

HISPANIC HERITAGE

SHAPING OUR FUTURE
ONE BOOK AT A TIME

BY MARIA G. O'BRIEN

I am a Hispanic American: a Latina, an Islander born in Puerto Rico, raised in the Northeast, and now living in the Sunshine State.

So, when September comes around, I look forward to celebrating my heritage with nearly sixty-four million other Hispanics who reside in the United States (Census, 2023). Our countries of origin are south of Texas—Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean—islands like Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. We are historically bonded to Spain and a language that defines us. We are Latino, Hispanic, and modern-day “Latinx,” and for one distinct month that begins on September 15th and ends on October 15th, this demographic is afforded the opportunity to celebrate their respective origins and their many contributions. This year’s theme for Hispanic Heritage Month is “*Pioneers of Change: Shaping the Future Together.*”

Finding My Heritage in Books

I have evolved from someone who reads when prompted to someone who reads for pleasure. When I reflect on my life as a Hispanic child, there were no books in the home, except for the collection of *novellas* (novels) my mother read. The stories I heard were typically told by mouth and not always intended to be heard by a child. We were held captive by our elders: “Sit here and listen. When I was your age...” Many years later, I read a children’s book that triggered a memory, not because the book was read to me as a child but because the character’s name, “Juan Bobo,” was often used among adults. This reference was based on a character from a popular Puerto Rican folk tale. The character’s general reference, “Simple John,” was not a complimentary one. According to the story, Juan Bobo was a peasant boy who had a propensity to mess things up. When I read this folk tale, it gave me a frame of reference and a renewed appreciation for individuals who worked in

individuals who worked in agriculture. A more common descriptor was *Jibaros* or country folk. John’s simplicity portrayed innocence and consequences, which led to a heartfelt lesson and learning.

The first book that I embraced as an adult was *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* by Judith Ortiz Cofer. This book is a collection of short stories about Puerto Ricans on the island and in the *barrio* (neighborhood). Again, finding this book was an incidental occurrence. I wasn’t looking for the book but when I picked it up and read the very first story, “Bad Influence,” it sparked a personal memory. I immediately committed to reading this book and the stories that reminded me about my past and my family, but when it came to the *barrio*, it wasn’t like the ones I grew up in— metropolitan areas, cityscapes, and the projects.

In 2001, I returned to public education as a school librarian at a rural school with over forty percent of the demographics representing

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Hispanics. Most were first and second-generation migrants. Many worked in agriculture and nearby ferneries. The media center had a small collection of books, including some bilingual and Spanish translations of popular fiction titles. Books written by Gary Soto, (e.g., *Baseball in April and Other Stories*; *Taking Sides*; and the books about Chato the cat) and Pam Munoz Ryan's, (e.g., *Esperanza Rising* and *Becoming Naomi Leon*) were titles I became familiar with. But it was Pat Mora's *Tomás and the Library Lady* that inspired me both professionally and personally. That year the students got to meet the author, and they also learned about Tomás and his contribution to society. I can say in retrospect, "I was content in knowing that there were books written by and for Hispanics, but I took it for granted that diverse books weren't readily available to most."

A Turning Point

We Need Diverse Books and the *Read Woke* movements revealed impactful data about the lack of books that included blacks and Hispanic characters, themes, and authentic authors. As best practice, I encouraged students to read, to simply find a book that would appeal to them. In hindsight, I'd celebrate when a book was being checked out but didn't stop to consider how circulation might be different if my students had access to diverse books. This caused me to re-evaluate my practice and include stories written by authors with similar cultural experiences. The next time I attended a conference, I was on a mission to get more information and resources to diversify my collection. I sat at a

session featuring Hispanic authors. I heard Dr. Raquel M. Ortiz speak about her book, *Sofi and the Magic, Musical Mural*. Inspired, I reimagined the possibilities. She wrote about a child's magical journey through the Island of Puerto Rico. At the time, I was at a different school, but not in a rural area, and it too had more than forty percent of Hispanics enrolled, most of whom were of Puerto Rican descent. The book became an essential piece in an event I sponsored in my media center that brought families together to engage in storytelling. Each family created a tile that depicted a shared moment or pastime. The tiles were brought together, reframed, and printed on a larger scale—it became the mural. Dr. Ortiz returned to present on *When Julia Danced Bomba*, this time as part of our Black History Month celebration. This allowed us to introduce a new and developing topic that featured Afro-Latinos, specifically the island's African roots and rhythm. I was at a turning point, influenced by the books that spoke to me as an individual, my heritage, and my role as a school librarian.

