



Pura Belpré Young Adult Author Honor Acceptance Speech



Laekan Zea Kemp received a 2022 (Pura) Belpré Young Adult Author Honor for *Somewhere Between Bitter and Sweet* (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers). She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Pura Belpré Award Celebración held Sunday, June 26, 2022, during the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, DC.

Hello everyone, I am extremely humbled and honored to be here, among friends, among this vibrant community. First, I'd like to thank every person who has championed this book from my agent, Andrea Morrison, to my editor, Samantha Gentry, and the entire team at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. I'm extremely proud to be sharing this honor with all of you. I'd also like to thank the members of the ALA, the ALSC, REFORMA, and the Pura Belpré Award committee for selecting *Somewhere Between Bitter and Sweet* and giving me the gift of a lifetime.



Ushering this novel into the world in the midst of a global pandemic and before the rollout of vaccines, was incredibly anticlimactic, to say the least. In truth, it was lonely and scary and the experience wreaked havoc on my mental health.

I worried my book was invisible and that this story about love in all its forms, about using our gifts for the betterment of our communities, would vanish into the ether. My own gifts wasted and helping no one. So while I was simultaneously grateful for the fulfillment of this dream, I was also mourning all the ways in which it wasn't quite what I'd imagined.

But the truth I can see so clearly now is that this story was never invisible. *I* was never invisible. Because you saw me. My community. My family. The people I wrote this story for in the first place.

In my newest book, *Heartbreak Symphony*, which follows one of the secondary characters from *Somewhere Between Bitter and Sweet*, there's a scene in which the male protagonist, Aaron, is delivering the keys to a new bakery to one of his neighbors whose former bakery was lost to gentrification. She's marveling at a mural someone has painted of her on one of the exterior walls and suddenly she says to Aaron, "They think they can do whatever they want to us because we're invisible. . .But we see each other."

That is what this honor means. That is why we're here. Because we see each other. In all of our beautiful complexity. Where we've been. Where we're going. Who we are in the deepest, softest parts of ourselves. We *see* each other.

Thank you for seeing me. Thank you for seeing this story and for giving it new life and another opportunity to reach the readers it was meant for. Readers who deserve to feel loved and celebrated and just as seen.

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