

Talking with Pat Mora

The award-winning author, poet, and champion of bilingual literacy talks about her work, *bookjoy*, and Día's fifteenth birthday. **By Jeanette Larson**

It's difficult to put labels on Pat Mora's writing, and that's a good thing for her readers. She is a picture-book author, biographer, poet, educator, advocate, and more. Since her first book for children, *A Birthday Basket for Tía*, in 1992, Mora has been a champion of bilingual literacy. Her writing frequently reflects the multicultural life of the Southwest, and she also tells the stories of important but overlooked people, such as Tomás Rivera and Sor Juana Inés. Mora writes poetry for every age group, from simple rhymes for very young children to haiku for teens and sonnets for adults. With the publication of *Doña Flor: A Tall Tale about a Giant Woman with a Great Big Heart* in 2005, Mora entered the realm of tall tales, adding a new character to the pantheon of exaggerated heroes.

A successful writer for more than 25 years, Mora has also used her talents as an activist for bilingual literacy. Seamlessly incorporating Spanish words into text that is mostly in English, Mora's writing often mirrors the natural code-switching speech patterns of children who grow up in bilingual communities. When Mora talks about *bookjoy*, a word she coined to convey the pleasure readers experience, her face glows with a passion for sharing words in many languages. Her commitment to reading in every

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language is also embodied in El día de los niños/El día de los libros, the annual literacy holiday she started in 1996. This year Día celebrates its Quinceañera, turning 15 on April 30, and I took the occasion as an opportunity to talk with Mora about her work and the inspirations for her bookjoy.

BKL: What was your journey to becoming a writer and poet?

MORA: The journey begins in a house with books. Aren't those of us who grow up in such a house fortunate? My childhood home was in the border city of El Paso, Texas. I'm a writer because I learned bookjoy early in my life thanks to my mom, aunt, teachers, and librarians. I loved poetry, hearing the old-fashioned rhymes, memorizing rhythms I still feel. Books weave through my life, enriching my days. How deeply grateful I am to those who taught me to love and play with words in English *y en español*.

BKL: You write poetry about some interesting subjects. How do you decide on topics?

MORA: Often I write about my loves—family, the desert, Mexican culture. I'm also curious, so I savor stories and imagine the lives of others. For example, when I assigned myself a book of teen love poems thanks to the suggestion of a Texas librarian, I let myself imagine and listen to a variety of voices—girls and boys. We humans have various dimensions. I have an orderly side that sees to it that I answer e-mails and organize my travel—what some would label left-brain work. When I create enough quiet, I let my less linear and more creative side surface and explore.

BKL: Do you consider your poetry to be a means to cultural understanding and communication?

MORA: I certainly hope to communicate with all kinds of readers, but when I begin a poem, I'm immersed in the pleasure and challenge of listening to

words. Like any writer, I consciously and unconsciously choose topics, stories, and ideas that are influenced by who I am, where and how I was raised, where I've traveled, what I've experienced. Ideally, we bring ourselves to the page.

BKL: *You haven't written any novels in verse. Have you considered that format for telling any of your stories?*

MORA: Interesting question. Poetry is my favorite genre. It's challenging to place a poetry manuscript, and it's difficult to have a poetry book widely read by any age group. To be honest, it's usually hard enough for a Latina to have a manuscript accepted without that added fiction-in-poetry hurdle.

