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READING ACROSS CULTURES
VOLUME XVIII, ISSUE I

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Open Theme

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WOW Review: Volume XVIII, Issue1
Fall 2025
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Introduction and Editors' Note

In a time period when hard-won rights for marginalized people are being erased, this collection of books supports the premise that everyone, no matter their cultures or beliefs, matters. This issue is a wonderful array of titles that support diverse people in telling a story about who they are at their core.

The issue opens with an anchor text. *All Because You Matter* is a letter to African American children that offers words that comfort, builds a strong sense of identity, and reassures each reader that they have immeasurable value. Two additional titles take place in urban areas and communicate the same message of immeasurable worth. *Saturday at the Food Pantry* is an every day story of the feelings of embarrassment that come to families as they visit a food pantry to collect necessities for the week ahead. The story concludes with a rich show of community care for each other. This worldview is even clearer in *Last Stop on Market Street* as a grandmother and grandson travel on a bus to serve meals at a soup kitchen. On the way they meet people who, on the outside, may not appear to have much to offer society, but because of the grandmother's outlook, the grandson sees beauty and value in everyone they meet and in the neighborhoods they visit.

Two titles highlight Indigenous ways of life and the cultures that shape actions. *Sunpainters: Eclipse of the Navajo Sun* introduces readers to Navajo cosmology through the story of a grandfather explaining to his grandson the reason for an eclipse of the sun. As the sky darkens, the Sunpainters have an opportunity to repaint the world in all the colors of the rainbow. *Daughter of the Light-Footed People* profiles Lorena Ramírez of the Rarámuri people in Northwest Mexico, famous for their ability to run long distances. Lorena has won ultra-marathons running in her traditional clothing of huaraches and a long skirt, honoring the cultural elements that have supported her family for generations.

Several other titles build on the premise of rich cultural heritage. In *The Truth About Dragons*, a young bicultural boy prepares to visit his two grandmothers who come from different parts of the world. Through a sensory description of a European forest and Asian landscape, his mother prompts him to ask his grandmothers to tell him stories about dragons, describing how Eastern and Western cultures view dragon habitats and personalities very differently. *Spanish is the Language of My Family* is a bilingual book in which a young boy prepares for a Spanish spelling bee with the help of his abuela. In the process he learns about the shaming she experienced in school if she was caught speaking Spanish. In contrast, he is encouraged to learn in two languages.

Several titles profile historical and current challenges in shaping an identity. In *Still Dreaming / Seguimos Soñando*, a young boy travels from the only home he has known in Texas across the Mexico-US border. He dreams of his friends, his tias, and his school while they drive through the night. The story takes place in the 1930s when many Mexicans and Mexican Americans faced discrimination, were denied the rights of citizenship, and were forced to go or return to Mexico. *Me and My Dysphoria Monster* describes the conflict that a child feels about the gender they were assigned at birth versus the gender that they identify with. With the help of an adult who

experienced the same dysphoria, the child is able to ask for lifestyle changes that will be more comfortable. Finally *My Pal Victor / Mi amigo Victor* is the story of the friendship between two young boys, full of laughter and activities where they cheer for each other. It is only at the end that the illustrator lets readers see that one of the boys is in a wheelchair. It is a wonderful story of seeing the child and not the chair.

We invite you to read and think with these titles and consider submitting a review for future issues. Please refer to calls below and the submission guidelines (<https://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/review/reviewcall/>).

Volume 18, Issue 2 (Winter 2026 – submission deadline December 1, 2025) – Themed issue profiling titles that involve curiosity, inventiveness and imagination as a tool for problem-solving.

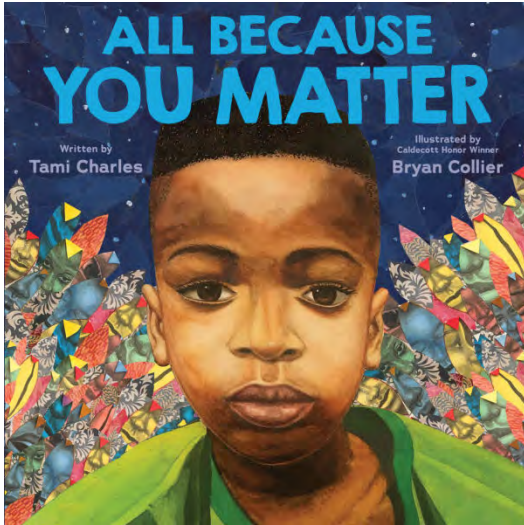
Volume 18, Issue 3 (Spring 2025 – submission deadline: February 1, 2026) – Open theme. The editors welcome reviews of global or multicultural children's or young adult books published within the last three years that highlight intercultural understanding and global perspectives.

Susan Corapi, co-editor
Melissa Wilson, co-editor

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All Because You Matter

Written by Tami Charles

Illustrated by Bryan Collier

Orchard Books, 2020, 36 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-1338574852

All Because You Matter serves as a letter to African American children to tell them they matter in a world that does not always show them favor and instead hands them hate and injustice. The letter affirms them, leading to inner peace, clarity about who they are and where they come from, and possibilities for their futures. The message uplifts and amplifies their voices while highlighting their history, in a

stance of resistance to marginalization. The words and images portray the rich culture and the dynamic journey of African Americans.

The first page introduces readers to the protagonist, a baby yet to be born, with an image of a mother and father in deep thought, wishing and hoping for all good things for their unborn son. Tami Charles uses a double meaning of the word ‘matter’ to emphasize that while all things are made up of matter, this child’s life matters. On the next spread, his parents assure the baby that his existence was a dream of his ancestors: “You were dreamed of, like a knapsack full of wishes, carried on the backs of your ancestors as they created empires, pyramids, legacies.” Bryan Collier represents this history with faces embedded in petal shapes, creating a quilted background of people helping the child bloom. As the letter continues, the ancestors’ wishes and deep support carries the child through the many phases of his life. Even when he experiences the darkness of racial injustices and the many hindrances society allows, the child is able to stand tall, be brave, and shine. This is especially clear on the double-page spread when the young boy is in school and hears cruel jokes regarding his name. That he still matters is the message of his parents and ancestors. The next to the last page sends the message that his significance will continue because of the grit, determination and excellence the ancestors possessed. The book ends with the child knowing that no matter what has happened or will happen, he is important.

