

# Tapestries of an Island's Tradition

by Cecile Betancourt Corral -- Criticas, 9/1/2001

Georgina Lázaro's childhood was drenched in family folk stories and classical poetry, making her a lifetime aficionada of verse, but motherhood converted her into the up-and-coming, Spanish-language children's book author she is today. 'My children are my inspiration as a writer,' says Lázaro, a native and resident of Puerto Rico. 'Since I was a girl, I've loved verse and rhyme, and it comes naturally to me-- I practically speak in verse. But I often couldn't find stories for my kids that they wanted to read, so I wrote my own for them. And that's how all this started.' All this is Lázaro's growing career as a first-rate author of books for Hispanic children. Since 1996, when her first book--*El flamboyán amarillo* (The Yellow Flamboyán)--was published by Ediciones Huracán, she has taken her island home by storm.

Today, Lázaro, 54, lives in a tucked-away country house surrounded by lush vegetation in Ponce, Puerto Rico's second largest metropolis, next to her native city of San Juan. She is preparing for the release this fall of her third and fourth books, *¡Ya llegan los Reyes Magos!* (Here Come the Three Kings, see review in the print issue) and *Mi caballo* (My Horse). With these new books, she hopes to extend her reach to Latino children in the United States and throughout Latin America.

In her books, Lázaro ties together experiences with her family and elements of Puerto Rican life. For example, in *El flamboyán*, Lázaro celebrates the island's tropical vegetation and in *Mi gorrita* (My Little Cap) the Puerto Rican island Vieques (which has had a lot of media attention due to the naval bombings) plays a key role.

Though she loves the work of renowned Brazilian children's writer Ana María Machado, who is known for *Niña bonita* (Beautiful Girl, see 'Titles In Translation' in the print issue) and other books, she compares her own style to the contemporary Puerto Rican writer and illustrator Lulu Delacre. Born in Río Piedras, Delacre wrote *Vejigantes masquerader* (Carnival Masks, Scholastic, 1993), one of Lázaro's favorite children's books.

'The book is about an annual carnival we hold here in Ponce in February; the older children of the town dress up in big, scary, colorful masks and try to frighten the younger children. It's very fun,' Lázaro explains. 'The book is cute and well written and full of detail. But I love it, mostly, because she did her homework in researching this tradition of ours and she shows how our children relate to it. It's a wonderful book.'

Lázaro's early inspiration came from her predecessors and fellow Puerto Ricans Isabel Freire de Matos, author of *Juegos para dedos* and *Many Poems* (Finger Games and Many Poems, Poesí Menuda, o.p.) and Ester Feliciano Mendoza, who wrote *Arco iris y coquí* (Rainbow and Coquí, Nanas, o.p.). 'Children's books, when well written and well illustrated,' says Lázaro, 'can open up the soul of an adult.'

A voracious reader as a child, Lázaro first began to gravitate toward poetry and rhythmic verse after reading José Martí's 'Los zapaticos de rosa' ('The Little Pink Shoes,' see 'Picture Books en Español' in the

print issue), Federico García Lorca's 'Los peregrinos' ('The Little Pilgrims'), and Rubén Darío's 'Margarita' (see 'Picture Books en Español' in the print issue).

'My godmother took me to get my first library card; my grandfather, Pépe, gave me my first book of poems for children,' explains Lázaro. 'Many people in my life made sure to stimulate my interest in reading. And I want to do the same for other children.'

But if her own childhood kindled her love for poetry, it was during her pregnancies with her sons--Jorge, now 22, and José Alberto, 13--and her experiences as a mother that she became inspired to pick up a pen.

Prior to marrying César Hernández, a lawyer and her husband of 24 years, Lázaro was a preschool teacher for the Headstart program in Carolina, a town near San Juan. She later became a science teacher until she got married. Today, she volunteers for the children's program at the Museo de Arte de Ponce. Standing next to a painting of a bright red flamboyán tree by the late Ponce artist Miguel Pou, she proudly reads aloud to visiting students her book, *El flamboyán amarillo*. The story, written as a poem, tells of a walk that she and her young son Jorge took in the countryside, when they came across a rare find: a yellow flamboyán tree. Typically, the flower of the flamboyán, a tropical tree common in Caribbean countries, is red.

### **Books by Georgina Lázaro**

*El flamboyán amarillo* *The Yellow Flamboyán* (1996) Ediciones Huracán, 46p ISBN 0-929157-33-8

*Mi gorrita* *My Little Cap* (1999) Everest, 45p ISBN 84-241-7901-3

*¡Ya llegan los Reyes Magos!* *Here Come the Three Kings!* (2001) Lectorum Inc., 40p ISBN 1-930332-05-X

*Mi caballo* *My Horse* (2001) Everest, 48p ISBN: 84-241-1794-0

### **Spreading her words**

Lázaro's first brush with literary fame happened in 1986 with a nana, or lullaby, she wrote for Jorge. Family friend Tony Croatto, an Italian musician who lives and works in Puerto Rico, fell in love with the piece and added music to Lázaro's words. Titled 'La nana de Giol' (Giol is Croatto's nickname for her), Lázaro's poem is included in Croatto's *Verde resplando* album. In August, Croatto will release a new collection of songs, six of which are nanas written by Lázaro.

Almost a decade later, Roy Brown, another local musician and family friend, approached Lázaro about adding music to a poem she had written in remembrance of her late niece, Tilly, who had died in a car accident. 'Roy was going to give a concert in San Juan, and he wanted to dedicate a song to Tilly,' Lázaro explains. Though the song was never recorded on an album, it was an indication of what was to come.

