



## Benjamin Alire Saenz

**In Perfect Light**  
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**Q: As a child, you loved to paint and draw. The prose in *In Perfect Light* is saturated with painterlike imagery. How are the two arts—visual and literary—related for you? Why did you choose writing over painting? Do you still paint and draw? If so, in what ways does it affect your writing?**

A: Children are very visual. Children notice something that "catches their eye" and they point, and if they can't yet talk, they let out a sound that we recognize as delight. Picasso observed that all children were artists. Put another way, the world is still new for children. They don't take what they see for granted. Unfortunately, as we grow older, the world becomes all too familiar—so familiar that we cease to see it, observe it, delight in it. We cease to use our eyes—really use them.

There was a time when I had almost given up the idea of being writer. I didn't seem to be getting anywhere, and at that point the romance of being a starving writer has long since lost its appeal. It was then that I was leaning toward becoming a painter. In the end, I was unable to shake my addiction to words, and continued writing. But I was very close to exchanging my pen for a brush. Words won out. But even as I developed into a writer, my love of art and painting has never faltered, and even now, I continue to paint and struggle to develop that talent. I have been unable to shake my obsession with color and form, with shape and texture, shadow and light. I sometimes watch a movie and for a fleeting moment, I see a particular scene as a still frame and imagine it as a painting. Some directors are very painterly. Painting has always been (and will always be) more than a hobby for me. The fact that I will never be a great painter is no reason not to work at it. In our house, there are paintings and Mexican folk art and sculptures everywhere. My life is surrounded by visual art and by books. I am always working on a painting—just as I am always working on a writing project (sometimes a poem, sometimes a story, sometimes an essay). And always, always a painting.

These two arts—painting and writing—are so different from one another really—but in this one thing they are alike: you cannot write or paint if you cannot sit still and look at a thing—truly look at it. Actually, it was photography that made me want to be a writer and a painter. I took a photography class when I was in college, and I learned for the first time to look at a thing or a person or the land I walked on. In a sense, you could say that I was a kitten who had finally opened his eyes to the world. You really have to stop and look at something before you can photograph it. That's the way it is with writing and with painting—in that sense both are "visual" arts. You need a lens, you need a point of view, you need a pair of eyes. You need to see. The world must be familiar and utterly and completely new all at once. Maybe it's like this: you have to have the eyes of a child and the mind of a mature adult. For me maybe that's what I understand as "the writer's vision."

**Q: You have written novels, children's books, and poetry. What is different about the process of writing these different literary forms for you? Are there other literary forms you've experimented with? What is your favorite and why?**

A: You can't compare writing poems and writing a novel, really. Well, perhaps you can say that you work with words in very different ways in those different literary genres. I'm most autobiographical and political when I'm writing a poem. I think concisely. I think in a rhythm. I think in lines. I think in images that work on both a literal, metaphorical and emotional plane. I'm often haunted by the iambic nature of the English language when I write poems, and it isn't surprising that I'm more and more interested in working with blank verse. Poetry is about control. Poetry is about immediacy—it must be intimate and produce some kind of emotional or intellectual response, and it must do so concisely. Poetry forces me to think about words in ways that novels don't. That said, I cannot imagine confining myself to writing only poems. I love writing novels. I find them difficult and painful and intellectually challenging. I also find them frustrating and haunting. Novels don't leave you alone and they somehow colonize your life and you find yourself wondering what you were like before you had this idea of writing. My wife tells me I'm constantly talking to myself when I'm writing a novel. I think I go temporarily insane.

You know, I'm very taken with the idea of constructing characters and plots and having a dialogue with the world I live in by creating fictions (it's much more interesting than running for congress). When I write a novel, I always begin with an idea: I have a topic sentence in my head, and I tell myself, "this novel is going to be about—and then I fill in the blank. The topic sentence never appears in the novel. I am never confused as to what my novel is about—just as I am never confused as to what my poem is about. That said, I have to confess that I sometimes get lost in my own sentences, and I am constantly untangling myself.

