



Pat Mora

TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth Author Interview

Pat Mora, interviewed in her home in Santa Fe, New Mexico on January 28, 2008.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are an award-winning children’s book author; a frequent lecturer at schools, libraries and book fairs; and a constant advocate for children’s literacy. You started Día, a celebration of children, families, and reading that is observed annually on April 30. How would *you* describe what you do?

PAT MORA: I am a writer. I am also a mom. I do public speaking. But by and large I have the privilege of being a writer—a writer who loves poetry. That is my favorite genre.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your poetry.

PAT MORA: I’m currently working on a collection of love poems for teens. The poems have a lot of variety. Not all of them are in the voice of Latinos, although I am of Mexican descent, and Latino culture shapes who I am as a person and as a writer. But writers are always diverse on the inside, and I have many loves. This book is an opportunity for me to explore those loves.

TEACHINGBOOKS: So many of your books are poetic, like *Yum! ¡Mmm! ¡Qué Rico! America’s Sproutings*, a celebration of 14 multicultural foods from the Americas. How do you balance the poetic element with the wish to pass along information to students?

PAT MORA: I often focus more on language than on the conveying of information. I initially suggested *Yum! ¡Mmm! ¡Qué Rico! America’s Sproutings* as a book of haiku poems. My husband and I own several books about plants and foods of the Americas. I thought, “What if I did a book of haiku focused on foods of the Americas that kids might enjoy?” Teachers like to teach haiku, a poetic form of Japanese origin that traditionally has five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second, and five syllables in the last. It feels doable to students who might be intimidated by the word “poem.”

The information element came from my editor, who suggested putting in some facts about the food I was describing. A teacher friend of mine agreed. She said, “What about students who won’t be drawn in by the poetry but would want to know how many pounds of peanut butter we consume in the United States each year?” It was a convincing argument.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Would you share a haiku from *Yum! ¡Mmm! ¡Qué Rico! America’s Sproutings*? What makes a poem a haiku?

PAT MORA: Here is one called “Peanuts.” Notice the five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second, and five syllables in the last.

Smear nutty butter,

then jelly. Goopy party,
my sandwich and me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: One of your first books, *Tomás and the Library Lady*, was a commended title for the Américas Award and won the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award. It was published in 1997, and since then, a lot has evolved in how children's books portray different cultures. What are your thoughts about that?

PAT MORA: There hasn't been enough change in the range of voices that you find in children's and young adult books. About 14% of public school children today are Latinos, and yet only about 2% of children's books are about Latinos. I don't understand why we are not seeing a dramatic increase. Publishers should be excited about publishing more Latino authors and about providing books not only for Latino children, but for children who are in school with Latinos and want to learn about that culture.

Teachers and librarians can be the most effective advocates for diversifying children's and young adult books. When I speak to publishers, they're going to expect me to say that I would love to see more books by Native American authors and African-American authors and Arab-American authors. But when a teacher or librarian says this to publishers, it can have a profound effect.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to write *Tomás and the Library Lady*?

PAT MORA: I had the pleasure of knowing Tomás Rivera, the president of the University of California at Riverside, who had grown up in a migrant farming family. I wanted to honor him.

I'm often struck how, when I am visiting schools, I rarely meet a child who knows what a migrant worker is. Here's a man who survived that experience and became the president of a major university, with a library named after him. Here's a Texas hero who doesn't have boots, a saddle, or a horse. He's an educational hero.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many of your books, including *Tomás and the Library Lady*, incorporate Spanish phrases within a mainly English narrative. Can you talk about that?

PAT MORA: When Tomás is saying good night, he says "Buenos noches" to Papá, Mamá, Papá grande, and his little brother Enrique. In one sense, it's a pretty simple sentence. He's saying "Good night," but he's saying it in a language that many children hear at home. I want children who feel embarrassed because they speak Spanish to realize that there are places where the beautiful Spanish they speak is an asset.

I will never know what it's like to have only one language in my head. I have the pleasure of being able to move back and forth between Spanish and English, and I incorporate both languages in my books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is the importance of accolades like the Tomás Rivera Award, honoring specific cultures and authors from specific cultures?

PAT MORA: Publishers know that teachers, librarians, and parents are bombarded by the vast number of new books every season. One way to sort through them is through reviews and awards like the Tomás Rivera Award, the Américas Award, and the Coretta Scott King Award.

These give books that might go unnoticed some validation. Those gold stickers on book covers do matter.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is the subject matter of the books in your bilingual early-independent reader series, “My Family/Mi Familia?”

PAT MORA: The first book, *Let’s Eat! ¡A Comer!*, is about how we define wealth. On the surface, it seems like a very easy story, about families coming together for dinner. We see that some families have roast beef and mashed potatoes, while others have beans and salad and tortillas. In the book, a child asks a question as she is looking at all the food on the table. She says, “Are we rich?” The dad looks at the food on the table and around the room he says, “Yes, we are rich.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Doña Flor: A Tall Tale About a Giant Woman with a Great Big Heart* was a 2006 Belpré Author Honor Book, and Raul Colón won the 2006 Belpré Illustrator Medal for his art. What were some inspirations for this book?

