

Interview with F. Isabel Campoy for Senderos, Houghton Mifflin

As a writer, you have a strong focus on the culture and civilization of the Hispanic world. Can you share a little on your background and how you became a children's book writer?

I cannot remember a time in my life in which I wasn't part of the world of children's literature. . As soon as I learned to read I became the person that teachers chose to read out loud to the rest of the class while they did art, or sewing. I had a good voice and I couldn't hold a thread and needle for more than two seconds, so it was a perfect match to keep everyone busy. That practice stimulated the writer in me and when I was eleven years old I published my first tale in a local magazine. I continued writing throughout my childhood. When I came to the U.S. for the first time at age fifteen in 1963, writing kept me alive through the difficult moments of missing my family (I was here as an AFS exchange student), and conquering my fears after the tragic assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy on November of that year.

My first job after college was as an assistant editor in Madrid. I applied to the position because it was my way to be part of the publishing world. Later I was offered the opportunity to co-author with Phillip Locke a series for the teaching of English, my responsibility being to provide the literary texts. I left publishing many years later. At the time, I was a Senior Acquisitions Editor for College publications in a company in Boston. I realized then that the joy of publishing others, was hiding my fear to publish my own manuscripts... so I finally quit everything and became a full time writer.

I love to travel. I am interested in the places, the people, and their histories. When I began writing for children I wanted to contribute to present the cultural richness of Latino history, art, and literature for readers in this country. There is much to be written about our culture.

Tales Our Abuelitas Told: A Hispanic Folktale Collection, is one of the many books you have written with Alma Flor Ada. It was first published in 2006 and it has just been reprinted for the 4th time as a hardcover. Congratulations! What does this milestone mean to you?

Why do you think so many readers are drawn to your and Alma Flor Ada's retellings of these particular folktales?

Authors love all their books, but there are some that connect with you in a very personal way. "Tales Our Abuelitas Told" was published the year I lost my mother. She was the greatest story teller, imaginative, soft spoken, and these were tales she had told us growing up. I wrote some of the stories for this book by her side. At the time I was the one who would read to her, to make her forget pain, to keep a smile in her beautiful face.

I remember each line in that book and how she reacted to my reading of the stories I was writing. Because she knew the storyline so well, she would frequently interrupt me to say: "That is not exactly how I told you that story" ...when I was using some literary freedom in my re-telling. Those moments are my greatest treasure of her memory, now.

I have given readers the echo of my mother's voice through the beauty of our folklore. I am sure she is enjoying the success of her tales...now in a fourth hardcover reprint.

Which of the folktales resonates with you the most? Why?

Does there appear to be a favorite folktale amongst the readers of your book?

I could probably say that all of them but "The Story of the Not-So Small Animal" is one that I like to tell when I visit schools because I love the landscape and the people of the Basque country. I tell children how so many of them brought their skills as shepherds to the mountains of Idaho. I like this story also because it is one in which the little creatures, together, win the battle against the big animals. I like that!

The stunning artwork in the book was created by four leading Latino artists: Felipe Dávalos, Viví Escrivá, Susan Guevara and Leyla Torres. How do you feel about the illustrations and the extra dimension that they bring to the tales?

Our friendship with these artists has created more than one collaboration that

resulted in great published books. But here they are all together, each one bringing their talent, point of view of the story and energy, and the result is magnificent. It is an honor to have them all in here.

Viví Escrivá has been a frequent collaborator with us. Together we published “Pio, Peep! and !Muu, Moo!”, two of our first Nursery Rhyme collections with Harper Collins. Felipe Dávalos put wind underneath important books such as “The Quetzal’s Journey”, “On the Wings of the Condor”, and “Eyes of the Jaguar”.

You have many published books. Which book from your own esteemed list of published titles would you consider to be the most personally rewarding?

I love art, sometimes I try my hand at painting and sculpting, and having had the opportunity to present to children the richness of Hispanic art has given me great satisfaction. “ Blue and Green”; “Brush and Paint”; ”Artist’s Easel”; and “Canvas and Paper” are four of our art books (written with Alma Flor Ada). But I find writing biographies a very special challenge that I welcome. When I fall in love with a character, I want my readers to love him/her too. For that to happen, every word must be chosen carefully. In our series “Gateways to the sun” we wrote about twelve very special personalities from the world of science, leadership, media, art, and literature.

Which books from your own childhood have most influenced your life?

I continue to find “Platero y yo” by Juan Ramón Jiménez a source of inspiration. I go back to its pages when I want to remember my childhood.

I never understood “Don Quixote” by Miguel de Cervantes until I grew up, but when I did, I realized I have been Don Quixote half of my life and Sancho Panza, the other half.

Do you have anything specific that you want to say to your readers?

I want to express my gratitude to them. I wrote a haiku to say precisely that:

Gratitude is a golden bird

Perched in the branches of your heart

May its voice be heard!