

# MY FEET ARE LAUGHING

**Norman, Lissette. *My Feet Are Laughing*. Illus. Frank Morrison.  
NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2006.**

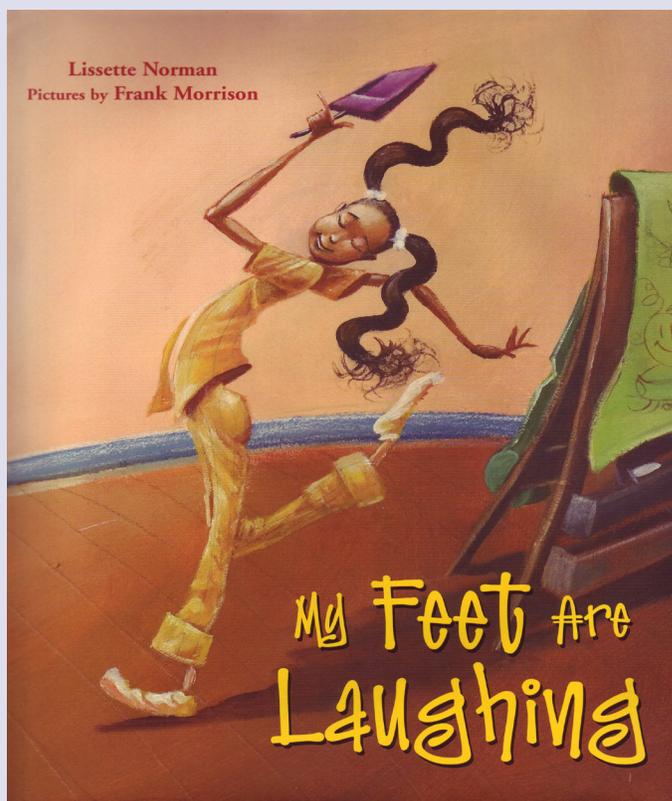
## FIRST OPINION

### Immigrants in American Culture

**Sybil Durand, Louisiana State University**

Defining any kind of literature as “international” is an attempt to designate stories written by people in countries other than the place native to the reader. These stories speak of cultural experiences and settings outside of the reader’s context and can serve as an introduction to new ways of living. The increasingly multicultural makeup of the United States could imply that literature written by immigrants living in the U.S. is inherently international. However, I argue that the author’s residence in the U.S. makes this work national, albeit part of a multicultural body of literature. This contextual difference should be considered in determining whether literature is international or multicultural.

*My Feet Are Laughing* is written in the voice of an eight-year-old girl, Sadie, a second generation Dominican American living in Harlem. Lissette Norman uses poems that allow Sadie to share her understanding of her life through revelations of family, place, and culture. As I read each poem, I would stop to explore the wonderfully vibrant illustrations by Frank Morrison depicting Sadie’s life at home and in the city. Reminiscent of funhouse mirrors, everything in the images—including the furniture—swirls, indicating action, movement, music, and dancing. As we get to know Sadie and her family, we understand that the animated imagery represents Sadie’s lively personality. Sadie is always in motion and is full of energy. In the poem, “My Feet Are Dancing,” Sadie’s sister wants to know why “I can’t sit still and my hand is always tapping” to which Sadie answers, “Because my feet



are laughing.” The landscape ranges from scenes inside her brownstone with warm hardwood floors to her urban backyard with its graffiti-filled fence or the Harlem sidewalk where Sadie plays with friends.

Sadie’s self-expression is equally as enchanting as the images. Whether read silently or out loud, there is a cadence that is reflected in the dancing images. Sadie, for all she has to say, brings a lot of wisdom to her not-so-good-girl ways. She explains her thoughts on love, which is sharing with her sister or setting her curly hair free so it can sing. She speaks of death and divorce in a voice of a true eight year old who has figured out what that means for her. Sadie thinks probably as much as she talks and has a unique and wise vision of the world to show for it. *My Feet Are Laughing* casually references the Dominican Republic as the place where Sadie’s family is from and explores some cultural aspects in the more detailed poem, “Dancing Merengue with Mami.”

*My Feet Are Laughing* is a positive addition to the body of multicultural children’s literature and will easily appeal to a second-generation immigrant audience through its combination of references to hip hop, the urban landscape, and life in a modern family within Latino culture. *My Feet Are Laughing* will also present positive aspects of urban life to those children living outside of it and perhaps also serve in a small way as an introduction to an international culture as present in American society.

## SECOND REACTION

### Swaying to the Rhythm

*Joy Dangora, Happy Hollow School, West Lafayette, IN*

In this collection of poetry written for elementary-aged children, Lissette Norman lends a strong, free-spirited voice to the character of eight-year-old Sadie. Sadie shares her innermost thoughts and stories as she sees them from her Harlem brownstone home. Many of the poems touch upon the heavy yet realistic subjects of death, divorce, and love.

Infused with Dominican culture, Norman’s poetry provides a multicultural as well as poetic experience for her young audience. Sadie makes reference to her Dominican heritage several times and even devotes an entire poem to dancing the Merengue with Mami and sister Julie. As with most of the poems, Norman’s tone is light-hearted, with the steady movement of the Merengue portrayed through her language:

Then we shake our hips from side to side.  
We shake our hips from side to side.  
And turn around and shake side to side.  
We turn around and shake side to side.

Accompanying Norman's words are Frank Morrison's vivid, elastic images of the family. The illustrations creatively complement the free verse and contribute to Sadie's vivacious character. The manipulated curvature of lines support and embody Sadie's positive yet non-conforming personality. More specifically, Sadie's hair, her most defining physical trait, often appears as an exaggerated focal point on the page.

Sadie's energy proved easily transferable to upper-elementary students. As an introduction to an upcoming poetry unit, students ranging in age from eight to ten years were encouraged to interact with *My Feet Are Laughing*. The title and cover illustration quickly arose interest as students commented on Sadie's "long limbs," "wavy hair," and "curvy body." This attention to the illustrations continued without prompting for the duration of the story. The students suggested that the illustrator "made everything curvy to show that Sadie didn't always follow the rules." Several students noted the importance of Sadie's independence, commenting, "She doesn't care what other people think about her," and related that to her not wanting her mother to fix her hair. Female students especially enjoyed Sadie's outright rejection of Aunt Emma's notion that girls should be seen and not heard.

It is important to also discuss the multicultural qualities of *My Feet Are Laughing* since many students are unfamiliar with Harlem and the Dominican Republic. By providing an introduction in Dominican American culture with references to the Merengue and "rice, beans and sweet plantains," Norman's poetry sparks students' curiosity, encouraging further investigation.

*My Feet Are Laughing* can easily be tied into the language arts and social studies curriculum of any school. An obvious way to utilize the book is as a companion to a poetry unit. It may also be useful in teaching various elements of writing, including style, voice, organization, and word choice. When sharing Norman's poems in social studies, the teacher can turn to the multicultural component of geographic and cultural study. And finally, the way Sadie's character encourages autonomy and rejects conformity may be the most important aspect students take away from Lissette Norman's *My Feet Are Laughing*. Her poetry is evocative and full of life, and her main character is a genuine free spirit.