Pam Muñoz Ryan

Author Program In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Movie

Pam Muñoz Ryan, interviewed in her studio in Leucadia, CA on May 23, 2003.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You write picture books, middle grade novels, young adult novels, historical fiction and nonfiction. What is appealing to you about writing in such a variety of genres and what are some of the differences between writing a picture book and writing a novel?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I really love changing mental channels and doing something different. When I do a picture book, I write with a limited palette because I know that the illustrator is going to say things with the art that I don't need to say. When I write a novel, I write with a limitless palette. I can paint with as many words as I want; I know that I need the cinematography of the writing to carry the reader along, because an illustrator will not be doing that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's an example of the illustrator saying things in the art that you don't need to say in your text?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: When I first wrote *Mice and Beans*, I indicated a sub-story for mice, and we really worked hard to make this a great marriage of art and text — to the point that after I saw Joe Cepeda's sketches and after text was laid on the page, I took out text that was redundant to his art so that it would be really tight.

I have to give Joe credit — he made the book so much funnier than I wrote it; he was such a great match for the story. In fact, when my editor sent the manuscript to Joe, he called her and said, "I love this book and I love the grandmother in the book. She's exactly like my mother, very preoccupied and very quirky — and my mother's name is the same as the grandmother in the manuscript — Rosa Maria!" That was such a great serendipitous thing that happened.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What other unique contributions do the illustrators bring to your books?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: Sometimes we look for sort of a metaphor for the book and then that leads me in my writing and I think sometimes it leads the illustrator in their art. For example, Brian Selznick wanted *Amelia and Eleanor Go For a Ride* to have the look and the feel of a black-and-white movie, so he went to the video store and checked out a lot of black-and-white movies from that time period. This helped the book have a sort of almost romantic, black-and-white movie poster appeal to it.

Brian and I wanted *When Marian Sang* to have the look and the feel of an opera. When you open to the first page, the curtains are closed. Then you turn the page, and the opera curtains open, and we see a young girl singing in a window, and then we enter that window into the opera of her life. I even wrote the title page as an opera program to add to that feel.

Joe Cepeda did something really interesting with the cover of *Esperanza Rising*. He gave a synopsis of the story across the entire cover, which you can see if you hold the cover entirely open, looking left to right from the back cover to the front cover. The book begins at sunset in

Aguascalientes, Mexico, at El Rancho de las Rosas, next to the Sierra Madre mountains. He includes the symbolic river that runs in the story. Esperanza stands on one side of the river and Miguel stands on the other. He also includes her father's roses and, of course, Esperanza taking her journey. And the book ends at DiGiorgio Farms in Arvin, California. So, he shows the fields, the farm labor camp and a sunrise — which is how the book ends.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Esperanza Rising* is based on the life of your grandmother. Can you share something about the real Esperanza?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: My grandmother, Esperanza Ortega Muñoz, was really the hub of the entire family and everybody seemed to congregate at her house. As I grew up, I observed the influence that her affection had on people and how her traits carried over to other people in the family. I became a big fan of hers when I understood her story and the things that she overcame.

She immigrated to the United States at a very young age, where she lived in the Mexican farm labor camp that I depicted in the book, *Esperanza Rising*. Later, she and her husband had a number of young children. When her husband died, she was still living in the farm labor camp and didn't speak English. Catholic Relief Services came and helped her move into town and got her a little house. She learned English and made sure that her children spoke English.

I look at all of that, and I think that it's so different from what my life was like or what my children's life is like, and so I have a great admiration for what she did and how she persevered.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are the themes of *Esperanza Rising*?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: *Esperanza Rising* is about growth and Esperanza's journey to becoming somebody she never knew she could become.

My favorite scene in the book is when Esperanza gives the doll to Isabel (who is actually me in real life). This scene is really indicative of how far Esperanza has come. It's her turning point. She is giving away her last bastion of her old life and not even caring, because she has grown so much and can let go.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What kind of impact has *Esperanza Rising* had on readers?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: One of the nicest things about *Esperanza Rising* has been the letters that I receive from children. Very often, it's not so much about the story as it is about what it made them realize. Many of the letters read something like, "Dear Mrs. Ryan, I never knew I had it so good." or "Dear Mrs. Ryan, I really appreciate my family now. After I read that book, it really made me realize that I have a really nice life." That's been very gratifying, because I didn't consciously set out to drive home that nail, but I am grateful that the story opened their eyes to a part of their life that they didn't understand or appreciate.