'I had written many poems over the years, and my husband was encouraging me to share them with other children,' says Lázaro. 'So one day I just opened the phone book and started writing letters to all the publishers in Puerto Rico.'

Her pitch was for *El flamboyán amarillo*, and, within days, publishing house Ediciones Huracán called her. 'I felt like I had won the lottery,' Lázaro recalls. 'It was an experience that has spoiled me for the rest of my life, because it gave me the false impression that publishing a book is the easiest thing in the world, when in fact it's a very difficult thing to do.' Ediciones Huracán bought the poem, and more than a year later, in 1996, released *El flamboyán amarillo*. Today it is in its third printing.

In 1997, Lázaro completed an important project proposed by another friend, ballet teacher Grace Bigas. Lázaro was asked to write the verse for a ballet celebrating Puerto Rican culture and the importance of preserving the countryside. Apprehensive at first, Lázaro finally wrote a poem about a boy who loves Puerto Rico's vegetation and worries that the land is being destroyed by development and pollution.

'It was this experience that really prepared me for my career,' Lázaro says. 'It came out beautifully, and it made me realize that writing wasn't all about inspiration; it taught me that I could complete a project that was asked of me. Before, I was a mother who wrote for herself and her children. But with this, I had graduated.'

Confident of her ability, Lázaro set out on a mission to write and publish more books. For her second book, she proposed a story she had written years ago when she and José Alberto had gone on a day trip to the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. During their voyage, a gust of wind swept Lázaro's hat off her head, causing José Alberto to cry because he felt sorry for his mother.

'It was a touching moment for me, so I wrote a poem about it,' she explains.

But, because she thought the story would be more marketable as a children's book if the child lost his cap instead of the mother, she reworked the premise and changed the title to *Mi gorrita*.

This time, she sent the manuscript to Everest, a major publishing house in Spain, which bought the book. The company airmailed a preliminary copy to Lázaro for final approval. 'Thank God they did, because the drawings had some serious errors,' she remarks. The illustrator, Tesa Gonzáles, had originally pictured the mother and child driving a car to and from Vieques instead of riding on a large ferry. 'Many people from other Hispanic countries don't know about the geography of Puerto Rico,' says Lázaro. 'I quickly explained to them that Vieques was an island that could not be reached by car. If a Puerto Rican were to read that book, they'd have been insulted.'

Corrections were promptly made, and by 1999 *Mi gorrita* was distributed in Spain by Everest and later in the United States and Puerto Rico by New York City-based Lectorum Inc. (See Distributors )

Looking to further expand her reach into the United States' rapidly growing market for Spanish-language children's books, Lázaro partnered with Lectorum for her third book--*¡Ya Llegan los Reyes Magos!* (Here Come the Three Kings!). 'This book is very special to me for several reasons,' Lázaro says. 'It will

conserve on paper a strong tradition among all Latin Americans. It's about a tradition my family held very dear, and I base the book on my own childhood memories surrounding the holiday.'

Three Kings Day, January 6, is considered one of the most important holidays in all Spanish-speaking countries, making Lázaro's book a strong sell beyond Puerto Rico. It marks the Epiphany, the last of the 12 days of Christmas, when the Three Kings--Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar--find the baby Jesus and bestow the child with gifts. To celebrate the Epiphany, children across Latin America set water out in front of their homes for the travelers and grass for their camels in exchange for gifts.

This time around, Lázaro worked closely with the illustrator, Morella Fuenmayor. A Venezuelan artist, Fuenmayor also grew up celebrating the holiday and is now passing it on to her eight-year-old daughter.

### **Building a future**

This new book represents a milestone for Lectorum, as it is the company's first original publication in Spanish specifically for Hispanic children in the United States. 'Our first of many more to come,' promises Teresa Mlawer, president.

Since 1989, Lectorum has published Spanish translations of popular children's English-language books, including the Dr. Seuss, Franklin the Turtle, and the Arthur series.

'Georgina's books are a celebration for us all as Hispanics,' Mlawer says. 'In the future, I will look to publish Spanish-language books that portray our children accurately. I want our children to relate to these books as Hispanics growing up in the United States.'

Still, there remains a place for classic children's literature. Mlawer says that recently she has been asked by distributors, retailers, and readers for more classic books by Latino authors that they themselves read as children, or books that are written for their children 'that express a love for the Latin culture.'

She added that major chains, including Barnes & Noble and Borders, are looking to expand their Spanish-language offerings for children, especially for the highly concentrated Hispanic markets--Miami, Los Angeles, Texas, Chicago, New York, and New Jersey.

In fact, the need for more Spanish-language children's books sparked the birth of the biennial Pura Belpré Award, sponsored jointly by the American Library Association (ALA) and REFORMA--the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking Populations in the United States. The award is named after the first Hispanic librarian to work for the New York Public Library. Established in 1996, it commemorates a Latino or Latina author and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Hispanic cultural experience in a work of literature for children and youth. Lázaro was proud to have been nominated in 1996 for *El flamboyán amarillo*.

Lázaro's fourth book, *Mi caballo* (My Horse), about a handsewn toy she made for José Alberto, will be published and distributed by Everest in August 2001.

'My children are growing up, but I feel I still have a lot to give to other children,' Lázaro says. 'This new career of mine has allowed me to start doing just that. It satisfies me intellectually and assures that what I have to give can go far beyond the walls of my house and my own country.'

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