

# FIRST OPINIONS

## SECOND REACTIONS

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Second Reactions

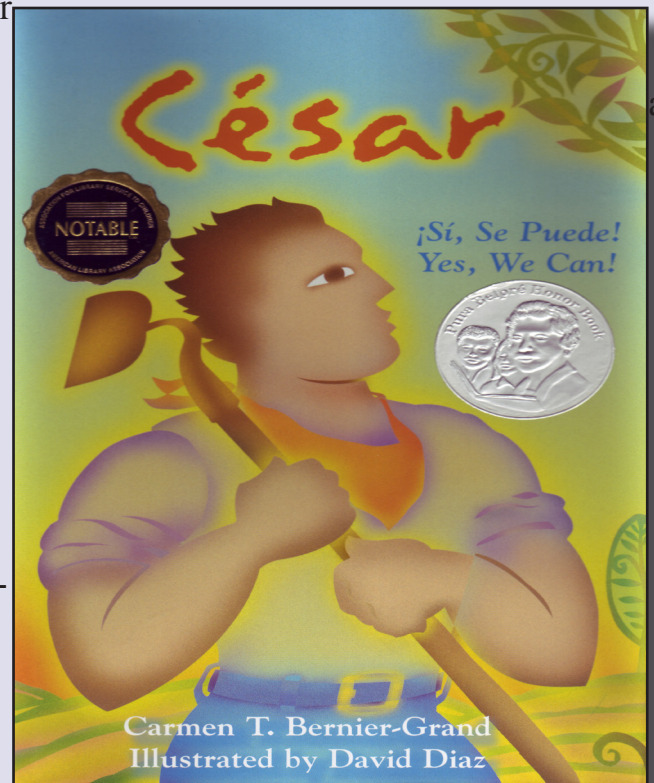
# CÉSAR CHÁVEZ'S LIFE IN A CHILDREN'S BIOGRAPHY

**Bernier-Grand, Carmen T. César: ¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can! Illus. David Diaz. NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2004.**

## A FIRST OPINION

**Minerva Alaniz, Texas Tech University**

The biography *César: ¡Sí, se puede!* tells how César Chávez, a well known Mexican American leader in the struggles of the farm workers, became a farm labor organizer. David Diaz has collaborated with author Carmen T. Bernier-Grand to create an arresting story. Bernier-Grand is the author of several children's books, including *Shake It, Morena!* and *Juan Bobo: Four Folktales from Puerto Rico*. Diaz has won the Caldecott Medal for his illustrations in *Noche de Humo*, written by Eve Bunting. Once again, Diaz does a great job of illustrating an American story of struggle and acceptance. The colorful photoshop-rendered pictures draw the audience into Bernier-Grand's poetic portrayals of César's life. Intended for juvenile reading, *César: ¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can!* contains Spanish idioms that create a sense of realism for the poems.



Each poem represents a part of Chávez's life.

Many of these incidents have been highly romanticized. When telling how Chávez grew up, became a farm laborer and a leader of the farm laborers, Bernier-Grand emphasizes César's family's economic struggles, his teacher's rule that the children speak in English in her classroom, and his eventual involvement in the labor movement.

Carmen Bernier-Grand reveals Chávez's respect for his parents, his familial training against violence, and his desire to stand up for the farm workers who were being mistreated. This is what inspired the formation of the United Farm Workers. The purpose of the United

Farm Workers, a movement organized to help the farm laborers, is woven into the poetry as the reader follows Chávez's career. The text shows that eventually the strikes were successful and the laborers received better wages and better working conditions.

Bernier-Grand has included references to articles written about Chávez and the speeches he made. A glossary is provided to elaborate what some of the terms used mean. A detailed but brief biography of Chávez's life is included, along with a chronology of his life from his birth to his death. Some of Chávez's own quotes appear throughout the book. Websites are provided for readers who want to search for more information about Chávez. Readers of all ages will enjoy the representation of Chávez's life in Bernier-Grand's poetry and the book's thoughtful references and will gain aesthetic pleasure when exploring the illustrations created by Diaz. Although the book is targeted to elementary and junior high school children, adults who are interested in Mexican-American history will enjoy the art and poetry.

## A SECOND REACTION

**Olivia Rothenburg, Frankfort School Corporation, Frankfort, Indiana**

*Education is not just the filling of a pail; it is the lighting of a fire.*

**B.F. Skinner**

The students I teach are a group of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade ENL (English as a New Language) children, in a self-contained classroom. Their language level is 1; they have no English skills or very limited English proficiency. Their primary language is Spanish. English will be their second, or in some cases, even their third language, since a few of the children speak an Indian dialect. The parents of my students have come to the United States to seek job opportunities and better lives, just as many other immigrant groups who have come to this country. César Chávez's story and my students' backgrounds have several commonalities: a Latino heritage, humble beginnings, and for some, hand-to-mouth poverty. Chávez is a notable person of worth with whom my students can relate. They should identify with his life and struggles.

Normally, I would have used *César: ¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can!* during Hispanic Heritage month, which begins in mid-September and lasts through mid-October. This is a time to look at and study the accomplishments of famous Hispanics in different endeavors. Sharing a book about César Chávez is an ideal opportunity to read about a champion of migrant workers. However, since I did not read the book until later in the year, I found another way to incorporate the book into my lesson plans. In January, we do a unit on Martin Luther King, Jr., another champion of justice for racial minorities who worked to change social, legal, and working conditions in a nonviolent way. I decided to use *César: ¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can!* in my unit on Martin Luther King, Jr.

After we had learned about Martin Luther King, Jr., I introduced *César: ¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can!* to my class. Because a couple of my students have worked in the fields picking peaches, or have lived on farms in Mexico, I showed them pictures of farm fields, some fruits, and a supermarket advertisement. We discussed how food gets from the fields to the supermarkets and the personal experiences of the children who had labored in fields. I then showed them the cover of *César: ¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can!* and explained that this was the story of a man, a Mexican-American, who is important in the history of the United States. He, too, helped change some laws and make things better for people, especially the farm workers, the campesinos, in the United States.

My particular group of children sometimes found the text difficult to understand. For instance, they did not understand the concept of a strike, *un huelga*. I had to take time to explain or summarize some parts of Bernier-Grand's narrative. However, they reacted with smiles when I read some of the Spanish words, because they already knew them, and this enabled my students to gain a better understanding of Chávez's life. Afterwards, we did a Venn diagram on Martin Luther King, Jr. and César Chávez, looking for similarities and differences in their lives. The children were then asked to write in their journals, sharing with me their reactions to César Chávez. Some of their comments were: "...he a good man;" "...he help people like Martin Luther King," and my favorite, "...he like me."

I hope to use *César: ¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can!* during Hispanic Heritage month next year. This time, however, I would like the students, with the help of the art teacher, to construct a mural of Chavez's life in the style of Diego Rivera, combining their appreciation of Mexican American literature and art. By sharing this book, I hope to "light a fire" in my students.