I also get letters from children whose family members are still in Mexico and they will say, "I really liked *Esperanza Rising* and I could identify with Esperanza because even though my father's not dead, he's still in Mexico," or "My grandfather is still in Mexico," or "I have family that is there" or "I have family that is dead."

So I guess *Esperanza Rising* presented these commonalities in a way that children can connect with.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why did you name the chapters in *Esperanza Rising* after fruits and vegetables?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: That wasn't something that came about early in the planning of the book. It came about very late at one of the final passes. I started to feel that Esperanza's life was taking on sort of the rhythm of the harvest, so I called my editor one day and I said, "What do you think if I named the chapters after the harvest that she's experiencing in each chapter?" And she said I should give it a try. And it really worked. Then I went back and reworked the chapters a little to pull that thread a little tighter and to make those chapter headings a little more symbolic.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How closely does *Esperanza Rising* depict your family's story?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: *Esperanza Rising* parallels my grandmother's life very closely, but it is fiction. I created many of the characters. The Mexican camp and her early life are very accurate. However, I had to make the story dramatic and compelling so I used my imagination to fill in all the empty spaces.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your first novel, *Riding Freedom*, is another example of where you were writing about a real person but had to fill in details.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: In *Riding Freedom*, I had only a handful of known facts about Charlotte Parkhurst. I knew she was an orphan, but I didn't know how she became one. I knew that she ran away from an orphanage, but I didn't know what was so bad about the orphanage that it would make her want to run away. I knew that she worked for a man named Ebeneezer Balch, but I didn't know what he looked like or what her relationship was with him. I wanted her to have a lifelong friend, so I gave her Hayward. So what I did is I had this handful of known facts about her life, and with continued research, I was able to fill in some of those spots. There were times where I had to create characters to help move the story along. The book began as nonfiction but evolved into historical fiction.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do students ask you about *Riding Freedom*?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: A lot of children will ask me, "What exactly did you mean by 'freedom?' Did you mean the horse Freedom, or did you mean the freedom that she got when she ran away, or did you mean her freedom to vote?" And I answer them by saying that sometimes authors mean all of those things. They have multiple meanings behind those words or themes.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to learn about the evening in 1933 that became the basis for your book, *Amelia and Eleanor Go For a Ride*?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I came across the reference to Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt taking a night flight over Washington, D.C. when I was reading an adult book. It was just a couple of sentences and I hoped it was true, but I didn't know for sure. Amelia and Eleanor were great fans of each other and they were both so out there relative to the time period in which they lived. I loved the whole idea of the evening, so I went to the library and found the Associated Press article. Then I knew for sure that it had happened, and it was easy to continue the research.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Amelia and Eleanor Go For a Ride* is historical fiction, rather than nonfiction. Explain what's fictional about the book compared with what really happened.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: *Amelia and Eleanor Go For a Ride* is based on an evening in 1933 when Amelia Earhart spent the night at the White House. And during the course of the formal dinner party, Eleanor Roosevelt asked her what it's like to fly at night, because Amelia Earhart was one of the few people, men or women, who had ever flown at night at that time. And Amelia described what it was like to fly over the Capital City at night. Being who she was, she asked Eleanor Roosevelt if she would like to take a flight over the Capital City, arranged a flight with Eastern Air Transports and took Eleanor on her first night flight over Washington, D.C. They flew the loop to Baltimore and back.

Amelia and Eleanor Go For a Ride is historical fiction for two reasons: I had to fill in the dialogue and I modified slightly the evening in that, in reality, Amelia and Eleanor weren't alone in the plane, with Amelia at the controls. There were two pilots onboard, and Amelia took the controls at some point during the flight.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The book certainly has more impact when you imagine that it was just these two influential women taking their own flight over D.C., rather than the fact that they were escorted by other pilots.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: We modified the book for the sake of illustration. I wrote it originally as it happened, but the art director, the illustrator and my editor found a great appeal in illustrating it the way that it was ultimately done. And I was in favor of it. But that's why I love the Associated Press photograph in the back of the book because it really does give credibility to the evening, and it sort of reinforces the fact that, yes, this did take place, but we took a few creative licenses with the night.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *When Marian Sang* also illuminates a strong American woman and a little-known or remembered event.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: *When Marian Sang* is a picture book biography of Marian Anderson. I wrote the book because she had such a compelling story. Her life has so much drama, so much determination, so much perseverance — I almost couldn't not write about it.

