



***Yuyi Morales***

**TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth  
Author Interview**

**Yuyi Morales interviewed in Pleasant Hill, California, on May 11, 2009.**

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You have won the Pura Belpré Award twice for your books, as well as the Jane Addams Award and many others, but first you were a PE teacher. How did your experience as a PE teacher influence your transition into the world of children's books?

**MORALES:** There is a connection between me having been a PE teacher in the past and now doing children's books. The connection is simply that I learned what I did not want for myself. I went to PE school because I never thought I could be an artist. I never dreamed that the thing I really wanted to do could also be my profession. When it was time to choose a career, I went into something that felt familiar to me. I had been a swimmer for a long time, so I got my degree and worked as a swimming coach for a couple of years.

When I came to United States, I left all of that behind because I did not speak the language and did not have a work permit yet. Also, I was a new mother. When I left everything behind, I felt this void; a scary emptiness. I didn't realize at the time that it was also an opportunity to do something that I always wanted to do: to learn how to do art.

Once I became a new mother, I felt so inspired. I had this baby, and he was beautiful. All I wanted to do was copy his face, and memorize his features and his nose, his eyes, and draw them again, and again, and again. And I did.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did your art evolve from drawing your baby boy to creating children's books?

**MORALES:** When I came to the United States I did not have much here. I didn't have the language. I didn't have friends. I didn't have a job anymore, which meant that I didn't have people who listened to me or that validated my thoughts or any of that. I was very lonely.

But then, my mother-in-law brought me to this place that changed my life forever. She brought me to the public library. In the library, I found this island of peace and this world where I didn't have to interact with anybody in order to know, and learn, and see, and love, because I was looking at these books—especially in the children's section.

There were picture books that were beautiful, fantastic works of art. The text was so simple that with my very, very simple English I could understand some of the words. When there were words that I did not know, all I had to do was look at the pictures and I knew what the story meant to say, just like children learn how to read from picture books.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Were you always interested in art?

**MORALES:** I always liked drawing. My mother has drawings that I made when I was two years old. Mostly, I drew myself, often as an older lady with long hair and platform shoes, with a dog walking next to me. I also would close myself into my bedroom, sit in front of the mirror, and study my face for a long, long time, so I could memorize my face. I memorized the shapes of my nose and eyes. I studied myself so long that I could almost draw myself without looking anymore. I did that for as long as I could remember.

When I was growing up, some of the biggest inspiration I had in art were adult graphic novels that my parents bought at the corner store. My uncles and my aunts all read them. The books were pretty much soap operas put in paper. But, to me, the illustrators of these books were the most wonderful artists in the world, because their drawings were so perfect, and they told a story. I loved copying them.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Beyond drawing, did you work with other media when you were young?

**MORALES:** My mother was a craft maker. I didn't know it at the time; all I knew was that everything in our house was made by her—everything. That also meant that when we had homework to do, everything would become a craft or art project. A lot of the things that I did for school, some of the papers I had to write, I did not write very much. Instead, I drew drawings and I put captions, pretty much like what a picture book will do. I just didn't know any picture books at the time.

When I had to explain for class what my school looked like, we made a model of the building out of cardboard and put plastic in the windows. My mother really influenced me. I always saw her doing things with her hands, so it was just natural that my sisters and I learned to do just the same.

When I was little, I was interested in playing with my dolls and making clothes for them. My mother taught me how to use a sewing machine when I was very little. She taught me how to knit when I was about five, so I knit the clothes for my little dolls and created all these things for them.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How do you suppose being a native of Mexico, and having this cultural background, informs your books?

**MORALES:** I was born in Mexico and lived there until I was 24 years old. All I knew was my country, my homeland, my language—Spanish. When I came here to the United States, there was a lot of adapting. There was a lot of new learning to do.

I realize that when I create my books, I bring into my books the things that I love the most. And, of course, some of the things that I love the most had to do with those things that I loved when I was a child. So every one of my books always has this combination of who I was when I lived in Mexico and who I am now—the things I've learned living in the United States, speaking English, and having new habits.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Someone once said of your books, “We taste the spices, we feel the temperature of what it means to you to be Mexican in your books.” It also seems that there is always more to the characters in your books than meets the eye.

**MORALES:** When I am creating books, part of the connection that I make with my own artwork and with a character is that I start knowing that they are more than just the image that I put in on the page.

