

# Stories from Afar: Using Children’s and Young Adult Literature to Teach about Latin America

Bárbara C. Cruz

“A soul is like a deep longing in you that you can never fill up, but you try. That is why there are stirring poems and brave heroes who die for what is right.”

—Minerva, *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez

**An evocative piece of literature** has the potential to move, rouse, and incite. Teachers have long noted that students who ordinarily are not interested in reading the classroom textbook, can become interested in an event, time period, or culture, when introduced to a richly descriptive storybook or novel. Some educators are now asserting that providing students with books that interest them may even help close the achievement gap.<sup>1</sup>

In teaching about Latin America and the Caribbean, bringing a human dimension to the study of the region is essential. Texts on the region can be dull and lifeless or even biased and skewed.<sup>2</sup> Introducing students to the region by exploring prose, poetry, and picture books helps to illustrate the rich diversity found throughout Latin America and the Caribbean and helps to give a human face to people who are often exoticized or ostracized.

For Hispanic students, incorporating culturally relevant texts into the curriculum can be especially beneficial. Students’ engagement in reading tends to increase when culturally relevant literature and nonfiction are provided.<sup>3</sup> This type of print media helps students understand the sociological aspects of language, further strengthening and developing language skills while allowing them to explore ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup> Hinton and Dickinson argue that providing students and teachers with print media in

which cultural awareness and sensitivity are apparent—books with multicultural characters, settings, and themes—is critical in our efforts to close the achievement gap.<sup>5</sup>

While it was at one point difficult to find high quality trade books about Latin America and the Caribbean for young people, teachers today have a plethora of excellent literature from which to choose. Many books have been translated from Spanish, French, Portuguese, and other languages and made available in the United States. Reading books that were written by people from the region can lend further authenticity to the study of a culture and can capture nuances in language and customs.

## **Picture Books and Children’s Literature**

In the elementary classroom, incorporating children’s literature is an effective way to develop children’s knowledge about the world around them. Creative teach-

ers can use trade books to help students process information, examine alternate points of view, differentiate fact from opinion, and solve problems.<sup>6</sup> Further, picture books not only stimulate student interest in culture, history, and geography, but can also bolster understanding of geographic concepts and historical events.<sup>7</sup>

As in other regions, folktales abound in Latin America and the Caribbean. Legends that reflect myths, folklore, and traditions are an excellent way to introduce students to the history and beliefs of a people. In addition to highlighting the unique differences of a culture, folktales can also draw attention to universal human themes. *Llama and the Great Flood* by Ellen Alexander, for example, is a Peruvian folktale about the Great Flood.

Since children delight in rhythmic language, books that feature rhymes, chants, and poetry capture students’ interest while simultaneously imparting information about traditions and customs. A collection such as *Arroz con Leche*, by Lulu Declare, introduces children to popular Latin American songs and chants and has an accompanying cassette tape to assist the teacher in presenting the bilingual text.

For older elementary students, biographies can be especially compelling since students in the upper elementary grades identify closely with biographical characters.<sup>8</sup> Latin America and the Caribbean have their share of fantastic, larger-than-life personages to inspire and ignite students' imaginations.

### Young Adult Literature

At the secondary level, biographies can also be effectively used in the social studies classroom. As Hancock states, adolescents are "almost magnetically drawn to the achievements of those who have overcome obstacles on their journey toward personal success."<sup>9</sup> Because adolescence is a time of intense introspection and identity formation, reading about others and relating their stories to one's life can be very rewarding for teenagers. Young adult biographies of famous Latin Americans abound, but biographical accounts of lesser-known people can also help students increase their awareness of the region and inspire them on a personal level. Pairing a bio-

graphy of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz with a collection of her translated works, for example, is a powerful way to gain insight into women's lives in seventeenth-century Mexico (visit Dartmouth College's website on her life and work for a detailed chronology and bibliography, [www.dartmouth.edu/~sorjuana](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~sorjuana)).

Historical fiction gives the reader an idea of how life was lived in a particular time period. Historical novels permit "readers to participate vicariously in the historical period, seeing the sights, feeling the emotions, being part of the events as they occur."<sup>10</sup> These realistic stories help students imagine the life, feelings, and experiences of others. This is especially true when the protagonist or narrator of the novel is a teenager, in which case the young adult reader is likely to feel an even stronger connection to the material. The novels of Julia Alvarez, Anilú Bernardo, and Edwidge Danticat are all engaging literary vehicles for young people to learn about other times and other places.