Marian Anderson had a beautiful voice at a very young age, but she was turned down from music school because of her race. She had a very strong mother who encouraged her. Her church community and her neighborhood community tried to support her. They got her auditions with professional voice coaches.

She continued to persevere against all of society's expectations and went to Europe to study and sing, where a famous composer said she had a voice that one is privileged to hear once in a hundred years. She came back to the United States after that acclaim and still could not sing in her country's capital because of the "white performers only" policy at the time (late 1930s).

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you listen to Marian Anderson's music as part of your research?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I loved writing *When Marian Sang*. I loved researching her. I've listened to her CD's so much that I actually dreamed the songs from one particular CD in the order that they are sung on the CD.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you see *When Marian Sang* being used in the classroom?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I think educators appreciate *When Marian Sang* as a way to help teach things like Jim Crow laws, protesting and what our rights are, discussing how things were for African-Americans during that time, and also ultimately perseverance.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What other themes exist in *When Marian Sang*?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: The theme of perseverance and the notion of wanting something and realizing that, fortunately, we do live in a country where there is often more than one way to achieve a goal.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to write a book about making raisins?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: The town where I grew up was surrounded by grape fields, and every summer I watched the workers making raisins. And when I was little, I never paid much attention to this because it was something that I saw all the time. The story called *How Do You Raise a Raisin?* came about because one time I was doing a school visit and I was showing the slide of the grape fields in my home town and I said, "Every summer, the workers go into the fields and cut the grapes and lay them down on the ground to make what?" And the children couldn't figure it out. Finally, a little boy's hand shot up in the air and he said, "I know, they're laying them on the ground to dry them into celery." That fed the thought that children sometimes don't really know that raisins are dried grapes.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book for young children, *Mud is Cake*, seems to hit just the right chord for this audience.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: *Mud is Cake* is an ode to my feelings about the value of play. I see such tremendous value in child's play. I also see very over-wrought, over-scheduled young children. Unchoreographed play is so valuable. If you watch children left to their own resources while playing, inevitably they will establish a scene. They will say, "this is going to be the circus," or "this is going to be the house," or "this is going to be the playhouse." And then they will assign characters. They will say, "you are going to be this and I am going to be that." And then they will establish a storyline, "okay, now you're going to this, and then when you come back in, then I'm going to do this." And then they will create a problem and somebody's probably going to get saved, which is making a resolution. This is pre-writing: establish a scene, assign characters, make a problem and create a resolution. They'll play the whole scenario over and over until it's plot perfect, and then they might stop playing that game and move onto something else.

I also see tremendous value in the dress-up corner, in the art table, in the block area, the puppet theater and plays in early childhood classrooms and lower elementary classrooms.

Mud is Cake is about these situations that children create and about replaying these situations over and over and over again until their scenario becomes plot perfect. It's like urban

legends. Urban legends become plot perfect because the story is told over and over and over again so many times that it becomes, through each retelling, better and better and better and better because all the extraneous things that don't work are removed. In children's play, it's much the same way. All of these situations are about understanding the concept of story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What else is *Mud is Cake* about?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: The other thing that I address in *Mud is Cake* is daydreaming and pretending — two things that I often tell children are ways to become a good writer. Children are always asking, "What could I do to become a good writer?" I tell them, "You should daydream often. You should pretend often. Because in those situations, you're learning about the concept of story, you're learning how to develop a plot, you try on different things in your mind to see which things work and which things don't work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In what ways does your diverse cultural background influence your writing?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: My background is Mexican, Spanish, Italian, Basque and Oklahoman, which culturally meant a lot of different types of food. And if you ask me, what do you remember about your childhood, I remember food and a lot of different languages. I grew up hearing different languages spoken. And I think that that's one reason why I have a real appreciation for the rhythm of language. Because when you speak a different language, you have to learn a different rhythm and a different sort of mindset.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In the book *Mice and Beans*, there's a recipe on the back of the book. Is it your recipe?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: It is my recipe for rice and beans, however, I didn't used to have a written recipe — I just made it out of my head. My editor called right before the book was going to production and wanted to know if I could send my recipe for rice and beans. Well, I had to make rice and beans every day for four days in a row to get the recipe down in a written format. Then, I had to retry it so that it would work and I could be sure that people could make rice and beans from it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many of your books are about strong women.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I'm very interested in little-known stories about women who persevered against society's expectations — against odds that were stacked against them. I came from a very matriarchal family and I'm sure that that had some influence on those desires. I also have two daughters.

