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Of Wondrous Places and "Benevolent Neglect": An Interview with Pam Muñoz Ryan

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With her recent book, *Paint the Wind* (2007), hitting the shelves this fall, author Pam Muñoz Ryan delivers a welcome addition to the 25 plus books she has written for young people, including her award-winning novels *Esperanza Rising* (2000) and

Riding Freedom (1998) and picture books *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride* (1999) and *When Marian Sang* (2002).

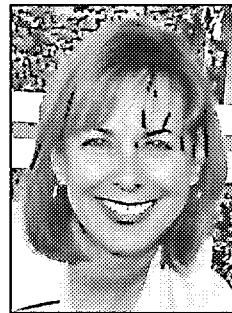
With "sense of place" as our focus, we asked Ryan about her thoughts on the place of imagination in her writing and in the lives of the readers she writes for; the place of history and research in her writing; the place of culture and identity in her life and in the lives of her characters; and a place for her books in the classroom and in the world of children's literature.

ON THE PLACE OF IMAGINATION

When reading Pam Muñoz Ryan's books, it is obvious that a lot of thought and imagination go into her stories. Her characters are realistic and human, her settings are vivid and clear, and her plots are unique and memorable. As readers, we are drawn into her stories, and we have the opportunity to let our imaginations mingle with Ryan's to create our own connections. As a child, Ryan was given the freedom to develop and foster her imagination. Now she is able to use her vivid creativity to share stories with young readers.

JF: You inspire imagination for young children in your picture book *Mud is Cake* (2002). Tell us about the importance of imagination in your life and also in the lives of the children that you write for.

Ryan: When I was in college, my undergraduate degree was in child development, so the value of play was always emphasized. I was taught from a very "develop-



Pam Muñoz Ryan has written more than 25 books for young readers, including the award-winning novels *Esperanza Rising* (2000) and *Riding Freedom* (1998). Her most recent book is *Paint the Wind* (2007).

mentally appropriate" school of thought. When people ask me, "what do you think was the most important part of your childhood that influenced your writing?" or "what was an important aspect of your childhood that might have later influenced your writing?" I often say that one of the things that influenced my writing the most was that I was blessed with an un-choreographed childhood. I had a lot of benevolent neglect where people said, "We love you, and now it is time for you to go play." I didn't have an overstructured or overscheduled childhood because, well . . . (laughing) I think we were too poor to have overstructured childhood. But that gave me a wonderful opportunity to spend time with my own wandering thoughts, which I think is key for a writer, and to spend time in creative and dramatic play.

The one thing I always like to point out to teachers is that we often forget that the creative and dramatic play activities that children do when they are very young are really precursors to understanding concepts of story.

When children are by themselves and they are playing, one of the first things they will do is establish a scene. They will say, "This is going to be the circus, or this is going to be the house, or this is going to be the farm." And then they assign characters. "You are going to be the mommy, and I am going to be the kitty, and you are going to be the horsy." Then they create a problem, and they will play out these scenarios over and over and over again. If it is boring, they will stop doing it, and they'll make it more exciting. Often there is that one child who is instigating a lot of it saying, "No, no, no, you do this and then I'll do this, and then I'll say this and you say that." (That would have been me.) Very often children will do these things until they make the scenario plot perfect, much in the same way that fables, and proverbs, and fairy tales have become plot perfect. The reason they are plot perfect is because of the replaying, or the retelling, over years and years of time. So these play activities help young children grasp the concept of what makes a good story. And in a way it's pre-writing. It's scripting. You are establishing characters, you are establishing a scene, you are creating dialogue, you are creating angst, you are making an ending. And that psychology, that whole school of thought, was the school of thought in which I was taught. I place a lot of value on dramatic play.

Mud is Cake is certainly my ode to the value of dramatic play. And even though there are studies that indicate that dramatic play is a cognitive requisite to many other skills—educational skills down the road—we don't always value it. That is a very long way of telling you the reason why I wrote *Mud is Cake*. And later, I discovered books, too. From about fifth grade on, I was an obsessive reader. That certainly influenced my love of story.

ON THE PLACE OF HISTORY AND RESEARCH

Many of Pam Muñoz Ryan's books are historical which requires extensive research to ensure that they are authentic and realistic. Ryan's meticulous attention to detail helps to bring each story to life in a true way. Whether the stories are based on a real event or person, set in a historical time period, or both, Ryan makes sure that the elements she is including in her story don't conflict with the reality of the event or the time period.

AJ: Tell us about the research of time and place in the historical picture books *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride* and *When Marian Sang*.

