



Pura Belpré Young Adult Author Honor Acceptance Speech



Natalia Sylvester received a 2023 (Pura) Belpré Young Adult Author Honor for *Breathe and Count Back from Ten* (Clarion Books/HarperCollins). She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Pura Belpré Award Celebración held Sunday, June 25, 2023, during the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago.

Hello, everyone. I hope you'll forgive me, but I just have to quote a viral tweet today.

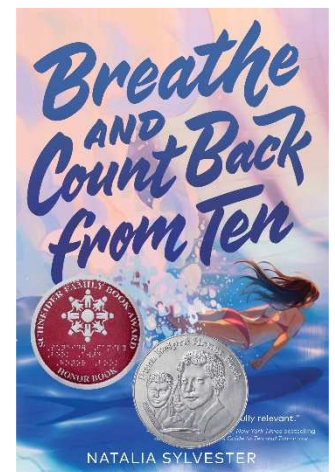
Late last year, the writer Jonathan Louis Dent wrote: "Imagine if we measured success by the amount of safety that people felt in our presence."

Imagine.

I wrote *Breathe and Count Back from Ten* out of a deep longing to feel safe in its pages and make others feel safe in return.

In the book, Vero's hip dysplasia means that her hip joint is literally out of alignment. As a disabled Latina immigrant, this is also how she exists in the world: never quite fitting in. She's drawn to the water because it's where she feels safest and most like herself.

Vero's body, like that of so many immigrants, people of color, disabled people, queer and especially trans and nonbinary people, is so rarely allowed to move through the world freely. Her existence is made hard by shame and bigotry and xenophobia and ableism and lack of accessibility and an immigration system that was never designed to welcome bodies like hers.



I wanted this book to be like the water. I wanted it to make the weight of the world a little less heavy. I wanted it to tell readers who saw themselves in Vero that here we can dream of becoming mermaids and fall in insta-love and never have to hide our scars or any other parts of ourselves that don't quite "fit" in.

There's a scene in the book, right before Vero auditions to become a mermaid at her local theme park, where her best friend Leslie—ever the cheerleader!—tells her she'll get the part. Vero says:

"Stop. I don't want to get my hopes up."

Leslie responds:

"It's not illegal, you know. To want something."

I felt these words in the days before the ALA awards were announced. And then I got two incredible, dream-come-true phone calls. And it felt a little safer to get my hopes up.

I want to thank the American Library Association, ALSC, REFORMA, and YALSA, and the Pura Belpré committee as well as the Schneider Family Award committee for honoring this book and seeing Vero in all her wholeness. Thank you also to my agent, Laura Dail, my editor, Jennifer Greene, and the team at Clarion Books/HarperCollins. Thank you to my family for everything, always.

At a time when books for our youth—especially books for our marginalized youth—are being banned and threatened, I'm honored to continue doing this ever-important work with you all, of measuring our success by how many people we make feel safe. Of asking: whose stories are safe here? Whose dreams? Whose hopes? Whose wishes?

Which is another way of asking: whose lives?

I hope we'll also ask an equally important question: What must we never create sanctuary for? If, whether through our actions or inactions, we are allowing hate, bigotry, and an indifference to each other's needs to thrive, then we are not only failing our most vulnerable, we are failing everyone. We all lose parts of our humanity when we fail to treasure the humanity in all of us.

Thank you, again, for honoring *Breathe and Count Back from Ten*. Thank you for lifting up stories for the safe havens they are.

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