



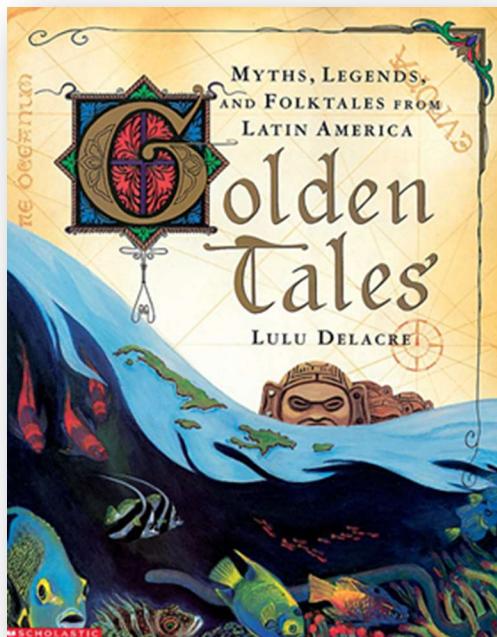
## Author Interview: LULU DELACRE

We recently caught up with Lulu Delacre about her work in children's literature. This interview covers two books. The first is *Golden Tales: Myths, Legends, and Folktales from Latin America*, for which she was both author and illustrator. The second is a new book by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, entitled *Turning Pages*, for which Ms. Delacre is the illustrator.



### ***Can you tell us what Golden Tales: Myths, Legends, and Folktales from Latin America is about?***

Well, *Golden Tales* is actually a glimpse into the very rich oral tradition, myths, legends, and folktales from the lands that we call Latin America. I selected several cultures, beginning with the Taino culture, because I myself, growing up on the island of Puerto Rico, had



actually read Taino myths and had studied much about the Taino Indians.

And adding to that, I decided to include the land of the Zapotec. The Zapotecs were famous builders during the classical period in Mexico. I also included the Muisca, who were goldsmiths in what we today call Bogota, Colombia. I chose them because one of the reasons that many Spaniards came to Latin America was in search of "El Dorado," or the land where the gold riches were hidden.

Of course, I had to have the Quechua, who are the children of the Inca, because the Inca empire still amazes me today with its span of land and the staying power of the Quechua. So that's why I included a glimpse at these four cultures.

The book includes some of the myths the natives already had and some legends and folktales that appeared after the Spaniards arrived. All belong to the oral tradition. Since the myths were recorded in an old Spanish I had to retell the stories in a language that could be understood by the children of today.

*Editor's Note: RIF recently launched a Google Earth Voyager Story on myths and legends and it includes the Golden Tales. Click [here](#) to see the Google Earth story (requires Chrome as the browser).*



### **What inspired you to write this book?**

What inspired me was something that happened at home. I think my oldest daughter was probably in fourth grade, and she was an avid reader at that age. One day I saw her poring over a collection of Greek myths. And standing in the doorway, I immediately thought, "This is fantastic, but I wish she were reading some of the fabulous myths that come from Spanish-speaking countries." It's a very rich lore that at that moment I realized she had not explored because she was growing up here in the USA. So I feared that, like her, there are many kids that probably need to know about this amazing lore, and that's what inspired me to mine the many, many legends, folktales, and myths in order to pick and choose the ones that I wanted gather and retell.

The book is grounded on research. And it was an immense amount of research= prior to the Internet took a long time. It entailed research at the Library of Congress where I found troves of primary sources material. It took trips to different countries, including Mexico's museum of History and Anthropology. The research that I do for any writing of mine actually informs the illustration. My editor was so amazed by all the research behind the book that we ended up with, I think, six pages of notes and sources, about the book.

I take very seriously the books that I do for children, especially because they *are* for children. Adults can discriminate a little better about whether what they're reading is correct or not. But children are less discriminating, so that was one of the reasons we added these six pages of notes and sources, not only for the children, but also for the educators that may not know any of these cultures. When this book came out, in 1996, many educators weren't familiar with any of the native cultures mentioned. How would they know that what I am retelling is correct? How would they know that how I'm illustrating something is correct? The only way is by citing all the sources. Research is not only important for

the writing, but sometimes research gives you ideas what to write about.

### **Who is the intended audience for the book?**

Well, like I said, initially I thought my daughter who must have been 10, 11. It is for children like her that grow up here in the US to Latino parents, but also for all the other kids that are not aware of the many other mythologies that are worth knowing about, and legends and folktales. So for me, it's for all children, because I truly believe that a book is a way to see yourself mirrored, but also, it's like Rudine Sims Bishop said so well, books are mirrors and windows and sliding doors. And they are definitely a way to learn about other countries and other cultures and open up your horizons. When you cannot travel physically, you can travel with a book.

### **Tell us about your life as an author and illustrator.**

I love the research process. I love to create the whole project. I love to find the specific illustrating method for the manuscript, whether it's mine or somebody else's. I think it's a way to challenge myself. The way that research challenges you to learn more and broaden your horizons is the same way that I find I use a project to challenge myself as an artist and find the right illustration method for the specific manuscript that I have in front of me.