The collage and watercolor illustrations show the culture, passion, and hope in stories from African American history. The images are carefully created to emphasize the powerful words written off to the side of each page. One illustration shows the Black boy, standing with his parents in the middle of a circle of contemporary friends with a quilt of petals in the background, representing ancestors proudly standing behind him. The quilt with the faces of the ancestors appears to acknowledge his struggle, as they experience the ultimate struggles, but their history provides him the strength to survive his own battles. The last illustration shows the mother and boy embracing one another with a smile next to the text that states, “You mattered. They mattered. We matter... And always will.”

Tami Charles, in her Author’s Note, explains that she wrote the text to help answer her young son’s “why” questions about African American history and current injustices. She knew she needed a

starting point for conversations about racial issues in the U.S. She wanted all children from marginalized backgrounds to understand that they matter. Bryan Collier added the visual element of many flower petals to her message, using them to demonstrate the efforts of centuries of ancestors to add dignity and value to their lives and history. The blossoming effect in the background expresses his wish that children today can blossom, face challenges to their identity and self-worth, and survive and thrive “surrounded by a community of family.”

Other titles that positively explore African American culture, using historical influence, are books in the same series by Tami Charles and Bryan Collier: *We Are Here* (2023), and *Together United* (2025). Books with similar themes that focus on affirmation, cultural pride, and self-worth, include *I Am Enough* (Grace Byers and Keturah Bobo, 2018), *Hair Love* (Matthew Cherry and Vashti Harrison, 2019), *I Am Every Good Thing* (Derrick Barnes and Gordon James, 2020), and *You Matter* (Christian Robinson, 2020).

Tami Charles is a former teacher and R&B performer turned best-selling author who has written over 20 books that appeal to children and young adults. Her books have received many honors including a finalist designation for the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award for *Freedom Soup* (illustrated by Jacqueline Alcántara, 2019) and an Orbis Pictus Honor for *Ketanji Brown Jackson: A Justice for All* (illustrated by Jemma Skidmore, 2023). Readers can listen as Tami reads *All Because You Matter* for Scholastic’s World Read Aloud Day (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=523017528952881>). More information about her work can be found on her website (<https://tamiwrites.com/>).

Bryan Collier is an outstanding author-illustrator. He is a four-time Caldecott Honor winner, a nine-time winner or honor recipient of the Coretta Scott King Award and was the U.S. 2014 nominee for the Hans Christian Andersen Award. To find more of his work, visit the R. Michelson Gallery (<https://www.rmichelson.com/illustration/bryan-collier/>).

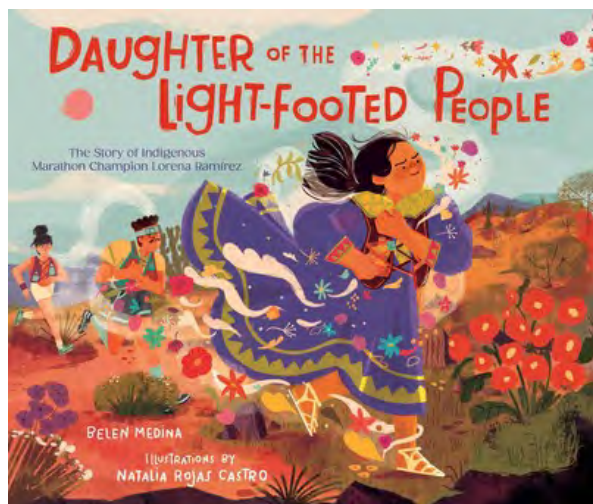
Krystal Cryer, Texas Woman’s University

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Daughter of the Light-Footed People: The Story of Indigenous Marathon Champion Lorena Ramírez

Written by Belen Medina

Illustrated by Natalia Rojas Castro

Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2024, 36 pp

ISBN: 978-1665931427

Belen Medina and Natalia Rojas Castro work together to tell the story of marathon champion runner Lorena Ramírez, showing the rich culture and endurance of her people, the Rarámuri or Tarahumara of the Chihuahua region of Northwest Mexico. Lorena Ramírez is an ultramarathon runner who often competes in races to help

support her family. The book starts with her running through the Copper Canyons and follows her throughout an entire 60 mile race, ending when she crosses the finish line. The story is based on her real life and even talks about a cultural drink called pinole that she carries and drinks throughout the race.

The narrative focuses on Lorena and cultural artifacts that connect to her people; however, it doesn't go deeply into the broader Rarámuri community. At the end of the book there is an extended informational section that gives more background on Lorena's life, including how she and others in her community often enter races to help support their families. This story brings attention to a group that is rarely represented in children's literature. It gives voice to not only Indigenous people, but to women too. Many Rarámuri families face economic challenges and run in races to support their families and way of life. This story challenges what we usually think success or professionalism looks like, especially when we compare it to what is valued in American culture.

Both Belen Medina and Natalia Rojas Castro draw on their own cultural heritage to tell Lorena's story. Castro's illustrations weave in traditional culture and design throughout the book. At the beginning of the book Castro includes a zigzag geometric pattern that represents traditional Rarámuri textiles that are passed down through generations and often used on baskets and clothing. She even includes a similar design on the traditional handmade Rarámuri dress that Lorena wears throughout the story. Castro also uses the illustrations to show the Rarámuri people's connections to nature through her vivid use of colors on flowers, leaves, and plants.

Medina draws on her own bicultural background to include the Spanish onomatopoeia *tapa tapa* to show a stronger connection to language and culture. The birds she mentions can be interpreted as symbolic of freedom or spiritual connection. She also writes about the shoes Lorena Ramírez wears that are handmade sandals. The handmade items worn by Lorena are powerful symbols of identity, tradition, and resilience.

The Rarámuri people have a strong cultural heritage, which is depicted in many ways throughout the story, including traditional dress, vibrant designs, rich colors, and a deep connection to nature as well

as the running. The book also highlights the perseverance of their people through Lorena's endurance and inner strength. Even when her knees ache and she feels tired, she pushes through and finishes first. While these elements are important and powerful, the story doesn't explore how material success or public attention has affected the Rarámuri community as a whole, an issue many Indigenous cultures face as they are impacted by Western values. At the end of the book, a section explains more about Lorena's life. It shares how she has been given expensive gear but chooses to race in traditional clothing and handmade sandals because that's what she's used to. It also mentions that she has stayed humble and true to herself, but it doesn't explore whether the rest of her community has been affected by the fame and attention.

