

SIGNAL journal

The Journal of the International Reading Association's Special Interest Group: Network on Adolescent Literature



Celebrating the Newest Voices in Young Adult Literature

Photo by Jennifer Burnes, University of Oklahoma

Coming of Age and
Coming of GAYge:
An Interview with
emily m. danforth

Katherine Mason

Flying Out of the Starting
Gates: A Survey of the
Finest Books from New
Young Adult Novelists

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Guadalupe García
McCall: A Storyteller of
Cultures and Odysseys

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ABOUT SIGNAL JOURNAL

SIGNAL Journal is a peer-reviewed (refereed) journal of the International Reading Association's Special Interest Group - Network on Adolescent Literature. The journal publishes articles, essays and reviews about varying aspects of young adult literature. Ideas for using young adult literature in the classroom, ways to get students interested in reading, interviews with young adult authors, critical analyses of several works by one author, thematic comparisons of books by different authors, and topical bibliographies are examples of the types of articles *SIGNAL Journal* publishes.

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

Manuscripts, which may be 4-15 pages in length, should be double-spaced and follow APA documentation style. NOTE: Please italicize book titles, but not series titles. Series titles should be capitalized but not italicized or placed in quotation marks. Please also submit manuscripts as Word documents, attaching tables, charts, and photos (.jpg or .gif) in a separate file.

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REVIEW PROCESS

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Guadalupe García McCall: A Storyteller of Cultures and Odysseys

by: Rodrigo Joseph Rodríguez and KaaVonia Hinton

Guadalupe García McCall represents an important new voice in young adult literature, one that spans diverse cultures and influences. Her debut novel in verse *Under the Mesquite* (2011) received several accolades, including the 2012 Pura Belpré Award, 2013 Lee Bennett Hopkins Promising Poet Award, and 2013 Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award. *Summer of the Mariposas* (2012), McCall's second young adult novel, has also been embraced, earning a citation on *School Library Journal's* 2012 Best Books list.

As educators interested in using culturally diverse and socially responsible young adult literature in our classrooms, we reached out to McCall via e-mail to learn more about her life and work as an author. In this article we highlight moments from our conversation as we discuss McCall's beginnings as a writer. We also offer a reading of her two novels that emphasizes how her writing is influenced by personal experiences—particularly her vocation, connection to literacy, and commitment to community. We conclude by arguing that McCall's voice speaks directly to young adults and should be included in our classrooms to advance culturally and linguistically diverse perspectives.

Writing Compelling Stories

McCall was born in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, México, immigrated to the U.S. when she was six years old, and grew up in Eagle Pass, Texas, a town located on the border of the Río Grande. McCall's parents inspired her to pursue her interests in a home rich with cultural heritage, books, and storytelling (McCall, 2012a). In our conversation with her, McCall told us, "I've been writing since my Papi put a pencil in my hand and I heard it whisper with its magical voice across the page" (McCall, personal communication, June 1, 2013). Her teachers nurtured her talents as well.

My third grade teacher, Mr. Hernández, read a story I wrote in Spanish and asked me if I was going to become a writer. That planted the seed. Then, in high school, Ms. García and Ms. Urbina were convinced I had the talent to become published. Even Ms. Moses, my mentor and math teacher, wanted that for me. I'll never forget that she gave me a Writer's Digest book for my high school graduation. ("Meet novelist," 2011)

McCall's peers were also encouraging: "In middle school, I wrote love poems and love stories for my friends," she says. "I sup-

pose you can say I was writing to the market back then, writing what my readers were demanding." As a young adult, McCall began to write for self-actualization, documenting her own coming of age: "Once I entered high school, I learned to write for myself, to cleanse, to purge, to reflect, to make sense of the world around me, and to find my place." Her voice was enriched by the experiences and cultures that shaped her development while growing up in Northern México and the Texas-Mexican borderlands.

After high school, McCall attended Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas, where she earned a bachelor's degree in theatre arts and English and became a middle school English language arts teacher in San Antonio. In the poem "The 411 on The Muse" (2013), McCall acknowledges:

[W]hen I became a teacher, I forgot about
Being special. I thought only
Of being significant,
About making a difference,
Because teaching is not just a job.
Teaching is what makes me whole.