PAT MORA: I love tall tales. I always loved Paul Bunyan and the notion of someone who was immense, and I thought, “We need a book about an immense and powerful bilingual woman.” But Doña Flor doesn’t use her size to bully anybody. I was interested in the idea that her power comes from her capacity to love. I live in the New Mexico landscape where the book is set. When I’m driving between Santa Fe and Albuquerque, I imagine Doña Flor striding across the desert.

I love to tell audiences about the first moment when I saw Raul Colón’s sketch in black and white of *Doña Flor*. It is always a tense moment for an author to see how someone has illustrated his or her story, because the author has lived for so long with these characters, sometimes for years. When I first saw *Doña Flor* in black and white, I gasped and immediately said, “She’s perfect.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: Doña Flor is just one of many strong female characters in your books.

PAT MORA: I grew up with two extremely strong and outspoken women—my mother and my aunt, who is the star of my book *A Birthday Basket for Tia*, about a girl seeking the perfect present for her great aunt’s 90th birthday. One of the many gifts to me by my family was conveying that it was natural for women to be strong and outspoken. Maybe Doña Flor is all of that, just literally enlarged.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share some other visions of the feminine in your children’s books.

PAT MORA: *A Library for Juana: The World of Sor Juana Inés* is about this amazing woman, Mexico’s most famous woman poet. Sor Juana Inés lived in the 17th century and is virtually unknown in the United States. In my book, you see her at just three years old, demanding that a neighbor teach her how to read. *The Desert is My Mother* is about a little girl who is alone the vast desert landscape. She has an intimate conversation with the desert: “I say, ‘Feed me,’ and you feed me red prickly pear on a sliced cactus. I say, ‘Make me beautiful,’ and you give me turquoise for my fingers, a pink blossom for my hair.” We sense her strength.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your alphabet book, *¡Marimba! Animales A to Z*, is a wonderful book for schools because it introduces students to cognates, words that sound similar in two languages. How did this idea come about?

PAT MORA: *¡Marimba! Animales A to Z* was an idea that probably took me ten years to realize. The idea came to me when I was sitting at the Cincinnati Airport with my Spanish-English dictionary. I thought it would be fun for people to be able to say, “I know 26 words in English” or “I know 26 words in Spanish” because the words are alike. One day I said to my son, “I really want to do this book about cognates, and I want readers to feel that they can say ‘Gorilla’ or ‘Flamingo’ in two languages.” He said, “Tell me the 26 words.” I told him my words, and he said, “Oh, it’s a zoo.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: A lot of your books, like *This Big Sky*, illustrated by Steve Jenkins, are about the natural world. How is nature important to you?

PAT MORA: I have a deep attachment to the natural world. It’s a major influence on my writing, and as I look out over the wonderful snow-covered Santa Fe hills, I’m grateful for every day that I live here. I grew up surrounded by low desert landscape, but Santa Fe is high desert country. There are differences in the plants, the animals, and the seasons. *This Big Sky* is a praise song of the high desert.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You helped start El día de los Niños/El día de los libros (Children’s Day/Book Day). “Día,” as it is known, honors children and families of all cultural backgrounds reading daily, and it is celebrated every year on April 30th. It combines a traditional Mexican holiday that honors the child with family literacy for people of all cultures. How did this idea come about?

PAT MORA: I was being interviewed by a public radio station at the University of Arizona in Tucson, and the interviewer mentioned the Mexican observance on April 30th of El día del Niño, the Day of the Child. I had never heard of this.

The interviewer said that it was a day to celebrate children. I walked out of the radio station to meet some academic friends for lunch, and I thought, “What if we combined this existing notion of April 30th as the day to celebrate children, with the idea of linking children to books, languages, and cultures?” The ALA affiliate Reforma (the National Association to Promote Libraries and Information Science to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking) endorsed it. We began having Día events throughout the country. Over time, we realized that we don’t want people to celebrate just on April 30th. Día is a daily commitment for linking all children to books, languages, and cultures. Over 400 libraries celebrated Día last year.

Family literacy is a big part of Día. So often we forget that families may not be readers through no fault of their own. I speak a lot about what I call “bookjoy,” that private pleasure you feel when you open a book. Those of us blessed with bookjoy can share this with others.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you share the teaching element of your career?

PAT MORA: I have taught at all levels. I started teaching in El Paso. I had planned to teach high school English, but since I was bilingual, the first job I was given was to teach Spanish to grades K through 6. I also taught reading and spelling at the middle school level, and I taught high school. Then I started raising a family. After a community college opened in town, I began

teaching night classes there, which was a wonderful experience, and I also taught Freshman English at the local university.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

PAT MORA: I tell them that writers are readers. Students are often focus on being published, and I find that regrettable. I encourage students to read and read and read and write and write and write.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What you like to tell teachers?

PAT MORA: I tell teachers that they are far more powerful than they think. I often compare teaching to our role as parents. If we thought about the impact we are having on our children, it could almost immobilize us because it is so profound. All over this country, five days a week, teachers in individual classrooms are working intensely with a group of students. Teachers have the power, sometimes with a glance or a phrase, to either shut a student down or open that student up.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday for you?

