Buenas tardes a todos. Good afternoon.

I just love hearing you say the title.

It’s funny how books come to be. *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* wasn’t supposed to be a novel. In fact, if it had been left up to me, the very idea for this book would have been left alone, dried out and harmless. It would have stayed one of those memories from childhood that was better left buried.

But one day, the late Marisa Montes called me. Marisa, as you know, received a Pura Belpre Honor in 2008 for her work *Los Gatos Black on Halloween*, illustrated by the richly talented Yuyi Morales.

The call came from out of the blue, and Marisa had an exciting proposition. She was planning an anthology project of Latina writers. It was to be called *Pivot*, and all the stories inside would be about young Latinas at turning points. The collection of stories, she told me, would be written by some of the leading voices in Latino literature—and she named a few. I was a newcomer at the time, and I felt so honored to have been asked. The thought of my work alongside the work of authors I had read and admired for years seemed unreal. So, of course I said ¡Sí, cómo no! And then I panicked.

I racked my brain thinking of all the turning points that a young Latina faces on her journey toward womanhood—some wonderful, others downright frightening. And along came a long-buried memory of my own tangle with a bully in a school yard in Queens, where I grew up. With a single sentence in the seventh grade—a threat that someone was going to beat me up—I started on a downward journey that lasted for much of my teen years. I stopped liking school. My grades dropped. I felt lost from my family. It made me distrustful and sad, and brought me to choices that frankly I hate to remember, even today.

It was the turning point from hell.


Cuban American author Meg Medina grew up in Queens, N.Y. and currently lives with her family in Richmond, Va. She writes books for children of all ages—picture books to young adult fiction. Medina is recipient of the 2012 Ezra Jack Keats New Writers medal for her picture book *Tia Isa Wants a Car*. *Yaqui Delgado* also won the 2013 CYBILS (Children’s and YA Bloggers’ Literacy) Award for YA fiction. Medina was recognized this year as one of the CNN 10 Visionary Women in America.

FUN FACT: Meg loves big dogs and Milk Duds!
So, with enormous reluctance—some days white-knuckled—I sat down to write a story based on that miserable experience, but one that would be more than a remembrance. I wanted to write a tale that pulled on what I had learned, but that reflected bullying today, fueled by that potent harassment steroid called social media and so difficult to fix despite posters and school assemblies and an endless stream of programs.

To me, the secret to writing for young people is to trust them with the truth, even when it’s ugly. And so that’s what I did.

Unfortunately, as sometimes happens in publishing, the anthology was orphaned when the editor moved to another house, and I was left with a thirty-page story and no place to publish it.

I have the amazing fortune of publishing work with Candlewick Press, which can only be described as an author’s dreamland for all the ways that they build an author’s inner light. My editor, Kate Fletcher, who is here with me today, and who does not speak a single word of español, read the story and told me that if I could turn it into a novel, she’d acquire it at Candlewick.

And thus it was. Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass got stretched and reshaped, and soon it became a novel about the awful ways that young people savage one another in high school and the miraculous role of culture, family, and friends in helping victims survive.

It has been widely received as a book about bullying. Almost every article written about the novel has been about bullying and how books can help. I’ve done my level best to talk with young people about this and to link them to sites and organizations that can help them find their voice and strength.

To that end, I’ve traveled a great deal this year with Yaqui, although not to all places because the word ass has made some people uncomfortable. What can I say to those critics? Maybe the word ass makes them more uncomfortable than knowing that their students are being abused?

But where I have gone, I have been met with rich and unexpected rewards. Readers have let me into some of their most private and painful experiences. It never fails—someone lingers after a talk and shares with me their own Yaqui story, so to speak. And it’s always the case—that the bullying is happening now or thirty years ago—that the pain and shame of the experience is palpable. I can see it in their eyes and in the way their lips quiver. They still have questions: Why me? Why did they choose to hurt me? Why was I the one?

