



Pam Muñoz Ryan

Q&A about *Becoming Naomi León*
Scholastic, 2004

Pam Muñoz Ryan, interviewed in September 2004.

TEACHINGBOOKS: More than your other books, *Naomi León* blends your Mexican and Oklahoman roots, traditions and dialect. Why now, with this book?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I didn't wait until I felt the time was right or anything like that. The next project is often what has been nagging at me or floating to the top in my mind.

After I wrote *Esperanza Rising*, many adults told me how much they loved the story and how much it connected them to their Mexican heritage. Many admitted they didn't know one word of Spanish or celebrate any Mexican customs. This is a common trait that many American children share: a heritage from another country with no knowledge of that country. That idea often brought me back to my own upbringing among several cultures.

Even though the sensibilities of Gram, Naomi and Owen were familiar to me, some of that information came to me in ways that go beyond my own family. After years of working with hundreds of families in the education field, I'd met many people who unwittingly donated aspects of their personality to my characters.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Esperanza Rising* is inspired by and about your Mexican grandmother. Is Naomi's Gram an ode to your Oklahoman grandmother?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: The book is a work of fiction and all of the characters are composites. There are a few small similarities between Gram and my grandmother. For instance, many of the sayings came from my grandmother and she was a tiny woman, but other than that, the personality of the character in my book came from my imagination. Gram is much more contemporary and feisty than my grandmother was. But, how does one ever really know what is conscious and unconscious?

TEACHINGBOOKS: You skillfully and painfully evoke a family with a neglectful parent and neglected children. Was this aspect one of the initial pieces of the book? From where did you draw your inspiration?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: Yes, from the beginning of the story, Naomi and Owen had been abandoned by their mother. Through my work, years ago, in Head Start and my work with families in other programs, and even in my own extended family, I've personally known many children who were raised by their grandparents. I also have a wealth of resources for information on these types of situations as various family members work in social services.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Soap carvings are an integral aspect of the story. How did soap carvings make their way into the book? Is this something you or a family member does or did?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I needed a craft that Naomi's father could hand down to her, but it had to be something safer than woodcarving. Mexico is also known for soapstone carving, which is a soft stone, but

that would have been too difficult for Naomi as well. When I was a young girl, I carved soap once as a craft in Camp Fire Girls, so it wasn't hard to make the jump from soapstone to carving soap. I went online to find out information about it. One thing led to another, and it became a good fit. I actually carved several rudimentary animals out of soap while writing the book. (Embarrassingly basic. I'm not nearly as talented as Naomi!)

TEACHINGBOOKS: Naomi carries a notebook with her and therapeutically makes lists in it. It also gives us a window into her thoughts and feelings. What was your reason for including the notebook?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: For me, all books are an evolution. Since Naomi didn't talk much, I wanted her to have an outlet and writing seemed logical. Originally, I had Naomi carrying around an old appointment book but I couldn't convey the information I wanted through a written schedule. Then I migrated to the idea of her copying lists. I think there's often a comfort level and security in transferring words from one place to another, in that you appear occupied, but you can also let your mind wander while you're doing it. It precludes having to participate in conversation.

I'm also a huge fan of *A Writer's Notebook* by Ralph Fletcher; specifically, his lists of favorite words that a writer creates: unusual names, funny words, etc. You can see his influence reflected in Naomi's lists.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book is divided into sections: "a rabble of yesterdays," "a passel of todays," "a murmuration of tomorrows." Are these headings crafted from Oklahoman expressions? If not, please explain their origins.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: No, those headings didn't come from any Oklahoman expressions, although I love that they sound like they might be and that is why I chose them. The collective nouns that are chapter heading are all accurate terms. Rabble, passel, and murmuration were from the lists of collective nouns but had been applied to specific animal groups: a murmuration of starlings, a passel of ducks. I plucked them from those phrases and used them for my yesterday, today and tomorrow headings as a way to help the reader establish the time sequence of the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The surprise of Naomi and Owen awakening to the trailer being pulled down the highway was a brilliant development. Did you think of this as you wrote the book, after they'd been living in the trailer, or did you place them in the trailer specifically with the plan to take the trailer to Mexico?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I didn't originally plan for the trailer to ever move but when I needed them to flee...well, one thing led to another.