BKL: *Is there a poem by someone else that you wish you had written?*

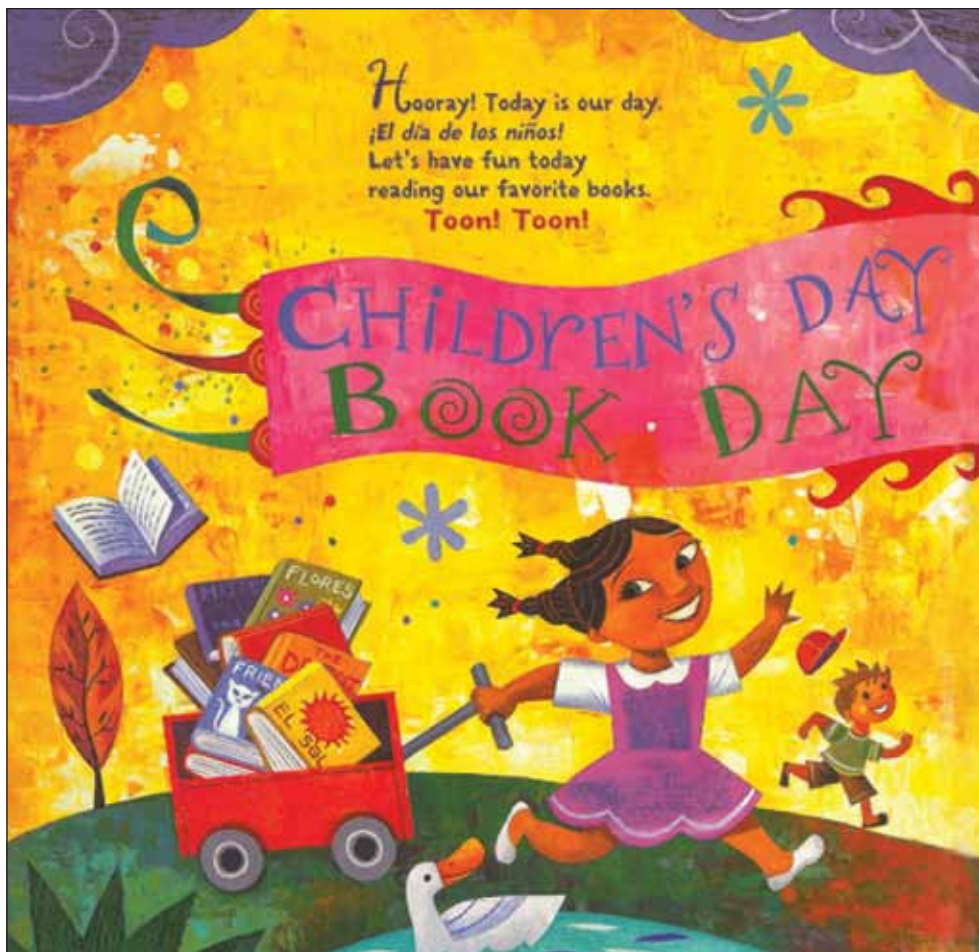
MORA: There are countless poems I wish I had written! I'm a devoted fan of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, a Nobel Prize winner. I wrote *Adobe Odes* (2006), inspired by his odes. I love the poetry of Mary Oliver and recently have been reading Carol Ann Duffy. Writing for children, teens, and adults and writing in various genres means I'm longing daily to write more and better in many formats.

BKL: *Which of your books was the most challenging for you to write and why?*

MORA: The family memoir *House of Houses* (1997) was probably the most challenging for me. I hadn't planned to write it, but once I embarked, it was a puzzle, to figure out how to construct a word house for the various stories. I soon hope to begin a YA version of *House*.

BKL: *What research do you do while writing a nonfiction picture book such as *A Library for Juana*?*

MORA: I read Sor Juana Inés' work and books about her and saw a film about her. Though she's Mexico's most famous poet and her work is memorized throughout the Spanish-speaking Americas, I'd never heard about her until I began writing poetry for adults.



Writing about her and about Tomás Rivera was a way of introducing them to children, families, teachers, and librarians who might not know these important voices.

BKL: *There seems to be a resurgence of interest in creating tall tales. What was the genesis of *Doña Flor*? How is writing a tall tale different from writing any other story?*

MORA: Didn't most of us who went to elementary school in the United States read about the massive Paul Bunyan and see images of him and Babe the Blue Ox? I sure remember them. A few years ago, I had a thought: We need a tall tale about a *giant* bilingual woman. Who knows where such ideas come from? We live in a world that glorifies size, force, and violence. As I began to talk to my husband about the story and play with possible scenes, I realized that I wanted *Doña Flor* to be motivated

by caring. It's her heart rather than her brawn that helps her solve problems. I thoroughly enjoyed the exaggerations that are part of tall tales.

Sweet story: Some years back a teacher in Delaware who had shared *Doña Flor* with her middle-grade English language learners stood up at a presentation I was giving and, hugging the book, said, "We love *Doña Flor* because she's so big and we feel so small." *Doña Flor* would love that she's helping.

BKL: *You appear to move effortlessly between writing for various audiences from preschool through adult. Do you approach writing in any specific way for each group?*

MORA: Effortlessly? Finding the time to write is hard, at least hard for me. Growing *Día* to reach what I believe is its potential requires significant amounts of time. When I manage to



Children celebrate *El día de los niños/El día de los libros* in grand style in *Book Fiesta!*, written by Pat Mora and illustrated by Rafael López.

celebrations are often on April 30, but communities select what works for them. In honor of Día's fifteenth anniversary, I'll be posting 15 Día Nuggets, 15 lists of 15 Día resources and ideas, on my website, www.patmora.com, and on my blog, <http://sharebookjoy.blogspot.com>.



BKL: Embedding Spanish words in your writing has become something of a trademark for you. Why do you use that technique?

MORA: I grew up bilingual and have no memory of not speaking both beautiful languages. Both my parents were bilingual, so luckily, English and Spanish were part of the rhythm of our home. I wish I were trilingual; I learn words wherever I travel internationally. As I tell students at all levels, I feel blessed that I know two languages and have them as resources for my writing. I feel passionately about helping those living in the United States to feel proud of their home languages—they are valuable resources in our global world.

BKL: What more can librarians and teachers do to inspire and motivate young people to read, especially in situations where their families do not value reading?

