



**Classroom Guide for  
THE STORYTELLER'S CANDLE/LA  
VELITA DE LOS CUENTOS**

Written by **Lucía González**  
Illustrated by **Lulu Delacre**

### Reading Level

\*Reading Level: Grades 3–4

Interest Level: Grades 1–6

Guided Reading Level: O

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.9/.5

Lexile™ Level: 730

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

### Themes

Libraries, Reading, Storytelling, Education, Mentors, Friendship, Immigration/Immigrant Experience, United States History, Biography (historical fiction), Latino Interest

### Synopsis

The winter of 1929 feels especially cold to cousins Hildamar and Santiago—they arrived in New York City from warm, sunny Puerto Rico only months before. Their island home feels very far away indeed, especially with Three Kings' Day rapidly approaching.

But then a magical thing happens. A visitor appears in their class, a gifted storyteller and librarian by the name of Pura Belpré. She opens the children's eyes to the public library and its potential to be the living, breathing heart of the community. The library, after all, belongs to everyone—whether you speak Spanish, English, or both.

Hildamar and Santiago spread the news that Spanish is spoken at the New York Public Library, much to the residents' surprise. Pura Belpré, the librarian, welcomes the newcomers to the story room with a traditional tale from Puerto Rico about Martina, a Spanish cockroach, and Ratoncito Pérez, a mouse. The familiar story and Spanish books on the library shelves comfort the children and their families.

The library announces that there will be a fiesta and play to celebrate Three Kings' Day on January 5. The community comes together to create the music, costumes, and stage. Pura Belpré concludes the event, like she does with all of her stories, by having the children blow out the storyteller's candle so their wishes will come true.

The award-winning team of Lucía González and Lulu Delacre has crafted an homage to Pura Belpré, New York City's first Latina librarian. Through her vision and dedication, the warmth of Puerto Rico comes to the island of Manhattan in a most unexpected way.

## BACKGROUND

*On Pura Belpré (from the Afterword):* Pura Belpré was born sometime between 1899 and 1903 in the little town of Cidra, Puerto Rico, in a home full of storytellers. The stories she heard from her grandmother had been handed down by word of mouth for generations. These stories came with her to the United States in the early 1920s.

Pura Belpré began her career as a children's librarian when she became the first Puerto Rican librarian to be hired by the New York Public Library system. She had a great passion for library work, and her passion lasted a lifetime. Pura Belpré was also a magnificent storyteller and puppeteer with a deep and evocative voice. Her story *Pérez and Martina*, first published in 1932, remains a classic of children's literature. In 1996, the Pura Belpré Award was established to honor Latino writers and illustrators whose children's books celebrate the Latino cultural experience.

To learn more about Pura Belpré's career in the New York Public Library system, check out the NYPL blog post, "[Pura Belpré, In Her Own Words: NYPL Celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month.](#)"<sup>1</sup> A listing of books that have won Pura Belpré awards can be found on the American Library Association site in the section about [Pura Belpré Award recipients and history.](#)<sup>2</sup>

*On Puerto Ricans In New York:* According to the Library of Congress' presentation on "[Immigration: Puerto Rico](#)," immigrants from Puerto Rico have been settling in New York since the mid-nineteenth century. Immigration to New York ebbed and flowed throughout the time Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony, of the Spanish-American War, and when Puerto Rico became a commonwealth of the United States. Puerto Rico experienced a serious economic depression in the early twentieth century, spurring many Puerto Ricans to seek out a new life in New York City.<sup>3</sup> Puerto Ricans living in the United States by 1917 obtained full American citizenship under the Jones-Shafroth Act. Leading up to the Great Depression, Puerto Ricans in New York competed with other immigrant groups for well-paying jobs. Language and discrimination proved significant barriers, causing many to settle for low-paying, unskilled factory work. The Harlem Riots of July 1926 were the result of racial and economic tension between unemployed Jews and Puerto Ricans.<sup>4</sup> In 1937 East Harlem, Oscar Garcia Rivera Sr. became the first Puerto Rican to be elected to public office in the continental US as a member of the New York State Assembly. According to the [PBS Puerto Rico timeline](#), the largest wave of Puerto Rican migration to New York occurred after World War II.<sup>5</sup> For information on the Puerto Rican population in America today, check out the [Pew Research Hispanic Trends Project.](#)<sup>6</sup>

