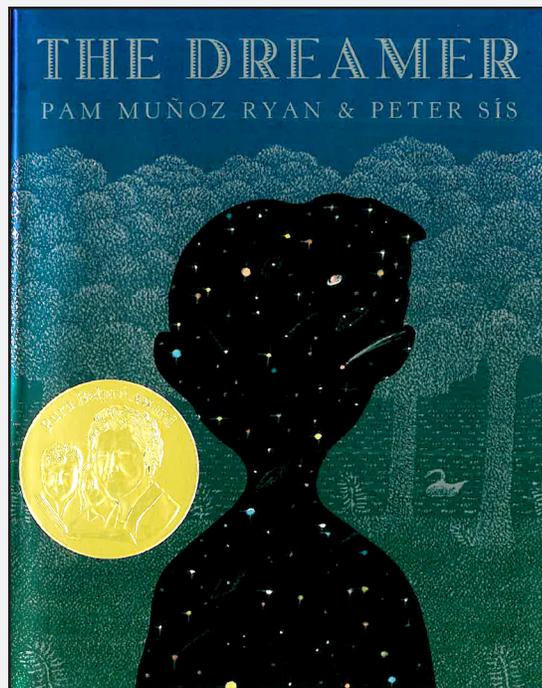


First Opinion: Magical Realism Meets Biography

Ryan, Pam Muñoz. *The Dreamer*. Illus. Peter Sís. New York: Scholastic Press, 2010.

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Ryan's text successfully portrays the magical realism that has come to be expected of contemporary Latin American literature through its observance of details in the world and its ability to entice the reader to enter a fantastic one. Her use of acoustic prose and typeface provide visual and auditory pleasure as they mimic a plethora of natural sounds: rain drops' resonance as they hit a zinc roof, a tropical bird's peculiar chirping, and the ocean's majestic waves. Ryan's constant use of metaphorical language and personified objects adds to the reader's mystic journey through Latin America. Her mastery of the Latino/Latina aesthetic is evident through her inclusion of Spanish words, which she effectively blends with the predominantly English text. She achieves this by avoiding explicit translations and contextualizing the words in subsequent sentences.

Another source of appeal in *The Dreamer* is Ryan's ability to conceal until the end of the story the true identity of Neftalí Reyes, the introverted child who will one day become the Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. The accuracy of this biography is

latent in the portrayal of the Chilean landscape, the inclusion of real-life occurrences in Neruda's life (Gonzalez Trujillo 51), and the exploration of his family's troubled relationships (Loyola 26). Through a genuine portrayal of the poet's childhood, Ryan captures the poetic persona of Neruda—a man whose poetry conveyed a strong connection to nature, a deep understanding of solitude, and a resilient political consciousness (González-Cruz 53).

The allure of Ryan's text is complemented by Peter Sís's illustrations. Each chapter is preceded by three tiles, each one foreshadowing an event in the chapter. For instance, in the chapter called "Love," Sís includes the following tiles: first, a heart-shaped rock laying on sand; second, a stamped postcard; and third, a boy and a girl about to meet across a building's corner. Here, Neftalí is forced by the school's bully to write a love letter. Not knowing anything about this genre, the boy breaks into a chest where his parents keep old correspondence between a relative and a loved one. In the end, Neftalí gives a heart-shaped rock to the girl of his dreams. Symbolically, Ryan and Sís bring closure to every other chapter with a double-page spread where the illustrations accompany a poem that always commences with the verse, "I am poetry."

Similarly, the illustrations provide depth to the poetic questions posed by Ryan at the chapters' intervals. In the first chapter, Neftalí wonders about an unfinished construction project in his house, and thus the chapter ends with the question: "Neftalí? To which mystical land does an unfinished staircase lead?" (16). This inquiry is positioned alongside an illustration of a large egg nested on a tree branch. Out of this egg hatches a staircase that leads to a floating island populated by trees, mountains, and a path. Sís's illustrations serve as an intertextual role as they extend highly emotive scenes of fear, embarrassment, wonder, and magic. For example, as a loner, Neftalí treasures a toy sheep and even calls it "friend." The illustrator exposes the boy's imagination and affinity with the stuffed animal by presenting him walking gaily with his "pet" on a leash. The reader will certainly be enthralled by Neftalí's fantastic world and will respectively become acquainted with Neruda's *bildungsroman*.

The Dreamer comprises a repository function as it may well be the first time many young adults in the United States become familiar with the life of Pablo Neruda. Perhaps this is why the book includes an author's note, a compilation of selected works by the Chilean poet, and a list of additional resources. The in-depth exploration of characters' motifs and, particularly, Neftalí's story of survival amidst bullying at school and a constant lack of understanding at home, will ring familiar to many adolescents.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Zaira R. Arvelo Alicea is a third-year doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue University, majoring in English Education. Her previous research areas includes the intersection of gender and the discourse of English language learners in asynchronous learning environments. She also has experience in English arts curriculum development in Puerto Rico. Currently, she focuses on oral tradition, colonial discourses, and Latino/Latina aesthetics in children's literature.