For example, *Grandma Beetle*: a lot of people ask me why her name is Grandma Beetle. And I always tell them the image of Grandma Beetle comes from this little beetle that used to fly in the windows in my room when I was a child. And they are very round, brown, and always busy—they always seem to be going somewhere. I see Grandma Beetle as this brown beetle who is so busy that nothing can stop her.

The same with *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*. If you are not Mexican, you might not know that there are a lot of characters in that book that come from Mexican popular culture and Mexican history textbooks. Anybody who is dead and was important to me or that I was curious about when I was a child is in that book, like the children’s chaplain of Mexico; the freedom fighter, Simón Bolívar; and many other characters that I wanted to make part of this story. I put them in this book because I’m creating a book that has connections to the culture and, hopefully, will have connections for the reader as well.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Toys come up a lot in your books.

**MORALES:** I love toys. Because of this and because they are part of the celebration of what it means to be happy and what it means to be a child and what it means to enjoy something, I tend to put them in my books a lot. I’m not sure if that’s very intentional, but now that I look back at my books, I realize that there are a lot of toys in them.

When I go to school presentations, one of the things that I bring with me is my toys. Most are things that I used to play with when I was a child. Every time I go back to Mexico, I try to bring back more of the traditional toys that I used to play with when I was a kid.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Clothing is also an important element in your illustrations.

**MORALES:** Yes, definitely. Different books usually call for different visuals. I love creating things that have details, and when I can put it in a book, I always do. Señor Calavera in *Just a Minute* and *Just in Time* wears a hat and is very traditional. He’s just like my grandpa, like my abuelito, who always wore a hat.

Some of the books, like *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*, have a lot of references to clothing worn many years ago, sometimes dating more than a century or two ago, including what people from the colonial times in Mexico were wearing.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Harvesting Hope*, winner of a handful of awards and recognitions, was the first English-language book you illustrated.

**MORALES:** *Harvesting Hope* is a very, very special book to me. First of all, because the story is extraordinary all by itself. The man that we get to know in *Harvesting Hope*, César Chávez, is an exceptional person. And I need to say that I really didn't know him very well when I started doing this book. I grew up in Mexico, and César Chávez is not in our textbooks. I didn't know anything about him until I came to United States.

My learning of César Chávez had to be, like many children do at school, by researching, by looking at books, by going to the library and looking in the Internet. In that journey of trying to learn who César Chávez was, it took me to places. My family and I traveled to the places where he had worked and where he had lived. And we talked to people who knew him. And even though my illustrations are not necessarily realistically portrayed, I think that they portray the feeling of what it is to be in those places. I knew that I wanted to know how it felt like to be there.

In that process of learning about César Chávez and his work and his life, I felt very connected to him. At the time, I was working very hard, many hours every day, and I had pictures of him all over the walls of my work area, which was very small. So I felt like he was very, very close. And for months and months, I spent more time looking at him than I spent looking at my own family. He became very special to me; I almost felt like he was my uncle.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** It looks like you did some very different things in creating the art for *Harvesting Hope*.

**MORALES:** *Harvesting Hope* was the first trade book that I illustrated, so I learned a lot with that book. I painted in acrylics for the first time, and I utilized some other things that I love doing—for example, the handmade stamps. I put some handmade stamps that are not an essential part of the illustration, but they are just little symbols, hidden in the illustrations. I also photographed plants and berries, and made compositions with them in Photoshop. Then I cut them and collaged them onto the paintings of the fields.

Also, some of the things I paid attention to when I was illustrating *Harvesting Hope* was how I used color. For example, in those places where César Chávez is young and happy and they are living at this beautiful ranch that the grandfather has built, there is a lot of luminosity and there is a lot of colors. I would call them happy colors.

But once they get to the point where they are working in the fields and the work is hard, and their backs are hurting, in the colors and the composition I tried to create this feeling of being engulfed by the earth, of having to bend over the plants, by the darkness of the earth and how it kind of surrounds these people. I tried to convey the feelings of what they were going through, the dryness of the earth, of the ranch, where it hasn't rained for a long, long time.

At the end, joy pours out at the celebration when they are all together in front of the capital, and there is a mariachi, and people with the flags, and a boy playing the drum. Here I paid a lot of attention of how I was using the color and how I was trying to create this explosion of joy, not only through the colors, but also through the composition.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Do you work in art forms that you started learning as an adult or are still learning today?