After *Riding Freedom* came out, so many educators would say, "Oh, we're so happy that you did this book about this strong female, and the boys in my class love this book as much as the girls." That reaction makes you want to do it more.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Flag We Love* is a different sort of book about the American flag.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: *The Flag We Love* was written in the early 90s right after Desert Storm. I had gone into a local grocery store and had seen a flag being misused. So, I went looking for a picture book on the flag for my own children; I wasn't looking for something that was political or really "rah, rah." I just wanted something very simple that was highly illustrated. Librarians and booksellers showed me their books on the flag, which were more like social studies books.

For a writer, the best inspiration of all can be to realize that you might have an idea for something that nobody has done before. In *The Flag We Love*, I was going for a feeling and not a political statement. I really wanted the book to explain the different uses of the flag and some of the meanings behind them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your intention in creating your picture book, *One Hundred is a Family*?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: *One Hundred is a Family* counts 1 to 10 and 10 to 100 by tens, and it's about different types of families. My goal was to take the family from the family that you live with on a daily basis and expand it to include families of community, teams and groups that you spend a lot of time with.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You showed a huge variety of family types in *One Hundred is a Family*.

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: Yes. One of the ideas behind *One Hundred is a Family* was to show the different types of families that exist and that every family is not a mom, a dad and 2.5 children — to show that there are sometimes families that are a father and a son, or maybe a grandmother, a mother and a child that live together and that families are formed from a variety of different circumstances. I also wanted to show a lot of different cultures in the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Would you say you are an issues-oriented writer?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: When I write a story, I don't always set out to send a specific message or to necessarily carry out a specific theme. I write a story with the hope that it's a compelling story and it's a story in which the reader will want to turn the page.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your inspiration behind *A Pinky is a Baby Mouse*?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: *A Pinky is a Baby Mouse* was such a fun book to write. I was reading a magazine article on spiny anteaters, and it mentioned that their babies are called "puggles." And when I saw the one word, "puggle," it was honestly like a light bulb went off. I immediately knew that there were probably other really unusual baby animal names. And I started doing research, and pretty soon, I had a list of a hundred common and uncommon baby animal names, and that list was the inspiration for *A Pinky is a Baby Mouse*.

In the back of the book is the complete list that I accrued during that research and it's been a wonderful jumping-off place for teachers. The teachers read the book to children, then encourage them to write their own book using the list reusing the format of my book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Hello, Ocean*?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: The beach in *Hello, Ocean* is just down from my house. I wanted to write a book about the ocean — someplace that I know, that I love and that I'm familiar with. This book is a great example of what I like to tell children: "write about places that you know and that you're familiar with so that you can write with confidence."

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday like for you?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: If it's a writing day and I'm not going to a conference or a school to speak, I get up early in the morning. I'm a morning person, so I get up at 6:30, make coffee, eat a little something and go to my office and start checking my e-mail, deciding what I'm going to work on or pulling up what I've been working on and I start working. It wouldn't be unusual for me to go straight through to like around 2:00 and not even know that it's 2:00, if I'm really entrenched in something.

Almost every day, I take a long walk, either at the beach or in the neighborhood. I just sit so long that I pretty much have to get up and get going. And also it really helps me when I'm writing to clear my mind so that I can come back and look at something fresh. And if I'm working on a novel, I can be plugged in for, you know, six or eight weeks like that almost every day. If I'm on a deadline, I can be really plugged in and maybe work even longer than that.