I’m an author, of course, not a trained psychologist. So all I can offer is solidarity and a shared experience, and a story. It turns out that sometimes that goes a very long way. If this book can in some way make that experience less lonely, if it can open up honest dialogue about the roots of why we abuse others and how we can survive it, if it can help even one child stand up for another or stop any desperate young person from self-harm, I’ll be a very happy woman. And I do have hope that a novel can do those things. I do believe that stories change lives. Stories have always been a safe place for a young person to consider her own situation with the help of a protagonist in a jam. Stories help young people go inside, to the place of reflection, which is truly the place where change happens. Stories are our best hope for
helping them with the hard work of becoming resilient, thoughtful, and compassionate. That's the magic of books.

But the Pura Belpré Award, which I am receiving here today, is about something more than even that wonderful sorcery.

What I especially love in receiving this particular award is that Yauqui also helps me feel heard as a Latina writing for young Latinas today.

Yauqui is a bullying story, sure, but it is also the story of how young women fight for their dignity as they leave girlhood behind. I meant it to be about how a Latina here in the United States stays connected with her culture and finds her clave—that unshakable sense of herself—so that she can dance over the world’s troubles no matter how heavily they are heaped on her. It is about culture and identity and its role in helping young women find their core. Being Latina is not something you have to get past. It's something you embrace and use as fuel.

That is how it worked in my life, although you couldn’t have told me that as a young girl.

I am the first American born in my Cuban family. I was raised by a woman named Lidia, with the help of her sisters and my abuelos, all shell-shocked by the Cuban exodus in the early and mid-1960s and all frightened of this vast and wonderful new country.

My mother was a teacher, but here in the US, her job was to pack transistors into Styrofoam sheets. She was one of dozens of Latina women in that electronics factory, all of them struggling with English, with their Americanized children, and all of them drinking a strong cafecito promptly at two o’clock every afternoon. There were many times that my mother and I struggled to understand each other as mother and daughter, across the ocean of differences between us. But one thing is certain. My mother worked hard over the years to make sure I stayed connected with my culture. She made sure I could speak Spanish without saying too many disparates, although I have to admit that a few get by me every so often. She drew the provinces of Cuba—which she thought I might never see with my own eyes. She told me every last story she had about Santa Clara and fulanito de tal from her town so that I would know that I came from people who loved each other, from a country teeming with all kinds of people, doctors and musicians and poets and people who worked the land. My mother worked hard to give me a clave, even when I didn't want to hear it. It would be years before I could appreciate all she gave me.

So, what I want my books to do is to offer some of that same sense of connection to the children sitting in classrooms today. To give all children books that speak our story with pride and dignity and accuracy—and that speak about the universal problems of growing up. What I want my books to do is help make our varied stories as Latinos simply part of what we call the American story.

So, let me end here in gratitude because this prize will help me do that more than ever before.

To receive this award—alongside the insanely talented Margarita Engle, Matt de la Peña, Duncan Tonatiuh, Yuyi Morales, Angela Dominguez, and Rafael López—is an enormous honor. I am so proud to have my name included alongside theirs. This, in itself, is a gift to me.

Enormous thanks goes to my editor Kate Fletcher for her vision and friendship, to Erika Denn, my publicist, to Sharon Hancock and Liz Bicknell, and to all the wonderful souls at Candlewick Press who usher my books out into the world with enormous care. Thank you for being the gold standard of publishing houses and for getting behind mis libros.

Un abrazo fuerte for my agent, Jen Rofé at Andrea Brown Literary Agency, who is also part Cuban, by the way, and who is always hard at work building her list of multicultural clients who the world should know.

My deepest thanks to Ruth Tobar and the entire Pura Belpré committee for choosing my book from a very worthy group, for embracing a dirty word in the title (that’s not easy), and for honoring Yauqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass as an example of a work that celebrates us.

And most of all, to my children Cristina, Sandra, and Alex, for supporting their mother's dreams, and to my husband of thirty-one years, Javier Menendez, a man I’ve known and loved since I was five years old. Javier worked alongside me in that same factoría where our mothers both worked when they first arrived from Cuba. We’ve seen so many things together, Javier, and I’m so glad this moment is one of them. Thank you for believing that I could do it and for being such a blessing to me.

Thank you, everyone. Mil gracias por este honor tan bello.
ILLUSTRATOR AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Era un gran rancho electrónico
con nopales automáticos,
con sus charros cibernéticos
y sarapes de neón.

