What’s in a name? It is a form of identification that can reveal important aspects about a person such as gender, ethnicity, social class and even personal preference, as given names can be shortened or spelled differently. More importantly, our name tells part of our own story, it tells us who we are, where we come from and even who our ancestors were. Our names present us as the last link of a family chain that generation after generation has been creating their own story: a story that will not end with us but continue indefinitely through our children and grandchildren. For many Hispanic families, the name given to a child is part of an important family tradition like using names with a religious connotation such as José or María or naming a child after a parent or grandparent. However, while parents know exactly the reason why they chose a particular name for their child, it might not be as clear to the recipient, the child, who must be called by that name for their entire life.

Why do I have the name I have? This is the question that many children ask themselves when they reach the age in which they begin to question things and they start making sense of the world and the way they fit in it. This is also the question that the book Alma and How She Got Her Name, written and illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal, tries to answer. It tells the story of a little girl, Alma Sofia Esperanza José Pura Candela, who does not feel comfortable with her
own name, who doesn’t identify with it. Her name, she feels, is “too long” and “it never fits” (Martinez-Neal, unpaged). When Alma’s father sees her discomfort with her own name, he decides to tell her the story of it. He reveals that behind each one of her names is a person, an ancestor, a piece of the puzzle that is her own identity. Each name explains a little bit about her. Alma discovers that she shares certain qualities or traits with each ancestor such as an inclination for art, the desire to travel or the love for books. As Alma understands the significance behind each one of her names, she not only accepts them, but is filled with pride. Alma is able to see how her name truly fits her and how it is a link to the generations that came before her, to her roots, and how it makes her a unique individual. In fact, the name Alma, which in Spanish means soul, is a fitting name for the protagonist of the story since it reinforces the idea that a name is not an empty signifier, but one full of life. Alma understands that she will be responsible for writing her own personal story and that it will be much richer now that she recognizes and takes pride in her heritage and family legacy.

The beautiful illustrations emphasize the connection between Alma, her ancestors, and her cultural roots. The blooming trees interwoven in the images highlight the relevance of each person in the family tree. In turn, each ancestor is brought to life by the addition of carefully thought-out details like books, maps and drawings that represent the unique personality of each individual. In addition, the inclusion of artifacts that represent the Peruvian culture such as masks, books and dolls serve to reinforce the idea that our cultural heritage is an important part of who we are.

In conclusion, in her debut picture book Alma and How She Got Her Name, Martinez-Neal addresses self-esteem issues related to identity by focusing on the significance for children in accepting their own name and feeling pride in their heritage. At the end of the book, the author Juana Martinez-Neal, reveals that when she was younger, she also disliked her name but that it now serves as a connection to her Peruvian roots and culture. She ends with two questions that parents can use to start the conversation of how their child got their own name, how it makes them special, and how, just like Alma, they will need to tell their own story. Therefore, it is important to note that the book stresses the importance of having parents explain to children the value of their roots and how they are part of their identity. Alma and How She Got Her Name is a 2019 Caldecott Honor Book, a well-deserved distinction awarded by the Association for Library
Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association. It was published in 2018 by Candlewick Press.

Works Cited


About the Author

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