I always feel that momentum is far more important than inspiration — that your best inspiration comes when you're in the process of doing. And every single day, if I'm working on a novel especially, I will try to make progress on the story. And it's the consistency and the momentum of continuously working on the story that provides the fertile ground for inspiration. It certainly doesn't come in the form of a muse who sprinkles fairy dust on me, and all of a sudden, wow, I have this great revelation. That has not happened to me yet.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: When I get stuck, I usually just let the story rest for a few days and then I look at it with a fresh eye. Time is my biggest nemesis, and I think a lot of writers would admit that. There are ways to get out of being stuck. For instance, I'll make a list of all the things that I think should or could happen. Sometimes I just get away from the manuscript and brainstorm or daydream and make notes on little pieces of paper and carry them around with me. Sometimes I'll take a walk and bring a little notepad or my cell phone. With my cell phone, I can call myself and leave a message so that when I get home, I can remember the sentence or the words or the characteristics that I wanted to plug in.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you tell students about being a writer when you visit schools?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I think the most important message that I want children to understand about writing is that my first draft is never very good. It's a jumping-off place. It's something to change, something to make better. And by the time one of my stories becomes a book, I've rewritten it 20 to 30 times. And I hope that they'll measure me by my failures and the times that I started over, and not by my successes because they're such a small part of all of the things that I've written and all the times that I started over, and all of the attempts that I've made. You know, we live in a time where everything seems very instantaneous, with immediate gratification, and writing, for me, is not that. It's a lot of starting over, rethinking, rewriting.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you want children to take from your books?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: I want children to love the book for the sake of the book. I want them to clutch it to their chest and say, "I loved this book." I want my books to elicit discussion between students and between students and teachers. I want the children to have affection for what they read.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you enjoy about your writing?

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN: The wonderful thing about writing is you get to try on different lives. You get to try on other people's weaknesses or their strengths and you can figure out how those might work for yourself.

An example of this is in *Riding Freedom*. I would love to think that I'm as brave and courageous as Charlotte Parkhurst. Part of me knows that I couldn't have done some of the things that she did. I'd like to think that I could, but by writing about her life, I got to go there. I got to pretend to be her and all of the parts of me that wanted to be her were reflected in her actions. You let that character become who it is you really would like to be.

NOTE: Read a TeachingBooks exclusive interview with Pam Muñoz Ryan about her 2004 novel, *Becoming Naomi León* — go to http://www.teachingbooks.net/content/RyanNaomi.pdf.

Books by Pam Muñoz Ryan

- THERE WAS NO SNOW ON CHRISTMAS EVE (illustrated by Dennis Nolan**)**, Hyperion Books for Children, 2006
- NACHO AND LOLITA (illustrated by Claudia Ruida), Scholastic Press, 2005
- BECOMING NAOMI LEÓN, Scholastic Press, 2004
- BOX OF FRIENDS, A (illustrated by Mary Whyte), School Specialty Children's Publishing / Gingham Dog Books, 2003
- HOW DO YOU RAISE A RAISIN (illustrated by Craig Brown), Charlesbridge Publishing, 2003
- BANDERA QUE AMAMOS, LA (illustrated by Ralph Masiello), Charlesbridge Publishing, 2002
- HELLO OCEAN (illustrated by Mark Astrella), Charlesbridge Publishing, 2002
- MUD IS CAKE (illustrated by David McPhail), Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- WHEN MARIAN SANG (illustrated by Brian Selznick), Scholastic Press, 2002
- MICE AND BEANS (illustrated by Joe Cepeda), Scholastic Press, 2001
- ESPERANZA RISING, Scholastic Press, 2000
- AMELIA AND ELEANOR GO FOR A RIDE (illustrated by Brian Selznick), Scholastic Press, 1999
- DOUG'S TREASURE HUNT (illustrated by Jumbo Pictures), Disney Press, 1999
- WHERE'S PORKCHOP (illustrated by Jumbo Pictures), Disney Press, 1999
- DOUG COUNTS DOWN (illustrated by Jumbo Pictures), Disney Press, 1998
- FUNNIE FAMILY VACATION, THE (illustrated by Jumbo Pictures), Disney Press, 1998
- RIDING FREEDOM (illustrated by Brian Selznick), Scholastic Press, 1998
- ARMADILLOS SLEEP IN DUGOUTS, AND OTHER PLACES ANIMALS LIVE (illustrated by Diane deGroat), Hyperion Books for Children, 1997
- CALIFORNIA HERE WE COME! (illustrated by Kay Salem), Charlesbridge Publishing, 1997

- PINKY IS A BABY MOUSE, A, AND OTHER BABY ANIMAL NAMES (illustrated by Diane deGroat), Hyperion Books for Children, 1997
- CRAYON COUNTING BOOK, THE (written with Jerry Pallotta; illustrated by Frank Mazzola, Jr.), Charlesbridge Publishing, 1996
- FLAG WE LOVE, THE (illustrated by Ralph Masiello), Charlesbridge Publishing, 1996
- ONE HUNDRED IS A FAMILY (illustrated by Benrei Huang), Hyperion Books for Children, 1994

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