**MORALES:** Yes. Even though I've drawn since I was a child, I practically never painted. The only painting I have from my childhood is one that I did in middle school for which I received a failing grade. When I lived in Mexico, I never took my art seriously, and I never dared to ask my parents to buy me any art supplies—paints or brushes—so I never had any.

It wasn't until I came to United States that my husband started working and I was finally able to go to the art store and buy myself my first set of brushes and paints. I didn't have any experience in using any of these tools or any of this material. As much as I would have loved to go to art school, that was not a choice for me at the time.

So, I sat at my dining room table, and I painted. I pretty much copied from all those books that I love, books like those created by David Shannon, Peter Sís, Marjorie Priceman, and others. I just sat at the table and tried to paint like many illustrators of children's books. I always tried to draw like others did as well; that was one of my learning techniques. Eventually, by painting more and more, I found my own way of doing things. I had to practice, and I'm still learning.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Talk about your counting book, *Just a Minute*.

**MORALES:** *Just a Minute* was a book that I created in a class for illustrating picture books. As I was trying to learn how to make these books, I enrolled in one of the evening classes at Berkeley. And art teacher, Ashley Wolff, came up with this assignment of creating a concept book. I decided I was going to make a counting book. But what to count?

I have always, always loved the folk tales from Mexico—the stories of spooky, supernatural things: especially the tales where regular, ordinary people can defeat incredible beings. So little by little, I came up with this idea that I wanted to have a skeleton in this story, and this skeleton represented the other life.

And who could be ready to go to another life but an old lady? So I came up with the idea of Grandma Beetle, who was always busy, like the beetle in my country. And she was so busy that death could never take her with him. Now this is also not such an original idea, because we have many stories in Mexico that deal with the fact that, if you are smart enough, you can trick anybody, even death. And if you are too busy or if you are so determined to stay in this world, then you can find a way to trick death.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Talk more about the skeleton, Señor Calavera, who currently has starred in two of your books, as well as some homemade movies you produced for the Internet.

**MORALES:** Señor Calavera comes from this idea of the sugar skulls that the children and even the adults eat during the celebration of the Day of the Dead in Mexico. During this time, relatives often will bring children these candies that are in the form of a skull. And they are very colorful. They are all decorated with icing in many colors. My Señor Calavera come from there. I always thought that my skeleton in *Just a Minute* was made

out of sugar. He's made out of candy, and that's why he has all these decorations in his face and his arms because they are icing, just the way they do it in Mexico.

Not only do we have sugar skulls, but we have toys and many other candies that resemble the skeletons as skulls. This is both part of the celebration and a kind of making fun of something that is so natural. It is, I guess, this realization that we all carry death with ourselves once we are born. And Señor Calavera is just one of those companions.

Now, children are choosing to believe who Señor Calavera is according to their own needs. Some say Señor Calavera is death and he's come to take Grandma Beetle to go to the other life or to the cemetery or this heaven.

And there are kids who tell me that they think that Señor Calavera is a friend, that he has come up to take Grandma Beetle to a birthday party or maybe they are going to go to the market or maybe they are going to go to the movies.

And what I realize is that every child now has been given the opportunity to take from the story what they need the most. If they are ready to believe that this is death, they do take it. If they are just ready to believe that this is another friend who has come to see Grandma Beetle, that's exactly how they take my story.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Just in Case*, a sequel to *Just a Minute* includes more spooky things, and features the return of Señor Calavera.

**MORALES:** At the end of *Just a Minute* Señor Calavera leaves a note that says he has enjoyed Grandma Beetle's birthday party so much that he cannot miss her next one. I never thought I was going to make a sequel for *Just a Minute*. I always thought it was a book that stood by itself. However, I kept wondering what would happen if Señor Calavera ever came back? Would he be on time? Would he know what to do? Because Señor Calavera doesn't seem to be very experienced at celebrating birthday parties or any celebrations for that matter, the idea of *Just in Case* was born.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please explain the concept of *Just in Case*.

**MORALES:** *Just in Case* is a trickster tale that uses a Spanish alphabet book as a device in the story. Through the use of a Spanish alphabet book, I was able to bring Spanish words that I love into the story. There are letters that only exist in the Spanish alphabet, and some of them are my favorites.

When I was making this book, I created a list of words that love. It was a little hard to have to choose some of the words, each of which became a present in the story. I especially love words that start with the letter c-h. All Mexican words that come from pre-Hispanic times have this sound.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Little Night* is decidedly NOT a scary story.