Ryan: I came across a reference to the story of Amelia and Eleanor in an adult book that was an anthology of stories about American women. I wasn't sure if it was true or not, but it was immediately intriguing. First off, you have Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt, but you also have the White House, which is so interesting. Most people are fascinated with it, and it's a place where most people do not get to go. There is also a real nostalgia for the art deco influence of the period. And, of course, there is the mystery involved with Amelia Earhart. So, all of that was incredibly appealing. As far as the research I did, there is something called the White House Curator's Office, and I was in touch with them and I read many books. A lot of people ask, "How did you find out what they had for dinner?" During my research, I found a book written by Amelia Earhart's sister, called *Amelia, My Courageous Sister*. In it was a copy of the thank you note that Amelia Earhart had written to Eleanor Roosevelt where she mentions what they had for dinner. Also, there were two books written by Henrietta Nesbitt, the housekeeper for the Roosevelts, and I was able, through inter-library loan, to get those books. When I'm writing a book, one thing leads to another, and it often feels as if I'm putting together a puzzle. Whenever I am working on something historical, I am never going to get my information from one tidy place. It's like being on a scavenger hunt.

With *When Marian Sang*, the research for that was fun because by that time, I already knew Brian Selznick and was told that he was going to illustrate the book. Brian and I went to South Philadelphia, we went to Marian Anderson's childhood home, and we went to the United Baptist Church. We also went to New York to the Metropolitan Opera archives. It just so happened that when we were researching the book, the Metropolitan Opera was performing *Un Ballo in Maschera*, The Masked Ball, as part of the repertoire. So we went to the opera in which Anderson debuted. We were able to be in touch with primary sources because she had family that was still living. The impetus for this story was my fascination about Anderson's journey from this humble childhood in South Philadelphia to her debut at the Metropolitan Opera. When Brian and I went to the Met (we went to the new Met at Lincoln Center, but she debuted at the Old Met), we'd been directed to "Please meet us at the stage door." I'm thinking, "We're going to the stage door!" We followed a gentleman who had arranged to take us to the archives, and in a hallway, Plácido Domingo walked

by with his arms full of scores. I was speechless. So this project became very exciting and very romantic. The research we did became part of our affection for the book. We always hoped that when it came time to write and illustrate it, that those feelings showed through.

AJ: I'm curious about the difference between researching historical events and researching for fiction books that are set in historical time periods. Do you prefer one over the other?

Ryan: I'm not sure which I prefer. They both present challenges. In historical fiction, there are a couple of issues that come up. For instance, when I wrote, *Riding Freedom*, which was set in the mid-1800s, I couldn't use any words that weren't in use during that time. That, in itself, opens up a very big research window. Also, a writer can go to the places where a historical fiction story takes place, if they are accessible, but those places are not necessarily going to look the same. If it's a historical setting or place, you have to be careful about so many things: the clothing, the dialect, the politics of the time. All of those issues influence the writing. On the other hand, when I write a contemporary story, I often set the story in an actual place. If that is the case, I have to be true to that place. For *Becoming Naomi León*, I went to the Night of the Radishes in Oaxaca. I knew what it was like because I was there. And in my new novel, *Paint the Wind*, I traveled to Wyoming.

JF: Can you talk more about Oaxaca?

Ryan: When I first read about The Night of the Radishes, I knew I had to see it. In 1997, I went to Oaxaca City. I actually happened to be there on the 100th anniversary of the Night of the Radishes. The festival was so different from anything I'd ever experienced – so magical. As a writer, I became very intrigued and curious, and sometimes when you go someplace very different, your eye is much more acute than people who live there all the time. You are able to pick up on the tiny details and hopefully capture the spirit. The whole event seemed very sentimental. It was Christmastime, and everything was illuminated, not only with lights, but with fireworks. The other thing about being there was that I not only experienced the sights, I experienced all the senses, and I can't do that when I am writing historical fiction. I can read about it, but I'm not going to smell it. So, when you

This is a story about captivity and a girl who grows up in a very sterile environment with a grandmother who is agoraphobic. She has grown up in an environment where everything is white—physically white. Everything in her life is basically a blank canvas. Then,



through a series of events, I move the character to Wyoming with her mother's family, at a base camp in the wilderness, where she will live in a drastically different setting. It is a landscape that is wide open and startlingly beautiful—she goes from this captive place to this place that is almost overwhelmingly free. And then I put her into a situation where she is surviving on her own with a wild horse. So, for this book, both places are canvases: one is a blank canvas and the other is a canvas that is rich with colors and elements, and so in a sense, the land becomes a character, too. And the wind becomes a character. With words, I wanted to illustrate the contrast between those two places.

