



# Pura Belpré Author Award Acceptance Speech

## All People Are Connected

Pam Muñoz Ryan



*Pam Muñoz Ryan is the winner of the Pura Belpré Author Award for *The Dreamer*, illustrated by Peter Sís, published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic, Inc. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans on June 26, 2011.*

Thank you to the American Library Association, ALSC, and REFORMA, and especially to Martha Walke and her 2011 committee. I am thrilled that you chose *The Dreamer* and feel privileged to be in the company of such fine writers and artists.

Ten years ago, in 2001, I received my first Pura Belpré Medal for *Esperanza Rising*. The Pura Belpré award was young then—only a kindergartner. And even though the award already had a toehold of growing respect and support, the ceremony was nonetheless sparsely attended.

Four years later, in 2005, I received the Pura Belpré Honor for *Becoming Naomi Leon*. By that time, the ceremony was more prominent, and the celebration had grown to include music and singing. The festivities quickly garnered a reputation for being not only an awards ceremony, but a fiesta in the true Latino sense of the word, and one not to be missed.

Today, at its Quinces, the Pura Belpré Medal has come of age. I am heartened to see that so many people from the greater publishing community are here to share this day with me and my colleagues.

My book *The Dreamer* is also a coming-of-age story about a boy, Neftalí Reyes. One event in young Neftalí's life seduced me to write *The Dreamer*—the incident of the hole in the fence, when an unknown child in the backyard next door passed him an old toy sheep through an opening in the wood planks. Neftalí reciprocated with a treasured possession, a pinecone from the Araucanian forest. He never discovered who passed him the sheep, or to whom he passed the pinecone. But even after he grew up and changed his name to Pablo Neruda, he reflected and wrote about this moment. For him, it became a lifelong reminder that all people were somehow connected.

He wrote,

That exchange brought home to me . . . a precious idea: that all of humanity is somehow together. . . . Just as I once left the pinecone by the fence, I have since left my words

on the door of so many people who were unknown to me, people in prison, or hunted, or alone. . . . Maybe this small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me . . . deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light

Initially, I wrote this story as a picture book for older readers. I worked with my editor, Tracy Mack, on and off for over a year, finished what I thought was the final rewrite, and sent it off. I gathered up all of the books I'd checked out from the library and returned them. I put all of my research notes in a box, labeled it, and put it in a closet. I felt like a mother who had finally put an errant three-year-old child to bed, tucked it in, turned off the light, and said, "Buenos noches." I breathed a sigh of relief. I was ready to set my sights on my next book.

Tracy read the manuscript and conferred with our creative director, David Saylor. She called a few weeks later and said, "David had a brainstorm, and I agree with him and we have a suggestion for a new approach to the manuscript." These are not the words you want to hear when you think you are finished with a book. She asked me to consider reworking the book, and expanding it into a novel.

What? I had put it to bed!

As I listened to their rationale, I had the sinking feeling that she and David were right. But I knew that this change would mean going back to square one, physically and emotionally. I admit, I shed a few frustrated tears. Ultimately though, I was convinced, and I discovered that the book was not asleep, at all. It wanted another drink of water. It needed more than "one more story." It was scared and wanted to be rocked. It was cold. It was hot. It wanted a night light. And a lullaby. It was another two-and-a-half years before it allowed me to pull the covers beneath its chin, and kiss it good night.

While I rewrote *The Dreamer*, I focused on the elements in Neruda's young life that I hoped would resonate with particular readers—his strained relationship with his father, his struggle for independence, his painful shyness, his escape into fantastical worlds, and, especially,

his suspicion and hope that there was something yet to be discovered about himself that was magnificent—something that he had to share.

I think that young readers need to feel that they can still become something they've never been before. That there is something splendid dwelling inside, some talent or ability yet unknown. I often envisioned middle grade boys and girls as the potential readers—brooding adolescents, who might feel misunderstood and might be closet poets, artists, scientists, or musicians, who are too embarrassed to speak their heart.

I was together with my sister and a group of my cousins recently, and we became hysterical with laughter while reminiscing about my grandmother, Esperanza, and how she used to embarrass us, sometimes to tears. If she had any one of us girls with her at the market, church, or walking in the neighborhood, and she stopped to talk to someone she knew, or didn't know, she'd pull us forward and say, "Hello Mrs. Gonzales. This is my granddaughter. Isn't she beautiful?" Oh, how we wanted to crawl into a hole!

But it did not matter one bit to my Grandmother. She would tell the bus driver, a sales clerk, the mail carrier, or a passerby. And she was pleased with herself and expected an affirmation.

Once, when I was an awkward, acne-ridden adolescent, who had not yet grown into my nose or my feet, I was with my grandmother at Mr. Louey's market, standing in front of the meat counter. She shoved me front and center and said, "Mr. Louey, this is my granddaughter. Isn't she beautiful?"

Mr. Louey said nothing, smirked, and handed her a roast wrapped in white paper, and turned away. It was clear he did not see anything special in front of him. The butcher had dismissed me.

I was paralyzed with embarrassment. My grandmother grabbed my hand, pulled me away and, in the bizarre way she sometimes translated Spanish to English, said, "Do not worry. He does not see the bones of you."



Pam Muñoz Ryan (center) with Lucia Gonzalez (left), 2010-2011 REFORMA president, and Julie Corsaro (right), 2010-2011 ALSC president during the Belpré Award Celebration in New Orleans. Photo Credit: Alexandra and Michael Buxbaum.

At that age, I remember thinking that of course he couldn't see my bones. I was covered with flesh and skin and clothing. I remember thinking that my grandmother was ridiculous and infuriating. Now, I know she meant that he could not see my core, the essence of me, the potential in me.

I cannot help but feel that the Pura Belpré committee and this luminous medal are like my proud grandmother, a persistent compliment. The award nudges the books forward. It suggests that the literary community pay attention to the Latino experience. It points out that there is something special here, that should not be dismissed. It promises that someone might see the bones of us.

I can't imagine this book's journey without my editor, Tracy Mack, who always saw the potential in this book, shared my vision, and was unfailingly supportive. My gratitude spills over for the compliment of Peter Sís's art. And now I can wholeheartedly appreciate David Saylor for his brainstorm. I thank him, along with his department, and Charles Kreloff, for their art direction and beautiful bookmaking.

I do not want to miss this opportunity to thank my Scholastic family: Tracy Van Straaten, Lizette Serrano, John Mason and

their teams, and the Scholastic sales reps. In that odd and insecure window of time when the manuscript was finished, but not yet published, they invested their expertise and enthusiasm in my book, before reviewers, before readers, before committees.

Pablo Neruda believed that the profession of writing was isolating and that only after someone read his words could a communion take place. It is often the same for all of us. We don't always know whose lives we will touch. We hope that someone will admire our illustrations, will use the knowledge we left behind, emulate our actions, consider our views, wield our hammer, live in the house we built, eat the bread we baked, learn from our skills, appreciate our endeavors. The passing of our respective gifts to those we know, or will never meet, is our spiritual union with humanity.

I feel fortunate to be in this profession of writing for children and young adults. I hope that I'll continue to have the opportunity to pass my work through a hole in the fence. And that possibly, many years from now, an aspiring teacher will take a children's literature class and will be assigned to read a Pura Belpré book. I hope, if that student chooses *The Dreamer*, that at that distant time and place, our souls will meet.

*Un mil gracias.* 🌸