**MORALES:** *Little Night* is the book for which I receive the most sincere comments from the heart. They say, "Yuyi, I love that book." I do, too.

I wrote the story, and then, a few years later, it was time to do the illustrations. I had to come up with ways to represent what the night is like and what the mother sky is like. Are they transparent? Are they solid? Are they humungous? Are they just like anybody else on earth? Do they have their own world? Do they have a world that looks like us? I had to think of all these things.

People ask me sometimes where this story comes from. I tell them it comes from my memories of when I was getting ready to start my day with my mother. She dressed me, and fed me, and did my hair. Sometimes my sisters and I would run away from it. From these memories, the idea of *Little Night* came to happen. In the book, there is this element of hide-and-seek. As the mother is getting Little Night ready, Little Night runs away and hides. She says, “Yes, momma, but you have to find me first.” And then, the mother tries to find Little Night. And Little Night darts inside the darkest of places in the earth.

When I was making the illustrations for this book, I knew that it was going to be a dark book. And yet, I wanted it to be luminous and I wanted it to be colorful. And once I started doing the illustrations, I realized what a pickle I was in. With my own limitations as an artist and as a person who knows how to utilize the paints and the acrylics, I find myself in moments where I knew that I didn’t know what I was doing, where I had to practice, and where I had to make mistakes, and do it again, and try it again. Because it was difficult trying to make this darkness, and yet, bring the color out.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Why did you want to write *Little Night*?

**MORALES:** In my writers’ group, we give ourselves assignments, and we come up with an idea that we all create a story around. It might be a war. It might be a concept. In that year, the assignment was to create a story based in hairdos and a lost thing.

So when it was about hairdos, I immediately recalled my memory of how my mother always wanted to be a hair stylist. And I had very long hair when I was growing up, so she loved to do things with my hair and put it up. And she even created ornaments—anything from felt to bread dough that she put together with glue and painted. She made all these ornaments, and she put them in our hair.

With *Little Night*, I wanted to recapture these moments, and have Mother Sky playing with her child, and getting her ready, and, at the end, doing her hair. She brought what she thought was the most beautiful thing that she could bring—which was a star and the planets—to put them on her hair as ornaments, just like my mother used to do.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** The book was published in English and Spanish; you mentioned that you wrote it simultaneously, which is pretty rare.

**MORALES:** I knew that I needed to learn how to write and think in English. So, through night courses, English became my first language in writing. I always write it in English first. That’s how it comes out.

In the case of *Little Night*, I wrote the story first in English, then I wrote it in Spanish, and it was a joy to write in Spanish. I already knew the story; I had already

taken it out of myself, so I was free to now bring this language that I love so much and is so beautiful.

In fact, one of the things that I love now is when teachers at schools, they bring the Spanish-speaker students, and they ask them now to retell the story in Spanish. They have done it with *Just a Minute*, and I was amazed at how beautiful and how rich it sounds, the way the children read a story in Spanish. It was like they were telling the story all over again.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You won a Pura Belpré Award for your illustrations of Marisa Montes' text of *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*. What did you feel when you were initially handed the manuscript? What started spinning in your head when you first read it?

**MORALES:** When I was given *Los Gatos Black on Halloween* to illustrate, I loved it because it was a very playful text. But the other thing I love about it is, and I discovered more as I was working in it, was I could actually give my own interpretation to the story. The text was specific, but not so much that it would constrain me into what these characters were going to be and what I was going to illustrate. That was a perfect balance. I had so much to put in this book.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What are you trying to show and tell in your pictures in *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*?

**MORALES:** In *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*, I did want to have a lot of cultural connections. I wanted the characters to be people that I could either recognize or that I could learn more about. And I hope that readers, if they look really, really close into *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*, will start seeing that there is more than just spooky characters in these illustrations, and that within these pages are portrayals of real people. Readers might not necessarily recognize that my aunts are there (I made them witches), or see that historical characters from pre-Hispanic and colonial times are illustrated, but there are many of them within these pictures.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please share a little about the palette and the painting in *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*. It seems like there was some progress in the palette itself. It moves across the book.

**MORALES:** I really liked doing the art for *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*. I did something a little different from what I've done before. First, I created a background, and from there I started building the story forward.