PAT MORA: There are no typical workdays. I can describe an ideal workday. I would get up, have breakfast, and have some time for quiet and meditation. Then I would work on a new manuscript. Sometime during the day, I would have a light lunch and get to e-mail. But the truth is that I travel a great deal, and life can be a lot of little emergencies. The ideal day may happen one or two days a week.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Could you please describe your writing process?

PAT MORA: I have been writing for quite a while now, and I trust the process. I don't put a lot of pressure on myself. I will often read a little bit before starting to write, to sort of prime the pump. If I'm working on a book of poetry, I might read poetry to remind me of how moving and how delightful poetry can be, and then I will begin playing around on the page. I don't expect tremendous results with my initial scribblings. I love revisions. Whatever my first draft is, I'm going to have many, many opportunities to improve it.

When I'm writing poetry, 99.9% of my writing begins in English. I spent most of my life in English, although I am bilingual. I usually begin a poem in longhand. I like to sit where I have a nice view, ideally, although I worked on haiku this weekend at an airport. I'm not one to romanticize inspiration. I try to get to the work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

PAT MORA: I try to play with a slightly different part of the poem or of the story, because it's important to push through a hard spot. I try to judge whether I'm practicing avoidance or if I'm really stuck. If I'm practicing avoidance, I say to myself, "You need to sit here and try to figure this out." If I feel that I'm genuinely stuck, I do something else. I might fix myself a salad or do some e-mail or, if the weather's nice, I take a walk.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What else do you want librarians and teachers know?

PAT MORA: I want them to know how personal bookjoy is for me, and how much I hope that it is for them. If we're trying to excite young people about reading, we need to be experiencing bookjoy ourselves so that we have references to make. It's important to be able to say, "You know, I read the most wonderful poem the other day. Let me tell you about it."

Books by PAT MORA (as of March 2008)

- JOIN HANDS, Charlesbridge Publishing, 2008.
- SWEET DREAMS/DULCES SUENOS, HarperCollins, 2008.
- LET'S EAT!/A COMER! (illustrated by Mirabel Suarez), Rayo Books, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2008.
- YUM! MMMM! QUE RICO!: AMERICA'S SPROUTINGS, Lee & Low Books, 2007.
- AGUA SANTA/HOLY WATER, University of Arizona Press, 2007.
- MARIMBA!: ANIMALES FROM A TO Z, Clarion Books, 2006.
- ADOBE ODES, University of Arizona Press, 2006.
- CONFETI: POEMAS PARA NINOS, Lee and Low Books, 1996.
- DONA FLOR: A TALL TALE ABOUT A GIANT WOMAN WITH A GREAT BIG HEART (illustrated by Raul Colon), Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2005.
- THE SONG OF FRANCIS AND THE ANIMALS, Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2005.
- LA CARRERA DEL SAPO Y EL VENADO, Groundwood Books, 2005.
- A LIBRARY FOR JUANA: THE WORLD OF SOR JUANA INES (illustrated by Beatriz Vidal), Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2002.
- MARIA PAINTS THE HILLS, Museum of New Mexico Press, 2002.
- THE RACE OF TOAD AND DEER, Groundwood Books, 2001.
- LOVE TO MAMA: A TRIBUTE TO MOTHERS, Lee & Low Books, 2001.
- THE NIGHT THE MOON FELL, Groundwood Books, 2000.
- MY OWN TRUE NAME: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS FOR YOUNG ADULTS, 1984-1999, Arte Publico Press, 2000.
- THE RAINBOW TULIP, Viking Books, 1999.
- AUNT CARMEN'S BOOK OF PRACTICAL SAINTS, Beacon Press, 1999.
- PACHANGA DELICIOSA / DELICIOUS HULABALOO (illustrated by Francisco X. Mora), Pinata Books, 1998.
- TOMAS & THE LIBRARY LADY, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.
- A BIRTHDAY BASKET FOR TIA, (illustrated by Cecily Lang), Simon & Schuster, 1992.
- CONFETTI: POEMS FOR CHILDREN, (illustrated by Enrique O. Sanchez), Lee & Low Books, 1996.
- UNO, DOS, TRES: ONE, TWO, THREE, Clarion Books, 1996.
- EL REGALO DE LA FLOR DE NOCHEBUENA/THE GIFT OF THE POINSETTIA (written with Charles Ramirez Berg, illustrated by Daniel Lechon), Pinata Books., Pinata Books, 1995.
- EL DESIERTO ES MI MADRE / DESERT IS MY MOTHER (illustrated by Daniel Lechon), Pinata Books, 1994.
- PABLO'S TREE, Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- COMMUNION, Arte Publico Press, 1994.

- CHANTS, Arte Publico Press, 1994.
- LISTEN TO THE DESERT/OYE AL DESIERTO, Clarion Books, 1994.
- BORDERS, Arte Publico Press, 1986.
- Agua, Agua, Agua (illustrated by Jose Ortega),
- THE BAKERY LADY / LA SENORA DE LA PANADERIA (illustrated by Pablo Torrecilla), Arte Publico Press.

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