Daughter of the Light-Footed People could be paired with *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom and Michaela Goade (2020) in that both stories celebrate the strength and cultural identity of Indigenous people. These books show a strong connection to tradition, use rich symbolism, and center on Indigenous female voices. This story reflects the lives of an underrepresented group while also offering a window into their rich culture and traditions for those who may not know them. Additional titles that pair well would be biographies of Indigenous people who worked hard like Lorena to serve their communities. *Autumn Peltier, Water Warrior* (Carole Lindstrom and Bridget George, 2023) describes the advocacy of Peltier to ensure communities have safe water supplies. *Freddie the Flyer* (Fred Carmichael, Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail, and Audrea Loreen-Wulf, 2023) describes a year in the life of pilot Freddie Carmichael from the Northwest Territories in the Canadian Arctic. His legendary career included everything from mercy flights to transporting teams of reindeer herders and dog sledgers. As Style and Arizpe (2014) state, "We must intentionally select and use texts that function as both windows and mirrors in order to move toward a more socially just and equitable world (p.5)." For this reason stories like these play an important role in classrooms to help students appreciate cultures beyond their own.

Belen Medina grew up in California with summers at her grandparents' house in Mexico. As the daughter of immigrant parents, she has been navigating two cultures all her life. She lives in the Pacific Northwest where she switched careers from law to writing books. She won the Lee & Low New Voices Award for a manuscript about two children living on either side of the Mexico/USA border. *Daughter of the Light-Footed People* won the 2025 Américas Award, a commendation from the Orbis Pictus Award, and was listed as a Notable Social Studies Trade Book and a HornBook Fanfare title. More information about Belen's writing and art can be found on her website (<https://www.belenmedina.com/>).

Natalia Rojas Castro is from Colombia. The flamboyant cheerful colors of her home are reflected in her artwork. She is also the illustrator of *Old Clothes for Dinner?* (Nathalie Alonso, 2024), a humorous story about a cultural misunderstanding between a Cuban grandmother and her American granddaughter.

Reference

Style, E., & Arizpe, E. (2014). Building on windows and mirrors: Encouraging the disruption of 'single stories' through children's literature. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 40(2), 5–11.

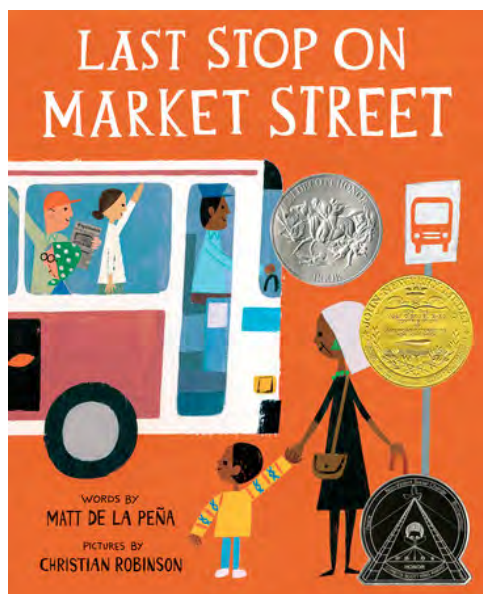
Misty Jacobson, Texas Woman's University

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Last Stop on Market Street

Written by Matt de la Peña

Illustrated by Christian Robinson

G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2015, 32 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-0399257742

Last Stop on Market Street is a critically acclaimed picturebook inviting young readers into a diverse urban environment in the U.S. The story is told through the eyes and voice of a young Black boy named CJ and his grandmother, Nana. The text looks at socioeconomic class, race, family relationships, and community involvement. The book has received numerous awards, including the 2016 Newbery Medal, a Caldecott Honor, and the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor.

The story begins as CJ and Nana are leaving church on a rainy day, heading to their weekly volunteer shift at a local soup kitchen. CJ sees a friend riding in a car and wonders why he and Nana must wait in “the wet” for a bus. As they travel across the city, CJ asks Nana questions, expressing his desire for what others have and he does not, such as a car, an iPod, and a neighborhood with less visible poverty. Nana’s responses are quiet, confident, and wisdom-filled, encouraging CJ to see the beauty in the people and places where they live. “Sometimes when you’re surrounded by dirt, CJ, you’re a better witness to what’s beautiful.”

Robinson’s illustrations amplify these themes using vibrant, textured drawings of an economically diverse city, filled with people of all races, ages, and abilities. The illustrations use collage-like textures, bold shapes, and minimal detail, allowing emotion and movement to take center stage.

This story illustrates urban life experiences in a way that is respectful, authentic, and affirming without falling into stereotypes. The characters are not defined by circumstances but by their actions, relationships, and values. For example, CJ’s family does not have a car, and the story avoids framing this as a negative. Instead, it becomes an opportunity for CJ and Nana to explore and connect with their community while riding public transportation. The cultural values of gratitude, respect for elders, and communal responsibility are woven throughout the story through interactions between characters.

Although the story does not directly discuss race or class, these social issues are subtly embedded throughout the setting, characters, and dialogue, leaving space for readers to draw deeper inferences. Nana’s view of the world reflects dignity and resilience, qualities often found in communities facing structural barriers yet maintaining strong communal ties. CJ’s outlook on his life situation captures the internal thoughts and questions children may have when comparing their lives to others. This dynamic is key, offering an ongoing conversation about how values are passed on within families and communities.

When considering cultural authenticity, *Last Stop on Market Street* succeeds in several areas. Christian Robinson, a Black illustrator who has lived in urban environments like the book's setting, brings his firsthand experiences and cultural insights into the visual world he creates. In interviews, Robinson discusses the importance of reflecting diversity in children's books, not as a lesson, but as a lived reality. Similarly, Matt de la Peña, a Mexican American author, often writes stories grounded in marginalized voices and has spoken publicly about the importance of telling stories about everyday people with nuance and heart. Both author and illustrator approach the story with care, collaborating in ways that elevate shared values and lived experiences across communities of color.

From a critical standpoint, however, the story leaves some questions open. The narrative uplifts resilience and optimism but rarely engages with the systemic reasons behind the inequities young CJ observes. For example, CJ's dissatisfaction with their neighborhood or desire for material items is gently redirected but not fully validated. There is a risk of suggesting discomfort with injustice can be resolved solely from a personal perspective, rather than through social awareness or change. Additionally, the background characters, such as the tattooed guitarist and man in a wheelchair, are shown with empathy but not given voices of their own. They represent inclusion, but their lack of dialogue may reinforce their role as scenery rather than individuals with agency.