Era un gran pueblo magnético
con María ciclotrónicas,
tragafuegos supersónicos
y su campesino sideral.

Era un gran tiempo de híbridos.
Era medusa anacrónica,
una rana con sinfónica
en la campechana mental.

Era un gran sabio rupéstrico
de un universo doméstico
Pitecantropus atómico
era líder universal.

Había frijoles poéticos
y también garbanzos matemáticos,
en los pueblos esqueléticos
con sus guías de pedernal.

Era un gran tiempo de híbridos
de salvajes y científicos,
panzones que estaban tísicos
en la campechana mental,
en la vil penetración cultural
en el agandalle transnacional,
en el oportunismo imperial,
en la desfachatez empresarial
en el despiporre intelectual,
en la vulgar falta de identidad.

~Rockdrigo González, el profeta del nopal.

Yuyi Morales is winner of the 2014 (Pura) Belpré Award for the picture book Niño Wrestles the World (Neal Porter/Roaring Brook). Her acceptance remarks were delivered at the Belpré Celebración on Sunday, June 29, 2014, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

For more information about the Belpré Award, visit http://bit.ly/belpre-award.

Yuyi Morales was born in Xalapa, Mexico, and currently divides her time between California and Veracruz, Mexico. She is an artist, author, and puppet maker. Her book Little Night and the Spanish edition, Nochecita, were 2008 winners for picture book illustration of the Golden Kite Award from the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book, 2004 Belpré winner, appears on the New York Public Library’s list of “100 Top Children’s Books of the Last 100 Years.”

FUN FACT: Yuyi is a plant admirer, music adorer, and student of dogs.
Ten is also the age I still feel I am, on the inside. You probably know how it is, that there arrives a time when you realize that you have become complete, with grown-up wants, fears, and dreams already inhabiting your body. You might be only five or ten or fifteen or a hundred years old, yet you sense yourself so truly that even as the years continue making you grow and change, and your nose becomes bigger, and your head stops getting stuck inside weird places, something essential remains, because deep in your core you already are you. I was ten when it happened to me.

When I was growing up in Mexico, my childhood fears were at the core of my existence. Have you ever been afraid of La Llorona, the ghostly weeping woman who cries at night for her children, “¡Ay mis hijos!”? Ask any Latino child and you will get to hear the most amazing testimonials of La Llorona’s existence. These niños and niñas will tell you all about her terrifying cries, and how she will kidnap children who disobey their parents, and even tell you that someone in their family—an aunt, a tio, a grand-ma, or an abuelito—once got to see La Llorona haunting by the river. I used to be afraid of La Llorona. Wouldn’t you be? Many dark nights I laid awake fearing that through the window of my room, La Llorona could appear at any moment. Have you ever been afraid of las mummies, the mummies your father took you to see in Guanajuato City, as mine did? Dead people buried no more, now displayed in the museum, all enjujutidas like dried prunes, most of them wearing their best outfits in which they were buried after the city’s cholera attack in 1833. Did you doubt that when no one was looking they could walk out of their glass cases, manage to get in the trunk of your dad’s car, and wait until you were asleep in your bed to come and take a mordidita, a little bite off you?

Or have you been afraid of extraterrestrials, the green men from Mars, and the sight of a UFO crossing the sky that no one else saw but you, and now who is going to believe you?

Oh, but is there anything like the anguishing mind games that a gigantic Olmec Head can inflict? How was it sculpted from huge basalt rock more than 3,000 years ago? Why does it have fleshy lips and a flat nose? What does it mean that he has slightly crossed eyes? Why is he wearing a helmet? What were the Olmecs thinking, ¡ay, dios! And whose giant head is it in the first place? I can’t tell you enough about the sleep one can lose trying to solve all the mysteries of a Cabeza Olmeca!

And don’t even let me tell you about being afraid of El Chamuco. There he is, behind you!

But I have good news for everybody. Fear no more. Heroes dwell among us! They might be tiny, they might be young, they might have a fondness for wearing very few clothes, but in their heart, they are mighty and whole. I am sure there is one in your family or in your neighborhood; lucky for us they are everywhere.

