

# VAMOS A LEER: ALMA FLOR ADA & F. ISABEL CAMPOY

*~ An Américas Award Interview ~*



Image: F. Isabel Campoy and Alma Flor Ada.

**Alma Flor Ada** is a Professor Emerita at the University of San Francisco; an internationally award-winning author of over 200 books for young readers; and a leading mentor and philosopher of bilingual education in the United States. Her work has centered in topics of critical pedagogy, bilingual and multicultural education, literacy and biliteracy, and authorship.

**F. Isabel Campoy** is an author of numerous children's books in the areas of poetry, theater, stories, biographies, and art; a researcher who has published extensively in pursuit of bringing to the curriculum an awareness of the richness of the Hispanic culture; and an educator who specializes in the areas of literacy and home school interaction, topics on which she lectures nationally.

## ABOUT VAMOS A LEER

Vamos a Leer: Teaching Latin America through Literacy is a web-based initiative of the Latin American & Iberian Institute at the University of New Mexico. We created the project because we wanted to create and compile resources that teachers could access anytime, anywhere. The materials are all designed to support educators as they undertake to use great literature to create globally literate students, to engage inauthentic discussions of culture, and to think about social justice issues.

[bit.ly/VamosaLeer](http://bit.ly/VamosaLeer)

## ABOUT THE AMÉRICAS AWARD

Founded by the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs (CLASP) in 1993, the Américas Award encourages and commends authors, illustrators, and publishers who produce quality children's and young adult books that portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latins in the United States, and provides teachers with suggestions classroom use.

[bit.ly/AmericasAward](http://bit.ly/AmericasAward)

Most recently, Alma Flor Ada's 2015 young adult memoir, *Island Treasures: Growing Up in Cuba*, was recognized as an Américas Award Commended Title.

Here, the authors converse with Hania Mariën of the Vamos a Leer blog as she poses questions about their respective and collaborative publications and the need for preserving and valuing cultural heritage and history. For more about their work, including publications and supporting educational resources, visit [almaflorada.com](http://almaflorada.com) and <http://isabelcampoy.com/>

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**HANIA MARIËN (to Alma Flor Ada):** At the University of San Francisco you taught a class in the multicultural literature program titled "The Author Within." How might teachers be able to collaborate with (and encourage students) students to produce and share their stories? Why is nurturing "the author within" important?

**ALMA FLOR ADA:** It is important to establish a difference between "writing" and "authorship". Writing is a most valuable skill that deserves to be honed. But just knowing how to write does not make someone an author. Authorship is acknowledging that one has something to tell and being willing to share it. Authors may have varying degrees of writing efficiency that can be helped by an editor, but an editor does not make an author. The author needs to acknowledge the value of what s/he holds within and make the decision to share it. We are all authors of our own lives. Every person has lived through important moments, have had experiences, feelings, thoughts that deserve sharing. Nurturing "the author within" means validating the life, thoughts and feelings of every student and encouraging them to share. The best method for the teacher is to be willing to risk becoming an author of self-published books, and to share the result and the process honestly with the students. More about this can be read in the book [\*Authors in the Classroom: A Transformative Education Process\*](#), co-authored with F. Isabel Campoy.

**HANIA MARIËN (to F. Isabel Campoy):** In your most recent book, *Maybe Something Beautiful*, you collaborated with illustrator Rafael López to tell the story of Mira, a young woman who transforms her community with art and optimism. Can you speak more about that and how art can help foster change at an individual or collective level?

**F. ISABEL CAMPOY:** Mira has beautiful, big, brown eyes. She looks at her surroundings with hope and uses her rebel inner power to transform what she sees that needs improvement. Although she is a fictional character, she represents the voice of a community that one day decided to make their world a little better. *Maybe Something Beautiful* is the triumph of hope, and possibility. It is the assertiveness of identity, and the recognition that the search for beauty is a powerful motivator for change, and that ART is a great tool to materialize it.

Actually this is the story of Rafael López, the illustrator of this book, and his wife Candice. They were the ones that organized their community in San Diego to create change. Change from singular to plural, from prose to poetry. Theresa Howell, my co-author and I, discussed the possibility to convert this true story into an example of beauty and power. It took years for all of us, authors, illustrator, agents, and publishers, to materialize the idea and create these pages that are no longer just a children's story, but evidence of the triumph of dignity.

