



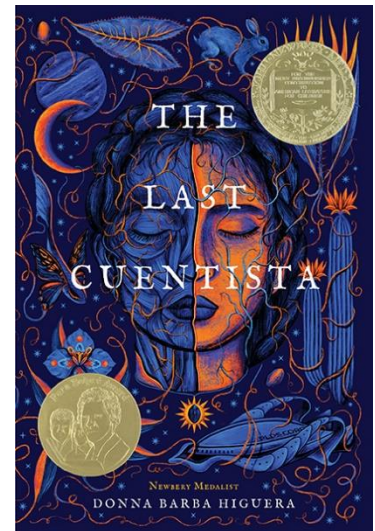
# Pura Belpré Children's Author Award Acceptance Speech



**Donna Barba Higuera** received the 2022 (Pura) Belpré Children's Author Award for *The Last Cuentista* (Arthur A. Levine, an imprint of Levine Querido). She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Pura Belpré Award Celebración held Sunday, June 26, 2022, during the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, DC.

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It seems insufficient to tell you I'm thrilled to be in this room with you all, and how special this day means to me. I am feeling so much more than that. And I get to share this evening with my fellow Musas in the children's book category. It is humbling to be in your company and books such *Barefoot Dreams of Petra Luna* by my friend Alda Dobbs, *Child of the Flower-Song People* by another dear friend, Gloria Amescua. And also a new friend, Nomar Perez, and his book *De aquí como el coqui*.



I have been asked so many times what it means to win the Newbery Medal and the Pura Belpré Award all together in one sentence. Like somehow, they will feel like the same thing. They are two very different things to me.

As a mixed-race child, my mother white and Native American from Oklahoma, and my father Mexican-American, there were teachers, friends, and scantron bubbles who'd always remind me that I was definitely not white. So where does society put a kid like me? Which bubble on the scantron would accept me? As a child, I was encouraged to mark "Other." I most closely associate with my family with Mexican and Chicana roots. Aside from one other Mexican kid in our mostly white town, who because of our little club turned out to be the closest thing I've had to a brother, I often felt alone. So, to have a welcome and celebration like this for me, and the characters who are like me and my own children, feels like home to me.

Still, from the time I was young, to even now as an adult, I can't help those feelings of, "am I enough of this, or enough of that?" These are things the characters I write also feel and speak about in my books. And I am finding there are so many who have these insecurities. And I assure you, if you are feeling it, so are children. I am writing for those children.

Educators, librarians, writers...we are putting important books in children's hands. The books we write for kids will give them the confidence to be all of who they are meant to be. My hope is that my books will help young readers to never be ashamed of or nervous to share any single part of who they are. Our books can give them courage to carry their own stories and those of their ancestors proudly.

Like many in this room, while I write characters who've shared my experience, or the experiences of my own daughters, each time I can't help but worry. Will Petra Peña and Lupe Wong find acceptance in the world which I didn't always find? There were no books with characters like me as a child. I wondered if kids would see themselves in Lupe or Petra? I can tell you now, yes, kids are seeing themselves in these two very different Latina girls.

But as I was writing this strange sci-fi book, I hesitated. Should I include certain things most readers might find discomfort in? – Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl. How do you spell that? How do you say that? Or...Quetzalcoatl y El Conejo. Wait, El Conejo is in the moon? How did that happen?

I was not only given the opportunity by my publisher to introduce these stories to a mainstream audience, but encouraged to let our words and language stand as an opportunity for Latinx and Mexican children to have pride in their language and culture.

But what if a child reading doesn't have a shared experience, or is nothing like Lupe or Petra, will they feel at home? By the time they finish the books, I hope so.

That is part of the gift that Latinx writers can bring to children. Even if they are not like Petra or Lupe, maybe they will find a bit of themselves in Little Lobo and La Oink Oink. Maybe they will see themselves in Moon Fuentes or Julián Luna, Petra Luna, Penelope and Xander, Milagros Varga, Miguel y su coquí, Rosie y su abuela, Luz Jiménez, or even a young deer traveling across the desert in search of safety. In all these characters, readers may find something familiar or a place of safety. And if not, they will discover new friends. Something or someone in each of these books which might have been unfamiliar is now familiar.

But what if a single word placed right on the front cover is one a reader is unfamiliar with? That's a lot of pressure on one little word displayed front and center to be one that by the end a reader will not only understand, but feel they too are a part of.

In choosing the word "cuentista" for the title. There is a connotation that the cuentista or storyteller may be bending the truth. But even in folklore and mythology that feels fantastical, there are kernels of truth. Who was I to take that precious Mexican folklore and mythology, some of it thousands of years old, and weave it into a science fiction novel? But this is what storytellers and cuentistas do. We take these stories and make them our own. We can't help ourselves. Sometimes we tell stories because it is what helps us to survive in this world.

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I did not originally have this section in my speech. I was not ashamed. I just didn't think others would understand. But I was wrong. I think many of us in this room have similar stories of our families and their hardships. And sharing those stories will help us connect with one another. My great grandfather, Francisco, was a Mexican immigrant. A farm and field worker, he was killed under mysterious circumstances in a time when many Mexicans, both those who'd been in central California for generations, as well as recent immigrants, were being erased from a community of settling white ranchers. So, at the age of eleven, my grandmother, Maria, was sent away to work in a hotel to help support her mother and siblings.

So far from home, she carried very little with her but the folklore, culture, and stories of her family. She was alone and scared; the youngest of the other girls and women she worked alongside, she was desperate to connect with them. She said they often spent their time while working exchanging stories of home and family, or others passed down to them by parents and grandparents, both folklore and family tales. My grandmother told me, "I thought if I could tell the funniest or scariest stories to make the others cry or laugh that they would like me, then spend time with me, and I would not feel so alone. It worked." A scared eleven-year-old girl used storytelling to connect with others. She manipulated the stories she'd heard in a desperate need as a child to find family where she had none. Because of this yearning for human connection, she became a master cuentista.

