



A Club for Kids Who Love Books

Questions and Answers with Pam Muñoz Ryan

The author talks about what it's like to write a book, how she got hooked on reading, and who inspired her to write *Esperanza Rising*.

WRITING ADVICE

What advice would you give young writers?

My advice if you want to be a good writer is to first become an enthusiastic reader. That's the best beginning.

How long does it take you to write a book?

It takes about a year to write a novel and about 3–6 months for me to write a picture book, not including the research. If the picture book is nonfiction or the novel is historical fiction, then it takes longer.

When did you start writing?

I didn't start writing until after I graduated from college, got married, had my children and then went back to school to get my master's degree. After I turned in a project to a professor, she asked me if I'd

ever considered professional writing. Coincidentally, about three weeks later, a colleague of mine asked me if I would help her write a book. Before that point in my life, I had never considered writing as a profession. After that, I couldn't stop thinking about it and one thing led to another.

Where do you write your books?

I write in my office, which is also an extra bedroom in my house.

Why do you like writing?

One reason is that I discovered that it was something I am good at so that makes it very redeeming. I like to write because it's a job I can do in my slippers. That's a joke but in some ways it's true. I can get up in the morning, walk down to my office and start working without having to commute in a car or on a train. I also like it because every project is different. I enjoy that there are many diverse parts to my job: writing, researching, speaking to teachers and librarians or children, meeting other authors and illustrators, signing books, and working with the interesting dedicated people in the children's literature field.

Which of your books is your favorite?

That's like asking me which of my children is my favorite child. It's too hard to choose, as I love them all for different wonderful reasons.

ABOUT *ESPERANZA RISING*

Are you going to write a sequel to *Esperanza Rising*?

I wrote the story with the intention that it would be a book in its entirety — that it would be a complete story. Right now, due to my other writing

commitments, I have no immediate plans to write a sequel. Maybe someday.

What is your favorite part of *Esperanza Rising*?

One of my favorite scenes is when Esperanza gives Isabel the doll. It's a turning point for her. The doll represents the last piece of her previous life and she relinquishes it.

Why did you name the chapters in *Esperanza Rising* after fruits and vegetables?

Most people think that I employed this organization from the very beginning of my writing of this story. In fact, I didn't use this method until the book was quite developed and had been rewritten many times. I never intended to name the chapters. They were simply labeled Chapter One, Chapter Two, etc. I was in the middle of yet another rewrite and my editor and I were discussing the pacing of the book. My editor wanted me to name the chapters, just temporarily, so that during the rewrite I would stay focused on the events that should occur in each chapter. So I began to name the chapters things like, El Rancho de las Rosas, The Fire, The Escape... things like that. But as I read through my story, I began to feel a parallel between the harvest and what was happening in Esperanza's life. I called my editor and told her my inclinations and my idea of naming the chapters with the harvest. She encouraged me to try it. Sometimes these ideas work. Sometimes they don't. As I went through and began naming the chapters, the harvests began to take on the feel of metaphors. For example, the smashed figs for her smashed life and the resentment she felt. Their lives were dictated by the rhythm of the harvest seasons, so in a way, the story lent itself to this organization.

What inspired you to write *Esperanza Rising*?

The book was inspired by some actual events, the results of my research and my own imagination. (It will be helpful for the reader to read the author's note in the back of the book.) Although the book is based loosely on my grandmother's immigration, and parallels her story, *Esperanza Rising* is a work of fiction.

How did you research this book?

The time period and setting are as accurate as I could possibly depict. There is no way for me, or any other writer, to know the exactness of any time period, other than my own — to know every intimate social dynamic of an era. All I can do is try to give the most accurate suggestion possible, the most precise illusion of what it might have been like for the characters, based on my findings. I researched extensively in the local history room at the Beale Library in Bakersville, California, and interviewed many people, including family members, who lived in the same camp as my grandmother (the Mexican camp at DiGiorgio Farms), so I have some primary sources. I also visited the sites of the sheds and the area of Arvin, California. I did use family names in the book, but those characters are composites of who they might have been, via my imagination.

How did you come up with the title *Esperanza Rising*?

The title was created when the story was completely done, and it was one of many that my editor and I considered. It seemed to fit the book best.

Do you imagine that Esperanza and Miguel go on to get married?

The character of Miguel is based on my grandfather, Jesús Muñoz. So my grandmother, Esperanza, did marry her father's mechanic.

Did you actually have an uncle like Tío Luis?

No, the character of *Esperanza Rising* is not based on me, but instead on my grandmother, Esperanza Ortega Muñoz. She did have two half-brothers who were considerably older than she, who were more like uncles to her, and when her father died, they did acquire the family property.

What made you want to use Spanish words in the story?

I felt it gave the book a stronger flavor of Esperanza's heritage.

How did you come up with the name Esperanza?

It was my grandmother's name.

How long did it take you to write the book?

About a year.

Did your grandmother help you write the book?

No, unfortunately my grandmother died many years before this book was written.

Has your family ever gone back to Mexico to visit your grandmother's old ranch?

I have traveled a lot in Mexico. As a family we have never gone back. The original ranch is no longer there.

Did your grandmother teach you how to crochet the mountains and valleys?

Yes, my grandmother taught me this crochet stitch and I've made many blankets from it. I also have a baby blanket in that stitch that my grandmother made for my oldest daughter when she was born.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Where did you grow up?

I was born and raised in California's San Joaquin Valley. I grew up with aunts, uncles, and grandparents nearby and consider myself truly American because my heritage is part Spanish, Mexican, Basque, Italian, and Oklahoman. My grandparents on my mother's side came to the U.S. from Mexico in the 1930's. Today I live about 30 miles north of San Diego, California — the town is called Leucadia — with my husband, my four children, and our dogs, Sammie and Buddy.

Why do you love books?

Growing up, I spent many long, hot valley summers riding my bike to the library. The library became my favorite hangout because my family didn't have a swimming pool and the library was air-conditioned. That's how I got hooked on reading and books. After college, I knew that I wanted to work in a profession that had something to do with books and so I became a teacher. A friend encouraged me to write a book myself and that's when I discovered what I really wanted to do with my life. Today, I am a full-time writer and I still spend a lot of time at the library. When I start a new book, if it is nonfiction or historical fiction, the first thing I do is go to the library for research.

How do you start a new book?

When I actually start writing, there's really no mysterious secret. I sit at my computer and I just type a first draft. My first draft isn't very well written, but it gives me a jumping-off place. By the time one of my stories becomes a book, though, I have usually rewritten it somewhere between 20-30 times. I have written books for adults, picture books for children, and recently I completed my first novel for older students. I want kids to be hooked on reading and books, like I was.