One wonderful outcome of our research was to realize that all over the world art, and especially mural art, is used by communities from Egypt to California, and from Philadelphia to Praga to make visible their aspiration for beauty. Sometimes murals tell the story of the people, others, simply invite you to share the pleasure that color

and form brings to the spirit. In the website that we have created for this book, [www.maybesomethingbeautiful.com](http://www.maybesomethingbeautiful.com), we show many of those examples.

Art can move mountains. Literally!

**HANIA MARIËN (to Alma Flor Ada):** What was the inspiration for the story of *My Name is María Isabel*? What does your name mean to you? How can reading books help affirm students' identities?

**ALMA FLOR ADA:** My name was very important to me as a young child: It had been chosen by my grandmother, the person I have admired and loved the most. It contained my mother's name "Alma" but it was unique, created only for me. At home I was always called "Almitaflor" and my mother would write my name on the first page of my school notebooks with her beautiful handwriting and always draw exquisitely around it.

I did not know that the clerk at the city hall had refused to write my name as one word on the birth certificate. He was already annoyed by the fact that neither "Alma" nor "Flor" were names of Catholic saints, and while he ended up accepting them he refused to put them in one word since he saw that as totally unacceptable. So I went all the way to third grade happily signing my name Almaflor. In third grade the teacher felt her duty to inform me that I was writing my name wrong since that is not what my birth certificate said. And she insisted in calling me only "Alma". This created quite a conflict on me. As María Isabel I did not dare tell my parents about this. And I began to be Almitaflor or Almaflor at home and Alma at school. I felt robbed of part of myself and I suspect part of the reason I did not like school at all during Third, Fourth and Fifth grade was this fact. On sixth grade I was moved to another school because my parents wanted me to have the benefit of an extraordinary teacher. Since she was a friend of my parents she always called me Almaflor. Yet somehow the problem remained unresolved for me. With different people in different circumstances calling me either Alma or Almaflor. I know now that I should have taken responsibility when I moved to the United States to change my name to Almaflor and to publish under that name. But at that time I was a university professor, moving in the stifling world of academia, where Almaflor was not so readily accepted. I go through the need of constantly explaining to people that my name is "Alma Flor" and my last name "Ada", because since the last name is short and known as a first name most people, from hotel employees to professional people, want to call me "Ms. Flor Ada" or "Dr. Flor Ada". I'm so glad María Isabel had an easier and earlier resolution than I. All I can say today is my family and true friends call me "Alma Flor", it's up to you to call me "Alma" but if you choose to do so, it will be difficult for me to think of you as a true friend.

**HANIA MARIËN (to F. Isabel Campoy):** Much of your scholarship has focused on language acquisition and bilingualism. The CABE's Isabel Campoy Award in your name is given to a future bilingual teacher. In a guest post for *Growing Up Bilingual* you share that growing up you alternated between Catalan and Spanish depending on where you were and who you were speaking to. You say that these two languages, though equally important to you, often did not share the same spaces. How important is it to make classrooms spaces that can enable students to maintain and nurture bilingualism for students? Do you have any advice for teachers (both multilingual and monolingual) for creating these spaces? What advice do you have for teachers if they have many different languages represented in the classroom?

**F. ISABEL CAMPOY:** I belong to a generation that found its future curtailed by unjust laws. That was the case with racial segregation, but we fought and won the battle. Also women's rights, but we fought and won the battle too. Again with gay marriage, and we also fought and won the battle. Bilingual education has been a battle won and lost from the 1970s onward. We just won it again in California in November 2016! I think that at the core of these battles there is a deep misunderstanding of how positive it is for any nation to have two languages. There are

roughly 6,500 active languages in a world divided into 190 countries. If we do the math, we'll see that there are many bilinguals and multilinguals in the world!... and the internet is creating a village of our planet Earth. I don't think I have the space here to talk about the rights of children to continue understanding their parents, as well as educating themselves in the language of their adoptive country, nor about the endless benefits of bilingualism. But let me tell you that I just returned from La Cosecha , a conference devoted to Dual Language programs and how to implement them and what a great number of schools were there to learn how to start a Dual Program in their school. All over this country there are magnificent examples of success, thousands of classrooms in which everyone is learning in two languages. Just imagine in how many ways these children will be able to help this world be a better place! I refer you to CABE, NABE, TABE, and all state bilingual education conferences for specifics about hosting a bilingual classroom.