Guadalupe García McCall/Photo provided by author

After more than twenty-five years of teaching at the secondary-school level, McCall maintains, "Now I write for my students, to show them they are not alone, to teach them the lessons I've learned, and to hopefully help them make it through the most wonderful yet difficult time in their life ... growing into adulthood."

Rooted in Experience

Under the Mesquite and *Summer of the Mariposas* both feature girls growing up in loving families in border towns of Texas and northern México. These female protagonists must endure heartache brought about by personal loss, deferred dreams, and on-going disappointments. Many of the characters' experiences are loosely based on McCall's own life, especially their resilience to soldier on and care for their siblings. More specifically, McCall's novels are grounded in her experiences as a teacher and reader. For example, both novels grew out of her teaching experiences. *Under the Mesquite* was initially a compilation of poems written for her students, while *Summer of the Mariposas* was inspired by students who wondered why the books they read lacked adventurous female characters (McCall, 2011a; McCall, 2012c). Lupita, from *Under the Mesquite*, and Odilia, from *Summer of the Mariposas*, are also reminiscent of McCall's very own students, particularly the ones who have stood firmly against life's adversities—determined to bloom, thrive, and succeed (McCall, 2012b). However, the great-

est influence on her work is probably McCall's own youth.

Rozmus (2012), writing about *Under the Mesquite*, points out, "The mesquite tree is ... an appropriate symbol in this story, told in verse, of Lupita. Based on the author's teenage years, the book is an homage to survival despite great tragedy. Using beautiful metaphors and lyrical Spanish words, McCall writes simply of what it is to love and lose and to find strength in nature" (p. 69). As Lupita's mother in *Under the Mesquite* battles cancer, Lupita accepts many responsibilities as the eldest daughter and sister to seven siblings. In these roles, performing arts and writing poetry bring her strength, solace, and affirmation as she comes of age. Similarly, McCall found solace in literacy:

When I was a young woman, I had a lot of issues. I was quiet and "different" in a quirky kind of way, so I had few friends. I was also losing my mother, so I was very lost. Consequently, I read a lot. Books became my refuge, my friends, the place I went when I wanted to escape. Books fed my mind. They showed me the world.

Since McCall's reservoir for storytelling seems to come directly from her young adult experience and her current teaching life, we commented, in our correspondence with her, that the performing arts and literacy take center stage in her work. McCall responded:

All through my teen years, I tore through ... library bookshelves like a ravenous beast, wanting to find the connections between us, wanting to know how we were all the same. Then, in high school, I discovered plays (*Romeo and Juliet*/Shakespeare), and I just knew I wanted to act, so I took drama classes. It made perfect sense to me to act, to perform, to bring literature to life by opening up the flow of emotions I had been holding back. These experiences, the voracious reading and the love of acting, made me who I am today. I can't help but write about them. They are a part of who I am.

English language arts and reading teachers are challenged to make literature come to life for students of all abilities, ages, backgrounds, races, and interests, as well as across all elements of literacy: listening, noticing, performing, questioning, reading, speaking, thinking, viewing, and writing.

In a sense, McCall's approach to literacy involves not only reading and writing, but also performing and viewing for an interactive literary experience that explores adolescent life, thought, struggles, and survival.

In *Under the Mesquite*, the mesquite tree is resilient, naturally stubborn, and thrives in the harshest conditions, much like the characters that McCall introduces to her young adult audience:

A thorny mesquite has sprouted
in the middle of [Mami's] rose garden.

