

Allusions to Culture and Religion in Hispanic American Children's Literature

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Abstract

Allusions to culture and religion frequently appear in Hispanic American children's literature. These allusions resonate with those who share the culture and help those students connect with the book. These same allusions inform those who are not of the culture and broaden their understanding. This paper will provide examples of such allusions from Hispanic American children's literature written in English.

At the same time, the article will discuss the social justice issue of providing literature that reflects a culture. While Hispanic American children's literature provides rich content, the number of titles is limited. The number produced, distributed, and shared is only a small fraction of the total number of new children's books published each year. A bibliography of award-winning children's books reflecting the Hispanic culture is included to help the reader locate these books.

Introduction

Children's literature is part of the fabric of school life and instruction. Hispanic American children's literature is rich with allusions to culture and religion. Sharing books featuring Hispanic Americans resonates with the students who share this culture. The same books also provide a lens for those not of the culture to see within and to appreciate the similarities and differences.

The literature shared in schools should offer children a broad selection of choices. As a social justice issue in the United States, students should see a breadth of rich literature selections reflecting the diversity of the American population. Of course, no one book can represent all the complexity of a particular cultural group, which means multiple selections representing a cultural group need to be shared.

This paper provides examples of cultural and religious content found in Hispanic American children's literature. It also provides context on changing demographic groups in the United States, and the need to increase the number of literature selections that reflect the richness and variety within the Hispanic culture. It will share information about three awards for Hispanic children's literature as sources to access.

While the term *Hispanic* is used in the article's title for brevity purposes, the Hispanic culture is very broad containing many different groups and labels. Some are based on geographic histories: Mexican American, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Spanish. Other terms relate to language and/or political action: Latino/Latina, Chicano/Chicana, and other distinctions. This article addresses subgroups using Hispanic as a broad term.

Cultural and Religious Allusions in Selected Books

Selections of children's literature specifically written with Hispanics as primary characters generally reveal aspects of the Hispanic culture that may not be known by readers outside of the culture. Recurrent themes are family and extended family support, the role of religion, the marking of significant events, and the connections across political borders. One can learn about culture through the ways individuals mark significant life events related to birth, marriage and death. Examples follow that provide cultural and religious insights associated with the Hispanic culture. The examples are helpful for those who are outside of the culture.

Hispanic Cultural Theme of Family and Extended Family Support

Children's books reflecting Hispanic culture often have a theme emphasizing the importance of the family and its provision of security, care, and support. While the father is often portrayed as the authority figure in the family, strong resourceful women are also featured.

In the picture book, *My Very Own Room/Mi propio cuartito*, the main character shares a room with her five brothers. While she loves her brothers, she yearns for a room of her own. The house has limited space but her family finds a way to clear a storage area so she can have it to herself. Everyone contributes in some way so that she can achieve her goal. Her uncle assists too, delivering a small bed that will fit in the space for his niece. The uncle's efforts serve as an illustration of the role of extended family in the support system.

The author, Amada Irma Perez, revealed in a public lecture that others asked about the use of so many brothers in the telling of the story. The questioners were possibly concerned that critics might say it was "stereotypical" to have so many family members. Mrs. Perez expressed her concern, worried as to which of her brothers she would have to leave out of the story. She ultimately did not leave any brother out.

The short story, "She Flies" from the David Rice collection, *Crazy Loco*, tells about Milagros and her relationship to her great-aunt, Tía Mana Garza. Milagros is very talented academically. Her great-aunt encourages her to seek the opportunities that Milagros desires. In the cultural family dynamics, her father and mother do not want Milagros to pursue those opportunities, particularly if that means she leaves the immediate geographic area and the family. The great-aunt tells Milagros's parents that if you love someone, you must let them go. She demonstrates this by releasing her much-beloved parrot so that it can fly free.

Hispanic Cultural Themes Intertwined with Religious Practice

Associated with the Hispanic culture is a strong tie to Christianity and also to the Catholic religion. Symbols and customs of the Catholic faith often appear in books written to reflect Hispanic children.

Mexican American artist, Carmen Lomas Garza, grew up in Kingsville, a town in south Texas. In several of her children's books, her artwork is paired with descriptive paragraphs telling of the family and community events being portrayed. Each of these paintings contains minute details of characters and setting. These paintings provide strong images of Mexican American culture in the southern United States. In *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia (15th Anniversary Edition)*, the reader can examine art depicting attending a fair, helping a grandmother do chores, killing a chicken for dinner, celebrating a birthday party, participating in a cakewalk, picking nopal cactus, observing a hammerhead shark on the beach, acting out the story of Mary and Joseph when they were seeking shelter at the Inn (the custom of Las Posadas), making tamales, celebrating the fifteenth birthday (Quinceanera), the use of a curandera (healer), and other scenes.