Pam Muñoz Ryan
on "place" in her book,
Paint the Wind (2007)

actually experience something like the Night of the Radishes—I had the sights and the smells and the sounds and I had a lady selling me fried grasshoppers. I had all of those things. And that can make the story richer in a different way than historical fiction.

ON CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Pam Muñoz Ryan was born and raised in California's San Joaquin Valley and is the oldest of three sisters and 23 cousins on her mother's side. She grew up with many of her aunts and uncles and grandparents nearby and considers herself truly American because her cultural background is an ethnic smorgasbord: she is Spanish, Mexican, Basque, Italian, and Oklahoman. While Ryan's background and identity have some influence on her

writing, it is her focus on developing compelling stories and characters with strong identities that has allowed her to create books to which children can relate.

AJ: How has your own culture and identity influenced your creative process?

Ryan: I am half-Mexican, so certainly my ethnic background is part of who I am. I don't consciously sit down to write every book to have a Mexican-American flavor. But you can look at my titles and see the influence, for example, in *Mice and Beans*, the big family celebrations and everyone getting together and the Mexican grandmother and her proverbs. And all of those things were certainly part of my life. So, those elements are going to appear in some of my books. However, I have felt compelled to write about topics that intrigue me but do not necessarily involve my heritage. I am certainly very sentimental about *Esperanza Rising* because it parallels my grandmother's immigration story. Esperanza is the girl that I imagine my grandmother might have been, or a girl I imagine might have lived at the same time. My grandmother did leave Mexico, she did come to the United States, she did end up in the segregated farm labor camp at DiGiorgio Farms. My mother was born in that Mexican camp. Obviously, those roots run very deep. My ethnic background will be referenced in many of my texts, but it won't be in all of my texts.

Someone asked me, "When you sit down to write do you consider yourself a Latino writer?" When I sit down to write, I don't think about my ethnicity any more than I think about any of the things that I am—whether I'm a person who is half-Mexican, or a woman, or a mother. All of those things are part of who I am. And they influence my writing, sometimes consciously but more often unconsciously. When I sit down to write, I am really thinking about my character and trying to be true to the circumstances in which I put the character. To be honest, when I sit down to write, my goal is to hopefully write a story in which the reader wants to turn the page. And, the best compliment is to write a story where the child will write me afterward and tell me that they read the story more than once. So as a writer, those are really far more compelling issues to me. There are important issues in *Esperanza Rising*—historical issues—and I was dedicated to illuminating some of them, like the repatriation issue. But I also wanted to write a story in which many children could lose themselves. That includes *all* children—Latino and not.

JF: Many of your books depict strong female characters who struggle to find their places in the world and succeed. How do your characters come to you?

Ryan: Asking how characters come to you and where you get your ideas is like asking a person how their mind works. It's probably the most difficult question an author is asked. For me, ideas are like a confluence of rivers. For instance, in *Becoming Naomi León*, I had gone to the Night of the Radishes. I knew I wanted to do a book someday and integrate some of that information, but I didn't know what type of book that would be. I didn't know if it would be a nonfiction book with photographs. I didn't know if I could pull one thing out, like the *posada* [a Christmas festival originating in Latin America that dramatizes the search of Joseph and Mary for lodging]. But I was so enamored with the festival that I knew I wanted to do something with it. Five years later, I was in a library signing books after a school visit and the librarian brought me a book and asked me to sign it to a girl named Naomi Outlaw. And I loved the name Naomi Outlaw—it was so intriguing to me—and I started thinking about what it would have been like for a girl to have that name, and then I began supposing . . . what if she was really meek and she had to grow into this very dynamic name? The more I thought about it, the more intrigued I became, and I actually began the book with that premise. Then when I needed the character to have a hobby, I chose soap carving. The soap carving rushed me back to the radish carvings in Oaxaca, and I finally had a venue for the festival.

JF: And of course with Amelia and Eleanor you chose, not necessarily a struggle, but characters that have strong wills.

Ryan: And I have to say that I am very drawn to obscure stories about strong women. *Riding Freedom* was a little-known story. In many ways, so was Marian Anderson's story. When I first began writing that book, people would ask, "what are you working on?" and I would tell them, and they would say, "oh, yeah. She was a singer, right?" They knew the name, but they didn't really know the story. So that's the fuel—when I see those kinds of reactions, they always fuel my desire to keep developing that particular story.

AJ: In your books, specifically *Esperanza Rising* and *Becoming Naomi León*, the characters often take a "jour-

ney" of sorts from one place to another, and they often "discover" themselves in the second place. Talk to us about this discovery process and how the environment plays a role in that discovery for your characters.