TEACHINGBOOKS: During the creation of *Naomi León*, was there anything you had to do that was unique to this book (research, travel, etc.)? If so, please explain.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: In 1997, I went to Oaxaca City to see The Night of the Radishes. After the trip, I knew that someday, I wanted to employ the festival in a book. Back then, I didn't know if I would write a nonfiction book or a picture book or a novel. When I began this novel, the festival lent itself to Naomi's story. Again, one thing led to another.

I discovered startling information during my research on grandparents who were raising their grandchildren. One in ten children in the U.S. are raised by family members other than their parents, and it's usually the grandparents and often only the grandmother. Those statistics are based only on

known/recorded cases so that means the numbers are probably higher. There are probably many, like Gram in this story, who never really pursued available support programs for fear of losing the children. Those statistics also don't reflect the many children who live with a parent in a grandparent's home while the parent is absent, sometimes for months and years at a time.

Books by Pam Muñoz Ryan

- THERE WAS NO SNOW ON CHRISTMAS EVE (illustrated by Dennis Nolan), Hyperion Books for Children, 2006
- NACHO AND LOLITA (illustrated by Claudia Ruida), Scholastic Press, 2005
- BECOMING NAOMI LEÓN, Scholastic Press, 2004
- BOX OF FRIENDS, A (illustrated by Mary Whyte), School Specialty Children's Publishing / Gingham Dog Books, 2003
- HOW DO YOU RAISE A RAISIN (illustrated by Craig Brown), Charlesbridge Publishing, 2003
- BANDERA QUE AMAMOS, LA (illustrated by Ralph Masiello), Charlesbridge Publishing, 2002
- HELLO OCEAN (illustrated by Mark Astrella), Charlesbridge Publishing, 2002
- MUD IS CAKE (illustrated by David McPhail), Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- WHEN MARIAN SANG (illustrated by Brian Selznick), Scholastic Press, 2002
- MICE AND BEANS (illustrated by Joe Cepeda), Scholastic Press, 2001
- ESPERANZA RISING, Scholastic Press, 2000
- AMELIA AND ELEANOR GO FOR A RIDE (illustrated by Brian Selznick), Scholastic Press, 1999
- DOUG'S TREASURE HUNT (illustrated by Jumbo Pictures), Disney Press, 1999
- WHERE'S PORKCHOP (illustrated by Jumbo Pictures), Disney Press, 1999
- DOUG COUNTS DOWN (illustrated by Jumbo Pictures), Disney Press, 1998
- FUNNIE FAMILY VACATION, THE (illustrated by Jumbo Pictures), Disney Press, 1998
- RIDING FREEDOM (illustrated by Brian Selznick), Scholastic Press, 1998
- ARMADILLOS SLEEP IN DUGOUTS, AND OTHER PLACES ANIMALS LIVE (illustrated by Diane deGroat), Hyperion Books for Children, 1997
- CALIFORNIA HERE WE COME! (illustrated by Kay Salem), Charlesbridge Publishing, 1997
- PINKY IS A BABY MOUSE, A, AND OTHER BABY ANIMAL NAMES (illustrated by Diane deGroat), Hyperion Books for Children, 1997
- CRAYON COUNTING BOOK, THE (written with Jerry Pallotta; illustrated by Frank Mazzola, Jr.), Charlesbridge Publishing, 1996
- FLAG WE LOVE, THE (illustrated by Ralph Masiello), Charlesbridge Publishing, 1996
- ONE HUNDRED IS A FAMILY (illustrated by Benrei Huang), Hyperion Books for Children, 1994

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