In another Lomas Garza's book, *In My Family/en mi familia*, one has additional opportunities to study the images and read the paragraphs that speak authentically of life in South Texas. In this book, there are several direct images related to religion. On the page entitled "The Virgin of Guadalupe"/"La Virgen de Guadalupe", Carmen Lomas Garza paints a picture of a church altar with an image of the Virgin Mary and with candles burning in memory of loved ones. In the paragraph she recounts the legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe appearing to the Indian, Juan Diego in 1531 outside Mexico City.

On the page entitled, "The Miracle"/"El Milagro", the curious and the faithful have come to view an image of the Virgin Mary that has appeared on the side of a wooden water tower. Travelers and local community have gathered: some kneel, some appear to pray, and others are there to protect the travelers from rattlesnakes in the neighboring fields. This cultural and religious event is shared by other cultures connected by religious practices.

Other paintings from *In My Family/En mi familia* are of making empanadas, attending a birthday barbeque, creating cascarones (created for Easter), demonstrating a cure for an earache, telling the story/legend of "The Weeping Woman"/"La Llorona", using a curandera to heal a relationship between a mother and daughter, requiring a chaperone for teenage boy/girl meetings/dates, showing the custom of the blessing on the wedding day, and seeing all generations dance at the community open air garden.

Author Pat Mora wrote the award-winning picture book, *A Library for Juana: The World of Sor Juana Inés*, a biography of an exceptional woman from Mexico. The book is illustrated by Beatriz Videl. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was famous for her wisdom and poetry and in her later life, became a nun. She provides a strong example of a woman seeking education during a time it was limited for females.

In another David Rice short story, "Last Mass", one reads of the family and community support for service to the church. Pedro is volunteered by his father to become an altar boy. This becomes a commitment for him until he turns away from the church as a teenager. He returns to

the church as a young adult and is drawn to church service again when he perceives a real need. He helps to paint the church in memory of one of his fallen fellow altar boys. The story emphasizes community regard for service to the church.

Culture Through Ceremonies

Cultural elements are often revealed through the practices associated with significant life events such as marriage and death. In Gary Soto's, *Snapshots from the Wedding*, the reader gets a sense of marriage customs in the Hispanic culture. The marriage ceremony is conducted within a church, presided over by Father Jaime and assisted by an altar boy. All generations are welcomed and participate in the festivities. Carmen Lomas Garza painted the "Blessing on the Wedding Day" for *In My Family/En Mi Familia*. She describes what is happening with these words.

The daughter is about to leave her parent's house. This is the mother's opportunity to bless her daughter, give her advice, and send her off on the next phase of her life. It's a very special moment.

The celebration of religious events such as Christmas and Easter are portrayed in Hispanic books for children. The *Farolitos of Christmas* tells of a proud grandfather and his loving family. The granddaughter finds a way not to offend her grandfather yet solve the problem of how to provide light to those performing in Las Posadas. In *The Christmas Gift*, personal sacrifice is lovingly portrayed in the giving and receiving of gifts. Francisco Jiménez provides a story of gift giving when resources are extremely limited.

Culture and Attitudes Towards Death and the Spirit World

Cultures vary in their ceremonies, customs, and attitudes toward death. In the picture book, *Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book*, Grandma Beetle is confronted by Señor Calavera who has come to take her to the next life. Grandma Beetle has him wait while she attends to all the things she must do to prepare for the visit from her grandchildren for her birthday. In the end, Señor Calavera has such a good time that he leaves without Grandma Beetle. Author and illustrator Yuyi Morales said she had to rework the imagery of the skeleton, Mr. Calavera, many times to please those who were not as comfortable with the image of a skeleton, used in the Hispanic culture to mock death.

Another thread is the connection to healers or curanderas. The connection appears in both *Family Pictures* and *In My Family*. Another picture book, *Prietita and the Ghost Woman*, also centers around a curandera and La Llorona who appears in spirit form. The young girl seeks herbs to help her mother who is ill.

In books for the young adult, *Bless Me Ultima* tells of Ultima, a curandera who lives with the family. This coming of age novel by Rudolfo Anaya is a frequently challenged book or one threatened with banning. It made the top ten list for the American Library Association of most

frequently challenged books for 2008 (American Library Association web site). Among the several reasons given is the examination of religious viewpoint issues.