But allow me a few tips: Teachers can have books in Spanish in their classroom's library that children and their parents can borrow. They can create a corner where there will be CDs of books read in Spanish, and poetry sung into music. Parents can be invited to read to their children at certain hours, in their native language, thus establishing respect and good home school connections. In Spanish we have a saying that affirms: "Hace más el que quiere que el que puede". "Those who want, do more than those who can." And this would apply here.

**HANIA MARIËN (to both authors):** Poetry appears frequently among your books, including as the focal point in your recent publication [\*Alegría: Poesía cada día\*](#). Can you elaborate on the importance of poetry in a classroom? Do you think it has particular relevance for bilingual students?

**ALMA FLOR ADA:** Poetry is the highest use of language, and all students deserve the best. For bilingual students poetry from the oral traditional folklore, in the form of rhymes and songs, may be a way of connecting with their parents' cultural legacy. Poetry is a very important part of the Hispanic culture, since so many extraordinary poets have written in Spanish, we have several Nobel Prize winners who are poets: Juan Ramón Jiménez, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz and quite a number of equally notable poets from Spain, Latin America and among Latinos. From a language development view point poetry is one of the best instrument for the acquisition and retention of vocabulary. For all students poetry is a gift. Giving all students each day the gift of a poem, a gift they can keep for life, that no one can take away from them, should be a most important part of education.

**F. ISABEL CAMPOY:** What a joy it has been to work on *Alegría: Poesía cada día*. An anthology with one poem for each day of the year, and sometimes, two. You are right, poetry lives in the heart of our work because we both feel that poetry is the one that holds the triumph of language, the delight of meaning, the essence of culture, the joy of reading. Very frequently we find each other requesting a minute to read the latest poem, to share the work of a newly discovered poet, or simply to plan a new anthology. We are aware of the fear that some readers have of poetry, and some teachers of teaching it, so we recently worked on *Está linda la mar*, published by Santillana to show how easy, how much fun, how engaging it can be to teach poetry. I think we are in our 16th anthology of poetry and already are preparing our next one!

Poetry can be the perfect tool to start the day, to silence an unruly or tired class, to foster the learning of words, to call attention to beauty, or simply for the fun of it! We also suggest the dramatization of poetry in the class, assigning verses to different students who will "perform" the entire poem as a dramatization of its message. For Latino students, poetry in Spanish is a wonderful way to retain their first language. For students learning Spanish it is a great tool to master pronunciation and to acquire the rhythm of their second language.

**HANIA MARIËN (to both authors):** Together you have published a variety of folktale inspired stories and anthologies. What role do you believe folktales and fairytales play in learning about cultures different from our own? What advice would you give to educators in balancing folktales with stories of "everyday" life?

**ALMA FLOR ADA:** I strongly believe that all genres should be cultivated and made accessible to students. Folktales and fairytales have survived for so long because they have special appeal, as captivating narratives, and usually hold a moral or a teaching, as well as the promise that good will eventually triumph. Realistic fiction is important as a way of understanding real situations and characters. Of course, we would like to create a balance between fantasy and realistic fiction, but need not see them in opposition, rather, being complimentary to each other. References to folktales and fairytales (as well as mythology) will continue to appear throughout the life of students. Familiarity with these stories will be important to understand many future references. I would like to add that I find it troubling that recently the recognition of the value of non-fiction writing is demeaning the importance of realistic fiction. Again, this is a false dichotomy. While it is true that sometimes realistic fiction is limited to common day occurrences, there are many excellent novels for children and young adults that provide a great richness of information. When well researched facts are woven intelligently within a fictional narrative they can provide the same quality information as non-fiction and will probably be remembered better and generate an interesting in learning more about the facts.