MORA: I explore this topic at length in *Zing!* As the lucky ones who are print rich, we can coach parents and families in how to support the reading habit. When I speak to Spanish-speaking parents, which is always an honor, I stress that it isn't necessary to speak English to support print literacy, nor is it necessary to read English. We know that non-English-speaking parents, particularly those with limited economic resources, often feel intimidated by our educational systems, including libraries. When we involve them as our literacy partners, we can illustrate how to use a picture book, for example, as an occasion for discussing the illustrations and

create the quiet I spoke about earlier, I select my project (to choose my projects is a gift) and write, striving eventually to create delight or opportunities for reflection for those whom I hope will sink into the story or poem. Once I have a draft, I begin to imagine an ideal reader for that specific piece. My newest book, *Zing! Seven Creativity Practices for Educators and Students*, for example, is a book of letters. I so enjoyed having an intimate conversation with teachers, librarians, professors, and others who, like me, want to develop their creative selves and want to support the creative potential of all their students.

*BKL: You started *El día de los niños/El día de los libros* as a way to promote and support bilingual literacy. How has the celebration changed since it began 15 years ago?*

MORA: Like any mom I'll say that the journey has been a challenge,

much more of a challenge than I ever expected. How open are we to fostering bookjoy in all children, including the underserved? Día, as this daily commitment to linking *all* children to books, languages, and cultures is known, has grown thanks to the dedication of many, particularly up to now librarians. REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking, an American Library Association (ALA) affiliate, was my first organizational partner. In 2004, ALA's Association for Library Service to Children's board asked to be Día's national home.

If we want our nation to be a country of readers, those committed to sharing bookjoy need to work together to inspire communities in nurturing reading families. Creative in our daily joint efforts, we then enjoy culminating Día celebrations across the country in April. The major

WEB CONNECTIONS

For more on Mora's work and *El día de los niños/El día de los libros*, visit the *Book Links* website at www.booklistonline.com/booklinks and click on "Web Connections."

story and for having the children read to us. Parents who do not value reading come in all colors and from various economic brackets, of course. The challenge of championing reading not only for pleasure and knowledge but also as essential in a democracy is significant in our diverse country—but, ah, the glory of making our rhetoric a reality!

BKL: *What has winning awards, such as the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award and the Pura Belpré Award, meant to you? Do these awards inspire writers and illustrators? Is there any award that you cherish more than others?*

MORA: A big thanks to those who founded and maintain these awards to ensure that work by Latinos is being recognized. Awards please publishers and attract readers. Each award I've received is a thrill, a validation. I've lived long enough to know, though—and I often tell beginning writers this—that awards reflect the tastes and values of award committees. I'm immensely grateful

for the honor but try to remember that ultimately what matters is that the books do their work in the world. In the field of children's books, teachers, librarians, and parents assist the book's journey.

BKL: *What are you currently reading and who are some of your favorite authors?*

MORA: Because of *Zing!* I'm currently reading *On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself through Mindful Creativity* (2005), by Ellen J. Langer, a painter and psychologist. I've mentioned some of the poets I enjoy. I've read much more nonfiction in the last few years. Novelists whose work has amazed me in the recent past include Carol Shields, Marilynne Robinson, and Elizabeth Strout. To end where I started, I feel so fortunate to savor bookjoy daily.

Sampling Mora

Book Fiesta! Celebrate Children's Day/Book Day: *Celebremos El día de los niños/El día de los libros*. Illus. by Rafael López. 2009. 40p. HarperCollins/Rayo, \$17.99 (9780061288777). PreS–Gr. 3.


Dizzy in Your Eyes: Poems about Love. 2010. 176p. Knopf, \$15.99 (9780375843754); lib. ed., \$18.99 (9780375945656). 811. Also available in an e-book edition. Gr. 7–12.

Doña Flor: A Tall Tale about a Giant Woman with a Great Big Heart. Illus. by Raúl Colón. 2005. 40p. Knopf, \$15.95 (9780375823374); Dragonfly, paper, \$7.99 (9780375861444); lib. ed., \$17.99 (9780375923371). Also available in a Spanish edition. PreS–Gr. 3.

A Library for Juana: The World of Sor Juana Inés. Illus. by Beatriz Vidal. 2002. 40p. Knopf, \$15.95 (9780375806438). 861. Gr. 2–5.

Tomás and the Library Lady. Illus. by Raúl Colón. 1997. 40p. Knopf, \$17 (9780679804017); Dragonfly, paper, \$6.99 (9780375803499). Gr. 2–4.

Yum! ¡Mmmm! ¡Qué Rico! Americas' Sproutings. Illus. by Rafael López. 2007. 48p. Lee & Low, \$17.95 (9781584302711). Also available in a Spanish edition. 811. PreS–Gr. 3.

Zing! Seven Creativity Practices for Educators and Students. 2010. 152p. Corwin, paper, \$23.95 (9781412978392). 371.102. 

Jeanette Larson is an independent library consultant in Pflugerville, Texas. Her book *El día de los niños/El día de los libros: Building a Culture of Literacy in Your Community through Día* will be published by ALA Editions in April 2011.

