

From “Juan Verdades” to Life in Prison: Recent Books about Latinos

By Isabel Schon

From the triumphs of adaptation to a new home to the pain, sufferings, and frustrations of adolescence, these recently published books about Latino people are eloquent testaments to literature at its best. The books on this recommended list include picture books for the preschool and elementary levels, poetry collections, fiction and nonfiction for intermediate readers, memoirs for teens, and folktales for a variety of ages, all published in the past two years.

For the Young

Elya, Susan Middleton. *Home at Last*. New York: Lee & Low, 2002. 32 pp. Illus. by Felipe Davalos. ISBN 1-58430-020-5, \$16.95. Gr. 2-4.

Eight-year-old Ana Patiño likes her new school in the United States, even though life is different from that in her village in Mexico. Papá is also adjusting, but Mamá finds learning English difficult and resists trying to do so. After several distressing situations, especially when Ana's baby brother becomes ill, Mamá agrees to learn English. To celebrate her success, the whole family enjoys a special dinner. Although this story is more about the mother, Elya's upbeat account about adjusting to a new language and culture is beautifully illustrated with Davalos's sensitive double-spread oil paintings, which possess a definite Latino ambiance. Despite the almost predictable message, Latino children will empathize with the frustrations and triumphs of adaptation.

Hayes, Joe. *Juan Verdades: The Man Who Couldn't Tell a Lie*. New York: Orchard/Scholastic, 2001. 30 pp. Illus. by Joseph Daniel Fiedler. ISBN 0-439-29311-1. \$16.95. Gr. 2-5.

Hayes adds a decidedly southwestern/Latino flavor to the traditional tale about Juan Verdades, an honest foreman who can't tell a lie. The smooth retelling, sprinkled with Spanish words and phrases and the vernacular of ranchers, is further embellished with Fiedler's lush earth-tone, double-page spreads, which perfectly depict the romantic nuances of the tale. Young readers/listeners will enjoy the humorous dialogue and the surprising conclusion, as they delight in Juan Verdades's ability to gain the girl and the wealthy farmer's approval without telling a lie. An author's note explains the origins of the tale and the changes made for literary purposes.

Lee, Claudia M., ed. *Messengers of Rain and Other Poems from Latin America*. Toronto: Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 2002. 80 pp. Illus. by Rafael Yockteng. Translated from Spanish by Andrew C. Leone and others. ISBN 0-88899-470-2, \$18.95. Gr. 3-7.

Maintaining the tone and style of the original poems, these smooth English renditions of 64 poems from 19 Latin

American countries will appeal to devoted lovers of the genre. Longtime favorites by such masters as Rubén Darío (Nicaragua), Nicolás Guillén (Cuba), Gabriela Mistral (Chile), and Octavio Paz (Mexico) as well as lesser-known poets are included. Novices, however, will be challenged by the arbitrary groupings that fail to entice or invite them to delight in poetic art. It is especially disappointing to note that “Farewell,” an anonymous poem, is wrongly attributed to the great Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges, who must be objecting from his grave. The occasional pastel illustrations are mere decorations. A Spanish edition is available.

Ryan, Pam Muñoz. *Mice and Beans*. New York: Scholastic, 2001. 32 pp. Illus. by Joe Cepeda. ISBN 0-439-18303-0, \$15.95. Ages 4-7.

With the warmth and bustle of a Mexican fiesta, grandmother Rosa María looks forward to celebrating Little Catalina's seventh birthday. As she plans a typical Mexican menu, buys a piñata, orders a cake, and decorates her house, she makes sure that mice are excluded. Then she realizes that the helpful mice had filled the empty piñata, allowing Little Catalina to enjoy the candy, and she opens her heart even to them. Ryan's vibrant repetitive text, liberally sprinkled with Spanish words, is accompanied by Cepeda's exuberant double-page spreads, which joyfully depict the color, fun, and humor of a Mexican family fiesta.

For Middle Readers

Hill, Christine M. *Ten Hispanic American Authors*. Berkeley Heights, N.J.: Enslow, 2002. 112 pp. Series: Collective Biographies. ISBN 0-7660-1541-6, \$20.95. Gr. 6-8.

Highlighting significant aspects in the lives of 10 of the greatest contemporary Hispanic American writers, Hill introduces Julia Alvarez, Rudolfo Anaya, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Oscar Hijuelos, Nicholasa Mohr, Richard Rodriguez, Esmeralda Santiago, Gary Soto, and Piri Thomas. Despite the mostly uninteresting black-and-white photos, the conciseness of each biographical sketch and the selected bibliography make this collective biography a useful introduction to the life and works of these Latino writers.

Joseph, Lynn. *The Color of My Words*. New York: Joanna Cotler/HarperCollins, 2000. 138 pp. ISBN 0-06-028232-0, \$14.95. Gr. 5-8.

In a heartrending first-person narrative, Ana Rosa, a 12-year-old girl from the Dominican Republic, tells about the beauty of her island juxtaposed with her family's travails and the government's abuses. Despite the lack of freedom of the press, Ana Rosa's greatest wish is to write. Fortunately, an understanding mother and a most generous brother encourage her dream. Amid the allure of the music, food, and

beaches of the Dominican Republic, Ana Rosa's poignant coming-of-age story chronicles her father's constant drinking and her brother's tragic death at the hands of government soldiers.

