we were coming up short. Until Mia walked into a bookstore this summer...and found one.

Aida Salazar: The story is about 11-year-old Celi Rivera, who is a dancer. She dances Afro Puerto Rican *bomba* and she is on the cusp of adolescence.

My name is Aida Salazar. I'm the author of *The Moon Within* and my pronouns are she/her.

Narration: *The Moon Within* is Aida's first book. The story's told from the perspective of Celi, who's eleven years old.

Aida: She was very inspired by my daughter. You know, my daughter bites her nails. My daughter is bicultural and multiracial. My daughter likes to dance *bomba*. I thought it would be really interesting to write a story where she could see herself reflected.

Narration: In the novel, Celi and her mother, Mima, don't agree on something pretty important. Mima's *really* excited about Celi experiencing puberty. And she wants to celebrate Celi's first period with a moon ceremony.

Aida: A moon ceremony as I practice them...is a Mexica-based ritual that is celebrated by the light of the full moon very soon after the menstruator has, uh, experienced their first moon.

Narration: Celi has Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage. So her moon ceremony is made up of indigenous Mexican traditions...and Yoruba and Taino traditions from West Africa and the Caribbean.

The type of moon ceremony Aida described to Mia is a pre-Columbian tradition practiced by indigenous people before Europeans colonized the Americas. And it's still practiced today in places like Oakland, where Aida lives.

Aida: So we gather elders in the community that are close to the menstruator. And usually it's women or people who menstruate. And we build an altar in the center of the circle and we build a fire. And we set thirteen stones around the fire to represent the thirteen moons that appear in a year.

Narration: Indigenous communities across North and South America celebrate young people in a lot of different ways. [The Hoopa Valley Tribe of northern California perform what's called the Flower Dance.](#)

[In the Flower Dance, people in the community sing songs to a young person being honored, who wears blue jay feathers over their eyes. The ceremony can last for a few days. At the end, folks come together for a feast, where they give gifts and they bless the young person.](#)

Aida grew up in Los Angeles, but her mother is Mexican and comes from an indigenous background. And Aida learned a few traditions from her.

Aida: My mother has a third grade education and she was born in Zacatecas in a *rancho*, which didn't have any running water or any electricity. And so her customs are very rooted in the earth. So there's a big practice of the medicinal use of herbs. There was lots of folktales and lots of...superstition around all sorts of things. Back then, they would call menstruation *lunas*, which is 'moon' in Spanish.

Narration: The moon completes a full cycle around the Earth every 27 days. On average, a menstruator will have a period every 28 days.

Aida: It was really illuminating to think about that connection...that we cycle in 28, 29 days when we menstruate...as does the moon. And that began a kind of fascination slash long-term investigation with this concept.

Narration: As Aida learned more about moon cycles, she started searching for books that speak about menstruation. And she remembered *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*.

Aida: And now that book I read as a child and I thought, you know, it would be really interesting to, to write the story from a Latinx perspective, especially one that was...a child that was multiracial and bicultural like my daughter. And so I set out to write the story for her and for other menstruators like her.

Narration: Although Aida has indigenous heritage, moon ceremonies weren't something that she knew about when she was growing up.

Aida: The first time I got my period, I, I cried. I was so scared...I knew, but I didn't really know what was happening. And I remember going to my eldest sister and whispering in her ear and, and she came, um, and took me to the bathroom and she told me, 'Okay, this is what you have to do. You have to put it on, put on this pad this way with the sticky side down.'

Narration: When Aida first learned about the Mexica moon ceremony practiced by her *own* ancestors, she did some serious digging.

Aida: I started talking to other elders in our, in our community and, and other women who are trying to kind of reclaim that which was lost during colonization. And I became aware that, that moon ceremonies were actually happening within

my community, the Mexican indigenous...reclamation of our culture. And I thought, um, you know, if I ever had a daughter, I would do that for her.

Narration: And when Aida's daughter got *her* period, that's exactly what they did.