**F. ISABEL CAMPOY:** As an immigrant to the United States I was forced to leave behind all material things that surrounded me until I left. But my heart was big, and my memory generous, and I brought in both my heart and my memory my mother's folktales, her stories real and invented, her sayings, her songs, her words of advice in proverbs, the richness of her heritage in the language we spoke. I think highly of the value of folklore in education and I recommend to anyone learning a second language to start in the literature created by tradition for children. But folklore is just one part of what readers should read. Children need to read and be aware of the world that surrounds them. They need to familiarize themselves with all other worlds outside their school, town, state, culture, faith. Reading is the main door to knowledge, tolerance, recognition of identity of self and others. "Everyday stories" are the bridges between differences, and the way to create just, compassionate, and prosperous societies.

**HANIA MARIËN (to both authors):** You've spoken in different settings about how books can serve as both mirrors and windows -- and that we need them to serve as both. Can you speak more about the importance of providing positive mirrors for Spanish-speaking children, or indeed all children? And how books can cultivate and nurture their personal growth?

**ALMA FLOR ADA:** Books can serve as mirrors, contributing to our understanding of ourselves, the people around us, our community and ourselves. When children never see themselves represented in books this can lead to a feeling of being invisible or ignored, of not been recognized or valued, particularly in a society that continues to exhibit many racist attitudes. Books can serve as windows allowing us to better understand other cultures and experiences. And, of course, books that will be mirrors for some can be windows for other. What we need to achieve is sufficient diverse books so that everyone can be seen themselves and we all can learn about each other.

**F. ISABEL CAMPOY:** One day, visiting a school in Texas, I asked students: "Do you know where there are important, beautiful pyramids" The answer was quick, many arms up, and all showing it was an easy answer. "Egypt!" they all said. The pain of that answer has been repeated many times, in many schools, given by Latino and non-Latino students. None of them had even been made aware of the fact that south of where they were stood the most magnificent pyramids built in this continent in México, Guatemala, and Perú! And as we always do, we set up to

work. We wrote four books about the beauty, intelligence, and uniqueness of the cultures of Latin America. And then we wrote biographies about the important writers, artists, scientist, leaders that it is imperative they are aware of, from Benito Juárez to Fernando Botero, Frida Khalo, Carlos Finley, or Gabriela Mistral. These positive images in the Latino culture create a path towards pride and honor in their roots as Latinos.

**HANIA MARIËN (to both authors):** You've written extensively about Latino/a culture (with this being a most broad and ample term). Your collective works have transformed the world of children's literature overall and most especially for Latino/a children. Can you talk a bit about how you define Latino/a and how that shapes your process of choosing what to write about?

**ALMA FLOR ADA:** First: I do not endorse the use of the term Latinx. I have just posted this on Facebook: "Warning to all Latinas and Latinos: Once again we are allowing others to define our identity. We decided to embrace Latinos/Latinas probably unaware that this term was first used by Napoleon III to justify the invasion of Mexico by the French, supporting Maximilian's claim on the fact that Mexican and French were Latinos. We also forgot that the term Latin America was imposed by the United States. We thought we were being defiant by taking the name Latina/Latino which we felt distanced us from a history of colonization from Spain. Regardless of its origin, we made these words a banner of honor. Personally I took pride on the fact we had inserted a Spanish word into the English language with both its masculine and feminine form. Now we are allowing others to call us Latinx - a term which cannot even be pronounced in Spanish, under the guise of its being a more inclusive term. Beware of how much of our identity gets lost with this acceptance."

Second, I believe Latinos/Latinas can and should write about all topics. When writing from the heart the specific worldview and values of the author will be conveyed whatever may be the topic. I find the need to write about Latino characters because I know them well, because I know I have something to contribute, and because I want to augment the body of works where Latinos can find themselves represented, but I do not limit myself to write only about Latinos.

