

# Words that Wake Us: A Guest Post by YA Author Ashley Hope Pérez

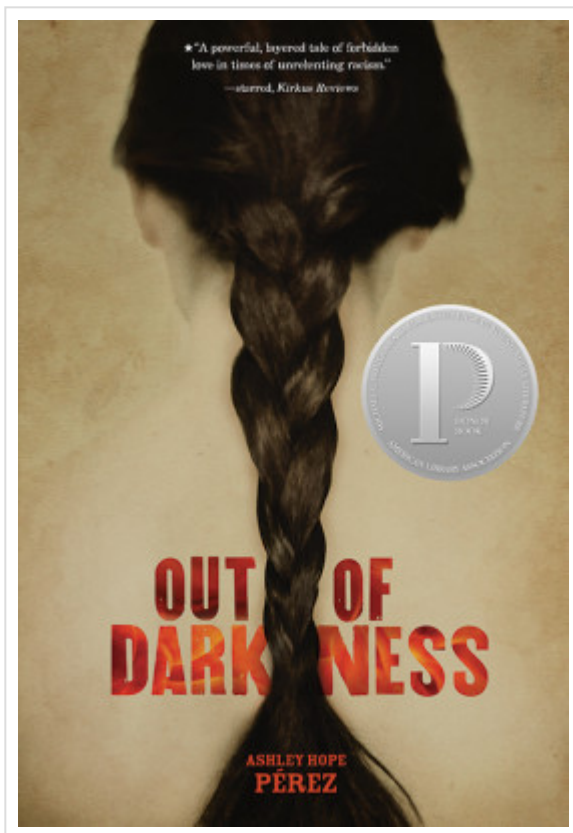
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*Out of Darkness* is set in Texas, and it takes the 1937 New London school explosion as the backdrop for a secret romance between an African American boy and a Mexican American girl. It's a book about segregation, love, family, and the forces that destroy people.

When I began *Out of Darkness*, my goal was to write a historical novel that would capture experiences largely excluded from the sanitized historical accounts in Texas history books. I wanted to approach the past in a way that would also prompt my readers to think more deeply about the present and the shape of the world around us.

Growing up in East Texas, I heard powerful stories of loss and of survival related to the natural gas explosion that killed nearly 300 students and teachers. But I was driven even more by the stories I didn't find collected in the archival materials on the disaster. Because the New London school was intended to serve white children, historical accounts of the explosion focused on the tragedy as the white community experienced it; no one recorded how people of color in the area had responded or how they viewed the disaster.



Gaps in the historical record catalyzed my imaginings of the two teenaged characters at the center of *Out of Darkness*: African American Washington Fuller and Mexican American Naomi Vargas. They meet in East Texas, where Wash is a long time native and the son of the New London Colored School's superintendent. Naomi is a beautiful and painfully shy high school senior who has just moved to New London with her younger twin half-siblings, Beto and Cari (short for Roberto and Caridad). They've come to East Texas from San Antonio to live with the twins' white stepfather so that the children can attend the New London School. The lighter-skinned twins quickly settle into their new life, but Naomi encounters hostility and racism. Wash helps her navigate the day-to-day demands of her new life, befriends the twins, and awakens Naomi to her own desire for love and freedom. Wash and Naomi's love grows through secret meetings and stolen moments in the woods, but they know that they can't hide forever. What they don't know, though, is that the worst school disaster in U.S. history awaits, threatening to shatter the school, the community, and their hopes for a future where they can be together.

Because *Out of Darkness* is set in the South during the 1930s, color lines shape the story. In San Antonio, for example, Naomi and the twins are forced to attend "Mexican" schools with overcrowded classrooms and underqualified teachers. In East Texas, Wash attends a "colored" school with a shorter school day and year, and Naomi is sent to the back entrance of New London's only grocery store. Although forced segregation of schools and communities may be a thing of the past, the effects—and reality—of segregation linger on. Wash experiences the heightened vulnerability that still characterizes the lives of many today, as evidenced in the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Renisha McBride, to cite just two examples. Racism and violence have deep roots in our history, and these roots are among the painful legacies that *Out of Darkness* examines.

*James Baldwin once noted that, in the U.S., “words are mostly used to cover the sleeper, not wake him up.”*

Reading fiction is no substitute for engagement with the world around us. I hope, nevertheless, that *Out of Darkness* confronts readers with words that wake them to the human cost of racialized violence and wake them to the need for change in our communities.

**About the author:** In addition to *Out of Darkness*, Ashley Hope Pérez is the author of the YA novels *The Knife and the Butterfly*, and *What Can't Wait*. She grew up in Texas and taught high school in Houston before pursuing a Ph.D. in comparative literature. She is now a visiting assistant professor of comparative studies at The Ohio State University and spends most of her time reading, writing and teaching on topics from global youth narratives to Latin American and Latina/o fiction. She lives in Ohio with her husband, Arnulfo, and their son, Liam Miguel. Read her [Q&A](#) here.

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