

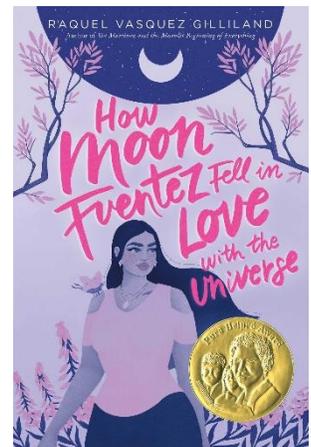


Pura Belpré Young Adult Author Award Acceptance Speech



Raquel Vasquez Gilliland received the 2022 (Pura) Belpré Young Adult Author Award for *How Moon Fuentes Fell in Love with the Universe* (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing). She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Pura Belpré Award Celebración held Sunday, June 26, 2022, during the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, DC.

When I was a child, I would take walks down the street from my parent's home in West Palm Beach, Florida. There grew a tall, skinny pine tree around the corner. It had branch-arms lifted up, as though it were about to hug the sky. Vines had grown over it, giving it long, green hair that swayed in the winds. And every once in a while, from the corner of my eye, this tree would become a woman. When I saw the tree as a woman, it was intensely magical, and at the same time, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.



One day, when I came home from college, I discovered that the tree woman had been cut down with a chainsaw. The only thing that remained of her was a short stump. I cried like a baby, and I couldn't help it: I went on the property to touch what was left. To say thank you for showing me what Potawatomi scientist and author Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer calls "the more than human world."

I recently read a book by Doug Tallamy called *Nature's Best Hope*. Dr. Tallamy is a scientist who specializes in conservation. In this book, he posits that each of us can create an ecosystem in our own yards and on our own balconies and windowsills, the sort of ecosystem that nourishes the land, feeds wildlife, and slows climate change.

It is very easy. Plant native plants.

Of the many things people tell me after reading *How Moon Fuentez Fell in Love with the Universe*, one of my favorites is, “Reading this book made *me* fall in love with the universe.” I believe this is because Moon Fuentez sees the universe as alive. Moon says that plants are sacred. I see the universe as alive, and I say that plants are sacred, because colonization did not kill the beliefs of my Mexican lineage. I was raised to understand this world is magic. I was raised to fall in love with it every moment I could.

Dr. Tallamy says one of our fundamental world views is incorrect. That the wild is somewhere out there, and we are not a part of it.

I believe what he says is true, but I feel that in addition to seeing ourselves as part of wildlife, we must see wildlife as part of us. This means seeing and respecting the spirit of wildlife. This means seeing and respecting the spirit of a plant.

When I was feeling despair after the 2021 attack on the US Capitol, I ordered a tray of native plants. I told my mother I had no idea why I did this. My mother reminded me something she’s always said: Plants talk. Plants talk to each other, and to us, and the plants that I plant, and the healing work they do on the land, will eventually reach plants near the Capitol. We are near the Capitol right now. You know what this means? This means that surrounding us are the words of showy goldenrod and yellow coneflower and little bluestem grass, because I planted them when I could think of nothing else I could possibly do to somehow make this world better.

I’m going to quote Moon Fuentez right now. This is on page 356:

One hundred and seventy thousand years ago. That’s when the first anatomically modern humans roamed the earth. I knew that from Daddy.

Three hundred and eighty-five million years ago is when the first banyan trees appeared.

Nearly five hundred million years ago—like holy crap, what kind of a number is that, anyway?—is when plants first appeared.

It's hard for those of us who have been raised with Western cosmologies to see the spirits of plants. To look at a tall pine tree covered in vines and see a woman. But I think a really easy way to connect with it is to consider what Moon says here. Plants are our ancestors. Plants are *your living ancestors*.

We, like plants within an ecosystem, live and thrive in community. With that in mind, I am going to thank the ALA and the Pura Belpré award committee for this beautiful award. Thank you to my agent, Elizabeth Bewley, and to my editor, Jennifer Ung, for believing in Moon, and the magic of her universe.

Thank you to my family, for raising us to know that plants talk.

Thank you to the Earth. The very first home, the very first story, the very first mother.

If you get nothing else from this speech, please let it be this:

Milkweed. New England aster. Wild bergamot. Echinacea, pink as sunset. Native oaks and Carolina allspice and blueberry bushes, fat with sweet fruit.

Plant native plants.

When you connect native plants to their native lands, you begin to heal the wounds colonial landscaping and agriculture have left behind. When you connect native plants to their native lands, you begin to understand how to fall in love with the universe. And this is what I want for all of you. I want you to fall so deeply in love with this whole, wild world, your heart is always breaking for it, and healing for it, because that is what it is, to live among and be a part of “the more than human world.” This is what it is to fall in love with this universe.

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