

BOOK REVIEW

Imagine Brings The Power Of Words To Life

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Imagine by Juan Felipe Herrera. Illustrated by Lauren Castillo. Somerville, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 2018. Pp. 32. \$16.99. (hardcover)

Imagine, an autobiographical poem illustrated by Lauren Castillo, offers a space for children—especially those growing up in poverty—to both connect and imagine a world otherwise. Though Herrera does write poems that address structural violence and racism, this book does not dwell on the harder elements of poverty or the miseducation of Latinx children; rather, it offers a glimpse into everyday beauty, especially in the natural world, and commits itself to the power of language.

Though it is clear that the author grew up in rural poverty, Herrera writes about his childhood with tenderness and beauty. As a child he whispered to “fuzzy faces” of chamomile flowers and enjoyed nighttime stars that covered his blanket with “milky light.” The book’s illustrations augment this beauty. For example, a child’s walk through a forest to a neighboring town just to fetch water is rendered in rich tones of yellow, purple, and orange, with trees bathed in waning sunlight.

In addition to sketching the outlines of his childhood as a migrant farm worker, Herrera highlights the moments of his education when he discovers a love of words and music. As an emerging English language learner, Herrera asks his readers to imagine him as he teaches himself to read and write in English using his Spanish pronunciations. He delves into the tactile

experience of writing those words (“the ink flowed/like tiny rivers across/soft paper”), singing them in his school choir, using them to write poems on the walk home from school and, later, to compose songs on his guitar. Herrera is empowered by language as he “grabbed a handful/of words” to write “a magnificent story.” Castillo’s illustrations manage to bring words to life, capturing the acts of writing and performing with lovely motion.

In the penultimate pages, Herrera asks the reader to imagine him reading his poetry to an audience at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and signing his books of poems as the Poet Laureate of the United States. This moment marks the culmination of a life begun in poverty but always recognizing the beauty of the natural world and the potential of language to guide him. The final pages of the book are an illustration of an evening plain dotted by nopales, a star-filled sky, and a moon casting light on rolling hills. Two birds soar through the sky, and in the sole five words on those pages, Herrera implores his readers, “imagine what you could do.”

The rural landscape that Herrera paints in his poem is reminiscent of the worlds represented in Pat Mora’s *Tomás and the Library Lady*, an autobiographical children’s book about Tomás Rivera, and Anzaldúa’s *Prietita and the Ghost Woman*. In Mora’s book, a young Rivera sees the library as a refuge from his life in the fields, and in *Prietita*, the titular protagonist initially experiences fear of the rural landscape. Herrera, on the other hand, revels in it. There is an implicit spirituality in Herrera’s landscape, similar to that found in Denise Chavez’s *Loving Pedro Infante* and in Sandra Cisneros’s graphic novel *Have You Seen Marie*, both of which represent protagonists who find solace and a form of spiritual resolution in the natural world.

Though the poem/book is primarily written in English with only a few Spanish words, the author clearly valorizes his Spanish language upbringing. The linguistic reflectiveness recalls Chicana poet and author Pat Mora's writing. While Mora's writing for children is often fully bilingual and/or explicitly didactic, Herrera's poem focuses more on a love of language for its own sake, and he uses words in poetry and song.

The premise of this book recalls Tejana activist Rosie Castro's reflection, "We have practiced a different kind of leadership, a leadership that empowers *others*." In *Imagine*, Herrera aims to do just that as he taps into the imaginations of young people to help them reflect and imagine the possibilities for themselves.