I painted, pretty much in black and white and grays. I kind of sculpted the figures first with black and white. Then, I added color on top of that. I started from dark, and then came up to light. The last things I painted were always the brightest of whites, and it helped me to give them a lot of luminosity, even though the book is dark for the most part. I knew if it was a Halloween book it was going to be a dark book. I enjoyed that very

much. It was easy, and it had a good result. It also had that spookiness that I think the book needed.

I also put myself in that book. I am on page 17. I'm in the scene in the graveyard. I wanted to have not only spooky things in the graveyard, but have this graveyard be a very popular place. I guess it was one of those other attempts to be brave, to know that I can be placed anywhere and I'm not afraid of that. I'm not afraid of death, you know, in a way, by putting myself in the graveyard, as if I were already there. So I'm the woman who is helping her child putting on the coat, and they are both stepping up off their graves. It is nice that my son is with me.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your characters are very fun; they're playful, they're scary. They have a lot of energy. There's a lot of zest, even in things that might not have characters, ordinarily...like a skull or a graveyard.

**MORALES:** I know that, when I wanted to start making my books, that as much as I admire many, many books that I saw at the library and the bookstore, I knew that I had my own characters and that they were in a way a little different from the characters that I was seeing in these books. I know that a lot of people are doing work like this, but I know that my characters are backed up by my own culture.

I also realize that a thing that is very constant in my work is celebration. There is almost always a celebration in a book, whether it is a celebration of someone's life on her birthday or whether it is a celebration of a holiday, like Halloween that someone might come back from the other life to be with you again, like in *Just in Case*, and bring the best present for you or the celebration of what it's like to be with your mother, and how you get ready to come out and be the night.

And I realize that what carries me through the creation of these books is this sense of celebration in almost of them. In *Harvesting Hope*, once more, we have a celebration at the end; after the journey and after the hard moments, there comes a celebration at the end. And even though celebration is inherent to almost every work in children's book, I think that, in a way, for me, it's something that I attach myself to easily.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** I love how the Mexican celebrations in your books include lots of dance, food, color, and clothing that are very expressive.

**MORALES:** When I started creating books, it was during a time when I felt that there was so much that I didn't have anymore. I didn't have the colors of my country. I didn't have the words that I was familiar with. I didn't have the celebrations, and I didn't have my family to be with me to enjoy with me that I was raising my son and all the things that we go through as we grow older. I didn't have that with me anymore, because my family was back in Mexico and I was living here in the United States.

I was doing all of this pretty much by myself. I was living in an apartment that was rented, and we could not paint. The walls were white and cream, and the building was gray. It just did not match what I was familiar with, and what gave me joy, and what I vibrated with.

Once I started making my work, I start pulling back together—close to me—all those things that I missed. The colors that I wanted now surrounded me. I brought them in my work. And the food that I missed, I put them in *Just a Minute*. The sense of being with family, I put in my books. And the sense of celebrating, and the sense of speaking in Spanish and being understood, I put these in my books, too.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Tell me about what books can do for readers.

**MORALES:** To me, books are this place. To me, this is very personal. I found myself in books because I found what I wanted to do in books. I found it there. When I saw picture books for the first time, I fell in love with them so, so deeply. They were the epitome of everything I always thought I could be, so perfect and beautiful. And I wanted to do it.

I knew that, after many years of looking for what I really wanted to do and after many years of not knowing what I wanted to do, here, in this place that I have chosen to be, in this country that I had come to. Where, for a long time, I wondered, why I was here. I didn't think that I could find a reason, but when I found picture books, it was like I had an answer. I finally had an answer.

It didn't mean that I felt I was going to publish my books, but I knew I wanted to make them. So I went home, and I created my own stories, and I put the pages together with drawings that I made, just like when I was a child with coloring inside of the lines and all of these things. And then, I put that together, and I had my own books.

I knew I found my path there, and I also found trust that I have everything I need to create all these things. And it's been through books that I learned how to express these stories and all these feelings in a language that other people could understand. It was through books that I learned the language, and I learned the new words in English that I didn't know. It was through books that I learned where you can find someone who might be interested in your work. It was through books that I found all of this.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What is your hope for readers of your books?

**MORALES:** I hope that my books give readers joy. I celebrate every time I finish a book. I put all the illustrations on the floor, and I take a picture in front of the pages. And then, I get them ready to go to the publishing house. And I say goodbye to them, and I have a nice dinner. It's just a moment of celebration, knowing that I accomplished something.

