

INFINITY RING

Q&A with Matt de la Peña, author of **INFINITY RING: Curse of the Ancients**



Matt de la Peña is the author of numerous books for teens, including *Ball Don't Lie*, *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here*, and *I Will Save You*, all of which were named ALA-YALSA Best Books for Young Adults. His first picture book, *A Nation's Hope*, made several Best of 2011 lists. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, where he teaches creative writing.

- 1. With *Infinity Ring*, you had pretty much all of history as your playground. How did you decide to focus on the Maya?**

I approached the project selfishly. I've always looked for excuses to research Mexico's history, so when I stumbled upon the Mayan presence in the Yucatán in southern Mexico, I dug in. I also wanted young Mexican American students to be able to take a little ownership over the series.

- 2. How much research did you have to do as you worked on *Curse of the Ancients*? Did you already know a lot about the ancient Maya before you started writing?**

I didn't know a whole lot about the Maya when I began my research. Like many people, I sometimes confused the Maya and the Aztecs. I read two long non-fiction books which really changed my perception of the Maya. It also helped me better understand the region.

- 3. Did anything you learned in your research surprise you?**

The ancient Maya were an incredibly artistic and forward-thinking people. They came up with the concept of zero in math and developed the only known written language in the pre-Columbian Americas. The Spanish

Conquistadors attempted to destroy all Mayan texts (claiming they were the work of the devil), but three survived, most notably the Dresden Codex. I'm fascinated by the idea that some of their ideas have survived in a document we're still trying to accurately decipher.

- 4. Did working with a team of authors provide any new and unique challenges? Any benefits that you don't experience as the sole writer of a series?**

I think we all had a great time working together. There was still so much freedom within the series, it never felt confining. If we didn't like each other, it would have been more challenging. But we all genuinely like each other and get along.

- 5. Looking ahead, what do you think will be the biggest challenges for the other writers of the *Infinity Ring* series?**

It's all on Dashner's shoulders once Jen Nielsen's book is in the can. He has the challenge of bringing it all together and giving all the *Infinity Ring* readers a satisfying conclusion to the story. No pressure, James. Just remember to make it brilliant!

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6. What was your first impression when reading the first book, *A Mutiny in Time* by James Dashner? Did you know right away that you wanted to focus on Sera in book four, or did you decide on that later?

I was so excited to see that there was an ambiguously Hispanic character. Honestly, I felt like I had a home in the series. It allowed me to explore some of the identity elements I explore in all my novels, while at the same time focusing on the exciting twists and turns of this particular Break in history. I gravitated to Sera immediately.

7. Aspiring writers are often told to write what they know. Since your story infuses adventure, history, and science fiction elements, how have you followed that advice?

I think novels have two different levels. There's the plot, which is what the story's about. And there's also the theme, which is what the story's *really* about. When I worked out the theme of the book I was writing what I know. Everything else was new to me and demanded research and imagination.

8. Can you describe your writing process? Do you have any quirky writing rituals to carry out as you work? What advice can you give to aspiring writers?

I do all my research before I even start the story. I think it's good to have a firm grasp on the material before you start laying down sentences. I actually think of my best

ideas while jogging around Prospect Park in Brooklyn, especially when I'm jogging slow enough that old ladies start passing me. My best advice for aspiring writers: Show up every single day. The longer you step away from your story, the harder it is to go back.

9. The importance of heritage is a deeply rooted part of *Curse of the Ancients*. Did you always see this particular theme as the core of your novel? How early in the process did you know you would be focusing on Sera's complicated feelings about her ancestry?

I knew right away that Sera's complicated feelings about her heritage would be the focus of *Curse of the Ancients*. I knew she'd start out wanting to distance herself from the Maya because she views herself as American. But I also knew that over the course of the novel she would start seeing the grace and dignity of the Maya, and by the end she'd feel proud to be associated with them.

10. Do you believe there are underlying themes or universal truths to be found in the Infinity Ring series? Or is it difficult to say when each book is written by a different author?

I love watching the characters learn from every new culture they encounter. That's the most powerful recurring theme to me, the fact that the vastly different people who Dak, Sera, and Riq meet on their journeys all leave a lasting impression. I'm excited to see this continue through the series.



Sera has a secret. She's seen the future, and it is terrifying. Unfortunately, she can't do anything to prevent the Cataclysm while stranded with Dak and Riq thousands of years in the past. Their only hope lies with the ancient Maya, a mysterious people who claim to know a great deal about the future. Is there more to these ancients than meets the eye?

Infinity Ring Book 4: Curse of the Ancients

By Matt de la Peña

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