Educators find this book useful as a springboard for discussions about equity, diversity, gratitude, and community involvement. It is well suited for children in early elementary grades but can be extended to older students with critical discussion and cross-text comparison. Related picturebooks that could extend thinking include *Those Shoes* (Maribeth Boelts and Noah Z. Jones, 2008), which focuses on poverty and generosity; *Saturday* (Oge Mora, 2019), a story about a Black mother and daughter navigating disappointment; and *The Old Truck* (Jerome and Jarrett Pumphrey, 2020), which highlights intergenerational labor and resilience in a Black farming family.

Last Stop on Market Street is a thoughtful and detailed picturebook representing a culturally specific experience with global relevance. The book values community, humility, and empathy in ways that resonate across social and cultural boundaries, making it a standout story for inclusive and critical classrooms.

Matt de la Peña has written 7 young adult novels including *Ball Don't Lie* (2007), and *Mexican White Boy* (2008). He has also authored 6 picturebooks, such as *Miguel and the Grand Harmony* (illustrated by Ana Ramírez, 2017) and *Love* (illustrated by Loren Long, 2018). You can read more about this author on his website (<https://mattdelapena.com/>).

Christian Robinson was born in Los Angeles and now lives in Oakland, California where he works as a designer, animator, author, and illustrator. He paired up with Matt de la Peña for the bestselling picturebooks *Milo Imagines the World* (2021) and *Carmela Full of Wishes* (2018). Visit his website to learn more about his work (<https://www.theartoffun.com/>).

Kristine Cochran, Texas Woman's University

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Me and My Dysphoria Monster: An Empowering Story to Help Children Cope with Gender Dysphoria

Written by Laura Kate Dale

Illustrated by Ang Hui Qing

Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2022, 32 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-1839970924

Nisha is a young trans girl who is dealing with feelings of gender dysphoria, the distress a person feels when there is a mismatch between the sex they were assigned at birth and their gender identity. Nisha is AMAB (assigned male at birth) and identifies as a girl. Nisha's gender dysphoria is a monster who is always with her, growing as she struggles in a world that misidentifies her as a boy. The reader sees her dealing

with this monster while she goes about her everyday life and watches the monster grow bigger every time people see Nisha as a boy.

Luckily, Nisha meets someone who can help her make sense of what she is going through. Jack, who is her dad's friend, explains that when we are born, the doctor is sometimes wrong to announce the baby as a boy or a girl. People get a visit from their gender dysphoria monster when others identify a gender that does not feel right. The monster is the little voice within a person that tells us who we are and who we want to be. The monster is calm when we are comfortable and when other people understand and accept us for who we are. Jack is a trans man who understands Nisha's struggles. Jack reassures Nisha that his own monster still exists at times, but it is small and quiet now. Jack suggests that Nisha speaks with trusted adults who can help, and she does. She speaks with her parents. They start to call her by her girl name and refer to her by feminine pronouns. Her monster begins to shrink and calms down as she wears new clothes that she is more comfortable in, uses the girls' toilets, and plays on the girls' teams.

This book values acceptance and affirmation by the community as seen with Jack and her parents. Freedom of expression is evident through the liberating action of choosing one's name, clothing, and activities, along with a feeling of hope. Laura Kate Dale wrote this book specifically to reach young trans folks as well as the people in their lives. In the back matter, she includes an adult's guide that contains useful terminology and explanations and questions and answers to help guide children and their adults. Her own childhood in the early nineties was a confusing and lonely time, and she wants to help others feel seen.

Hui Qing Ang's bright colors on the cover are inviting, and the inconsistent font of the title aligns with Nisha's confused emotions. The illustrations inside are little vignettes or snippets of Nisha's daily life. Color choices are wisely used to depict feelings of sadness and frustration when the monster is taking over with lots of black and blues. The monster appears at times as little scribbles and at other times as cute and cartoon-like. Nisha's ethnicity is not clear, but her skin color of light brown gives the feeling of diversity. While there is no dialogue described between Nisha and her parents, they are represented and present in the illustrations.

This text might be read with other books that explore themes of family love, support, and gender identity and expression. Some possible titles are *Julián is a Mermaid* (Jessica Love, 2018), *My Rainbow* (Trinity Neal & DeShanna Neal, 2020), and *I am Jazz* (Jazz Jennings, Jessica Herthel & Shelagh McNicholas, 2014).

The author, Laura Kate Dale, lives in London, UK. She is a transgender woman who enjoys roller derby when she is not writing. Inspiration for this book came from her own childhood in the early nineties. She writes that it was a confusing and lonely time, and she wants to help other trans youth feel seen. Dale has authored books like *Uncomfortable Labels* (2019) and *Stories of Autistic Joy* (2023). She is also a video game journalist.

Originally from Malaysia, Hui Qing Ang works as an illustrator and visual development artist in Bristol, United Kingdom. They work in animation and comics as well as children's literature illustrations. Find out more about them at their website (<https://anghuiqing.com/>).

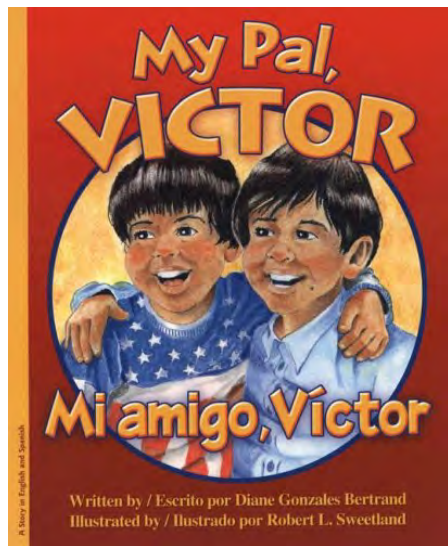
Yolanda Huckaby, Texas Woman's University

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My Pal, Victor/ Mi amigo Victor

Written by Diane Gonzales Bertrand

Illustrated by Robert Sweetland

Raven Tree Press, 2004, 32pp

ISBN: 978-0972019293

My Pal, Victor/ Mi amigo Victor is a heartwarming bilingual (Spanish/ English) picturebook about two Latino best friends in the U.S. Dominic and Victor enjoy spending time together doing fun activities like swimming, riding roller coasters, and telling scary bedtime stories. Told from Dominic's perspective, the story highlights the reasons he loves being Victor's friend including his bravery, kindness, and sense of humor. Only at the end does the reader learn that Victor uses a wheelchair, emphasizing Victor's personality and abilities

before revealing his physical disability. This surprise invites readers to reflect on their own assumptions and challenges them to see individuals for who they are rather than how they move through the world.