I hope the children will be curious. My books are not only for the people who find themselves in my books, they are not only for the people who look like the people in my books, and they are not only for the people who speak words in Spanish or know the numbers in Spanish. I really hope that a lot of other people who don't look like me and don't speak my language are finding connections to my books. And I think that they do, because books are universal. The more specific they are, the more universal they become.

And especially with children's books, we bring in situations and experiences that are very common to everybody. We all celebrate, and we all have parents who love us or don't, and grandparents who take care of us or don't, and our desires to be together with the people that we love, and decided to learn, and decided to give.

I put all these things in my books, and the fact that I do it in my own way, with my own colors, and with my own words, is just another way to share that this experience is, in fact, so universal to everybody. I really hope that the kids who are not familiar with some of the things that I depict in my books will be very curious about those things.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You talk to students a lot. What are some things you like to talk to them about?

**MORALES:** One of the things that I like to talk to kids about when I go to schools is toys. What a joy it is to play with something that is so simple.

I also talk about things that we are afraid of. Children love to talk about what they are afraid of. And that happens a lot when we talk about books like *Just a Minute* or *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*. I get to tell them that I put in these books things that I used to be afraid of. In these books, I am sharing my own perspective and my own experiences. So it becomes a good time for them to tell me their own experiences.

They also like to tell me about Señor Calavera. They have many questions about him. They always want me to tell them, "Really, who is Señor Calavera?" They also want to know why Señor Calavera doesn't have any skin, why he doesn't have any clothes. And we get to talk a little bit about that.

I also usually bring my own Señor Calavera to schools. I have a Señor Calavera puppet that I anticipate sometimes that kids might be afraid of, but they always tell me, "Nah, they are too brave. They are not scared of Señor Calavera." Children are amazing. I mean, I used to be a lot more afraid of skeletons when I was their age than they seem to be.

A lot of kids like to talk about César Chávez, because I visit kids that are second, especially third graders. Here in California, they are learning about César Chávez. I also get to hear a lot from teachers, because there are a lot of teachers who actually experienced and even walked with César Chávez sometimes. I get to hear about parents and people who knew César Chávez.

We also talk about the process of creating, of making pictures or making stories, and how difficult it is sometimes. Like when you sit at your table and your teacher or someone tells you (or you tell yourself) that you have to create a story or that you have to make a new picture, and how frustrating it might be at the beginning.

I show the kids how my first drawings are actually very bad. It takes me a long time before my art looks like something that can go into a book. We talk about that, because I think that they like to see that even people who might make pictures for a book, when they start doing it, it might not look very good at all.

It happens that children are actually very fearless sometimes, and they are able to express and put drawings out there with no regrets and just do it. But as we keep growing older, and older, and older, a critic inside us appears and tells us that we are really not that good. We are not good enough to be dreaming that we can make drawings, and make paintings, and all of those things. And we stop practicing. I talk to kids about that because one of the reasons why I'm good at making my books is because I practice a lot. It's not because I am good at drawing. I might be good at drawing because I have done it for a long time. Most of the kids that I visit are just as good as I was when I was a child. I guess the only difference between them and me is the years of experience.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What are your beliefs about creating art for children?

**MORALES:** A lot of people have the idea that, because it is for children, then it should be simpler. The artwork and stories should be a little more simplified.

I have never really felt that that's the way to create for children. To me, making my art, whether it is for children or for myself, it is the highest expression that I can come up with every day. I do not look for work to create something that is below my abilities, or my expectations, or my dreams.

I always have these big expectations. I try hard to do something that I will love, that when I'm done, I will be marveled by my own creation. At the beginning, I'm in front of just a blank piece of paper. When I'm finished, I look for this feeling of magic that happens. At the end of the day or maybe after many, many days, I will have created a completely new image and a complete new world. I love that feeling when I get up from my chair and look at what I have created, and I see that it is a lot more than I could have ever imagined. In creating all of that comes all that I have with me: talent and experience—the years and years of practicing my drawings, and my lines, and how to move my hands, and how to use my pencil.

It is very difficult to create a book that I don't love. It is very difficult to illustrate a story that you have not connected to. Because illustrating or writing a story is not so much just about words or lines or colors or pictures. It is about feelings and about connections. And by just repeating in illustrations what has been told in text, I am really not doing myself or anybody a favor.