Ryan: When you come to a new place, you often approach it with a look of wonder when you're first taking everything in. You are also mentally comparing and contrasting the place from which you came to the place in which you've arrived. I think that is something we all do. Also, when you put a character in a completely different place, you give them permission to do things they would have never done in their own environment. I have always been fascinated with and loved stories where there is a change of station in life, and you can see that reflected in my books.

The other thing, too, is that if I put the character someplace so very different from where they've been, they have to grow and adapt, or not. They may carry their emotional issues, but they have relinquished a lot of the restrictions that might have been put on them in the place from which they are coming. It's often a different set of rules. It's a different protocol. When writing for this age group, I really want to take the character through some sort of emotional growth. Whether it be positive or negative, I want to be able to show some sort of character development. Because if the character stays the same, the story really isn't very interesting!

ON THE PLACE OF RYAN'S BOOKS IN CLASSROOMS

Every author hopes his or her books will find a way into the hands of students, and Pam Muñoz Ryan is no different. Many of her books are especially well suited for the classroom, and teachers often use them because of the variety of ways to integrate the books' ideas and concepts into lessons. Ryan expresses her hope that teachers will help students grow to truly love and appreciate her books.

AJ: What advice do you have for teachers who plan to use your books with their students?

Ryan: Every writer hopes a child will clutch one of their books and say, "I really love this book." As a young reader, I can remember the feeling of having a sense of ownership over the story—of being *in* the story and feeling privy to the story and not wanting to share. My

mother would ask, "What are you reading?" or somebody would be over visiting, and they would say, "tell me about your story," and I didn't want to because I wanted it to be my own. I think that still happens with children, but I also know that books are sometimes "picked to the bone" to the point that the joy of unencumbered reading is lost.

I often say that one of the things that influenced my writing the most was that I was blessed with an un-choreographed childhood. I had a lot of benevolent neglect where people said, "We love you, and now it is time for you to go play."

I am often amazed and grateful for the many ways teachers can take a book and integrate it into their curriculum in a way that's enriching for the students, but also feels seamless. For those teachers I am so very grateful. But I am also equally amazed and saddened by the way that books are sometimes dissected to the point that the beauty of the book, the integrity of the story, becomes lost. I have received lengthy chapter-by-chapter tests on my books from well-meaning teachers who wanted to share them with me. But sometimes even *I* had to look up the answers. That is disheartening. Certainly my desire would be that if a teacher had a choice between two books (and sometimes teachers today no longer have this choice so it's not always their fault)—one book they had to evaluate and scrutinize and dissect and the child has to take chapter test after chapter test, and another book that they would read out loud to the class and the children would be allowed to enjoy it and love it for the sake of the book—please let mine be the one that you are reading out loud.

JF: What are your thoughts on children's literature awards?

Ryan: One thing that many people don't realize is that awards really help sustain the life of the book in print. So, they can be important for the writer in that they validate what you do. They are important to the publisher because they validate the working relationship between

the editor and the author and sometimes the art director. Also, they bring a book to the attention of groups who may not have been aware of it. Young Reader Award nominations have brought books back into print that were going out of print because all of a sudden, there is a guaranteed audience. Publishing is a business and any accolades can influence subsequent printings and are actually very influential to the life of a book and to the author or illustrator's professional career. So, in that sense, I certainly understand and appreciate them.

The part that is odd about awards is that when an author is writing, he or she is so far removed, sometimes by years, from any awards that the book *might* receive. Publishing is a very slow business. And maybe that's a good thing. That makes it easier to stay focused on the craft. I have to say that I'm grateful for all of the reviewers and committees that give of themselves to read the books and grant the honors. They often volunteer for nothing more than the love of reading and books. How can anyone fault them for that?

ON RYAN'S PLACE IN THE WORLD OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

When it comes to the world of children's literature, it seems that Pam Muñoz Ryan has secured a spot among authors who will be remembered for their quality writing, intriguing stories, and diverse body of work. Her work will continuously live on in the minds of her readers.

JF: How do you want to be remembered in children's literature?

Ryan: I don't think I have a good perspective on where I am in children's literature. The reason that ques-

tion is hard to answer is because most of what I do—my job—(and other writers, too) is very solitary. You may see me when I go to a conference, but I would say probably 80% of what I do is by myself—at home or at my desk or at the library. I try to stay focused on my work. I love writing. I have some professional goals but as far as my perspective of where I fit in, I'm sure I don't have a grasp of where that is. I hope that I'll be remembered for writing stories that made the reader want to turn the page.

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