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Pat Mora Celebrates 20 Years of Honoring Día

By Sally Lodge | May 05, 2016

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For two decades, children's book author and literacy advocate Pat Mora has been rallying enthusiasm for and participation in *El día de los niños/ El día de los libros* (Children's Day/Book Day), aka Día, an annual celebration of two of Mora's highest priorities: children and books. Founded by Mora in 1996, Día, though focused on the month of April, represents a yearlong commitment to linking children and families to books by a collaboration of national library and literacy organizations and educators. The endeavor encourages the hosting of book fiestas in libraries, schools, homes, child-care centers, and parks—all designed to unite communities with the common goal of fostering what Mora calls "bookjoy" in children's daily lives.



Pat Mora.

The Día initiative has its roots in the Mexican tradition of celebrating April 30 as *El día del niño*, which stemmed from the inaugural World Conference for the Well-being of Children, held in Geneva in 1925, where international delegates passed the Geneva Declaration Protecting Children.



U.S. Representative Mark Takano (Calif.) reading to elementary students on Capitol Hill.

"Even though I grew up in El Paso, on the Mexican border, I had never heard of *El día del niño* until 1996, when I was being interviewed for a public radio program at the University of Arizona in Tucson," Mora recalled. "As a mom, I knew that children often ask, 'Why do we have Mother's Day and Father's Day, but not Children's Day?' and as a reader, I wanted to foster 'bookjoy.' I asked myself, 'What if we link a celebration of children with literacy, an issue central to the well-being of children?'"

That idea led Mora to inaugurate Día, a notion that was embraced by REFORMA (the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking). In February 1997, the association became Mora's first organizational partner when its members voted to endorse Día as a family literacy initiative and to promote Día throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico. On April 30, 1997, the first annual Día celebrations were held in several cities, including Tucson, El Paso, and Austin.

Mora has subsequently acquired additional Día partners, including ALA's Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC), the United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and, more recently, First Book. As a result,

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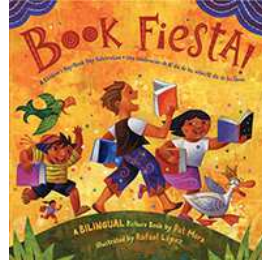
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awareness and observation of Día has expanded exponentially, with 500 Día programs now taking place in 39 states. The support of so many organizations, Mora noted, "has given us an important boost. And, like so many other initiatives, the success of Día comes from the enthusiasm of individuals. People who are passionate about children and literacy make Día celebrations happen wherever they are."

Yet Mora believes that more work is needed to further spread the message and spirit of Día. "In my view, we have a long way to go," she said. "I'd love to see Día on the national calendar. Some middle-class or affluent parents may say, 'Every day is children's day,' but this is not true for all kids. We need more people who are committed to diversity in children's books, so that all of our kids can see themselves in books. Obviously, publishing is a business, and we all need to support diversity in books by *buying* the books that champion diversity."

As an author, Mora does her part to spotlight diversity. She has written more than three dozen children's books that represent the Mexican-American experience, including *Book Fiesta!: Celebrate Children's Day/Book Day; Celebramos El día de los niños/El día de los libros*. Published by HarperCollins/Rayo in 2009 and illustrated by Rafael López, this bilingual picture book celebrates children, diversity, and literacy, and includes tips for celebrating Día.



Mora shared her passion for the message of Día throughout April, when (among other appearances) she was keynote speaker at the University of Texas at San Antonio's annual Early Childhood Institute, delivered the ALSC's May Hill Arbuthnot Lecture in Santa Barbara, addressed the Texas Library Association Conference in Houston, and spearheaded the ALSC's Día Turns 20 Event at the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, at which several legislators read to children. "I see this event in D.C. as symbolic of what we want to happen with Día," Mora said. "I feel as if we're saying, 'See – this is what we're doing! What are you doing?'"

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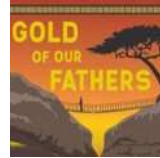
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