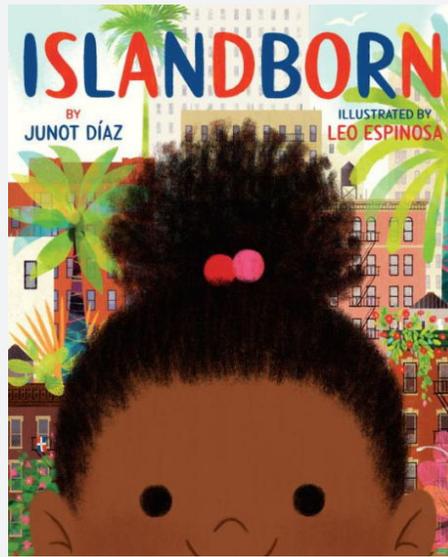


**Second Reaction: Sometimes Monsters Are Real:  
Exploring *Islandborn* with Young Children**

Díaz, Junot. *Islandborn*. Illustrated by Leo Espinosa, Dial Books, 2018.

*Helen Bentley*



*Islandborn* is a children's book regarding feelings of belonging. Set in a town composed of communities of different ethnic origins, this book explores concepts of community and ideas about home. The main character, Lola, is given a school project to describe the place where she was born. Since she left the island as a baby, she has to rely on the memories of others to piece together her story. Her neighbors tell tales of beautiful music, non-stop dancing, and wonderful wildlife; however, there is a shadow that lies over the island in the form of a monster terrorizing the people.

It is this monster that caused me to reread the book several times before reading it to my five- and six-year-old children. I wanted to plan the reading and not spring it on them as just another bedtime story. I was concerned that the book would change my children's belief that adults are above being scared of monsters. Furthermore, I was wary about the subject matter of people leaving, either mysteriously disappearing or being forced out of their homes, by the monster who "for thirty years . . . did as it pleased," often making "a whole family disappear simply by looking at it" (Díaz unpagged). Monsters are something that lurk under beds or hide in closets, but they are not real. However, in this book the monster *is* real and the adults *are* scared.

As I read the book to my son and daughter I realized that they were preoccupied not only with the monster, but also with having to leave people behind. They were anxious to know what happened to the main character's friends—did they all move together to the new place? Did they still see each other? Did some friends stay on the island and remain in danger? Another preoccupation was what happened to pets when people left the island (even though pets were not mentioned in the book). Did the monster “get them too?”

An additional sticking point was the illustration of a man crying holding a mango. This was unexpected and caught me off guard—how do I explain to a five- and six-year-old that the man is not crying over a piece of fruit, but what it represents? In order to comprehend such an abstract concept, I had to relate it to something they were familiar with. We discussed objects that meant something to the children; their lovies. Is a lovie just another stuffed animal, or does it mean more to you? Moreover, why does it mean more? By talking about who gave the children their lovies, how long they had “loved” them for, and the comfort they bring at night, they both began to understand the term *represent*; and with that, why the man in the picture was crying over a mango.

Furthermore, this illustration led to two discussions: what we would miss if we had to move to a different country (instigated by myself), and how we could discover the monster's weakness in order to defeat it in the future (instigated by my six-year-old son). I am not sure my children fully understood what the monster was, however. The bat-like creature in the illustrations who “could destroy an entire town with a single word” (Diaz) is reminiscent of a Disney villain, and as such they readily accepted it as a “bad guy”—because there is always a bad guy—and consequently did not ask any further questions.

As we progressed through the book to the pages where the heroes defeated the monster, my children visibly looked more comfortable—there was a sense of *this is how a story should be. There is good and evil, and good always wins in the end.* Throughout the reading I was surprised by how much the children related the story to themselves, thinking about how they would feel and what they would do in a similar situation, rather than seeing the book as merely another story.

Another intriguing talking point was why Lola could not remember the place where she was born. Throughout the book Diaz stresses that a person's birth place is an integral part of who they are and “Just because you don't remember a place doesn't mean it's not in you” (Diaz). The book is set in a town filled with communities from different countries: “Every kid in Lola's school was from somewhere else. Hers was the school of faraway places” (Diaz). This idea of home being part of a person rather than home being wherever they happen to live at the time, is crucial not only to understanding the myriad of cultures in Lola's class in *Islandborn*, but in understanding and empathizing with displaced communities generally.

In conclusion, while the colorful illustrations and the familiarity of completing a school project held my children's interest, some aspects of the plot, such as the identity of the monster,

were above my five- and six-year-old's heads and needed lengthy discussions and explanations. However, conversations about what we would miss if we moved to a different place: friends, school, teachers, etc., went some way to explaining how it may feel to leave "home." If I were still in the classroom I would happily read this to my third graders as I believe they would comprehend the challenging concepts more readily. Rich discussions could emerge based around topics such as diaspora, belonging, and community.

### **About the Author**

**Helen Bentley** is a former third grade teacher and a current doctoral student in literacy and language at Purdue University.