For teachers who feel they cannot

devote extended periods of time to literature, the "Book in One Hour" strategy can be very useful. It can also prove to be a cost-effective way of introducing literature, since only one paperback book is used for the entire class. This approach entails tearing up a paperback book into sections equaling the number of students in class, numbering each section in order, and distributing them to students. Each student reads his or her section in about 15 minutes and then verbally summarizes that section while the teacher writes characters' names or pertinent terminology on the board for reference. This collaborative activity creates suspense and heightens interest in the story while simultaneously building community in the classroom.

Because many adolescent readers can be resistant to reading, students should be allowed a certain degree of choice in what they select to read.<sup>11</sup> Teachers should consider putting together an annotated list of appropriate titles and authors and permitting students to choose something that resonates with them.

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## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Teachers often find that students become highly motivated to learn more about a culture or express the feelings evoked, after reading a literature piece. Conducting traditional library or Internet research is certainly one option, but there are other creative extension activities that can be developed as well, strengthening literacy skills and promoting more interest and knowledge about the region. Strategies include:

**Reflections:** simply sharing insights (orally or in writing) promotes students' interactive reading. *Literature Circles* entail having a small group of students read the same book independently and then coming together to discuss it. They are an excellent way to compare viewpoints, analyze characters, and critique a book. In *Book Talks*, students share with others in the class a brief synopsis of a book they read independently; an enthusiastic presentation often persuades other students to read the book shared by their peers.

**Diary/Letter Writing:** When students take on the perspective of a character in the book and write a diary entry or letter, they develop important thinking skills related to viewpoints and perceptions. As they write from a character's point of view, they delve deeper into motivations and historical contexts, further solidifying their understanding.

**What Comes Next?:** Having students write an additional chapter to a book promotes creative thinking and writing. Younger children can be asked to orally express what they think might happen next in the story. Students can also be asked to write an alternative ending to the tale.

**Mock Interview:** After reading a book and researching the historical period, students create mock interviews with one of the characters in a question and answer format. These interviews can merely be submitted as scripts or can actually be performed as part of a "talk show."<sup>12</sup>

**Foodways:** Many books feature foods from the culture or historical period in which the story is set. Recreating recipes, entire meals, or special celebrations is an enjoyable and instructive way to learn more about cultures and regions.

**Field Trip:** Where appropriate or possible, teachers can organize a field trip to a cultural center, art or historical museum, or cultural event that enhances a book or storyline.

**Maps:** Creating a map of the area in which the story is set is often a helpful situating exercise for students. And, if the character in the story takes a journey, charting the route on a map can also be very helpful in comprehending the storyline as well as developing geographic and spatial skills.

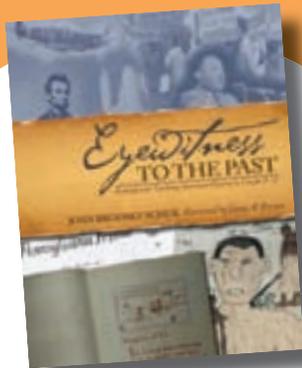
**Postcard:** A quick and effective exercise, having students design and create a postcard based on the book they have read helps them synthesize the main points of a story or book. One side of the postcard can have an illustration tied to the book; the other side can feature a message from a character in the book.

**Mural or Diorama:** Integrating art activities in the social studies classroom can sometimes pose challenges. However, asking students to create murals and dioramas can prove to be an enjoyable, creative, and collaborative task. Classroom murals can be painted on a butcher paper-lined wall. Dioramas can be constructed from recycled materials and then displayed together to form a community.

**Reader's Theater:** While a play is often too time-consuming for most classroom teachers, a reader's theater exercise can bring drama and theater into the social studies class relatively easily. Teachers can easily convert some of the story and dialogue into a reader's theater format and have students read their parts aloud.

**Role-Playing and Simulations:** Enacting or reenacting scenes from a story or book can help students better understand characters and the historical period and culture in which they lived. To ensure effectiveness and lessen classroom management problems, teachers should create role sheets, assign roles, and have specific directives and learning objectives.

# NEW from Joan Brodsky Schur



## Eyewitness to the Past

*Strategies for Teaching  
American History in Grades 5–12*  
Joan Brodsky Schur  
Foreword by James A. Percoco

Throughout history, people have often expressed controversial and conflicting interpretations of current events. In this unique resource for middle and high school teachers, Joan Brodsky Schur reveals how compelling and engaging the study of history becomes when students use documents to imagine living through events in American history.

*Eyewitness to the Past* examines six types of primary sources: diaries, travelogues, letters, news articles, speeches, and scrapbooks. Teachers will find interactive strategies to help students analyze the unique properties of each, and apply to them their own written work and oral argument. Students learn to express opposing viewpoints in documents, classroom interactions, and simulations such as staging congressional hearings or elections.