By the time I received those stories as a gift from her, she was an old woman. Her stories were indeed the most magical, the creepiest, and yes, sometimes the saddest. They made me laugh, scream, and cry. My abuela's path in the oral tradition of storytelling is not unlike what's happened with Mexican folklore throughout time, as people migrated, the stories changed. As our ancestors and grandparents and parents encountered new challenges, new enemies, new surroundings, the stories found new versions. So, in *The Last Cuentista*, I let Petra have this too. I wanted her to tell her own story. As Petra migrated, as she faced new challenges and enemies, as she encountered new surroundings, just like our ancestors have done for millennia, Petra passed down her version of those stories. Petra made ancient Mexican folklore and the cuentos told by her abuela her own.

I'm so happy this dystopian book is a work of fiction. But it does speak to the thing that most frightens me: someone trying to erase the stories of our world, of my culture, of my abuela. But I have something to say to those who would try to erase the stories of a strong-willed 12-year-old girl like my grandmother, a girl Petra's age, a lonely young girl telling stories, hoping to find family. You are challenging those with dreams of escape or hope for something more. And you are challenging them because you don't understand them, or they make you uncomfortable. But know that her dreams became my dreams. Her stories became my stories. The stories of her ancestors became mine. They entrusted those sacred stories to me.

It is who I am, and no one can take this from me. And I am not alone. This room is filled with those people. People with folklore and cuentos of our parents, grandparents, and ancestors. The people who would try to erase our cuentos cannot take this from any of us.

To those who are trying to remove literature from libraries and schools, I dare you to erase it from children's imaginations. It is impossible.

Just like my abuela gave her stories to me and others, now that I've given my story, *The Last Cuentista*, to young readers, it is no longer mine. This cuento belongs to others now, too. Even that one word, once unfamiliar to some, *cuentista*, belongs to all of them now also.

Thank you to the American Library Association, ALSC, REFORMA, and YALSA.

To have my debut novel, *Lupe Wong Won't Dance* recognized as a Pura Belpré honoree last year and now *The Last Cuentista* shows how this community, and the Pura Belpré committee can see two girls,

both Latina, both so different from one another, showing that being a Latina, and specifically Mexicana, is not a stereotype or cliché. You're not putting either of those young girls in the "other" bubble on the scantron. I would like to give deep thanks to Shelley Marie Diaz and the 2022 Pura Belpré committee: Denise Davila, Ms. Erica Dean Glenn, Louise D. Dimick, Diane Marie Olivo-Posner, Carolina Saldivar, Ruth Tobar, and to the committee's consultant, Deanna Mae Romriell, and the awards coordinator for ALSC, Jordan Dubin.

Thanks to my dear agent Allison Remcheck and all at Stimola Literary Studio. Thank you to Rosemary Simola, Alli Hellegers, Peter Ryan...everyone. Thank you.

To the editor of *The Last Cuentista*, Nick Thomas. I'm not even sure how to thank you at this point. The most personal parts of my writing that I thought would never make their way into books are not only here, you encouraged and continue to encourage me to pull more of the things that made me feel different and nervous as a child out into the light, things I was so afraid to share as a child growing up in a sundown town. You place them with grace and kindness out for the world to see. You leaned in, instead of away from, Mexican folklore. And when I messed up and italicized the Spanish because of my childhood insecurities, you said, "Ummmh, we don't do that." I hope I'm not sobbing at this point because I sure was while writing this. Thank you for helping me without even knowing it to heal on part of my life journey.

I must thank the rest of my team at Levine Querido, Arthur A. Levine, Antonio Gonzalez Cerna, Irene Vázquez, Meghan McCullough, Madelyn McZeal.

Thanks to the designers and producers of this book, Leslie Cohen, Freesia Blizard, and Richard Oriolo.

Thank you to Aurora Humarán who translated *The Last Cuentista* so Spanish language readers will be able to read Petra's story. Mil gracias.

A mi hermano, David Bowles, for your invaluable help with this book. Thank you.

Raxenne Maniquiz for creating the beautiful, breath-taking cover. Thank you.

Thank you to Yuyi Morales for the use of your book *Dreamers* and for the magic of its hopeful message.

Thank you to my critique group family, The Papercuts. Cindy Roberts, Jason Hine, David Colburn, Maggie Adams, Elinor Isenberg and my husband, Mark Maciejewski.

To Las Musas. You've given me what I didn't know I had, hermandad in the writing community. I have made dear and lifelong friends. Aida, Mia, Alyssa, Nonieqa, Kim, Yami, Rebecca, Alex, Ismée, Anika, Adrianna, Mayra, Jenny, and so many others.

I love you all so much.

I must thank my husband Mark for being on this journey with me. I have both a partner in life, and someone I can share my writing with. You are a brilliant and hilarious writer. When I'm stuck and I panic, you help me get back on the trail, both in writing and in life.

Thank you to my kids Elena, Sophia, Max, and Bethany. I love you.

And thank you to Pura Belpré. Pura Bepré wanted children to see themselves in books. We still have much work to do in continuing your work. But it is happening. Most of us in this room never saw a book with a character like ourselves when we were growing up. And bit by bit, year by year, we are changing this for our children and our children's children.

Family is everything. I've found family bonds in this community that are far greater than some in my biological family. So, this recognition by the Pura Belpré committee has a far deeper meaning into who I am and the family I've discovered in the writing and book community.

Thank you.

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