Even after she has pulled it out
by its roots repeatedly,
pricking herself on its thorns each time,
it keeps growing back. (McCall, 2011b, p. 11)

The devastation of her mother's death lingers, but by novel's end, the mesquite tree is a symbol for Lupita and her family. When spring arrives, so does graduation and opportunities for a promising future. Lupita flourishes as "the world around [her] is blooming brightly" (McCall, 2011b, p. 181). In the final chapter, she takes refuge by the revered mesquite tree as she writes her way through the pain, gathering the courage to begin a new journey without her mother's physical presence:

I find a tall mesquite
to sit under;
and with my pen in hand,
I open my journal
to a blank page and begin
writing a whole new batch of poems,
poems filled with memories
and hope. (McCall, 2011b, p. 195-196)

Thus, writing from experience allows McCall to offer an honest and sincere look at female adolescents slowly discovering themselves and their place in the world. In *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (1995), Rebolledo argues, "As Chicana writers 'remember' their childhood, they are witnesses to the construction of their own identities and the development of an understanding of their historical role in their families and communities" (p. 107-108). Such is the case for McCall who explains that while writing poems about her childhood that began as models for her students to learn from, she revealed the route of her own courageous journey in a family scarred by the loss of its matriarch. In this realization, McCall (2012b) found additional strength and a desire to share her story with others who

might be traversing pain: "I wanted young people to connect with my book, to have it make an impact on them. I wanted my book to help them." Contemporary realistic fiction such as *Under the Mesquite* often "reflect[s] the world as we know it and the problems and challenges many young people face daily" (Bucher and Hinton, 2013, p. 125). Students can make connections between McCall's adolescent life and struggles to belong and the struggles characters face in her contemporary young adult novels. Regarding Lupita in *Under the Mesquite*, McCall (2012b) reveals,

You see, I have taught many Lupitas in my 23 years in the classroom. I've listened to them talk, to me and to each other, but I've also read their innermost thoughts, their

dreams, their fears, their triumphs, their losses. Sometimes, their stories spill out of them, sometimes they keep their pain tucked away, where no one can see it. I wrote this story for those young people who can't talk about it, for those who are struggling alone in the dark.

McCall is direct about the power of books in her own life: "[Books] showed me the world. I discovered Greek mythology in middle school and it led me to world literature. I explored every myth, legend, and ancient world in the library by reading everything I could get my hands on." Various world literatures and traditions inform her narratives through communal wisdom, legends, myths, and texts. For instance, similar to Homer's *Odyssey*, McCall's most recent novel *Summer of the Mariposas* follows the journey and trials of Odilia and her four younger sisters who are seeking to find answers to life's numerous questions and to honor a drowned man by returning him home to his family in Coahuila, México. Odilia leads the sisterhood pack and explains, "Rule Number One of the code of *cinco hermanitas* [five little sisters]: The eldest sister has the final word. Always. Good night" (McCall, 2012d, p. 31).

In their epic journey, Odilia's bond with her sisters increases as they rely on one another to overcome trials and tribulations of their own making as well as those cast upon them by various characters, including a witch and warlock. In their adventures, they must rely on intelligence, language, wit, and cultural codes to establish order and honor in the face of danger and indifference. In their journey, the obstacles bring them closer to a sisterhood of trust and self-affirmation.

McCall's interests as a voracious reader and committed English language arts teacher merge in similar ways in her attempts to find understanding and connections between her characters and the circumstances they face. For instance, the metamorphosis of the butterfly, or *mariposa*, serves magical purposes in the odyssey of hardships endured by the five sisters in her second novel. Nancy Menaldi-Scanlan (2012) describes *Summer of the Mariposas* this way:

Written in the style of magic realism, this is an enchanting look at Mexican mysticism, coupled with the realistic celebration of the true meaning of family. The sisters' relationships are believably drawn, and the juxtaposition of modern realities and ancient Aztec mythology elucidates the importance of the spiritual side of life in Latin cultures. (p. 111)

McCall makes connections that braid her narrative across borders, cultures, environments, geographies, languages, time, and space. Her narratives explore what it is to be young and human in dominant environments, especially those that may not initially recognize the cultural and linguistic wealth of diverse communities.