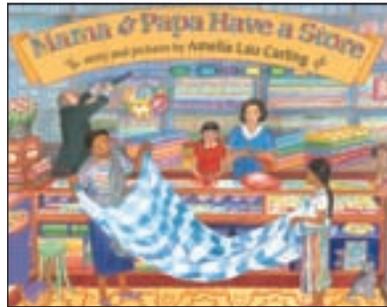
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## Some Recommended Latin American and Caribbean Literature

Certainly, the careful selection of appropriate texts is a crucial component of a successful literature-based social studies lesson. While the following annotated list is by no means exhaustive, it provides a starting point for teachers wishing to infuse more literature into their classrooms.



Cover from *Mama and Papa Have a Store* by Amelia Lau Carling, © 1998. Used by permission of Dial Books for Young Readers, A Division of Penguin Young Readers Group. All rights reserved.

### Elementary

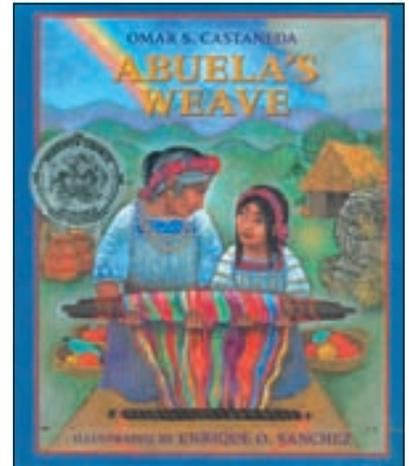
Alexander, Ellen. *Llama and the Great Flood*. New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1989. A Peruvian folktale about the Great Flood.

Ancona, George. *Carnaval*. San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace, 1999. The reader experiences carnival in Olinda, Brazil, through vibrant photos.

Ancona, George. *Mayeros*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997. Colorful photographs and a rich narrative depict the daily life of a contemporary rural Mayan family living in the Yucatán.

Brusca, Maria Cristina. *On the Pampas*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993. Drawing on her memories of summers on her grandparents' *estancia* in Argentina, the author recounts learning how to ride a horse, use a lasso, and hunt for ostrich eggs. A visual dictionary of the Spanish terms used in the text is provided.

Carling, Amelia Lau. *Mama and Papa Have a Store*. New York: Dial, 1998. This story is based on the



Cover from *Abuela's Weave*. Text copyright 1993 by Omar Castañeda. Illustrations copyright © 1993 by Enrique O. Sanchez. Permission arranged with Lee & Low Books Inc.

author's memories of growing up in Guatemala as the daughter of Chinese immigrants; the intermingling of cultures is highlighted.

Castañeda, Omar S. *Abuela's Weave*. New York: Lee and Low, 1993. The special bond between grandmother and granddaughter is evoked in this story set in Guatemala.

Declare, Lulu. *Arroz con Leche*. New York: Scholastic, 1989. Children's songs from Latin America, in Spanish and English, with music provided.

Dorros, Arthur. *Tonight is Carnival*. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1991. Daily life in the Peruvian Andes is recounted as a family prepares for a festival. Authentic *arpilleras* (tapestries) illustrate the text.

Ehlert, Lois. *Cuckoo: A Mexican Folktale*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997. A Mayan folktale of how the cuckoo lost its colorful plumage.

Flora, James. *The Fabulous Fireworks Family*. New York: McElderry, 1994. This is the story of a family quest to make an elaborate pyrotechnic display in honor of their village's patron saint.

Griego, Margot C. *Tortillitas Para Mamá*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981. Collection of Spanish nursery rhymes and their English translations.

Kurtz, Jane. *Miro in the Kingdom of the Sun*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996. Students will learn about the Incan Empire through this retelling of a traditional folktale.

Mora, Pat. *A Library for Juana*. New York: Knopf, 2002. This biography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, traces her seventeenth-century life from age three to adulthood as poet and nun.

Solá, Michèle. *Angela Weaves a Dream*. New York: Hyperion, 1997. Mayan myths come to life in this photo-essay as a Mexican girl incorporates ancient designs and symbols into her weaving.