### **Who are your favorite authors? Who has inspired you to write?**

I grew up surrounded by books. My father was a professor of philosophy, so I spent a lot of time in his study, but the majority of the books were philosophy books. So, growing up on the island of Puerto Rico, I didn't have access to children's picture books the way that a child growing up here in the US has. That for me was something that I discovered later. The fact that there are children's books and there are children's book writers and children's book illustrators did not become crystal clear to me until I was an art student in Paris and saw an exhibit of *In The Night Kitchen* by Maurice Sendak. Before



that, I didn't have an idea of what to do with the path of art that I was taking.

Today, I am an avid reader. But my favorite authors today are authors of adult books, both fiction and nonfiction. And I would name Isabel Allende top of the list. I love all her work. I love Laura Esquivel. I also like Amy Tan. She's a wonderful writer, and I had no idea about the Chinese culture until I started reading her. I also like Malcolm Gladwell, because I love the way that he writes and makes you think differently about certain topics. And in children's books, I would mention Margarita Engle. She's the Children's Poet Laureate right now.

As a child, I would read Jules Verne, and Saint-Exupery. I would also try to read the fairy tales that would come from Spain, but they did not speak to me at all.

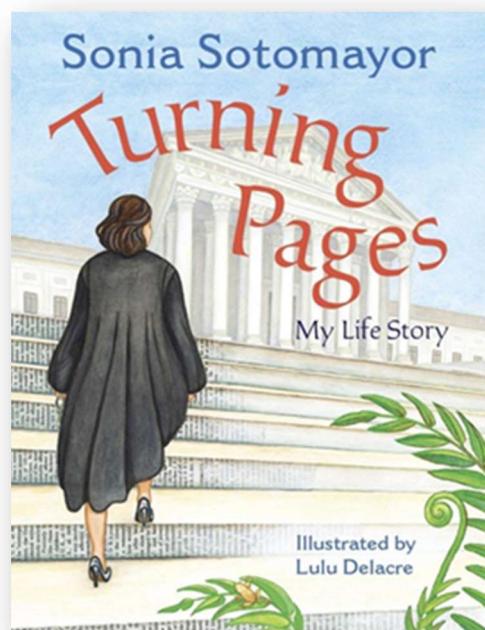
#### ***Do you author any books in Spanish?***

I write both in English and in Spanish. And actually, I make a point to, every time that I write a book, to make it available in dual language. *Golden Tales* itself comes in a Spanish language version, which I also wrote. Its title is *De Oro y Esmeraldas*. And actually, that was an interesting process, because for that book, I worked with two different editors, one for the English version, one for the Spanish version. I was working on both versions simultaneously, so one editor would tell me something, and that would affect the other version. And I think it was a very interesting process. And that experience has never replicated itself, but I've done a lot of books in dual versions. With those books I'd first do the English, and then once that is entirely done, I will do the Spanish.

#### ***Tell us about the new book you're illustrating.***

*Turning Pages* is the English title. *Pasando Páginas* is the Spanish title. It's by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. And the most interesting thing that happened about this book is that I discovered that I was chosen to illustrate the book by the justice herself, which is a very, very unique situation. I've been illustrating work for other people for many years, now decades, three

decades. I've been in the field for 38 years. And I know how the process works. And when I asked the editor that called me, "Why me?" because I have never worked with this specific editor or house, she said, "The justice selected you." In the publishing field, it's usually the editor that selects--that pairs--the author's manuscript with the illustrator.



#### ***So what made her choose you?***

Well, I think that the answer is in the book. She says in the acknowledgment, "Lulu Delacre has illustrated my works most beautifully. We share many life experiences, and she gave me her heart in her drawings."

And I think that by, "We share many life experiences," she meant that although I was born and raised in Puerto Rico, I've been in the States for many, many decades now. She was born and raised here in the US, but all her family come from the island. And she grew up in a household where Spanish was spoken, where it was Puerto Rico, the parties were about the island, and that



influenced her immensely. So we share that love for the island.

I think that was one of the reasons that she wanted me to illustrate the book. She had seen my work. She told me that she loved the work that I had done for another author. The one that she'd liked, by the way, was the one that I had illustrated for another Puerto Rican author, and it's about the folklore of Puerto Rico. And I think she liked it because I was picturing the island.

Well, one of my requests was the following, and I didn't know whether I was going to be granted this request, that when the editor, Jill Santopolo from Philomel called, before I said yes, of course I wanted to say yes, but before saying yes, there was something holding me back because I wanted the opportunity to meet with the author, to speak with the author, to find out why this subject matter that the author is talking about, why is it so important for her? And that meeting of mine I think is very important for me as an artist because that actually helps me visualize the right kind of illustration for this particular manuscript.

So, when this project came about, my fear was, "Oh my God, maybe I won't be able to meet her. And I don't know that I'll be able to do the best that I can for this project." And that was holding me back. So I said, would I, before saying yes, be able to interview her? I don't know if meeting her was possible, but at least interview her, so I can learn as much as possible.

