



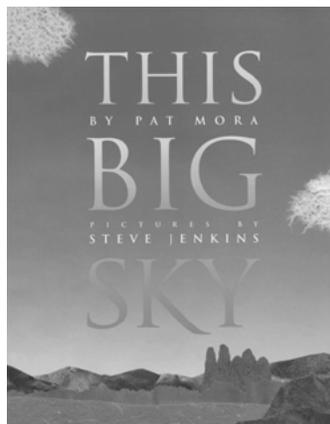
Pat Mora

Poet

Delicious languages

Bonjour. Buon giorno. Good afternoon. Buenas tardes. I'm sure many of you could add greetings in other languages. We often forget that one in seven children in this country comes from homes in which a language other than English is the home language. We are rich in children and rich in books, languages and cultures.

In the title poem from my collection, **This Big Sky**, I say about the Southwest, "This sky is big enough/for all my dreams." One of my dreams is seeing home languages honored in schools and libraries. Recently visiting high schools in Phoenix, I heard that dream come



true. At a poetry awards night, the young authors stood to read their work, and to my amazement, the first reader stated that he wished to read his poem in his own language first, Bulgarian. The second reader also chose to read his poem first in his home language, Swahili. A young woman who had been studying Japanese asked our indulgence as she attempted her poem first in this language new to her, and a young woman "signed" a poem to her father who is hearing impaired—it was the first time he'd seen this poem. When a young woman stood to read her poem first in Spanish, nothing was odd or awkward about her choice. An array of languages seemed natural in the museum where the event took place.

I have been working with various national organizations since 1996 on the celebration of

April 30th as *Día de los niños/Día de los libros*, a celebration of linking children to books, cultures, and languages all year long. This year, Dr Loriene Roy at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Texas incorporated the concept into her work with Native speakers in the Southwest. In our multilingual country, many of us hope to see linguistic diversity valued as a strength.

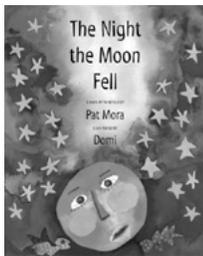
On another school visit to Arizona, this time to an elementary school, I was asked by a Mexican American student, "Why do you use Spanish in your poems?" His tone suggested that he doubted the wisdom of my decision. As a child of the border, I understood what he was really asking: Why was I incorporating a language often denigrated in his world? I answered with an analogy about playing the piano. "If I sat to play but refused to use the black keys though I knew how," I said, "wouldn't I be foolish?" I talked to the children about how much I enjoy braiding my two languages together and about the importance of bringing all we know to the page. I encouraged them to learn the names of the local birds, animals, rocks and mountains where they live, and also to study any home languages that could enrich their writing. I was exploring with them the power of being bilingual, the power of poetry, the power of language(s). I wanted them to experience the joy of letting wonderful language sounds into their work.

I have no memory of not speaking both English and Spanish. Languages are delicious! I enjoyed (and enjoy) nursery rhymes such as "Jack and Jill" just as I enjoy the children's counting song in Spanish about the little boat that's stuck out in the sea for weeks.

Being rich in languages in this country also means that we are rich in literary traditions. I'm

excited about my new book that will be published in 2002, **A Library for Juana**, about Mexico's most famous woman poet, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Sor Juana, a child prodigy, became a brilliant nun who wrote complex poetry. How I wish that in my educational experiences I'd been encouraged to explore my rich Spanish literary heritage.

In my own work, then, I include the beautiful Spanish language, braid my two languages together whether I'm writing a simple counting book such as **Uno, Dos, Tres: One, Two, Three**; an extended poem such as **The Desert Is My Mother/ El desierto es mi madre**, or the rhyming speech of the moon in **The Night the Moon Fell**:



Pezecitos, little fish,
Smooth me whole. Please grant my wish.

This Maya moon myth was also published in a Spanish edition, and we could spend an entire day on the complex topic of translation. The translation of **Delicious Hullabaloo/Pachange deliciosa** well could have taken ten times longer than writing the English—and I was working with a Mexican poet who has written for children. I'm thinking quite a bit about translation these days since I'm completing a bilingual poem that will appear on the Children's Book Council Book Mark for Young People's Poetry Week in 2002.

Children sometimes ask me, "How do you make a poem?" Some years back I wrote the poem, "One Blue Door," in response to that question. I love its concreteness and in preparation for the poem, I remember thinking about the kinds of things we make with our hands: cakes, gardens, houses. But the poem begins:

To make a poem
listen: crow calls.
Rain paints a door,
blue in the sky.

(from **This Big Sky**, NY: Scholastic, 1998, n.p.)

The poem like all poems asks the reader or listener to be still and attentive. If indeed I'm right that poems help us cross borders and build community, how do we expand the circle of poems we know and love? By labeling some as multicultural, do we

risk forgetting that all poems like all books are cultural? Can we be more creative about sharing a broad array of poems that speak to all our children? Such literary experiences help them raise their voices, feel the power of poetry in their mouths.

I'll watch you words, rise and dance and spin.
I'll say, say, say you
in English
in Spanish,
I'll find you.
Hold you.
Toss you.
I'm free too.
I say *yo soy libre*.
I am free
free, free,
free as confetti.



(From **Confetti**, NY: Lee & Low Books, 1996, p. 29)

In the introduction to my collection, **My Own True Name: New and Collected Poems for Young Adults**, I'm trying to lure young writers to the page, to "join the serious and sassy family of writers." I want them to find a safe home in language, to delight in language play, oral and written. I certainly enjoyed the language play of other Latino poets when I recently edited, **Love to Mamá: A Tribute to Mothers**. Selecting the poems from the hundreds submitted was a challenge. Among our goals was demonstrating the diversity of the Latino population including race and country of origin. Because of the repeated braiding of Spanish and English throughout the book, the publisher and I decided not to use italics at all for the words in Spanish. My poem, "Song to Mothers," concludes the book. The last lines are:

I snuggle into your laugh
your canción verde
and dream of growing
into my own green song.

(From **Love to Mamá: A Tribute to Mothers**, NY: Lee & Low Books, 2001, n.p.)



Together, may we help all our young people to grow into their own, green songs.