Community and Literacy

Issues of race and ethnic identity as well as dilemmas about membership and authenticity surface in McCall's work, possibly affirming her characters and many readers. For instance, in *Under the Mesquite*, Lupita and Sarita have the following exchange about speaking and being in "to be or not to be Mexican":

[Sarita says to Lupita] "You talk like you wanna be white."
"What," Sarita asks, "you think you're Anglo now 'cause you're in Drama? You think you're better than us?" (pp. 80-81)

Another classmate is more direct and adds:

"Then stop trying to act like them," Mireya says accusingly.
"You're Mexican, just like the rest of us. Look around you. Ninety-nine percent of this school is Mexican. Stop trying to be something you're not!" (p. 81)

Lupita communicates her way of defining herself despite limited points of view about marked utterances and appropriated attire:

"Just because of how I talk?"
I ask heatedly. "What—
because I'm Mexican
I'm supposed to speak with an accent?
Should I wear a rebozo too?
Being Mexican
means more than that.
It means being there for each other.
It's togetherness, like a familia.
We should be helping one another,
cheering our friends on, not trying
to bring them down." (pp. 82-83)

In the article "Multicultural Young Adult Literature as a Form of Counter-Storytelling" (2013), Hughes-Hassell argues, "For teens of color and for indigenous teens, coming of age is integrally tied to the process of racial and ethnic identity formation" (p. 218). This is the case for Lupita (and many of our own students) as she affirms her diverse identity, interests, and perspectives. In a review of migration and immigration policy legislated against Mexican-origin people in the borderlands of the Southwestern United States, Cummins (2013) concludes, "United States immigration policy has, over time, vacillated between welcome and rejecting Mexicans" (p. 58). As a result, feelings of inadequacy and rejection are not foreign even for native Mexican-origin and indigenous people living in the borderlands. English language arts and reading teachers are challenged to make literature come to life for students of all abilities, ages, backgrounds, races, and interests as well as across all elements of literacy: listening, noticing, performing, questioning, reading, speaking, thinking, viewing, and writing.

For whom and for whose community does a new writer write and promote literacy? What is the writer's purpose and commitment? Bista (2012) explains, "Literary creation depends on the imagination and experience of authors rather than whether the author comes from a particular group" (p. 318). In contrast, McCall's imagination and literary odysseys are informed by ethnic, familial, and regional cultures that strengthen her narratives. In her speech as a finalist for the William C. Morris YA Debut Award for *Under the Mesquite*, McCall (2012b) elaborates,

[A]s I structured the book and thought about characters

and conflict and theme, I began to consider the “job” I had accepted, the task I had undertaken, and it became very clear to me that this was not about me getting published at all, but about the young people who would be opening the pages of my book, leaving their little fingerprints all over it. I reflected on the choices I made in picking books, the motivation behind those choices, and I remembered the ambiguity, the muddled emotions, the sense of turmoil and bereavement I went through as a young woman.

This reflection by McCall can be beneficial for students in their role as emerging readers, writers, editors, and publishers. Students can reflect on their own audience as well as their writing process and production. McCall states further in her speech:

I remember being hungry for understanding. I wanted, above all else, to be moved, to be enlightened, to find solutions to my problems. The books I came to love opened my eyes. They showed the world to me—like friends, they were there when I need them to comfort me. They helped me find myself. They helped me to grow by answering questions I didn't even know I had. In this way, they empowered me.



Guadalupe García McCall/Photo provided by author

Which books and cultures do our students hunger to discover, read, discuss, and write? Are we teachers engaged with them to discover the books that they crave to find comfort, direction, and understanding? In “Embracing the Face at the Window: Latino Representation in Children’s Literature and Ethnic Identity Development of Latino Children,” Naidoo (2011) concludes, “Books are windows into the soul of society, illuminating the social, political, and cultural mores that underlie our world. It is through the illustrations and narrative of books that Latino children encounter these messages and discern the dominant culture’s view toward their cultural group” (p. 19). If we maintain Naidoo’s perspective in our literary selections, nonfiction collections, and assignments for our students, we can begin conversations about young adult novels such as McCall’s that are based on critical dialogue about cultures and perceptions that inform what we see and do not see in society in terms of self-discovery, self-empowerment, and self-determination.