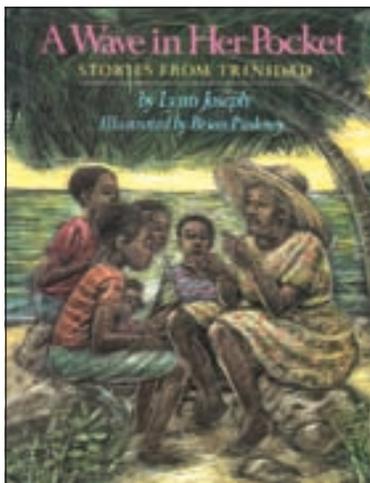
Wisniewski, David. *Rain Player*. New York: Clarion, 1991. Based on Mayan folklore, this story follows Pik, a child who challenges the rain god to a game of *pok-a-tok* in order to bring much-needed rain to his village. Notes at the end of the book provide further information about Mayan culture and history.

### Upper Elementary and Middle

Cruz, Bárbara. *José Clemente Orozco: Mexican Painter*. Berkeley Heights, N.J.: Enslow Publishers, 1998.

Horenstein, Henry. *Baseball in the Barrios*. New York: Gulliver, 1997. Following the life of fifth grader Hubaldo Antonio Romero Paez, this photo-essay conveys the passion for baseball that exists in the barrios throughout Venezuela.

Johnson, Sylvia. *Tomatoes, Potatoes, Corn, and Beans: How the Foods of the*



Cover from *A Wave In Her Pocket* by Lynn Joseph. Jacket illustrations (c) 1991 by Brian Pinkney. Reprinted by permission of Clarion Books, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

*Americas Changed Eating around the World*. New York: Atheneum, 1997. Children will learn about the many foods native to the Americas that were taken to Europe and used in new ways around the world.

Joseph, Lynn. *A Wave in Her Pocket: Stories from Trinidad*. New York: Clarion, 1991. This is a collection of stories highlighting Trinidadian culture, using local language and terms.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Fight for Haiti's Freedom*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. The Haitian freedom fighter's life is told against a collection of paintings first shown at the 1940 Chicago Negro Exhibition.

### Secondary

Alvarez, Julia. *Before We Were Free*. New York: Knopf, 2002. This book, by the author of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, tells what life under the Trujillo dictatorship was like through the eyes of 12-year-old Anita de la Torre.

Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1991. This collection of stories richly describes the immigrant experience of a Dominican family and

their new life in the Bronx. Although set in the United States, students will learn about Dominican history and culture through the tales.

Bernardo, Anilú. *Jumping Off to Freedom*. Houston, Tex: Arte Público Press, 1996. Fifteen-year-old David and his father decide to flee Cuba's repressive regime and seek freedom in the United States by taking to the sea on a raft.

Cofer, Judith Ortíz. *The Meaning of Consuelo*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2003. Set in 1950s Puerto Rico, this coming-of-age story explores cultural issues and tension between the island and the mainland.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik? Krak!* New York: Vintage, 1996. A collection of 10 stories examining the lives of Haitians, many under the Duvalier regime.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Behind the Mountains*. New York: Orchard, 2002. Thirteen-year-old Celiane chronicles her family's journey from her mountain village in Haiti to join her father in Brooklyn.

Garcia, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Knopf, 1992. The story of three generations of Cuban women is told against the backdrop of the Cuban revolution.

Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was a Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage, 1994. This young adult memoir recounts the author's difficult childhood in rural Puerto Rico and her equally difficult—though for different reasons—adolescence in New York City.

Skarmeta, Antonio. *The Composition*. Groundwood Books, 2003. Originally published in Venezuela, this book explores military dictatorship and terror through the eyes of Pedro, a Latin American boy.

## FURTHER READING FOR TEACHERS

Dietrich, Deborah and Kathleen S. Ralph. "Crossing Borders: Multicultural Literature in the Classroom," *The Journal of Educational Issues for Language Minority Students* 15 (Winter 1995). Available at: [www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/jeilms/vol15/crossing.htm](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/jeilms/vol15/crossing.htm).

Kornfeld, John and Georgia Leyden. "Acting Out: Literature, Drama, and Connecting with History," *The Reading Teacher* 59, no. 3 (2005): 230-238.

Medearis, Linda and Patricia Lozano. "Book, Border, and

Background: Why Use Hispanic Children's Literature?," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 14, no. 2 (2001): 25-28.

Tunnell, Michael O., and Richard Ammon, eds. *The Story of Ourselves* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1993.

Webster, Joan Parker. *Teaching through Culture: Strategies for Reading and Responding to Young Adult Literature*. Houston, Tex.: Arte Público Press, 2002.

Wilhelm, Ron W. "Juvenile Literature for Latin American Cultural Studies," *Social Education* 65, no. 4 (2002): 225-230.

