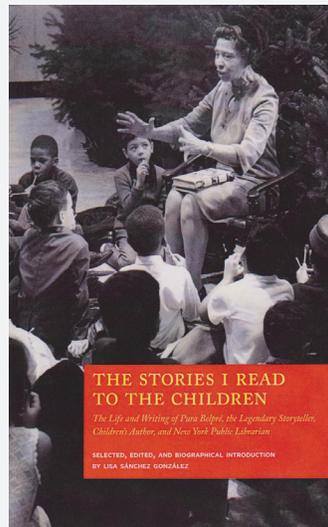


Professional Reading
A Biographical, Literary, and Scholarly Treasure
on the Life of Pura Belpré

González, Lisa Sánchez. *The Stories I Read to the Children: The Life of Pura Belpré, the Legendary Storyteller, Children's Author, and New York Public Librarian.*

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The Stories I Read to the Children is by far one of the most complete texts on the life and work of the influential Puerto Rican figure Pura Belpré Nogueras. The author, Sánchez González, has unequivocally conducted outstanding archival and editorial work to put together a portrait of Pura's life, which incorporates primary sources and a sensible amount of inferences to make up for historical gaps. Exceedingly interesting sections within the biographical note are the letters written by Pura and addressed to her husband. In these letters, Pura's inner conflicts as woman, author, and librarian are manifested in beautifully written streams of consciousness. These letters stress the significance of her work in an era when women's duties were tied to their husbands and families. Sánchez González embeds the biographical notes in major historical and political events in the contentious relationship of the United States and Puerto Rico. Her overview of the Puerto Rican experience in the past century is refreshingly honest and may catch newcomers to the subject off guard. The author positions Pura's work alongside contemporary issues, such as the education of minority children, the intricacies of diaspora

community experiences, and the identity formation of Puerto Rican migrants. This extensive overview of Pura's life and work is complemented by an elegant and thorough assortment of photography compiled into a photo essay that documents her many appearances in community and literary events.

The volume includes over thirty published and unpublished stories written by Belpré in the 1960s and 70s, although it is worth clarifying that some of these stories appeared much earlier, like the famous *Pérez and Martina: A Portorican Folk Tale* (1932). The book includes transcribed oral stories, picture books, and short stories that display mastery of literary forms such as Aesop's fables' use of morality and anthropomorphism, Daniel Defoe's first-person narratives of self-sufficiency, and the folkloric independent child heroes. At the same time, Belpré's writing is original and quite provocative, with flawless bilingual renderings, predominantly poor or working-class characters, female heroes, and new settings in the Caribbean. For the English-speaking reader, Sánchez González has provided a useful glossary of Spanish terms. The biographer clearly selected stories that represent some of the overarching themes and stylistic features of Belpré's larger work. The stories included here are typically brief due to their orality, which makes them ideal selections for bedtime stories, school reading hours, and story time in libraries. Be mindful that unless the reader plans to visit the Center for Puerto Rican Studies and do some invested work, this is the one source available with Belpré's work. My only reservation on Sánchez González's editorial hand is that we are not shown exactly where her modifications were made.

The last section of Sánchez González's book consists of essays, speeches, and reports written by Belpré. We hear from Belpré herself on a variety of topics, including the nature of the reader, the creative writing process, storytelling, and bilingualism. Belpré's background as a formally educated woman, library specialist, versatile storyteller, and I would dare say, scholar, transpire as she speaks her mind on important issues and reflects on her career. Her writing is insightful and purposefully placed alongside views espoused by key stakeholders of the time, such as education administrators, governmental figures, and prominent Puerto Rican writers and scholars; these manuscripts would be a delight for those interested in influential Latinos, Latino children's literature authors, and academics. For a solid overview of Belpré's published scholarship, the reader may also refer to Piñeiro de Rivera (1987).

It goes without saying that Sánchez González has successfully captured the complexity of the multi-voiced stances that Belpré used in her writings and speeches. The author's decision to let the stories and manuscripts flow without interruption is an open invitation to know the passion and craft of Belpré. The international community finally has a concrete introduction to the woman whose life's work changed the lives of immigrant families and those who had already made a home in the United States. For the first time, readers are welcomed to explore the legacy of a woman who is commended by a prestigious children's literature award from the American Library Association. ¡Enhorabuena!

Works Cited

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About the Author

Zaira R. Arvelo Alicea is a PhD candidate of curriculum and instruction majoring in literacy and language at Purdue University. She has worked as an educator and researcher in the United States and Puerto Rico. Her previous work includes pre-service teacher's cultural competence, Latino/a family literacies, and aesthetics and uses of Latino/a literature. She currently lives in Puerto Rico, where she is conducting her dissertation on reading and social cognition with young English learners.