This picturebook addresses the social issue of disability inclusion and learning to value people who differ from us. Showing Victor as an average, active child first and a child with a physical disability who uses a wheelchair to move second allows the reader to look beyond stereotypes. Instead of focusing on what Victor cannot do, the book celebrates who he is as a person and friend. It teaches readers to see others for their abilities and personalities, instead of their limitations. This focus helps even the youngest readers understand the importance of kindness, empathy, and including everyone, no matter what their differences.

The illustrations by Robert Sweetland are pen and pencil drawings that detail what the boys are feeling and thinking. He uses both large pictures and smaller thought bubbles to capture the boys' imaginations, joy, and humor. Sweetland's colors and lines take the story to the next level.

This book can be read alongside other books to open-up conversation around others who are different from themselves and allow those with visible and invisible disabilities to feel comfortable speaking about their differences and their needs. *Susan Laughs* (Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross, 2000) is a monolingual story with a similar narrative in that Susan is depicted doing everyday things, only learning about her wheelchair use on the very last page of the book. *Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You* (Sonia Sotomayor and Rafael López, 2019) explores a variety of visible and invisible disabilities and celebrates what makes each unique. *Hiya Moriah* (Victoria Nelson and Boddz, 2019) shares in a lighthearted way that those with disabilities can still have childhoods that include making friends, going to the park, playing jokes on others, and going to school. Reading these texts together can open meaningful discussions around inclusion, empathy, and how to create spaces where all children feel seen and supported.

Diane Gonzales Bertrand, a San Antonio, Texas native, is currently a professor of English Composition and Creative Writing at St. Mary's University. Before joining the university, she taught

English at both the middle and high school levels. Much of her work centers on culturally rich and inclusive storytelling that reflects her Mexican American heritage and her commitment to diverse representation in children's literature. You can find out more about the author on the Latino Author Blog (<http://thelatinoauthor.com/?s=diane+Bertrand&submit=Go>) and in an interview with Cynthia Leitich-Smith (<https://cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit-resources/read/authors/interviews/dianegonzalesbertrand/>).

Robert Sweetland returned to his passion for illustration after 30 years in the corporate world. He now illustrates books written by his wife, Diane Gonzales Bertrand, and teaches a variety of art mediums at his own art school. This book challenges ableism by showing how children with physical disabilities build joyful, equal friendships when they are seen for who they are and not their limitations.

Janee Chandler, Texas Woman's University

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Saturday at The Food Pantry

Written by Diane O'Neill

Illustrated by Brizida Magro

Albert Whitman & Company, 2021, 32 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-0807572368

Saturday at the Food Pantry is a sensitive and heartwarming portrayal of food insecurity through the lens of a child's experience. This picturebook presents a powerful narrative that addresses social stigma, poverty, and compassion. Through its accessible language and warm illustrations, the book opens a window into a common but often invisible struggle with hunger that many children and families face.

The story follows Molly, a young Black girl who accompanies her

mother to a local food pantry on a Saturday morning. When they first arrive, Molly feels confused and uneasy, especially after overhearing negative comments about people who need help. Her mother's reluctance mirrors Molly's discomfort, as she too grapples with feelings of shame. At the pantry, Molly meets Caitlyn, a classmate who is there with her grandmother. The two girls bond over the experience and gradually come to understand that needing help is not something to be ashamed of. The book ends on a hopeful note as Molly, Caitlyn, and their caregivers share smiles, food, and a sense of community.

The social issue at the heart of this story is food insecurity, which is deeply connected to broader cultural themes of socio-economic disparity, dignity, and societal judgment. By centering the narrative around a child's viewpoint, O'Neill provides an age-appropriate entry point into conversations about poverty, social services, and empathy. Food insecurity disproportionately affects marginalized communities, especially families from low-income backgrounds, single-parent households, and communities of color (Feeding America, 2025). This book addresses not just the logistical aspects of hunger but also the emotional toll, highlighting how shame and silence can compound hardship.

The book reflects a range of experiences. While race and ethnicity are not the overt focus, the diversity in the illustrations—including varied skin tones and family structures—subtly reflects the demographic reality of many communities in the U.S. One important aspect in this book is that it does not sensationalize poverty or reduce its characters to their circumstances. Instead, O'Neill humanizes them, portraying them as resilient, proud, and caring individuals.

Saturday at the Food Pantry excels in both text and illustration. O'Neill's writing is straightforward yet emotionally nuanced, using dialogue and internal monologue to articulate the complex feelings that children and adults might experience in similar situations. The illustrations by Brizida Magro contribute significantly to the emotional tone of the book. Soft color palettes, expressive faces, and warm lighting enhance the feeling of community and hope, while also showing the apprehension

and discomfort that characters initially feel. Together, the text and images achieve a strong partnership, offering a multidimensional portrayal of the issue.

The text is missing an explicit discussion of systemic factors that contribute to poverty and hunger, such as housing insecurity, underemployment, or lack of access to public benefits. While this omission may be deliberate, given the intended age group, it's worth noting for educators seeking to extend the conversation to older readers or through cross-curricular connections. The story also does not go into racial inequities within food insecurity, which could be explored further in classroom discussions or companion readings.

Thematic relevance is strong, especially in classrooms or libraries where educators wish to foster empathy and normalize seeking help. The author's note at the end adds meaningful context, drawing from O'Neill's personal experiences with food insecurity as a child. This note enriches the authenticity of the narrative and offers educators insight into the intent behind the story.

Saturday at the Food Pantry would be most compelling for elementary students, particularly in SEL (social-emotional learning) curricula or community-building circles. It offers educators a gentle yet impactful way to introduce conversations about fairness, dignity, and support systems. The book's message, that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness, resonates beyond age or circumstance.

Texts that would pair well with this book include *Maddi's Fridge* by Lois Brandt and Vin Vogel (2014), which also addresses hunger in a child-friendly way, and *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña and Christian Robinson (2015), which highlights economic disparity through a lens of joy and appreciation. Educators might also consider *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams (1982) to deepen conversations about family resilience and financial hardship.

Diane O'Neill is a poet from Chicago who has competed in three 24-hour Poetry Marathons and had her poems included in two of the anthologies. She grew up with a mother who was not always able to work so experienced living with food stamps (which she described in an op-ed for the *Chicago Sun Times* (<https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/1/2/21044582/food-stamps-snap-diane-oneill>)). Besides being a poet and published author, she has worked most of her professional life supporting the rights and services of people with disabilities. More information can be found on her website (<https://www.dianeoneill.ink/>).