Culture Through Immigration Stories

Within the United States, there are many different groups of Hispanics. Some Hispanic families already lived in the area that later became labeled as within the emerging borders of the United States. In other words, their families have been in the United States since before it began. The United States is also a nation of immigrants and many of whom are Hispanic. Many came legally from their country of origin and some crossed the border without being documented. This latter group faces considerable difficulties today, particularly in light of the events of September 11, 2001.

The story of the Mexican immigration experience is captured in books by Francisco Jiménez: *The Circuit*, *The Christmas Gift*, *La Mariposa*, *Breaking Through*, and *Reaching Out*. While each of these books tell the story of immigration in terms of the author's and his family's experiences, the author commented it is actually the story of many.

Pam Muñoz Ryan tells a story of immigration for survival in *Esperanza Rising*. The novel explains how a woman and her daughter had to flee their land and possessions in Mexico because their lives were threatened. The rest of the novel describes their struggle to survive and make their living in their newly adopted country.

Seeking Additional Sources to Portray Hispanic American Culture

The works presented are a few samples, rich in portraying the Hispanic culture, particularly to those outside of the culture. Any one culture is broad and complex, so these samples are only small segments of the whole picture. In reading these books and sharing them with students, the reader and audience come to know something about the Hispanic culture with its devotion to family, respect for elders and religious customs, and perseverance.

Additional examples can be found by reading selections from the lists of books that have received awards. By reviewing the list, one can find books that offer value in reflecting the Hispanic culture. By buying the books, one also helps ensure that the books stay in print.

Three lists of award-winning books are provided. As the books are relatively rare, the lists can be used to help school librarians easily locate and select books for the permanent collection. The three awards include the Américas Award, the Pura Belpré Award, and the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award. Each award was started in the 1990s because of the limited number of published books in the United States that reflected the Hispanic culture. Each award has a particular focus. The Américas Award goes beyond the borders of the U.S. to include the Caribbean and other areas. The Pura Belpré celebrates an author and an illustrator and includes honor books. The Tomás Rivera Children's Book Award is focused on the Mexican

American culture within the United States. The books are generally written in English but some are available in a bilingual version or in Spanish.

Changing Population Figures

The Hispanic population in the United States shows a dramatic increase. The increase comes from natural causes, such as birth rates, as well as from increased immigration. The recent census reports the 2010 resident population in the United States as 308,745,538. Not all states have provided the demographic details yet and the results will show differential results. However, in the state of Texas, the estimated total 2010 population is 25,145,561. The Hispanic or Latino group is 9,460,921 comprising 37.6 percent of the population in Texas. This represents a 41.8 percent change upward from 2000. The “Not Hispanic or Latino” group comprises 64.4 percent of the state’s population and had a 10.6 percent upward change.

The increase in population is particularly seen among the youngest; those who are in or will be in school. In Texas, the Texas Education Agency publishes the AEIS (Academic Excellence Indicator System) to reflect multiple points of information about schools in the state. For example, the TEA AEIS 2009-2010 State Profile Report (section II, page 1) indicates the following numbers and percentages for the major demographic groups within its public schools.

Of the 4,824,778 total public school students in Texas, the major groups were: (TEA, 2009-2010)

Hispanic	2,342,680	48.6%
White	1,607,212	33.3%
African American	676,523	14 %
Asian/Pacific Islander	179,473	3.7%
Native American	8, 890	0.4%

Given these numbers, each of these groups should have access to children’s literature reflective of themselves and others. Basal reader companies usually try to represent the different groups proportionally as per the population. The separate selection of children’s literature or trade books for publication and for purchase does not always reflect the same attention to proportionality. School librarians and teachers must continually seek books from the different groups and take time to share them. The number of books published in different demographic categories is affected by many factors, but the availability continues to be limited. Awards offered regarding books in a category may lead librarians and teachers to a useful source.

United States' Public Schools and Religion

The United States has laws regarding the separation of church and state. That separation may be interpreted in different ways. For example, Public Law 94-521 prohibits the Census Bureau from asking a question on religious affiliation on a mandatory basis; therefore the Bureau of the Census is not the source for information on religion.

Occasionally there are times when a US public school educator expresses a reluctance to read a book aloud or share a book that has religious references within it. This reluctance may come from an over-generalization in the perception of the law and school expectations. There are guidelines that can help a teacher know that the United States laws about separation of church and state apply in the public schools to mean that one *can* teach about religion. One is just not to teach to convert to a religion.

