

Interviews as a New Critical Approach to Latino/a Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Aldama, Frederick Luis. *Latinola Children's and Young Adult Writers on the Art of Storytelling*. Pittsburgh UP, 2018. 268 pp. ISBN 978-0-8229-6497-1.

Latinola Children's and Young Adult Writers on the Art of Storytelling is configured as a collection of interviews of a wide-ranging group of contemporary Latinx authors and illustrators conducted by Luis Aldama. Throughout these interviews, readers can immerse themselves into the world of Latinx arts and literatures, drawing a roadmap to understand the cross-cultural and linguistic experience of the young Latino population in the United States.

The variety of artists interviewed in this collection reflects a diversity of genres, styles, and ultimately, experiences, in order to rethink and discuss issues such as the power of all forms of art as a way of self-expression, the important role of the writers' mixed identities and their social backgrounds in their sense of "belonging" to a specific land or language, the importance and repercussion of the growing Latinx population in the US. Ultimately, this collection dismantles some of the mainstream stereotypes about the Latino communities.

The book is divided in five parts: a foreword, a preface, an introduction, the interviews, and finally, an afterword. Jamie Campbell Naidoo highlights in the foreword the historic growth of the Latinx communities in the US and how they have been able to gain their space in the literary and cultural sphere of the United States. As the founder of the National Latino Children's Literature Conference, Campbell celebrates the rich diversity of the artists portrayed in this collection and encourages readers to discover their stories, inspirations, and influences. In the preface, Norma Elia Cantú, refers to the writers and illustrators of this book as "creators of magic," and recognizes their talent to create stories that code-switch the dual realities of Latinx children in the US. She also points out their work as a way to give visibility to Latinx children and stresses the importance of their inclusion in K-12 curriculum and libraries, as well as the need for more recognition in the form of awards and publication contracts. In the introduction, Aldama offers a well-documented chronologic review of the most important scholarly books about Latinx children and YA literature and culture in the 20th century, and criticizes the obvious

misrepresentation of this group in the US publishing market: “while Latinos are nearly 17.6 percent of the US population, we are only represented in roughly 2 percent of children’s book published annually” (10). In fact, this book functions as a way to offer visibility and demand respect for this group of outstanding and diverse Latinx authors and artists.

The most extensive part of this collection is dedicated to the authors and artists in a total of 33 interviews that range from awarded, prestigious writers to more unknown artists without formal experience in the market. One characteristic is shared by all of them: despite their different backgrounds, they all grew up being part of a Latinx minority in the US, which allowed them to understand the world from a different perspective—a translingual, open-minded, multicultural reality that informs and is reflected in all their works.

Some of them have dedicated their professional life to illustrate children’s books or to create picture books, and many of these artists have received important awards, like the prestigious Pura Belpré. This award, established in 1996, recognizes each year a Latinx writer and illustrator whose work -dedicated to children and young adults- best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latinx cultural experience. Some of the artists that have been presented with this recognition are Jorge Aguirre, Joe Cepeda, Angela Dominguez, Maya Christina González, among others. Aguirre talks about the “hunger” Latinxs have to see themselves portrayed in mainstream culture, and Xavier Garza sees this as an opportunity to educate people and “bring awareness to the many ways one can be Latinx in this country” (94).

Most of the authors of this collection have also been recipients of important literary awards like the previously mentioned Pura Belpré, the Children’s Book Award, the PEN USA Award, or the Latino Book Award. To name a few we can mention Manuel Luíz Martínez, Meg Medina, Pat Mora, the New York Times best- selling author Pam Muñoz Ryan, or Judith Ortiz Cofer, who in 2013 was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame. It’s important to note that some of these authors’ works have been successfully translated into other languages, like Malín Alegria’s *Border Town* teen book series published in Spanish, or Francisco Stork’s award- winning and critically acclaimed *Marcelo in the Real World*, published in 2009, and translated into 17 languages since then. The heterogeneous nature of this collection allows the reader to choose any particular writer or illustrator that piques their interest, encouraging them to discover new artists in the US, new pieces of art, and ultimately, new ways of understanding the young Latinx population.

Another important point Belinda Acosta highlights in the afterword is that, most of the authors and artists in this volume agree on the fact that young Latinx children did not tend to see their experiences reflected in the books they normally read. For Acosta, that changed when Sandra Cisneros published *The House on Mango Street*, opening up a new world of possibilities for the Latinx population, both artists and audience. As she points out, “It’s not just fortunate for Latinx children. Latinx-authored books are important for all young readers. All young people need to see themselves, but they need to see the world, whether it’s on the other side of the planet, or in that house on Mango Street” (255). One thing is clear, children’s books have the potential to become powerful tools of expression for social, and cultural change, and this volume provides a strong, unanimous voice for the

rich, diverse Latinx population in the United States; a voice for the marginalized “majority minority” across the nation.

Readers will be inspired by the stories unfolded in this collection, and certainly, this book could be useful for many audiences and purposes: from parents, children and teenagers, to teachers and students, as well as an important resource for librarians and scholars who are interested and want to learn more about this growing and important corpus of Latinx authors and illustrators.