The Evolution: We are more than one book, story, experience.

As I evolved as a reader, I've come to realize that observing Hispanic Heritage is not always inclusive or fully understood. The best Hispanic celebrations are open to cross-cultural experiences; that is, stories with cultural exchanges, phrases, slang language, the use of idioms and different meanings—things that are common among us and some that are not. For example, *The Poet X* and *Clap When You Land* are two of my favorite books written by Elizabeth Acevedo, an Afro-Latina of Dominican descent. Each of

these books mention distinct moments that are common practice in our respective cultures. Other books share situations I may never experience but I appreciate learning about. *We are Not from Here*, by Jenny Torres Sanchez, is a touching story about a journey from Guatemala through Mexico and the challenges the characters faced. Then there are short stories and anthologies like *Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed: 15 Voices from the Latinx Diaspora*, by Saraciea J. Fennell. Books like these can ignite a conversation between Hispanics. They can also include non-Hispanics or stakeholders to broaden the discussion about immigration and race. These books go beyond Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's concept of *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors*. Collections of stories, themes, and authors can support those concepts all at once.

New Chapter: A Book for Every Purpose

After thirty years of being in secondary and post-secondary education, I've begun a new chapter in my career: elementary education. I consider the demographics of my school and decide to include the books I used with students from my previous high school VPK programming.

I begin with one of Pura Belpre's original folk tales, *Perez and Martina*, (Viking, 1991) This tale has been retold and recreated in countless iterations with modern day twists—most recently as *Martina the Beautiful Cockroach*, (Deedy, 2014). The authors, illustrators, characters, and settings are interchangeable, but the embedded message never changes.

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A new favorite of mine is a story rooted in folkloric tunes, simply titled, *Wepa*, by J. De La Vega (2023). I was beyond excited when I first found this book because I grew up hearing this word in my youth. “Wepa!” is not a word you say quietly. The author used it to describe a young child’s energy (ADHD) and how it was perceived by others. “Wepa” is also the title of a traditional Puerto Rican Folkloric song, and it is also the title of a modern-day song created by Cuban American singer and artist Gloria Estefan. More recently, it’s become a popular Latin cumbia-type dance. I use the combination of storytelling, music, and dance to celebrate what is different and shared among us, as Hispanics-- specific to this term. At some point, books that underline or align with other educational standards need to be introduced. Biographies about Hispanics of past and present, historical and current events, and real-time issues can also be considered during this time. Books like *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez*, (Krull, 2023), can be used to educate readers about civil rights, farmers, and immigration. A book like Supreme Court Justice, Sonya Sotomayor’s, *Just Ask: Be Different, Be Brave, Be You*, can be used to introduce her as a Hispanic, a leader, and as an author who encourages her readers to feel empowered by simply asking to be included, no matter your differences. She threads this through the concept of a community garden and the importance of getting to know one another while working toward a common goal. Sometimes we have to turn to bilingual books to teach a central theme, contemporary issue,

or historical view. The goal here is to ensure that all students including Hispanics or Spanish-speaking students have access to books that can facilitate learning in both languages. Timely books like Vice President Kamala Harris’ bilingual version of *Superheroes Are Everywhere* (2020), show her interpretation of heroes and how each person can find a hero within themselves. This is an opportunity for the reader to gain a perspective on our current Vice President and her personal story, told in a unique and engaging way.

Being a Pioneer of Change: Let them Read, Learn, Know, and Grow

Change only happens when one has a perspective on the past and a renewed vision for something different or better in the future. Change also comes from opportunities to learn, know, and grow by reading a variety of books including books about Hispanics. These days, if you can get students to embrace reading and develop a sense for critical thinking, then in my opinion, this would put them on the path to becoming lifelong readers and more successful overall.

As I revealed my path to becoming a reader, I also shared that the discovery of books that represented me and my heritage happened, “One Book at a Time.” I now know and understand both the history and the challenges of this practice. Becoming a school librarian gave me another responsibility, a voice. I will use this voice to continue to advocate for intellectual freedom and for our collective right to be represented in books. Together, we can change and shape the future of all readers.

Note: I purposely focused on the stories that have spoken to me as a Puerto Rican or have inspired me as a Hispanic, as well as stories that have opened my eyes to other Hispanic barriers, perceptions, and experiences. Included are Hispanic themes, authors, and characters that shaped the start of my career; diversification and woke period; and my continued hope for positive change and related aspirations. Lastly, it’s important to remind students and patrons that if you can’t find the featured books in your school libraries, partner with your public libraries to make it happen.

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