

Author/Illustrator Spotlight on MARA PRICE

By Grace Nall



Mara Price

New Year's Resolution or not, hard work can pay off in 1001 ways. Award-winning children's book author and illustrator Mara Price reflects on 2011 and the lessons she's learned from promoting her bilingual picture book, *Grandma's Chocolate/ El Chocolate de Abuelita* (Arte Publico Press/Piñata Books).

"To me human relationships are important, as is the connection with my community," stated Price. "I have

learned to expect the unexpected, and that one thing often leads to another."

She cited one example stemming from the 2011 American Library Association's (ALA) Midwinter Conference and Exhibition in San Diego, where she sparked her marketing and promotion by distributing postcards.

"I met people that invited me to several San Diego libraries for readings and signings in celebration of Dia del Los Niños/Dia de Los Libros from March to May 2011," stated Price. Other opportunities led to school visits and conference speaking engagements. She did a blog, book tour, book trailer (created by her son), and radio interviews. With social media networking, she states "I am learning about apps and e-books, but I am not on Twitter."

School Library Journal lists her book among the ten "culturally authentic" and "relevant books addressing the needs of the growing Hispanic-Latino population." Her banner year included the following awards: 2011 International Latino Book Award for Best Bilingual Children's Picture Book; 2011 San Diego Book Awards-Best Children's Picture Book; 2011 Paterson Prize for Books for Young People-Special Recognition; and the 2011-2012 Tejas Star Book Award; and among the Top Ten New Latino Authors to Watch in 2011 by LatinoStories.com.

Her cultural background paved the way for her passion as an author and illustrator. "Growing up in Mexico, I didn't have picture books as a child, but I tended to like classics later on... I remember the works of Jules Verne and 1001 Nights." She describes her childhood as "pretty normal" – school, coloring books, bike riding, playing with her dog, and cutting out paper dolls. "I was very good at darts," added Price. Later on, her hobbies included making beaded earrings.

Childhood memories can be spring boards for book ideas. "I used to drink hot chocolate every day with my grandmother and I cherish those memories," stated Price. As she grew older, Price's special interest in the archaeology of Mesoamerica became another motivation for her book. "Chocolate and my cultural heritage were central to this story, and the grandmother's visit became the vehicle to tell it."

In 2004, Price began writing and illustrating for *Iguana Magazine*. She ventured into a Spanish-language blog for children and was among the founders for Los Bloguitos. When asked about her art style, she stated "I draw with pencil and scan my drawings and then paint digitally with Photoshop. I also draw and paint traditionally with acrylic and mixed media," stated Price. "Style depends on the project. Working with magazine illustrations has given me that flexibility."

Price's work has been influenced by many talents. "I love the work of many artists like Raul Colon, Rafael Lopez and Beatrix Potter. .. My teachers have had a bigger influence like Phil Mendez and Glenn Vilppu. I draw from the work of Hokusai, Michelangelo, Raphael." As for writing, Price added "I like the work of Rene Colato Lainez, Monica Brown, Amy Costales, and many more."

Price received a scholarship to the Chautauqua Writers' Workshop in 2008. "Chautauqua gave me the deadline I needed to finish *Grandma's Chocolate*," stated Price. "A few months later Piñata Books accepted the manuscript."

Her favorite quote is "Imagination is more important than knowledge" by Albert Einstein. "I remember taking a design class," stated Price. "The teacher assigned us an art project (with) the stipulation that we were not allowed to research it. She gave no hints on how to solve it. I felt restrictive. In the end we came up with different but wonderful artistic creations that surprised all of us. This taught me that I can solve problems just by using imagination and creativity." She has passed on her knowledge by teaching art workshops at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, California.

A career as a bilingual author and illustrator is a challenge. "Unfortunately, at this time there are only two publishers in the U.S. that work with dual language books in Spanish," stated Price. "I encourage enthusiastic, talented writers and illustrators to keep creating. Make sure you know the culture and write stories that are culturally relevant." Price also made sure her story was factually correct. "I contacted a mayanist, Ellin Danien, from Penn State." Though research is important, Price advises on knowing when to stop. "Deadlines are important because they help you visualize your book being finished..." Also, "have an idea book or sketch book... carry it with you... an idea or image that you dream of will vanish if you don't make a note."

Furthermore, she says, "Things might not be perfect at the beginning, but little by little you start to see how fast you can do certain things and be realistic about what you can accomplish in a day. Have clear targets, deadlines and following a daily calendar makes life easier. Delegate if you can. Learn to say "No" and plan well.

Price is optimistic about the future. Along with her current projects, she's started the New Year with a "to read" list. "1001 picture books, for my professional growth!" stated Price. Now, that's another story!

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