In a story like *The Unicorn of the West*, I am using animal characters, including a mythological unicorn, to talk about identity and friendship. *Friend Frog* emphasizes that very diverse characters can indeed become friends, that external differences may disguise profound internal similarities, as well as showing that all of us, even those with less external appeal, can hold values within. *The Malachite Palace*, which takes places in an unnamed place that could easily be ancient Russia, is an exaltation of freedom and the need to make our own decisions without being influenced by the prejudice of others. *Jordi's Star* shows how dreams and ideals can lead to transformative actions. None of the messages of these picture books is as explicit as I indicate here, but they are latent within the story and children discover them easily. The four books of *Hidden Forest --Dear Peter Rabbit; Yours truly, Goldilocks; With Love, Little Red Hen* and *Extra! Extra!* were born out of my appreciation for letter writing and my experiences with newspapers. The characters may be from the traditional European fairytales, yet they all have been influenced by my own worldview: a very generous Little Red Riding Hood, a community where neighbors help neighbors and all love partying, a very hard working Little Red Hen who is helped in the task by her many chicks, they are subtle but highly significant cultural contributions. All my stories convey my values and believes, even when the characters are geometrical figures like the protagonists of *Friends*, a book that suggests solidarity as substitution of racism, and of *El reino de la gemonetria*, where figures of various shapes finally escape the imprisonment they have suffered under the rule of King Square VIII who believes only perfect squares can enjoy freedom. Regardless of the external characteristics, all my books are born from a deep awareness of what it is to be a Latina who believes in justice and equality.

**F. ISABEL CAMPOY:** We, Latinos and Latinas are a new culture. We are the product of the immigration into the United States from 21 countries. We are indigenous people and of African origin, we are Chinese and Japanese, descendants of Europeans and of all faiths. We are mestizos, our heritage is Hispanic and for many of us our languages are Spanish and English, or only English, or only Spanish. Outside of the United States we are Mexicans and Colombians, Peruvians and Argentinians, Costa Ricans and Bolivians. Here, we are a new culture: the Latino culture. We realized how important it was to create a literary foundation for this new culture, and that has guided most of our creativity providing children and their parents books about their past, and also books in which they can see their future. When we began writing for children there weren't many other Latinos in the field. We are very happy and proud to see new voices coming to provide children a beautiful mirror for their souls.

**HANIA MARIËN (to both authors):** Lastly, are there any words you can offer to the teachers reading this interview who may have young Latino/a students in their classrooms? Any words of advice or inspiration you can share?

**ALMA FLOR ADA:** Every one of your Latina and Latino students are inheritors of a rich legacy, a culture that has synthesized the achievements of many human groups: Indigenous, African and Spanish are the main components, but we must not forget that the culture of Spain is in itself a synthesis that incorporates ancient cultures, a significant Celtic presence, Roman civilization, Arab and Hebrew valuable achievements. And while Indigenous, African and Spanish are the main contributors, along the year many other people immigrated to the Spanish-speaking Americas: Chinese, Japanese, European Jewish people and people from India to name a few. Unfortunately the "Black Legend" against Spain has singled out the unquestionable evils of the Spanish colonization, as if similar evils did not exist in all other colonization of the Americas, where British, French, Portuguese or Danish. Instead of emphasizing the injustice of all colonization, the Spanish actions have been emphasized with the results of making Latin American people hate or feel shame of a part of themselves. Latinos need to embrace the *mestizo* nature of their heritage and feel pride in who they are. No culture in the world, NONE is perfect. As a human creation, all cultures are imperfect. They are also constantly evolving and this should be an opportunity to embrace those aspects of our culture that we celebrate and strive to modify those that are not as yet just, equitable, kind, generous, supportive, inclusive. All children deserve to know that they have all potential to become who they want to be, and all the right to celebrate who they are today.

To the teachers who approach their task with responsibility I would like to emphasize that educating is a process. We will make mistakes but we should also learn from them. Each action should be the beginning of a process of reflection before we act again. When we embrace a process of transforming our classroom into a learning community, where we learn along our students and from our students and their parents, in a true spirit of constant solidarity our task can be highly fulfilling.

May you find in teaching a constant joy of knowing you are transforming many lives and facilitating a better future for your students.

**F. ISABEL CAMPOY:** I would like to share with them a sentence that I repeat frequently in my trainings and workshops: "History belongs to those who write it." Our history as Latinos has been written by others and it is time to pick up our most potent tool in life (A PEN) and write about lives and our families, our accomplishments and our challenges. The world is watching us. New generations will continue what you start. There is dignity in the struggle. Let's embrace it!