Brizida Magro grew up in a Portuguese fishing village where she lived with her grandmother and sister. Together they would often make things by hand which influenced her artistic style that blends vintage children's art with fold art. Now living in Boulder, Colorado, she loves outdoor adventures and experimenting with different kinds of media to bring stories to life. More information can be found on her website (<https://www.sweetbeyond.com/>).

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Shelby Phelps, Texas Woman's University

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Spanish is the Language of My Family

Written by Michael Genhart

Illustrated by John Parra

Neal Porter Books, 2023, 36 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-0823450046

Imagine walking into your first day of school but instead of being excited to learn and make new friends, you are walking into a place where the only language you speak is illegal and you are repeatedly told that it makes you “dirty.” When you are caught speaking that language you are beaten with a paddle or locked in a closet as punishment. That is the history behind Michael Genhart’s *Spanish Is the Language of My Family* (published simultaneously in Spanish as *El español es la lengua de mi familia*).

This is the story of a young Mexican American boy and his pride in the cultural heritage of his family’s language, Spanish. As he is preparing for his school’s Spanish spelling bee, for which he can already spell many words, his abuela helps him study his word list. “Familia is family. F-a-m-i-l-i-a. . . Fuerte is strong. F-u-e-r-t-e” (pp. 5-6). As they work together she tells him about her school experiences when speaking Spanish was not allowed. While the boy finds this hard to imagine, it inspires him to work even harder, with his parents and abuela coming alongside to encourage him when he gets frustrated and tired. The day of the spelling bee comes and ends with cheers and the young boy full of pride.

The author’s note adds valuable historical background to the story. The inspiration for this story came to the author from personal stories he heard from his mother as a child. Genhart explains the shaming his mother and other family members received when caught speaking Spanish. In contrast Genhart also includes the history of the National Spanish Spelling Bee which began in New Mexico in 2011. He includes extensive notes for a picturebook about the prohibition of speaking Spanish in public schools and the evolution of the National Spanish Spelling Bee. His selected references include significant sources reflecting the history and importance of language for Spanish speaking families. Of particular interest, one of the scholarly references about bilingualism is the documentary by Brian Birdwell, *When I Dream Dreams* (<https://archive.org/details/WhenIDreamDreams>). The film is a series of interviews of Spanish speakers who experienced the shaming of being caught speaking Spanish. Many of the interviewees went on to gain higher education so that they could transform the educational system. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 changed the landscape and made a Spanish spelling bee possible.

In watching Birdwell’s *When I Dream Dreams* it is easy to see how the education system tried to strip generations of students of their cultural heritage and the work that educators and parents have had to do to reclaim that heritage for their children and future generations. It is fitting that *Spanish is the Language of My Family*, a narrative of a family who has reclaimed that cultural pride,

has been the recipient of many awards, including the 2024 Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, an Américas Award Honor Book, and the Gold Medal for the Alma Flor Ada Best Latino Focused Children's Picture Book Award.

John Parra, whose illustrations have won many awards including three Pura Belpré Honors, created the artwork for this book using acrylic paint and digital media. The illustrations serve to enhance Genhart's message of cultural pride. Seen throughout the pages are depictions of papel picado (bright intricately cut paper flags seen at Mexican celebrations) and the Sacred Heart (one of the most common motifs in Mexican religious folk art). The bright colors of the acrylic paint boost the sense of pride heard in the text, only dimming when Abuela is telling the story of her school experience.

Duncan Tonatiuh's (2014) *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* is an excellent book to pair with *Spanish Is the Language of My Family* because it gives further historical background to Michal Genhart's story. Other books that pair well include titles that discuss linguistic pride in a heritage language. *Ho'onani: Hula Warrior* (Heather Gale and Mika Song, 2019) is the story of a young girl leading a group of boys in a traditional Hawaiian chant and dance. *Code Talker: A Novel About the Navajo Marines of World War Two* (Joseph Bruchac, 2005) is a fictionalized account of the Navajo young men who would communicate valuable war-time information by using their Navajo language as a secret code. Other book pairs introduce readers to Indigenous languages by teaching vocabulary in a story context. Two stellar examples are *We Are Grateful – Otsaliheliga* (Traci Sorell and Frane Lessac, 2018) and *Stand Like a Cedar* (Nicola Campbell and Carrielynn Victor, 2021).

Michael Genhart holds a PhD in clinical and community psychology and has his own private practice in San Francisco. He is the award-winning author of eleven picture books including *May Your Life Be Deliciosa* (Loris Lora, 2021) which received a Pura Belpré Honor, *Love is Love* (Ken Min, 2018), and *I See You* (Joanne Lew-Vriethoff, 2017). His books have been published in several different languages. More information can be found on his website (<https://michaelgenhart.com/>).

John Parra is a children's book illustrator whose work is deeply influenced by his Latino heritage. His books have won many prestigious awards including a Pura Belpré Honor and NY Times Best Illustrated Book for *Frida Kahlo and Her Animalitos* (Monica Brown, 2017), and the Américas and Christopher Awards for *Growing an Artist: The Story of a Landscaper and His Son* (2022). More information can be found at his website (<http://www.johnparraart.com/>).

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Katie Campbell, Texas Woman's University

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Still Dreaming / Seguimos soñando

Written by Claudia Guadalupe Martínez

Illustrated by Magdalena Mora

Translated by Luis Humberto Crosthwaite

Children's Book Press, 2022, 40 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-0892394340

Muted pinks and soft earth tones, combined with the fluid lines of the illustrations, set the tone in *Still Dreaming / Seguimos Soñando*, a bilingual Spanish/English picturebook that was awarded a Pura Belpré Honor for Illustration. This is a moving story that speaks of historical injustice, cultural strength, and

the lasting power of dreams. A Latinx family is forced to leave the United States to move to Mexico during the Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s. The unnamed narrator of the story is a young boy who we follow from the only home he has known in Texas to the border of Mexico. Along the way he shares his fears and hopes on this forced journey, comforted by his parents and their strong family bonds. The young boy meets fellow travelers from across the United States who are also being forced to migrate to Mexico. His narration portrays the work Mexican Americans did in the 1930s; from picking pecans in Texas to farming sugar beets in Minnesota to laying down railroad tracks in Kansas (to name a few). We learn how hard these people worked to help build and maintain the United States.

Claudia Guadalupe Martínez's gentle, poetic text offers just enough language to anchor the reader emotionally and historically within the journey. By telling the story through a child's voice, she brings a subtle intimacy to a moment of historical trauma that turns the political into something deeply personal. The bilingual format deepens the themes of identity, memory, and belonging, creating space for both English and Spanish-speaking readers to connect with the heart of the story.

