

Interview with F. Isabel Campoy for “Papertiger Magazine”

We, Latinos

For the first 16 years of my life I never questioned my identity. I was Spanish, from Alicante, a happy, athlete, gregarious, artistic student. I went to public schools and was a member of sport teams, classical music clubs, and art appreciation classes. I knew how to manage between two languages, Catalan and Spanish, although I couldn't understand why the government wanted to delete all languages spoken in the country in favor of Spanish only. I knew that not questioning authority I would be safe, but I couldn't stop questioning all the limitations of freedom imposed by Generalissimo Franco, our dictator.

And then I came to the United States, and here I acquired a new identity. I was Latina. At least for English speakers. I was living in Trenton, Michigan, and it was the year 1963.

As I reflect on my life as an author I realize that the over 100 books I have published have all been a statement of what it means to be Latino. In a poem (Suní Paz composed music for it) I say:

Mia es la historia	Mine is a history
culta, honrada y valiente.	honest, educated, fearless.
Mío el orgullo	Mine is the pride,
de ser Latina y suficiente.	of being Latina, no less.

I realized that there are no Latinos in México or Guatemala, El Salvador or Cuba. There are no Latinos in any of the 20 Hispanic Countries. There, there are Mexicans and Guatemalans, Salvadorians or Cubans. The name Latino has been adopted in the US by English speakers to refer to the Spanish-speaking population in this country. Latinos are then a new culture, separate from that of their countries of origin, wider, more complex and in many ways richer. And I wanted our Latino children to know that.

So, in co-authorship with Alma Flor Ada, we created a plan to furnish young readers with tools that would help them choose their own identities as Latinos in the U.S. When we wrote books about Hispanic lands we talked about the new frontiers of our identity, no longer just México or Guatemala, Cuba or Puerto Rico, but also Bolivia and Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, Spain and Honduras.

We invited readers to meet poets born in all ages and all countries from the Mayan A'Kabal to, Octavio Paz, Gabriela Mistral or Federico García Lorca. To read the biographies of Benito Juárez and Fernando Botero, José Martí and César Chavez and to broaden their horizon towards inclusion, to add a second language, not substitute their heritage language by English.

A few years ago, as the third generation of our families was born in the U.S. and abroad, we realized that they needed a common past and we published books such as ¡Pío Peep!, Mamá Goose, Merry Navidad, and Animal Nursery Rhymes. They are all bilingual books because some of these children speak only English, others only Spanish and we hope that they will master both languages sometime soon. Our surprise has been that it is the mothers of young Latino children, the ones that wait in line for our signature in Conferences. They want to keep the memory of their own mothers and the joy of their own childhood, as contained in the pages of those nursery rhyme books. Hopefully, they will sing to their children those same songs, and will teach them the games they played, and will realize that children can learn two languages simultaneously without much problem.

We have ventured into yet another recovery of common memory with the publication of "Tales our abuelitas told" Our diversity of origins also translates in the color of our skin, the language of our ancestors, the faith of our families. Many tales from the Hispanic folklore bring those items to light in characters, settings, and humor. We choose twelve stories that have crossed the boundaries of time and space to find room in our common land as Latinos.

I am aware of the difficulties inherent in growing up Latino. Forty percent of Latino children under 17 are working, not because they choose to do so, but because their families need it. It is them who I wish would someday look at the pages of our books and find the strength to push themselves forward. There is a very difficult reality, but I believe in their honesty and their courage. I believe they deserve better.

A pen seems to be a very fragile tool, and however, it is the only one I have to help me dream and fight, work and hope, love and rebel. And it has served me well throughout the years to do exactly all that. Realizing the power of our pen, Alma Flor Ada and I decided to share that power with others and wrote "Authors in the Classroom: A Transformative Education Process." In those pages we invite readers to start paving their memory with short, simple words. Who are

you? we ask, and the answers are poems that repeat in each line I AM, in an affirmation of self, and life. We propose readers to write the Alphabet of Their Lives, to select photographs from someone important and to self publish a book entitled: A Person In My Live, to give voice to the many silent heroes of our society. We guide them through a poem about "Where I Come From", asking them to begin each line of their poem with the words "I come from...parents, I come from ...foods, landscapes, hopes, fears, tears. I have done this work with thousands of teachers, students, parents and I never failed to be moved to tears and be amazed by the power of their words.

My brother Diego has patiently created for me a collection of over two hundred pens he has found everywhere he goes. Now friends also add to that collection which I call my "arsenal of weapons".

There is nothing more powerful than words and I hope that each one of us will have the strength to use his or her pen to tell the brave history of their humanity.

We, Latinos, are just but beginning to write that part of history.