## HISPANIC LITERATURE RESOURCES

**Américas Award**—Begun in 1993 and sponsored by the National Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs (CLASP), the Américas Award honors engaging and authentic representations of Latin American and Hispanic life experiences. In addition to annual award winners and honorable mentions, the committee also issues an extensive list of commended books. For a complete listing of the Américas Award winners and commended titles, go to: [www.uwm.edu/Dept/CLACS/outreach\\_americas.html](http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CLACS/outreach_americas.html).

### Multicultural Children's Literature

This website contains links to annotated bibliographies of children's multicultural books appropriate for the elementary grades (K-6). Cultural groups currently listed include African Americans, Chinese Americans, Latino/Hispanic Americans, Japanese Americans, Jewish Americans, Native Americans, and Korean Americans. Books are categorized by genre: realistic fiction, information (non-fiction), traditional literature, biography, historical fiction, poetry, and fantasy. Each annotation includes an approximate grade level designation. Related links for elementary school teachers are also provided. Here is the direct link for Latino/a literature: [www.multiculturalchildrenslit.com/latinowel.html](http://www.multiculturalchildrenslit.com/latinowel.html).

### NCSS: Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People

The criteria for inclusion on the annual

K-12 list include cultural sensitivity, wide range of diversity representation, and high literary quality. Past years' lists are also available. Go to: [www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable](http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable).

### Pura Belpré Award

Initiated in 1996, the Pura Belpré Award honors authors and illustrators of Hispanic heritage. This biennial award was named after the New York Public Library's first Latina librarian, who was also a storyteller and author. For a complete listing of the Pura Belpré books and honor books, go to: [www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/belpremedal/belpremedal.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/belpremedal/belpremedal.htm).

### Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award

The Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award celebrates multiethnic literature and honors books that allow children to have a better understanding of who they are and what contributions they can make to this country. For a complete list of winners and nominations, go to: [www.education.txstate.edu/oldsite/rivera/mainpage.html](http://www.education.txstate.edu/oldsite/rivera/mainpage.html).

### Piñata Books: Arte Público Press

Focusing on U.S. Latino cultures, this publishing house offers children's and young adult literature that accurately and sensitively reflect themes, characters, and customs. Books are available in both English and Spanish.

## Notes

1. KaaVonia Hinton and Gail K. Dickinson, "Narrowing the Gap between Readers and Books," *Voices from the Middle* 13, no. 1 (September 2005): 15-20.
2. Bárbara C. Cruz, "Don Juans and Rebels under Palm Trees: Depictions of Latinos and Latin Americans in U.S. History Textbooks," *Critique of Anthropology* 22, no. 3 (Fall, 2002): 323-342.
3. Mary-Virginia Feger, "I Want To Read': How Culturally Relevant Texts Increase Student Engagement in Reading," *Multicultural Education* 13, no. 3 (2006): 18-19.
4. C. Robbins, "'Por Qué Soy Tonto?': Exposing 'Invisible' Interactions in a(n) Multiracial (American) Classroom," *The Radical Teacher* 60 (2002): 22-26.
5. Hinton and Dickinson.
6. T. McGowen and B. Guzzetti, "Promoting Social Studies Understanding through Literature-based Instruction," *Social Studies* 33, no. 4 (1991): 16-21.
7. Hancock.
8. Linda S. Levstik, "'I Wanted to Be There': The Impact of Narrative on Children's Thinking," in *The Story of Ourselves*, eds. M.O. Tunnell and R. Ammon (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1993), 65-77.
9. Hancock, 367.
10. Donald R. Gallo and Ellie Barksdale, "Using Fiction in American History," *Social Education* 47, no. 4 (1983): 286-287.
11. Kimberly Lenters, "Resistance, Struggle, and the Adolescent Reader," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 50, no. 2 (October 2006): 136-146.
12. See for example, Bárbara C. Cruz and Shalini Murthy, "Breathing Life into History: Using Role-Playing to Engage Students in Social Studies and Language Arts," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 18, no. 3 (January/February 2006): 4-8.

**BÁRBARA C. CRUZ** is professor of social science education at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Her research and teaching interests include global and multicultural perspectives in education, the representation of ethnic minorities in school curricula and textbooks, and the teaching of Latin America and the Caribbean. She is the recipient of NCSS's Carter G. Woodson Book Award.

This article, as well as the others in this special section on Teaching about Latin America through the Humanities, resulted from a Faculty Humanities Workshop at the University of South Florida in Tampa that was generously supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The workshop, "The Humanities in Latin American and Caribbean Studies: A Key to the Past, Present, and Future," was held in the summer of 2006, and afforded 40 high school teachers the opportunity to extend and deepen their knowledge and teaching abilities related to the humanities in Latin America and the Caribbean.