Conclusion

Educators honor students of a cultural group by sharing books about the culture in the classroom. Such books also help those not of the culture learn more about others. Several examples of cultural and religious allusions from Hispanic American children's books were offered in this paper. It is hoped that the reader will share books about the Hispanic American culture with others. Additional titles of award-winning Hispanic children's books are included for ease of access.

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- Anaya, Rudolfo. *The Farolitos of Christmas*. Illustrated by Edward Gonales. Hyperion Books. 1995
- Gonzalez. San Francisco, California: Children's Book Press/ Libros Para Niños. 2000.
- Jiménez, Francisco. *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*. University of Mexico Press. 1997.
- Jiménez, Francisco. *The Christmas Gift/El regalo de Navidad*. Illustrated by Claire B. Cotts. Houghton Mifflin. 2000.
- Jiménez, Francisco. *La Mariposa*. Illustrated by Simón Silva. Boston,MA: Houghton Mifflin. 1998.
- Jiménez, Francisco. *Breaking Through*. Houghton Mifflin. 2001.
- Jiménez, Francisco. *Reaching Out*. Houghton Mifflin. 2008.
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<http://www.tea.state.tx.us>

United States Census. Accessed March 1, 2011.

www.census.gov/2010census

<http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data>

Lists of Award-Winning Books Reflecting the Hispanic Culture in the Américas

Refer to the following lists to locate quality books reflecting the Hispanic American culture. The award-winning titles are listed in chronological order, based on year of publication. A key for general level of use follows each entry. (LG=lower grades, K-3. MG=middle grades, 4-8. UG=upper grades, 9-12). As with any book for the classroom, the teacher should read the text in advance to further evaluate grade level appropriateness. Refer to each award's website yearly for updates.

Books Winning the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award 1995-2010 Year Listed is Year of Publication

<http://riverabookaward.info>

Anaya, Rudolfo. *The Farolitos of Christmas*. Illustrated by Edward Gonzales. New York: Hyperion Books for Children. 1995. (Tied with *Chato's Kitchen*) LG

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- Soto, Gary. *Chato's Kitchen*. Illustrated by Susan Guevara. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1995. Tied with *The Farolitos of Christmas*) LG
- Lomas Garza, Carmen as told to Harriet Rohmer. *In My Family/En Mi Familia*, ed. David Schecter. Spanish Translation by Francisco X. Alarcón. San Francisco, California: Children's Book Press/ Libros Para Niños. 1996. LG
- Mora, Pat. *Tomás and the Library Lady*. Illustrated by Raul Colón. New York: Alfred Knopf. 1997. LG
- Salinas, Bobbi. *The Three Pigs/Los Tres Cerdos: Nacho Tito and Miguel*. Oakland, California: Piñata Publications. 1998. LG
- Anaya, Rudolfo. *My Land Sings: Stories From the Rio Grande*. Illustrated by Amy Córdova. New York: Morrow Junior Books. 1999. LG, MG
- Pérez, Amada Irma. *My Very Own Room/Mi Propio Cuartito*. Illustrated by Maya Christina Gonzalez. San Francisco, California: Children's Book Press/ Libros Para Niños. 2000. LG
- Jiménez, Francisco. *Breaking Through*. Houghton Mifflin. 2001. MG
- Mora, Pat. *A Library for Juana*. Illustrated by Beatriz Vidal. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2002. LG
- Morales, Yuyi. *Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book*. San Francisco, Ca: Chronicle Books. 2003. LG
- Ryan, Pam Muñoz. *Becoming Naomi León*. Scholastic Press. 2004. MG
- Reich, Susanna. *Jose! Born to Dance: The Story of Jose Limon*. Illustrated by Raúl Colón. Simon and Schuster. 2005. LG
- Herrera, Juan Felipe. *Downtown Boy*. Scholastic Press. 2006. MG
- Montes, Marisa. *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*. Illustrated by Yuyi Morales. Henry Holt and Co. 2007. LG
- Saenz, Benjamin Alire. *He Forgot to Say Goodbye*. Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing. 2008. (Tied with *The Holy Tortilla and the Pot of Beans*.) UG
- Tafolla, Carmen. *The Holy Tortilla and a Pot of Beans*. Wings Press. 2008. (Tied with *He Forgot to Say Goodbye*) UG
- Tafolla, Carmen. *What Can You Do With a Paleta?/Qué puedas hacer con una paleta?* Illustrated by Magaly Morales. Tricycle Press. 2009. LG

