

5 Questions With... Alma Flor Ada (YES! WE ARE LATINOS)

ALMA FLOR ADA
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Alma Flor Ada Professor Emerita of the University of San Francisco is a visionary educator, and prolific author of numerous award-winning children's books: THE GOLD COIN (Christopher Award); UNDER THE ROYAL PALMS (Pura Belpré Medal); DEAR PETER RABBIT (Parent's Honor), MY NAME IS MARÍA ISABEL; DANCING HOME; LOVE, AMALIA, I LOVE SATURDAYS Y DOMINGOS (Notable Books for a Global Society List) as well as of A MAGICAL ENCOUNTER: LATINO LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM and AUTHORS IN THE CLASSROOM: A TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION PROCESS, co-authored with F. Isabel Campoy. Among other life-time awards, Alma Flor is a recipient of the Virginia Hamilton Literary Award.



Your latest book, YES! WE ARE LATINOS includes both narrative poems and nonfiction pieces about Latino history and culture. What inspired you to mix genres for this project?

Both Isabel Campoy, who co-authored YES! WE ARE LATINOS, and I have a profound interest in sharing with children the richness of the Latino history and culture. We believe that presenting narrative poems about present day Latino children gives relevance to the non-fiction information by relating it directly to experiences that may in some cases reflect their own experiences, or the experiences of children they know, or which, in other cases will give them unsuspected insights into the lives of other children.

And, of course, we are both strong believers on the magic of poetry!

The poems and stories in YES! WE ARE LATINOS cover several historical periods and span several continents while still telling personal stories. How did you ensure that the global scale and personal touch were in balance?

This book took several years to write, but above all it is built upon two long lives of reflections. Isabel and I dialogued extensively about what we wanted to include, of this rich history and culture, or perhaps more about how could we resume all we wanted to say into the space of a book, making sure we were inclusive while accessible to the readers. Always striving to achieve as much balance as possible.

Some of the poems were created spontaneously as we were working on the book. Others we wrote specifically to serve as introduction to the information in that section. In all cases they represent composites of people we know, children we love. The number of pages restricted us from publishing some of the poems, because indeed, as you have said the book covers several historical periods and spans several continents. Fortunately, we can continue writing, and hopefully we will be able to publish more books about this rich and varied reality.

You're very prolific and regularly publish in both English and Spanish. What influence does each language have on you as a storyteller?

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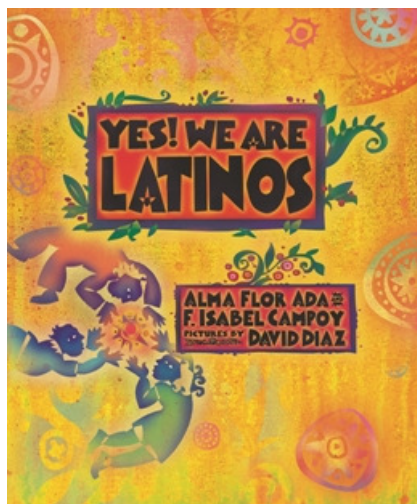
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What a fascinating question! Being bilingual is a blessing, but it is also very demanding. For me, it has such profound dimensions that when I needed to decide on a title for my book of adult memoirs, after completing the manuscript, I chose **Vivir en dos idiomas** ("Living in two languages") because for me language, as home and support of my being is essential, but I have inhabited, and continue to inhabit two languages, and this dual approach to life, determined by the language used, is one of the most significant aspects in my life. Very tangible at times, as now, writing in English for an English-speaking readership while looking at the Cantabric Sea, from the magnificent Palace of La Magdalena, the building of the Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, where I have been attending some conferences, in the city of Santander, birthplace of one of my grandfathers.



Spanish is my mother tongue, the language which constantly brings to my memory lines from the poetry of the poets I love, the language I first used for storytelling and for creating poetry. But living in the United States, at some point I began to storytell in English for those children in my family who had not been given the gift of two languages. And slowly I developed a second voice.

In Spanish humor, rhyme and alliterations, come naturally, nuances and metaphors need no invitation, in English I depend more on the strength of the story, the experiences of the characters. You could almost say I am two different writers. Yet, I strive to also be a bridge between the two.

As a bilingual educator and author, what advice can you share for teachers who are choosing books and lessons for bilingual readers?

Look for authentic voices. Believe in books that make you cry or laugh, books that you will remember forever, books that make you look at yourself, at others, at life with new eyes.

When choosing Spanish poetry, beware of the "easy rhymes", those made with verbal endings, with adjective or adverb endings, with diminutive suffixes. Poetry does not always require rhyme. There is an abundance of rhyming lines which are not poetry. The best way to distinguish true poetry in Spanish is to get used to reading our extraordinary poets, both all and modern: José Martí, Antonio Machado, Pedro Salinas, García Lorca, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, and those poets who have written for children with the same poetic quality: María Elena Walsh, Elsa Isabel Bornemann, David Chericían, Mirta Aguirre, and so many others.

Be truthful. Do not hesitate to acknowledge the painful experiences of many bilingual children and their families, the internalized notions of oppression, the racism and prejudice that has been passed on through generations, but make sure to transmit a message of hope, on the capacity of everyone to overcome difficult circumstances, to transform our social realities, not only for ourselves but for everyone.

Your own teaching career began when you were all of seventeen. What was the path that you followed?

Upon retiring from the university I wrote an article to share some of what I had learned focused on "a long life of learning to become a teacher" because for me this process of becoming is an unending journey. Respect and appreciation for every human being, regardless their origin, conditions or circumstances has been the guiding force in my life and teaching. And respect and admiration for all there is to know, aware of how little any of us can master of the combined human knowledge—thousands of languages, of literature, of artistic creations, so many sciences and the knowledge each has accumulated means none of us has, nor ever will, reach the level of kindergarten. This is a daunting awareness and yet a liberating feeling.

All the knowledge I can accumulate will always equal very little, so I must not be dismayed of how little I know, and at the same time it is an extraordinary motivation to continue to want to learn some more, a reaffirmation in the path towards the utopian wisdom.

I have loved teaching and live in gratitude to my numerous students and what they have taught me in the process of learning together.

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