Magdalena Mora's illustrations gently guide readers through the family's journey, passing through dusty towns with shuttered Mexican shops and barren stretches of land. The landscapes often open into vast, empty spaces that make the family appear small and isolated, visually expressing the emotional distance from home and the uncertainty ahead. As the story unfolds, the color palette shifts to pale yellows and dusty browns that reflect the harsh desert sun, while touches of turquoise and red represent the family's cultural identity. The characters are softly outlined in minimal detail with their quiet and pensive expressions capturing the unspoken fear, confusion, and hope that shape their journey.

As the boy's world is uprooted, dreams become a recurring visual motif seen in the floating faces above train cars and the blooming flowers in night skies. These dreamscapes are textured and abstract, often spilling beyond the edges of the page, symbolizing the freedom of imagination even in the face of hardship. Mora's use of layered media, blending hand-drawn and digital techniques, mirrors the complex emotions of the story, including hope, grief, confusion, and resilience, while offering visual depth to an already emotional and difficult journey.

Inspired by the real-life history of forced repatriation of Mexican Americans in the 1930s, *Still Dreaming / Seguimos Soñando* invites deep reflection, empathy, and a reexamination of an often forgotten past, one that remains incredibly relevant today in different, yet familiar, ways. Books that echo the themes of memory, displacement, and cultural identity include *La Frontera: El viaje con papá / My Journey with Papa* (Deborah Mills, Alfredo Alva, and Claudia Navarro, 2018), *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* (José Manuel Mateo and Javier Martínez Pedro, 2014), and *My Two Border Towns* (David Bowles and Erika Meza, 2021). While these titles vary in storytelling style, they each center around a child's perspective as they navigate the challenges of migration and belonging. Like *Still Dreaming*, they invite readers to see migration not as an abstract concept, but as a deep human experience shaped by family, place, hope, and resilience.

Claudia Guadalupe Martínez, originally from El Paso, Texas, is an award-winning author who often writes stories that highlight Mexican American history and identity. Some of her titles include *The Smell of Old Lady Perfume* (translated by Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, 2008) and *Not a Dog* (illustrated by Laura González, 2025). Martínez has received many literary awards including two Texas Institute of Letters Best Young Adult Book Awards, a Paterson Prize for Books for Young People and Américas Award Commendations. She also teaches writing at the university level. You can find out more about her on her website (<https://claudiaguadalupe martinez.com/>).

Illustrator Magdalena Mora grew up in Mexico, Chicago, and Texas and is now based in Minnesota. She brings underrepresented voices to life through her art, blending hand-drawn textures with digital techniques to create illustrations where children can feel seen and represented. You can read more about her and her work on her website (<https://www.magdalenamora.com/>).

Luis Humberto, the book's translator, was born in Tijuana, Mexico. He is also a journalist, editor, and writer. His own writing focuses on the complexities of the Mexico/United States border.

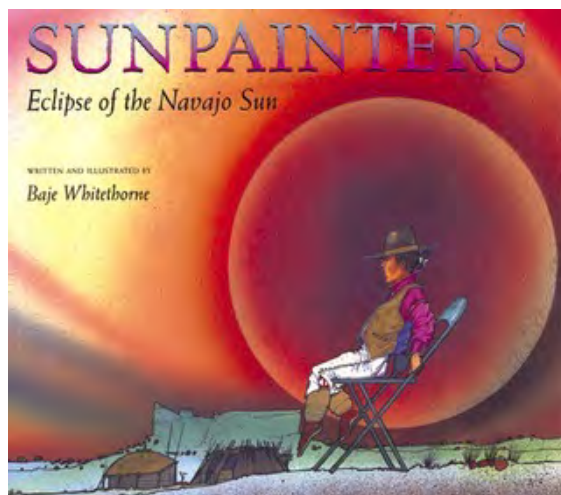
Kristian Rana, Texas Woman's University

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Sunpainters: Eclipse of the Navajo Sun

Written and illustrated by Baje Whitethorne
Salina Bookshelf, 2002, 32pp (unpaged)
ISBN: 978-1893354333

This luminous picturebook blends Navajo cosmology, intergenerational wisdom, and the awe of natural phenomena into a story that is both educational and deeply spiritual. The book follows a young Navajo boy named Kii Leonard as he experiences his first solar eclipse under the guidance of his grandfather, Pipa. Through vivid storytelling and rich illustrations, Whitethorne

offers a culturally authentic and thematically resonant narrative that celebrates Navajo traditions and the power of storytelling.

The story begins with Kii Leonard sitting in his favorite juniper tree, listening to the radio. Suddenly, his grandfather announces that the sun has died. Confused and frightened, Kii notices the world around him has started to darken into deep purples and reds. This moment of fear is transformed into wonder as Pipa explains the Navajo understanding of a solar eclipse. According to Navajo tradition, the Na'ach'aahii—Little Painters—are summoned from the four sacred directions (North, South, East, West) to repaint the world during an eclipse. These spiritual beings restore balance and beauty to the universe, using the colors of the rainbow to renew life.

Whitethorne's text is poetic and accessible, capturing the voice of a child while honoring the depth of Navajo theology of the universe. The dialogue between Kii and Pipa is gentle and reverent, emphasizing the importance of oral tradition and familial bonds in transmitting cultural knowledge. The narrative structure is simple yet profound, allowing young readers to grasp both the scientific and spiritual dimensions of an eclipse. The illustrations are a standout feature of the book. As a celebrated Navajo artist, Whitethorne brings his heritage to life through bold, expressive artwork that completely captures the painted desert of Arizona. The palette shifts dramatically to reflect the eclipse, with deep purples, reds, and blacks enveloping the landscape. The Na'ach'aahii are depicted as ethereal, childlike figures with paintbrushes, adding a magical realism that complements the story's spiritual tone. The visual storytelling enhances the emotional arc of the narrative, moving from fear to awe to renewal.

Culturally, *Sunpainters* is a rich tapestry of Navajo beliefs, language, and worldview. The book introduces readers to Navajo traditions in a respectful and authentic manner, avoiding stereotypes or simplifications. The use of Navajo terms like "Na'ach'aahii" and the emphasis on the four sacred directions reflect a deep engagement with the culture. The story also highlights the role of elders in Indigenous communities as keepers of knowledge and tradition. Pipa's calm, wise presence contrasts with Kii's youthful curiosity, illustrating the intergenerational transmission of cultural identity. Kii's determination to follow Pipa's directions of denying himself both food and water during the eclipse blossoms beyond respect for one's elders to a reverent connection to heritage and the unique experience of witnessing an eclipse.