Books Winning the Main Américas Book Awards

Year Listed is Year of Publication

<http://www4.uwm.edu/clacs/aa/index.cfm>

- Delacre, Lulu. *Vejigante Masquerader*. Scholastic. 1993. LG
- Lynn, Joseph. *The Mermaid's Twin Sister*. Clarion. 1994. MG
- Temple, Frances. *Tonight, by Sea*. Orchard. 1995. MG
- Martinez, Victor. *Parrot in the Oven: mi vida*. Harper Collins Publishers. 1996. UG
- Lomas Garza, Carmen as told to Harriet Rohmer. *In My Family/En Mi Familia*, ed. David Schecter. Spanish Translation by Francisco X. Alarcón. San Francisco, California: Children's Book Press/ Libros Para Niños. 1996. LG, MG
- Hanson, Regina. *The Face at the Window*. Illustrated by Linda Saport. Clarion. 1997. LG
- Jiménez, Francisco. *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*. University of Mexico Press. 1997. MG

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- Ancona, George. *Barrio: José's Neighborhood*. Harcourt Children's Books. 1998. LG
- Carling, Amelia Lau. *Mama and Papa Have a Store*. Dial. 1998. LG
- Herrera, Juan Felipe. *CrashBoomLove: A Novel in Verse*. University of New Mexico Press. 1999. UG
- Joseph, Lynn. *The Color of My Words*. HarperCollins Publishers. 2000. MG
- Skármeta, Antonio. *The Composition*. Illustrated by Alfonso Ruano. Groundwood Books. 2000. LG
- Argueta, Jorge. *A Movie in My Pillow/ Una película en mi almohada*. Illustrated by Elizabeth Gómez. Children's Books Press. 2001. LG
- Jiménez, Francisco. *Breaking Through*. Houghton Mifflin. 2001. MG
- Alvarez, Julia. *Before We Were Free*. Knopf. 2002. MG
- Cofer, Judith Ortiz. *The Meaning of Consuelo: A Novel*. Beacon Press. 2003. UG
- Morales, Yuyi. *Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book*. Chronicle Books. 2003. LG
- Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood*. Cinco Puntos. 2004. UG
- Brown, Monica. *My Name is Celia/ Me llamo Celia*. Illustrated by Rafael Lopez. Luna Rising. 2004. LG
- Herrera, Juan Felipe. *Cinnamon Girl: letters found inside a cereal box*. HarperCollins, Joanna Coulter Books. 2005. MG
- Elvgren, Jennifer Riesmeyer. *Josias, Hold the Book*. Illustrated by Nicole Tadgell. Honesdale: Boyd's Mills. 2006. LG
- Engle, Margarita. *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*. Illustrated by Sean Qualls. New York: Henry Holt. 2006. MG, UG
- Resau, Laura. *Red Glass*. New York: Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House Children's Books. 2007. UG
- Mora, Pat. *Yum! !MmMm! Qué Rico!: Americas' Sproutings*. Pictures by Rafael López. New York: Lee & Low Books Inc. 2007. LG
- Engle, Margarita. *The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom*. Holt. 2008. MG, UG
- Morales, Yuyi. *Just In Case: A Trickster Tale and Spanish Alphabet Book*. Roaring Brook Press (A Neal Porter Book). 2008. LG
- Alvarez, Julia. *Return to Sender*. Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers. 2009. MG
- Tafolla, Carmen. *What Can You Do With a Paleta?/Qué puedes hacer con una paleta?* Illustrated by Magaly Morales. Tricycle Press. 2009. LG
- Perdomo, Willie. *Clemente!* Illustrated by Bryan Collier. Holt 2010. LG
- Ryan, Pam Munnoz. *The Dreamer*. Illustrated by Peter Sis. Scholastic 2010. MG

Books Winning the Pura Belpré Award **Year Listed is Year of Publication** **Use Google "Pura Belpre Award"**

- Soto, Gary. *Chato's Kitchen*. Illustrated by Susan Guevara. Putnam. 1995. LG
- Cofer, Judith Ortiz. *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio*. Orchard Books. 1995. UG
- Martinez, Victor. *Parrot in the Oven: mi vida*. Harper Collins Publishers. 1996. UG
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- Ada, Alma Flor. *Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba*. Atheneum Books. 1998. MG

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- Ryan, Pam Muñoz. *Esperanza Rising*. Scholastic Press. 2000. MG
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Published by the Forum on Public Policy

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