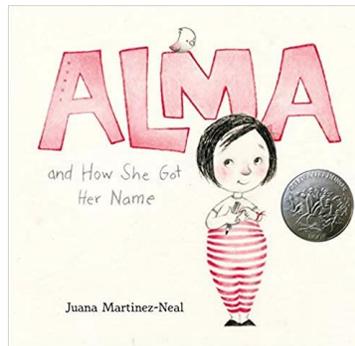


First Opinion: Breathing Life into Our Names, We Make Our Own Story

Martinez-Neal, Juana. *Alma and How She Got Her Name*. Illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2018. Print.



Cristina Santamaría Graff

In the beautifully written and illustrated book, *Alma and How She Got Her Name*, by Juana Martinez-Neal, Alma, the protagonist, begins with a declaration to her father, “My name is so long, Daddy. It never fits” (unpaged). Alma, a young girl, portrayed whimsically through shades of black graphite and hues of red, has a long name. It’s so long that when she writes it out on paper it doesn’t fit. So, she adds an extra section of paper to the bottom held by tape to include her name in its entirety, Alma Sofia Esperanza José Pura Candela, and shows it to her father.

Her father is a comforting figure. He is depicted with a soft, pillowy frame wearing large, half-moon, dark-rimmed glasses. He responds to Alma by beckoning her over to a bookshelf where he takes down a family photo album. He replies, “Let me tell you the story of your name. Then you decide if it fits.” Martinez-Neal cleverly uses the word, “fits” as a double entendre to mean both the actual space Alma’s name takes up on paper as well as to Alma’s potential of living up to a name that, as we find out, is full of meaning and significance.

Choosing a child’s name holds great responsibility as that name can shape identity, anchor an individual to a larger collective, or provide a child a template to which to live up to or fill. As a biracial Mexicana and mother of two girls, I was drawn to this book as it reminded me of the names my husband and I chose for our daughters. Following the tradition of many

Spanish-speaking families, our girls' names consist of both our family surnames as well as other names significant to us individually and as a couple. For example, one of my daughters' many names is Magdalena. For both of them it is the third name in a string of five total. Like Alma's many names which are linked to her ancestors, Magdalena comes from one of my husband's surnames, "Magdaleno," and is connected to his mother's paternal lineage. My girls share this name in honor of their father's ancestry and as a reminder of one of the many Mexican lineages they embody.

Like Alma, my daughters have a collection of photos of family members and ancestors on both sides of the family. The family photo album, used as a device in the book to animate the lives of the family members who had passed, works very well to ground both their stories through the father's accounts of them as well as Alma's imaginative interpretations of who they were in relation to her own identity. For every family member's story he describes, Alma's mind evokes specific images related to those she has been named after. As her father breathes life into each name and describes each family member's characteristics, Alma imagines the person and feels into their essence. As if taking each one in as a part of herself, she acknowledges their living memory with "I am" and other affirmative statements. Her acknowledgement of each family member is an activation of identity, for in the act of speaking her ancestors' names, she invites them to be living within her. Thus, she integrates them as part of the totality of her full self. The last name explained is her own, *Alma*. This is the final name to be discovered and integrated. Alma asks her father to tell her the origins of her name and he explains, "You are the first and only Alma. You will make your own story" (Martinez-Neal, unpagued).

It should not be lost on the reader that Alma, in Spanish, means "soul." This children's book is not only about unearthing the meaning of one's name and discovering the treasures of one's lineage, but it is also a soul journey. For Alma, the path of uncovering the story of each of her names reveals parts of who she already is – an artist, a lover of books and flowers – as well as the identities within her that, over time, she will, most likely, embody. For those on the journey of self-discovery or who are interested in exploring with their families the significance of ancestral narratives, *Alma and How She Got Her Name*, is a roadmap to opening up pathways toward meaningful and rich conversations. In my own family and, most likely for families across the globe, this book honors the child who is searching for purpose. Like in the case of my daughters, part of finding purpose is asking questions such as, "Why did you give me these

names and what do they mean?” In addition, this book offers adults a glimpse into the ways we can guide the children in our lives toward a deeper understanding of who they are. Alma’s story demonstrates how the journey to getting to know oneself, including the names that describe who we are, is a catalyst toward self-actualization. Through this book we have an important tool in assisting our children in feeling more confident about who they are and how they self-identify as well as to better understand how they “fit” in this world.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Cristina Santamaría Graff is a mother/scholar and an Assistant Professor of Special Education, Urban Teacher Education at IUPUI. She has expertise in bilingual/multicultural special education and applies her skills in working with Latina/o/x immigrant families of children with dis/abilities in family-centered projects. Her scholarship focuses on ways community engaged partnerships with families and other stakeholders can transform inequitable practices impacting youth with dis/abilities at the intersections of race, class, and other identity markers of difference. Cristina is one of the editors for the special education journal *Multiple Voices: Disability, Race, and Language Intersections in Special Education*. She is also a recipient of several awards focused on community engagement including the American Educational Research Association’s (AERA) Exemplary Contributions to Practice-Engaged Research and The Ernest A. Lynton Award for Scholarship of Engagement presented by Campus Compact in affiliation with Brown University’s the Swearer Center. Cristina is a mother of two girls who love to read and be read to. It is an honor for her to be a reviewer for this issue focused on BIPOC children’s power and brilliance.