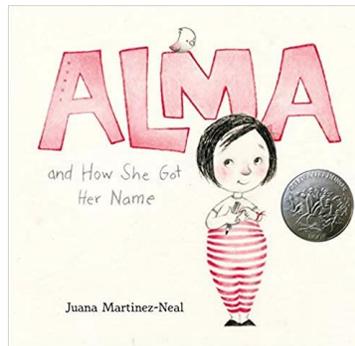


Second Reaction: A Culturally Relevant Opportunity for Self-Discovery

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



Janet Moritz

Alma and How She Got Her Name, written and illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal, is an endearing story of a little girl named Alma who feels her name is just *too* long. The main character's feelings are made evident from the beginning of the story with an illustration of a piece of paper where she wrote her name in all capital letters and clearly had to add one more strip of paper with tape at the bottom, just to fit it all in. Her full name is *Alma Sofia Esperanza José Pura Candela*. After explaining to her father that her name never fits, he pulls out a photo album to tell her the story of her name.

The book was easy to present to both my own young children and to my preschool students. The topic of a child's name is usually of interest to them and a very relevant one in preschool as we learn to identify the letters and parts of our names. The main character, Alma, is relatable, curious, likes books and art.

The story continues by going through each of Alma's names, beginning with *Sofia*. Her father, or as the author refers to him in Alma's voice, "Daddy," explains what important relative she was named after and a little insight on that special person. Whether they were an artist, an activist, or wanted to see the world, there was a story to tell behind each name. Along the way, Alma discovers that she has so much in common with the relatives she was named after, and how special her name really is.

The book has a manageable pattern for young children to follow. After each page with the story of the relative, the following page describes Alma's self-discovery and her declaring ownership of that particular name. This allows young readers to make connections with the characters and reflect on their own names throughout the story. With a short amount of text on each page and soft, simple illustrations on a plain background, young children can grasp how Alma views the world around her. The illustrations are unique, mostly black and white, with soft hues of pink and blue adding to its charm. The font change with each of her names is fun and consistent throughout the story. At the end of the book, Alma's Daddy explains that she is the first *Alma* in the family and that someday she will make her own story. Alma then decides that her name fits her just right. The book finishes with an illustration of Alma holding a book titled "Mi Historia" (my story).

The ending was so heartwarming my eight-year-old daughter declared "I love my name! I am special and I have a story too." It really provided an opportunity for conversation in my own family and with my young preschool students about our names and where they come from. Such as people we were named after, family names, and the various lengths or number of names we each have. Having bi-racial children myself (ages 8 and 5) and teaching Bilingual Preschool with students who are English Language Learners and speak Spanish in the home, I found this book to be relatable to them. Alma's long name is in Spanish and the stories behind her relatives were interwoven with her Hispanic culture making it very relevant for young Spanish speakers. My two children were so proud of the fact that their middle names are after a grandparent and that their first names were carefully chosen because they were easy to say in Spanish and English. When reading the book to my preschoolers, one of my students shared that she has two last names. Several of my students have a hyphenated last name like the author of the book. In her author's note, Juana Martinez-Neal who was born in Lima, Peru shares that she wrote this book based on her own feelings as a child disliking her name because it was "old-fashioned, harsh, ugly and way-too-Spanish". This book is a great resource for reflecting with young children about appreciating their own heritage and unique names.

This book can be a great tool for preschool to third-grade teachers as an introduction to a lesson on family, heritage, and name writing. With my preschool students we focus on their names constantly, so this beautiful book was a fun way to spark a rich discussion in our class.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Janet Moritz is a wife, mother of two young children and currently a Bilingual Preschool Teacher in Woodstock, Illinois. She has taught Dual Language Kindergarten and First Grade and has experience as a Dual Language Instructional Coach. She enjoys reading and experiencing children's books through the eyes of her students and her own children.