

First Opinion: Let's Talk About Immigration Counterstories in Yuyi Morales's *Dreamers*

Morales, Yuyi. *Dreamers*. New York: Neal Porter Books. 2018. Print.



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Yuyi Morales's picture book, *Dreamers*, is a powerful counterstory to anti-immigrant tropes and to the fear facing many immigrant families. From the Caldecott Honor and Pura Belpré award winning author and illustrator of *Viva Frida* comes a timely picture book that empowers immigrant families with aspirational and familial affirming mirrors. Although written for a k-2nd grade level, it can be read at various levels with older students picking up and identifying with the complexities and tensions. For immigrant students, and students of color, this narrative serves as a mirror, reflecting their own lived experience (Bishop). For students of the dominant culture, *Dreamers* can serve a window to understand multiple perspectives.

Dreamers chronicles Morales's immigrant story crossing the bridge from Juarez, Mexico to El Paso, Texas with her infant son. With elegant language she transports us to a world where even the clouds clamor her to "Speak English." The art is visually stunning starting with the cover which revisits the motif of Madonna with Child. The pages are filled with symbols from the natural world where artificial borders do not exist. There is a monarch butterfly on every page following them or guiding them through the city and even in the library. There are flora and fauna meandering through the pages including swallows, a type of migratory birds,

Xoloitzcuintle, Mexico's legendary hairless national dog, as well as bats, reptiles, and cacti from Morales's palette draws from nature using the colors of clay and bark, smoke, the prickly pears cactus, water and sky. Morales and her son venture across the border to hilly San Francisco creating adventures as they explore and get lost, until they find their way to a public library. She obtains a library card and visits the children's section of the library every afternoon, reading her way through classic picture books and discovering Black and Brown writers and illustrators. Morales includes a summary of her own personal story and lists the children's picture books influencing her as an author and illustrator. I highly recommend you read her list first and then try to find the titles in her illustration of the library.

Like Morales, I am a Mexican immigrant and first discovered the magic of picture books reading to my infant son. I had no idea such wonder could be contained in books for children. As a child I had no authentic experiences with books outside of school. Growing up in Mexico, then the United States, books were not a source of joy. Rather, books were about studying and homework. I was never introduced to a book that mirrored my lived experiences; not a single book or story reflected in any literary work until after college. *Dreamers* is a beautiful, affirming book that powerfully illustrates the "American Dream." In this case, the American Dream is not about riches, consumerism, acquisition of wealth or power. Instead, *Dreamers* is about the power of literacy for self-determination, self-empowerment, self-liberation, and to disrupt racism (Muhammad). Her story is visual, more than anything else, moving beyond the limitations of words. Each page is a visual feast, an invitation for the imagination.

Most of the children's picture books, chapter books and young adult literature novels published in the last decade are powerful narratives and testimonios of struggle, violence, suffering, detention and family separation (Cervantes, Cisneros, Salazar, Tonatiuh, and Torres-Sanchez). Morales's immigrant story is not rooted in pain and the spectacle of suffering. Instead, it flies and soars with joy, discovery, adventure, critical hope and the extraordinary moments of everyday life. Each visit to the library is an affirmation that counters stereotypes and xenophobia. Morales made this case in her Pura Belpré acceptance speech, "Don't even dream about it," oppression shouts, the dream is not for you" (<http://yuyimorales.blogspot.com/>). With this statement she claims the dream for all of us. For teachers and librarians seeking to create anti-bias and anti-racist learning communities *Dreamers* follows the four core #DisruptsText principles: interrogating our biases, centering the voices of BIPOC, developing and applying a

critical lens to our cultural work and promoting collaboration between educators and communities (Ebarvia).

In the tradition of *Lola at the Library*, *Planting Stories*, and *Ron's Big Mission*, Morales's *Dreamers* is an anti-racist, anti-bias Valentine love letter for libraries and readers of all ages. Morales renews that sense of wonder and adventure in a new world, a new country, in a library, and in community. This is a book that belongs in every classroom, library and in the hands of all who are looking for hope and beauty in troubling times.

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About the Author

Susana Y. Flores is an award-winning educator with 25 years teaching experience including preschool, elementary, middle school, outdoor school, after school, and post-secondary teaching. She is daughter of Rosalba and mother to Diego and Maya. She was born in Mexico where she attended elementary school. She was brought “illegally”, to the U.S. to reunite with her parents. She is the first generation to complete elementary school and first to complete community college; then bachelors, masters and PhD. Dr. Flores is an activist- scholar and teacher educator at Central Washington University. She is resilient and is a strong believer that students deserve to see themselves in books and in their teachers.