Aida: We blessed our ancestors. We asked for permission to the Ohlone people, the native people of Oakland. We thanked Mother Earth, the universe, and Grandmother Moon. And then we held hands and we gave thanks to all of the things that gave us strength, things that we were grateful for.

Narration: By the way, there are many types of special rituals that make up a moon ceremony, depending on the ancestral traditions of the menstruator.

At Aida's daughter's moon ceremony, the group ate cacao beans, which is the plant that chocolate comes from. They bathed Aida's daughter with flower water. Guests pinned a flower onto her hair or put it on her clothes. And then it was time to pass down wisdom.

Aida: We went around and we each gave her different bits of advice. Some people sang, some people wrote her things, some people were funny and it was all done with so much love and so much sweetness. There's a lot of times that people were crying.

There is one ritual in my daughter's moon ceremony that was, I think, the most powerful thing and I think it's the most powerful ritual in, in the book as well. And that is when you take menstrual blood and you feed it to the earth. And so my daughter did that. I collected her stained underwear from the hamper and I cut the, the actual bloodied pieces of it. And, and I asked her to wash it in a basin of, of blessed flower water. And then she dug a hole with her hand inside the earth and she poured that water, with prayer, into the earth.

Narration: Aida told Mia that this blood-giving ritual is really intended to help the menstruator renew their connection to the earth.

Aida: You know, from an outsider's perspective, from somebody who doesn't want to touch their menstrual blood from, you know, the negative narrative that we have against menstruation, this is something of disgust, or, or...you know, unheard of. But when you have a relationship to your body...your blood is as essential as your skin, as your breath, as your tears.

Narration: The moon ceremony for Aida's daughter was really significant for the both of them. But it wasn't so easy for Celi in *The Moon Within*.

That's because Celi and *her* mom, Mima, have different ideas about what's important.

Aida: Mima's really trying to reclaim, um, ancestral traditions and Celi is not along for the ride at all. She respects her mother...but...she feels like her mother doesn't see her...and doesn't understand how embarrassing it would be if she were to have a ceremony and have to divulge her personal information in front of

everybody. And Mima thinks it's just the most beautiful thing...she doesn't shy away from being proud about being a Chicana feminist who is reclaiming her indigenous cultures. But Celi is very, very shy. She bites her nails. She thinks that, um...it's nobody's business what happens to her body.

Narration: One of our favorite parts of the book is *after* the moon ceremony, when Celi reflects on how she feels.

[Excerpt]

Aida: Midnight light. It is nearly midnight when I come in from the garden and settle into bed. I try not to wake Juju. My skin still tingles. The stories and advice every woman shared with me about their moons, about being a woman, stir in my mind, secrets that could only have been given to me now, after my own moon. They fill my locket and I feel it overflow. I open my jar of moon beam water, take a sip and I notice Luna's rays have followed me in. In the middle of the room, we flutter together, my arms outstretched...longer now, and winged. I look into the beautiful dark, and sway with Luna's moonbeams as we dance into the night.

Narration: Aida's daughter was 11 when she first started her period — the same age as Celi. Now she's 14. Aida says *The Moon Within* is a gift to her, and in many ways, for the rest of us.

Aida: The craziest thing is that every single human on this planet came from a menstruator. You know, it couldn't have happened without that process.

Narration: Aida is now editing an anthology titled *Calling the Moon*. It's a collection of stories about menstruation...all by writers of color. Visit AidaSalazar.com for more.

The last song you heard is "Domingo Yaucano" composed by Aida's husband, John Santos, arranged by Saul Sierra, and performed by the John Santos Sextet.

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This episode was produced by Mia Warren. She's our executive producer. Our sound engineer is Carolina Rodriguez. Our associate producer is Harsha Nahata. Our assistant producer is Emma Forbes. We're a production of Lantigua Williams & Co. I'm Kamillah Kashanie.



CITATION

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Produced by