And children's books, well, that's beautiful break for me. All I have to do is think like a boy. Be a boy. It's like taking a vacation from the difficult country of manhood. Faulkner and Garcia Marquez—they can write sentences. But those kinds of sentence won't do for children. I will say this one thing—when you write a children's book, it must, on the surface be a simple story—but a good children's story has many meanings. Children don't buy children's books, adults do. You have to appeal to adults as well as children when you write a children's book. That's the trick. I also write essays, and in fact, I'm working on a book of essays on life on the border. Essays permit me to be more analytical than any of the other forms I write in. I mean, writers are intellectuals, after all, and they have a very analytical side. They have to have that side if they're going to write anything worth the paper its written on. You can't just feel. Ideas don't just visit you—you have to visit them.

**Q: Andres is an outsider in his family and in society until he meets Grace. He is also a talented writer. Do writers necessarily need to be outsiders? Do you consider yourself an outsider in any way?**

A: Well, there's that, isn't there, the writer as outsider? I suppose there's something to that, but I don't like overstating that case. I know there's always been that romance of the "writer as outsider," but some of that is just, well, posing. Some of that stuff is adolescent. It's easy to construct yourself as an outsider—politicians do it all the time (doesn't matter that it's not true). You know, the very best writers do tend to critique the society they live in instead of pandering to it. If you're going to be a serious writer, you have to stand a little apart from the world you live in. Absolutely. I would guess that most writers have "loner" tendencies. I mean we're not exactly engaged in group activities. Being a writer and being an artist—these are solitary endeavors. You have to spend a great deal of time alone, apart from others, apart from the noise of the world. And me, I enjoy that time. I love that time. I need that time. That time is like food and water and air. But at the same time you are always in dialogue with the larger society around you. Writers watch. They look at things closely—sometimes maddeningly so. But we are not merely creatures who sit on the fringes of society. I am not just an

interested spectator in this sport called life. I am also a player. I wouldn't consider myself a complete outsider. I know I am involved in an endeavor that is a little bit unusual. People are a little bit suspicious of writers—either that or over enamored with the glamour of it. But to me writing is neither unusual nor glamorous. I may not exactly be the consummate insider, but I'm not exactly on the fringes, either. I know about words and how to use them. That gives me a kind of power that a lot of other people don't have. I don't know. I live in El Paso/Juarez. I see some serious poverty around me every day. I see people who are truly on the fringes, truly outsiders. I feel a little disingenuous constructing myself as an outsider.

**Q: Is there something about guitar player Andres Segovia's style or his songs that inspired qualities in his namesake in *In Perfect Light*? What are your main sources of inspiration for your characters and stories? What would you say is the most unusual source?**

A: By giving my main character the name, Andres Segovia, I wanted to remind the reader that he was an artist. Andres Segovia was one of the most noted artists of the 20th century. I cannot imagine a world without his music. We are all the richer for his discipline, for his immense talent that took a lifetime of dedication to achieve. And here we have this young man in my novel—a very gifted young man who was never given the opportunity to become what he was born to be. The irony of his name conjures the cruelty of his circumstance, conjures disappointment. His name underlines the cruelty of the world. So many people in this world are nothing more than collateral damage to other people's wars, to other people's agendas. We don't give collateral damage a second thought. How many talented human beings are born into his world and how many of them have the opportunities to develop those gifts? Very few, really, when you stop to think about it.

My material for my novels always come from the world I live in. I have met hundreds of Andres Segovias—on the streets of El Paso and Juarez, in classrooms at the University. I have met thousands of Grace Delgados who are committed to saving other people's lives, day in and day out, and they do their work anonymously. I don't think I have unusual sources for my literary works. I get my material from very ordinary places, and from very ordinary people—the stores I shop in, the streets I walk, the stories I overhear, the sorrows that are everywhere so obvious. The thing with being a novelist is this—you can't write well about people if you don't like them, if you feel superior to them. And you can't write well about people if you romanticize about them, either. People are complicate and can be very cruel, and they're capable of inflicting a good amount of damage. Even the few saints I've met can be very difficult. Some people lead very sad, painful lives. Some of our misfortunes are of our own making. But millions of people are born into an almost unbelievable poverty—should we blame them for that? We do, don't we? We always blame the poor for being poor. That's the truth. We are not always in control of our lives. That's the truth. The world I live in has given me enough material for several lifetimes. Sometimes, I think it's a damn shame that I only get one life. I can be so greedy. One life will have to do. And really, what would I do with another life? Write more books?