The role of the writer is an enduring question, especially for new young adult writers of color who are often asked for whom they write and why. In the essay “Poet as *Curandera*” (2008), Pat Mora addresses the responsibilities that are often undertaken by many U.S. contemporary writers; there is resonance with Mc-

Call’s profile and her mission as storyteller and teacher:

Writers of Color, Chicana writers, feel a moral responsibility to serve their own. Just as the *curandera* uses white magic, manipulates the symbols that are part of her patients’ experience base to ease communication, the Chicana writer seeks to heal cultural wounds of historical neglect by providing opportunities to remember the past, to share and ease bitterness, to describe what has been viewed as unworthy of description, to cure by incantations and rhythms, by listening with her entire being and responding. She then gathers the tales and myths, weaves them together, and, if lucky, casts spells. (p. 131)

Mora’s metaphor of the *curandera* seems relevant to and appropriate in describing McCall’s novels, especially the storytelling, hopefulness, and poetic images that appear in her work, as well as her commitment to writing about the lives of young female adolescents.

Final Thoughts on the Impact and Future of New YA Voices

In our conversation with McCall, we commented that teaching young adult literature can be challenging and asked her to share her thoughts. She said,

The biggest challenge in teaching literature to young adults is that we don’t all have the same strengths, the same dreams, the same tastes. It’s hard to get 165 students to love the same book we are all reading. They are not all on the same page. I wish I could find the one book that can touch all their hearts ... and I wish it were part of my curriculum, the one I have to use in my classroom. But that’s impossible. So I have to keep trying, to keep searching, to keep recommending, and hope that at least one book, one story, one poem I put in front of my students will touch them in some way and make them wake up to the wonder of reading and the beauty of learning. It’s a mission I am happy to undertake.

McCall’s actions as a teacher reflect her on-going commitment to young adults and the literary selections available to them.

In “The Changing Face of Young Adult Literature: What Teachers and Researchers Need to Know to Enhance Their Practice and Inquiry,” Kaplan (2012) suggests how we might do a better job of increasing the possibility of finding books that will “wake [students] up to the wonder of reading and the beauty of learning”:

More importantly, today, the changing face of multicultural literature has made considerable progress in helping adolescents (and teachers) move away from the practice

of using stories about Caucasian and European Americans as the only literary canon suitable and required for adolescents; instead, multicultural literature has given significant voice and credibility to readings and narratives in which the characters and events represent other traditions and perspectives that are nontraditional. (p. 23)

As a new young adult novelist, McCall has written two books that serve as an example of nontraditional perspectives. Her novels introduce characters long absent in our classrooms and literary pages and forge new ways of seeing, reading, and interpreting adolescent life and thought.

Under the Mesquite provides a representation of a gifted Latina character who creates poetry and dramatic performances, supports her siblings, and seeks ways to keep her mother's memory alive. The impact of new voices in the YA canon, like McCall's, is immense and further advances our discussions on culturally responsive reading, teaching, and learning in the secondary-school classroom. In "Multicultural Readings of Multicultural Literature and the Promotion of Social Awareness in ELA Classrooms" (2012), Morrell and Morrell argue,

Students bring their multiple cultural perspectives with them wherever they go and these perspectives allow them to read with and against the texts they encounter. This has to be taken into consideration when we ponder a theory of reading that accompanies our ideas about inclusivity, solidarity, and awareness. (p. 12)

The dilemmas and choices young people face that lead to trials and triumphs are not foreign to adolescent readers. To further illustrate the world young people encounter for survival, we turn to the words of the wise grandmother Remedios in *Summer of the Mariposas* in which she explains to her five granddaughters, "The truth is, adults don't always make sense. They don't always do what's right. Sometimes, they are like children themselves, doing whatever they want. *Cada cabeza es un mundo*, they have a mind of their own" (p. 257). McCall's first two novels and her hope "that everyone find[s] life in reading books, any books, because books are the words of wisdom" make us confident she will continue to give young adults and their teachers texts that will offer affirming literary and cultural odysseys.

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