The request was granted: Six hours at the Supreme Court, complete with a tour and lunch with the justice. I spent an awful long time poring over all the family albums. I read her biography and it was extremely helpful. There is a connection that occurs with the other person that helps me personally as an artist and allows me to put the other person into the book, into the pictures.

It's like a first-person interview, but it's a type of research. You really want to get into their mind, but also into their heart and all into their ideas so that you can

visualize. That personal connection makes the art so much better. I want to make those words sparkle. And the way that happens is, for me, with that interaction.

***What did you learn about Justice Sotomayor that you didn't know before illustrating the book?***

Well, something that I learned, I sort of perhaps knew, but it wasn't so clear to me until I met her, is that she's an extremely generous person. And she will listen to you. She will listen to you even if you have a different opinion. And she's a very wise woman. Well, she's a judge of the Supreme Court. I guess that it's kind of redundant.

But I came out of the process of illustrating the book with a lot more respect of not only the woman but what she's doing with this book. The book is really not only about her life. It's not your run-of-the-mill autobiography, children's autobiography, or children's biography. It is not. The book is really about how the written word can open doors, how it can take you out of a difficult situation and make you see things in a different way, how at every point that you may have an issue, you can turn to books and books will lift you. And that's the message that she has in that autobiography and in her life that truly resonated with me, because I've been through events in my life where I've turned to books.

This book is for all children. It's written in such a way that it's really for everyone. You could give this book to a child who is going to college. It is an example of what you can do when you find yourself in a difficult situation. You turn to books and what happens? Books opens doors, and you can reach the pinnacle, even if you come from very modest means.

***What advice do you have for kids to become better readers?***

Well, for me, reading starts when a child is a baby. And I'm a firm advocate that parents should play with kids, should sing to the children in their native tongue, should interact with them at all times, and play games. That's why I've done several books about Latino folklore, because I truly believe that's where reading starts, by



learning the love of language, which in turn becomes the love of literature. That's where it starts.

Now, if you've missed those five years, then you place all sorts of books in front of your kid. But I still believe in — and I'm now thinking of many parents from Latino countries living here in the States who may not be literate themselves—empowering those parents by telling them, "You can talk to your children. You can tell stories to your children. Everyone has a story to tell. Tell stories about when you're growing up, what you were doing. Where were you living? The more you talk to your child, the better it is for your child."

I don't believe in talking to a child in English if that is not your native tongue and you don't feel comfortable in it. In my home, Spanish only, all the time. And both my daughters became totally bilingual. They learned English at school. The foundation is talking, is telling stories, and then reading aloud, reading aloud as much as you can.

When the child is reading on his or her own, just let him read whatever he wants. I don't believe in forcing a specific kind of reading, "Okay, you have to read at this level. Because you're in second grade, you have to read a second grade level book or a third grade level because we want you to get ahead." He needs to read what is of interest to him.

The child needs to see him- or herself in the book, but also needs to read about experiences of other children from other cultures. And I truly believe in that, because that is how children are amazed about, "Okay, we're all so different, but at the same time, we're so alike."

I do a lot of workshops with parents, because since my mother language is Spanish, and I can address the whole crowd in Spanish. And you'll see those kids, their eyes sparkle. And the parents totally connect with me because they can see that somebody that speaks Spanish has actually made it in this country as an author, as an illustrator.

So I am very keen in doing this, because I think it's important for the children to feel proud of their heritage

and their language and for the parents to feel accepted. I think that when parents hear their language spoken, it enables them to become part of the society and they become more invested in the school and in the schooling of their children.

It's all about that, about making the connection and making all the residents of this country realize they are contributors to the society. It starts by talking to your child in Spanish, building those strong roots, at the same time that the child is learning English language and American culture. Then the parent becomes aware that he is accepted, and he becomes involved in the schooling of their child. It all works together. You need a strong support system so that child becomes an avid reader and a good member of society.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Three-time Pura Belpré Award honoree Lulu Delacre has been writing and illustrating children's books since 1980. Born and raised in Puerto Rico to Argentinean parents, Delacre says her Latino heritage and her life experiences inform her work. Her 39 titles include *Arroz con Leche: Popular Songs and Rhymes from Latin America*, a Horn Book Fanfare Book in print for over 25 years; and *Salsa Stories*, an IRA Outstanding International Book. Her bilingual picture book *Olinguito, de la A a la Z! Descubriendo el bosque nublado; Olinguito, from A to Z! Unveiling the Cloud Forest* and her story collection *Us, in Progress: Short Stories About Young Latinos* have received multiple starred reviews and awards. Her latest work is the art of *Turning Pages* by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Delacre has lectured internationally and served as a juror for the National Book Awards. She has exhibited at The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art; The Original Art Show at the Society of Illustrators in New York; the Museum of Art of Puerto Rico and the Museum of Ponce in Puerto Rico among other venues. For more visit her at [www.luludelacre.com](http://www.luludelacre.com).