Niños! Niños! Niños!

When I was a niña, my father took my sisters and me to the famous Arena Xalapa, our hometown’s sports ring where Lucha Libre erupted in glorious wrestling spectacles. I was young and small, so most of the luchadores looked like giants to me. At the end of the show in which good had confronted evil, where luchadores rudos had played dirty tricks on luchadores tecnicos, where acrobatics had been performed in and also out of the ring, and where battles had been won and lost after spectacular marome-
Caballos and flying moves, my father took my sisters and me backstage. There, to our amazement, he introduced us to one of the luchadores, a friend of his, a man big and cabezon like an Olmec Head. With his rock-like arm, the luchador extended a hand big and dark like a blue corn tortilla, and with that hand he wrapped my fingers like carnitas and said, “nice to meet you.” I couldn’t speak for the rest of the night.

At home my mother scolded my father, “you shouldn’t have taken the niñas to las Luchas. They are going to get the idea that it is okay to fight!” Making use of his most strategic move, my father looked at her with sheepish eyes and said nothing at all.

That night at the luchas stayed with me until recently, when I sat in my studio creating the story of Niño Wrestles the World. On my table I had begun sketching the idea of a child as a hero. My narrative was shaped by my belief that we all, whether little or big, young or old, women or men or anything in between, when confronted with having to conquer our own fears, become first class luchadores. And since I personally knew so much about being terrorized and developing even more talent than I could have even imagined. To this day, my two hermanitas, my little sisters, Elizabeth and Magaly, continue challenging me and inspiring me with their feistiness and their strength.

Today, as I receive the Pura Belpré Award, I am taken back to that night when my father brought my hermanitas and me to Las Luchas, and I feel again as if my fingers are being wrapped like carnitas by a mighty tortilla hand—this strong hand that the Pura Belpré community and all of you hold up so that people like me can continue creating books worth bringing into your libraries, your classrooms, your bookshelves, your hearts, and the lives of the children in your life.

From then on I decided I would celebrate children’s talents. And, what are children very, very good at? Well, among other things, they are very good at imagining; they are experts at make-believe; and they are amazing at playing. Yes, Niño, my hero, would win his battles sporting his best moves at playing!

La Momia de Guanajuato would have no chance against Niño.

Forget about that big-headed Cabeza Olmeca.

PPTHHPPT! La Llorona.

Extraterrestrial shmeisterrestrial.

Chamuco babuco.

Niño would have no opponent who could match his superb skills at play!

Except, one should never underestimate the enemy. That is something else I learned back when I was growing up. After all, when I was a niña, my two greatest fears slept in a little bed and a crib, both gathering strength and developing even more talent than I could have even imagined. To this day, my two hermanitas, my little sisters, Elizabeth and Magaly, continue challenging me and inspiring me with their feistiness and their strength.

As I commemorate the 10th anniversary of my love relationship with the Pura Belpré Award, I also celebrate 20 years since I immigrated to the United States. The journey north began, as it does for most immigrants, on a road paved with losses: the loss of my family, my friends, my career as a physical education teacher, my dreams to be the best swimming coach.
in the world, my language and the validation that comes with being understood, as well as my identity. Who was I? And what was I doing here? Eventually it became clear that the road was also a blank piece of paper on which I could draw a new story. Back then I could have never imagined that my creation would find its way into the pages of the children's book world, and that one day I could be here thanking you all for becoming my family, celebrating what together we have accomplished, as we measure what is yet to be done. What a great place in which to find myself.

I will be making my journey back to Mexico tomorrow where my dogs, Mojo and Luna, await me, my parents, my sisters and brother await me, the streets of Xalapa where fire-eater kids at almost every stoplight await me, my studio with its century stone walls awaits me, my wild garden where fireflies come out at the edge of dusk await me, more books to be created await me. I am an immigrant, a member of two worlds, a speaker of two languages, a mother of a Niño born in Mexico and now a man who has embarked into his own journey in this place that he calls home, America. Please, continue to make this land the welcoming, diverse place of opportunities for Niños and Niñas to grow—and please let me be a part of it.

For more information about the Belpré Award, visit http://bit.ly/belpre-award.

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