From a broader cultural perspective, the book touches on themes of geography, spirituality, and historical continuity. Set in the American Southwest, the landscape is integral to the story, grounding the narrative in a specific place that is sacred to the Navajo people. The eclipse becomes a metaphor for transformation and renewal, resonating with universal themes while remaining rooted in a specific cultural context. In terms of genre, *Sunpainters* fits well within the tradition of culturally grounded picturebooks. It serves both as a narrative and an educational tool, bridging science and spirituality in a way that respects both. The book's thematic relevance is particularly strong in today's multicultural classrooms, where diverse perspectives on natural phenomena can enrich scientific understanding and cultural empathy.

The book also subtly addresses socio-economic and historical issues. By centering a Navajo family and their worldview, Whitethorne challenges the dominance of Western narratives in children's literature. The story affirms the value of Indigenous knowledge systems and offers a counter-narrative to the marginalization of Native voices in mainstream education. It also provides representation for Navajo children, who rarely see their culture reflected in books.

Other books that would complement this Indigenous masterpiece are: *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses* (Paul Goble, 1978) which includes mystic storytelling and vivid illustrations of the indigenous plains culture and a reverence for nature and spiritual transformation; *Jingle Dancer* (Cynthia Leitich Smith, Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu, 2000) which parallels the intergenerational wisdom in *Sunpainters*, highlighting the importance of family, tradition, and cultural continuity; and *Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story* (Kevin Noble Maillard & Juana Martinez-Neal, 2019) which is a contemporary complement to the more spiritual and mythic tone of *Sunpainters* as it explores Native identity through the lens of food and family.

Sunpainters: Eclipse of the Navajo Sun is a beautifully crafted work that excels in both text and illustration. It offers a culturally authentic, thematically rich, and visually stunning experience that honors Navajo traditions while inviting all readers to see the world through a different lens. Baje Whitethorne has created more than a children's book—he has painted a bridge between generations, cultures, and ways of knowing.

Baje Whitethorne Sr., a beloved Navajo artist and storyteller, grew up near Shonto, Arizona, where the vast landscapes and rich traditions of his homeland shaped his creative spirit. As a child Baje and his brothers would invent stories on their way to their grandmother's house. Known for his vibrant depictions of Navajo life, Baje's work often features a small blue folding chair—a nostalgic nod to his childhood and a signature element that invites viewers into his world. Baje illustrated eight children's books, authored two, and earned numerous accolades, including the Western Heritage Wrangler Award. Though he passed away in 2023, his legacy lives on in the stories he told through brushstrokes and ink. He lived and created in Flagstaff, Arizona, where his art continues to inspire. More about his life and work can be found on his official website (<https://bajewhitethorne.com/>).

Abby Tree, Texas Woman's University

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The Truth About Dragons

Written by Julie Leung

Illustrated by Hanna Cha

Henry Holt and Company, 2023, 40 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-1250820587

This Caldecott Honor book opens with a mother and son at bedtime. The mother begins to tell her son, whom she calls bao bei, a story about the magic that lives inside of him. The mother's story introduces a quest to find the truth about dragons. The boy enters the story wearing a cape. The frame includes a golden European, fairy tale-like, forest. Throughout the beginning of the story there are very Western elements of folk

tales, such as hobgoblins, will-o'-the-wisps, and a cottage in the heart of the forest. The boy is fed Western foods (such as apple cider and sugar cookies) by the wise woman who lives there who tells him about the Western ideas of dragons.

The boy leaves the cottage dressed in a wrapped shirt, loose pants, and slippers. The forest changes into a forest full of bamboo as the boy's mother tells her son that he may also journey into another forest. In this new setting, the boy encounters traditional Eastern folktale characters like the nine-tailed fox, white rabbit, and moon goddess. The boy then sees a palace with Chinese architecture among the clouds. There he meets another wise woman, drinks chrysanthemum tea and listens to another story of dragons. While these dragons still have claws, they are illustrated in an ethereal style with long and curving bodies. The boy learns that dragons are majestic and that one would be lucky to see them.

Then the boy learns that he may have to choose which truth to believe. The boy is illustrated being embraced by both dragons as he is told that both forests exist in his heart and that both worlds are his to discover. The scene changes: the mother covers up her son in his bed and tells him that his two grandmothers will each tell him their own truths about dragons.

The social issues raised in this book are how to balance two distinct cultures within one family unit and the dichotomy between two different truths and experiences. The author, Julie Leung, wrote this book for her son because she didn't want him to feel like he was half Chinese and half American; she wanted him to feel that his heritage provided him more opportunities than what others have and to see his heritage as an advantage. One of the main themes of the book is that it is possible to hold two competing truths in your heart.

This book offers an introduction to both Western and Eastern folk tales. Both truths about dragons are presented in a broad way and do not give a specific region in the West or East. The illustration style changes as the story's setting changes, and this helps set the scene for both types of dragons. In the first part of the book, Hanna Cha uses warm colors and draws fierce and threatening dragons

with sharp teeth and claws. In the second part of the book, the illustrations change, the palette is cool tones, and while these dragons still have claws, they are drawn in an ethereal style with long and curving bodies.

This book would be a great introduction to folktales and fairy tales from diverse cultures. *The Truth About Dragons* could be in a text set of other Asian folktales like *Goldy Luck and the Three Pandas* (Natasha Yim and Grace Zong, 2014) and *Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China* (Ai-Ling Louie and Ed Young, 1982). It could work with texts that combine Eastern and Western cultures such as *Take Me Out to the Yakyu* (Aaron Meshon, 2013).

Julie Leung is the author of eight children's books. She grew up in the Atlanta suburbs with her parents who moved to Georgia from China in the early 1990's. Leung was one of only three Asian students in her school. She authors books specifically about Chinese Americans because she wished she had these books available to her as a child. Besides a Caldecott Honor, *The Truth About Dragons* won the Asian Pacific American Award for Literature. Read more about her on her website (<https://www.jleungbooks.com/>).

Hanna Cha grew up splitting her time between Korea and America. She has illustrated several books for other Asian authors and has written and illustrated her own book as well. She incorporates Asian culture into her art by using sumi ink and calligraphy brushes used from Korean folk art for her illustrations. She won a Caldecott Honor Award for *The Truth About Dragons*. Explore her illustrations at her website (<https://www.hannacha.com/>).

Heather Barton, Texas Woman's University

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