Illustrating is more about experience and not so much about the final result. Needless to say, the result at the end always surprises me; when you have done things right, everything at the end just falls into place.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You get to talk to the librarians, the teachers, and educators a lot. What are some things you like to tell them?

**MORALES:** One of the things I try to tell teachers is to be very observant of kids. When they comment about what their students create, I hope that they do it in a way that will encourage children to keep creating.

I didn't have a very good experience with my teachers when I was growing up. I had an art teacher in middle school who did not believe that it was me who was doing some of my work. And obviously, because he didn't know me, he just did not believe me. And he had been my favorite teacher, but he never could relate to me.

I know how fragile it is to want to create something, and how that first creation is so fragile that anything can break it. So when I talk with teachers, I tell about my experience with the first person who ever told me that I was an artist. I was already an adult and old enough to believe it and it really gave me light.

We need to remember that when we see children doing something, we don't necessarily have to say, "I think that you are an artist," but we can say, "I think that you like what you are doing." You know, "I can see that you really like using the yellow color. Oh, wow, look at how much green you put in here," rather than trying to guide the children into creating art the way that we adults see it. Just make a celebration of what

they are doing, so that they, themselves, can decide whether it is something that they like to do or they don't like to do.

So what I talk to adults about a lot is usually the creative process, and just how fragile it might be, and how frustrating it might be sometimes, but how enriching it is when you find that, if you practice, you can get very, very good at it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Does being a Mexican-American children's book creator bring with it a responsibility to be a representative of your culture in white America?

**MORALES:** I didn't always like being Mexican. When I was growing up, I wanted to be white with blue eyes—maybe German. Because, unfortunately, in Mexico, for many, many generations, and even still now, being Indian-looking or being Mexican wasn't really the most beautiful thing of all.

We carry this from the colonial times when Spaniards came and they imposed this idea onto Indians that they were like little kids. They weren't very smart. Their color was not beautiful. And even after generations, like my grandmother and even my mother, they still carry some of those ideas that, if someone has blue eyes and is white, he or she is beautiful. What a beautiful baby. What a pretty child. But if you are brown and have brown eyes, and you have sideburns like I do, like all Mexicans do, well, you're just okay.

As I was growing up, I never necessarily felt any pride of being Mexican or looking like a Mexican, because I wanted to look like something that didn't look like me. But then, I came to United States, and I also met my husband, a husband who has blue eyes, and who told me that I was beautiful. I couldn't believe it.

This isn't only about beauty, but about what is the best. If you dress like you are Mexican, in Mexico, that's not the coolest thing to be, necessarily, at least among certain groups of people. And it wasn't until I came here to United States that I start relating back to all those things and taking pride in my colors, my look, and my words.

It took my husband, for example, to say that I was beautiful, to believe that I could be beautiful, regardless. And it took a mother-in-law to tell me that I was wonderful, to believe that I was wonderful, even though I was Mexican.

Finally I started seeing how marvelous it is to be multicolor, and how marvelous it is to look like me or not. I finally started feeling that pride and that happiness of the memories, of the cultural backpack that I carry with me, with the stories and all these things that belong to me.

So is there a responsibility there? Is there a responsibility in the way that I portray things, how they reflect what it's like to be Mexican to other people? How does that reflect onto people who are not out in the culture? The truth is that there are many ways of being Latino or being Hispanic, and even many ways of being Mexican. It has to do with class, it has to do with who your family was, and what school you went to, just like everywhere else.

### **Books by Yuyi Morales**

- MY ABUELITA (written by Tony Johnston), Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009
- JUST IN CASE: A TRICKSTER TALE AND SPANISH ALPHABET BOOK, Roaring Brook Press, 2008

- LITTLE NIGHT, Roaring Brook Press, 2007
- LOS GATOS BLACK ON HALLOWEEN (written by Marisa Montes), Henry Holt and Company, 2006
- SAND SISTER (written by Amanda White), Barefoot Books, 2004
- HARVESTING HOPE: THE STORY OF CESAR CHAVEZ (written by Kathleen Krull), Harcourt, 2003
- JUST A MINUTE: A TRICKSTER TALE AND COUNTING BOOK, Chronicle Books, 2003

This In-depth Written Interview is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies.

Questions regarding this program should be directed to [info@teachingbooks.net](mailto:info@teachingbooks.net).

Copyright ©2009 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.