Pohl, John M. D. ***The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico***. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002. 64 pp. Illus. by the author. ISBN 0-19-514019-2, \$17.95. Gr. 5-8.

The Mixtecs of ancient Mexico are introduced to young people through Pohl's vivid retelling of their great epic saga and stunning color illustrations based on their ancient codices. Interspersed in the narrative are informative overviews about the Mixtec nation, ritual dress, personal adornment, codices, and battles, followed by an author's afterword explaining his work. A cast of characters and a chronology will assist readers as they relive Lord Eight Deer's quest to rule his kingdom, amid cruel battles, family murders, bloody tyrants, and noble women.

Rice, David. ***Crazy Loco***. New York: Dial, 2001. 135 pp. ISBN 0-8037-2598-1, \$16.99. Gr. 7-10.

With verve and gusto, Rice depicts everyday life in a border town in South Texas in this collection of nine stories that resonate with the ambivalent feelings of many Mexican Americans. In "Her Other Son," he speaks for many Mexican Americans when he states, "Though we had grown up listening to Spanish all our lives, we didn't speak the language very well..." (p.18) and "My Spanish was very Tex-Mex, and I thought he probably would laugh at me" (p.25). Other stories tell about family tensions, the prevalence of domestic workers from Mexico, the pain of first love, the duties of altar boys, and other aspects that add a distinctive flair to life amidst two very different cultures.

For Adolescents

Baca, Jimmy Santiago. ***A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet***. New York: Grove Press, 2001. 264 pp. ISBN 0-8021-1602-7, \$24.00. Gr. 9-adult.

In an engrossing memoir, Baca, an award-winning poet, recounts his life from his childhood in rural New Mexico—where he was abandoned by his parents and put in an orphanage at age seven—to detention centers for boys, drug dealing, and years of abuse at a maximum-security state prison in Arizona. Highlighting the impact of the dehumanizing environment of prison, which can "turn a man into a monster," and the effects of learning to read and write, which gave him the resources to understand himself, Baca provides a living testament to the power of literature and a young man's efforts to survive despite overwhelming odds. Latino adolescents will be touched by Baca's seemingly endless sufferings and his ultimate success.

Bierhorst, John, ed. ***Latin American Folktales: Stories from Hispanic and Indian Traditions***. New York: Pantheon, 2002. 386 pp. ISBN 0-375-42066-5, \$26.00. Gr. 9-adult.

Selected and translated by Bierhorst, a recognized author-

ity on pre-Columbian language and literature, this collection of Latin American folktales includes early colonial legends featuring Aztec and Inca rulers: Montezuma and Mayta Capac. Also included are twentieth-century stories that are "told at wakes in order to pass the time, or, more to the point, to prevent people from falling asleep" (p.45) and modern-day myths that describe the war between nature and culture. From the ever-popular Latino trickster, Pedro de Urdemalas, to "Don Dinero and Doña Fortuna," to Charcoal Peddler, who chooses to share his humble meal with Death rather than Luck because death treats everyone equally, these stories provide a joyous display of the wit and wisdom of Hispano-American people. Serious folklorists-to-be will appreciate the author's notes, register of tales and motifs, glossary, and bibliography.

Jiménez, Francisco. ***Breaking Through***. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. 200 pp. ISBN 0-618-01173-0, \$15.00. Gr. 7-12.

In this touching autobiographical sequel to *The Circuit*, Jiménez relates his teenage years, beginning with the family's deportation to Mexico up to his admission to college. Especially affecting are Francisco's painful efforts to help his hard-to-please father support the family ("thinning lettuce and picking carrots after school and on weekends"), as he struggled to keep up with his schoolwork, encouraged by his loving mother and supportive teachers and counselors. In a direct, steady tone without melodrama or didacticism, he achieves his objective: "to voice the experiences of many children and young adults who confront numerous obstacles in their efforts to 'break through...and become butterflies'" (p.195). Black-and-white photos of the author as a high school student and his family as migrant workers are included.

Ortiz Cofer, Judith. ***The Year of Our Revolution: New and Selected Stories and Poems***. New York: Puffin Books, 2001. 131 pp. ISBN 0-14-130974-1, \$5.99 (pb). Gr. 9-12.

In a work even more candid and touching than her 1995 stories, *An Island Like You*, Ortiz Cofer provides stories and poems, originally published by Piñata Books in 1998. With great sensitivity, she expresses her personal emotions and observations about her conservative Puerto Rican parents' viewpoints, which contrasted with her rebellious adolescent attitudes of the 1960s. She describes her feelings about President Kennedy, her father's death and funeral in Puerto Rico, her grandmother's strong *Nacionalista* (pro-independence) political beliefs, the tragic rape of an adolescent girl by her teacher, and her strong desire to go to college. These eloquently written coming-of-age works are sure to appeal to mature readers, who will empathize with the author's adolescent conflicts and tribulations.

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