History of the Pura Belpré Award

The award was established officially in 1996 through a collaborative effort between REFORMA (the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking, an affiliate of the American Library Association) and ALSC (the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of ALA). However, the discussion of creating the award began earlier between two Latina librarians, Oralia Garza de Cortés from Texas and Sandra Ríos Balderrama from California.

They knew that the publishers’ excuse that there are no Latino authors and illustrators was wrong.

Although the Latino population was not as large as it is today, the presence of Latinos in the United States was not small enough to be overlooked. Today, Latinos are the largest emergent majority in the country.

The purpose of the award was to honor Latino authors and illustrators whose work authentically “portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth.”

The creators of the award hoped to achieve many things: to establish an award as a body of work that best represents the wealth and diversity of books and stories about the Latino cultural experience for all children, to develop high standards for high-quality writing and illustrations of the Latino cultural experience in books for children, to increase the number of published Latino authors and illustrators relative to the size of the Latino population, to honor and recognize the authors and illustrators of the Latino cultural experience as cultural literary models for children, and to acknowledge that readers respond best to literature when they recognize that the story is authored and/or illustrated by someone just like them.

In the decades preceding this award, published Latino authors and illustrators were few, although the first books written by any Latina during the first half of the 20th century were those that Pura Belpré herself authored: folktales from Puerto Rico that she heard as a child.

It’s important to mentioned that according the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC), of the 5,000 or so children’s books published in 2009 only around 1 percent were about and/or by Latinos. Unfortunately, since then, this percentage has changed very little, although, according to projections by the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2020 the so called minority children in our country will comprise more than half of all children.

At the same time, this award allows non-Latino children a glimpse into the rich cultural experiences, languages, and traditions of their fellow Latino classmates and friends. It’s only through culturally authentic, accurate collections of children’s literature that librarians and educators can celebrate diverse cultures and, in this case, Latino cuentos.

Who is Pura Belpré?

She was the first Puerto Rican librarian in New York City. She was also a writer, collector of folktales, and puppeteer.

Belpré was born in Puerto Rico, in 1899. She graduated from Central High School in Santurce, Puerto Rico in 1919. In 1920, she moved to NYC and remained there for the rest of her life.

Pura Belpré began her career at New York Public Library in 1921, and she pioneered the library's outreach within the Puerto Rican community. Because of her Spanish language and community and literary skills, she earned a position as Hispanic Assistant in a branch of the public library in Harlem becoming the first Puerto Rican to be hired by the New York Public Library (NYPL).

In 1925 she began her formal studies in the Library School of the New York Public Library, and became an active advocate for the Spanish-speaking community by instituting bilingual story hours, buying Spanish language books, and implementing programs based on traditional holidays like the celebration of Three Kings Day. Through Belpré's work, the 115th Street branch became an important cultural center for the Latino residents of New York, even hosting important Latin American figures like the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.

The first story she wrote and published was *Pérez and Martina*, a love story between a cockroach and a mouse. Belpré also collected many other folktales from Puerto Rico, translated them into English and had them published as children’s literature.

Belpré died in 1982, having received the New York Mayor's Award for Arts and Culture that same year. Her archives are held and maintained by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College in New York City.

Finally, I like to mention the purpose for this mock award:

The Children Services Division of the Oregon Library Association is launching this mock award for the first time. This is a great opportunity not only for librarians who are working with Latino and/or Spanish speaking children, but also for all children librarians in order to include other cultures, in this case the Latino one, in their programs and collections.

We are expecting that this event will be a learning experience for all of us. The focus of the workshop will be on knowledge building by including titles which are open to deliberation regarding the Pura Belpré Awards criteria. This will helps us educate ourselves about ways to improve the CSD Mock Pura Belpré Awards in the future, and also to raise awareness of the importance of more quality children’s literature written and/or illustrated by Latino authors.

The Pura Belpré Award defines Latinos as “people whose heritage emanates from any of the Spanish-speaking cultures of the Western Hemisphere. The award recognizes works rooted in any of the cultures found in the countries that compose Spanish-speaking Latin America, including the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. However, this works must be published in the United States or Puerto Rico, and the authors and/or illustrators, while they need not be American citizens, must reside in the United States.