*On the New York Public Library:* The New York Public Library was founded in the mid-nineteenth century. Today the New York Public Library offers many classes and events, including Adult Learning Centers that help adults work on basic English and literacy skills. The New York Public library currently includes more than 51 million items in

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nypl.org/blog/2013/09/13/pura-belpre-hispanic-heritage-month>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/cubana3.html>

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto\\_Rican\\_migration\\_to\\_New\\_York\\_City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Rican_migration_to_New_York_City)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/woman/timeline.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/06/19/hispanics-of-puerto-rican-origin-in-the-united-states-2011/>

research and circulating collections, among them materials for the visually impaired, English Language Learners, and studies in foreign languages.<sup>7</sup> The NYPL is the third largest library system in the world after the British Library in the United Kingdom and the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.<sup>8</sup>

*On English-Only Movements:* With various waves of immigration over the course of United States history, movements have emerged starting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to institutionalize English as the official language, discourage bilingualism, and stamp out minority languages. Currently the US has no official language, although thirty-one states have passed legislation making English the official state language. For a thorough history on English-Only Movements, explore PBS's *Official American*.<sup>9</sup>

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Take a look at the front and back cover. Take a picture walk. Ask students to make a prediction. Do you think this book will be fiction or nonfiction? What makes you think so? What clues do the author and illustrator give to help you know whether this book will be fiction or nonfiction?
2. What do you know about stories that are biographies? What kinds of things happen in biographies? What are some things that will not happen in biographies? Why do authors write biographies? How do you think their reasons differ from authors who write fiction? What are some of the characteristics of a biography?
3. What is a librarian? What does a librarian do? What are some ways people use libraries? Why are libraries important? Why does almost every community offer some type of library? Share a memory you have of a librarian or a library helping you in some way.
4. What do you know about New York City (in the 1920s)? What were some challenges that immigrants faced when they moved to the United States? Why might people immigrate to New York City from other countries?
5. Why do you think I chose this book for us to read today?

### Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Read and talk about the title of the book. Ask students what they think the title means. Then ask them what they think this book will most likely be about and who the book might be about. What places might be talked about in the text? What do you think might happen? What information do you think you might learn? What makes you think that?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, title page, Introduction, English and Spanish language text, illustrations, backmatter, illustrator's note, and glossary of terms.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl>

<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_York\\_Public\\_Library](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_Public_Library)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/officialamerican/>

Have students read to find out who Pura Belpré was and what the title, *The Storyteller's Candle*, refers to. Encourage students to consider why the author, Lucía González, would want to share this story with children.

Have students also read to determine why the text is written in both English and Spanish.

## VOCABULARY

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

### CONTENT SPECIFIC

Great Depression	<i>Nueva York</i>	Manhattan	<i>El Barrio</i>	<i>Navidad</i>
<i>Bendito</i>	<i>pasteles</i>	<i>parrandas</i>	<i>aguinaldos</i>	<i>niños</i>
<i>luceros</i>	<i>buenos días</i>	<i>español</i>	<i>nenes</i>	<i>mami</i>
<i>titi</i>	<i>tío</i>	<i>viva</i>	<i>habichuelas</i>	<i>café</i>
<i>doña</i>	<i>don</i>	<i>bienvenidos</i>	<i>fiesta</i>	<i>vecinos</i>
<i>bodega</i>	Caribbean	<i>maracas</i>	<i>la biblioteca es para todos</i>	
<i>El Día de los Reyes/Three Kings' Day</i>				

### ACADEMIC

harsh	tropical	chimed in	slender	countertop	declared
handsome	doubting	gallant	cockroach	applause	carpenter
preparations	impatiently	tiptoe	concluded	gentle	twinkling

In addition to the Spanish-language version of the story, there are quite a few Spanish words in the English text. English translations immediately follow most of the Spanish words and have rich context for students to practice inferring the meanings of the words. The book also provides a small glossary of terms on the last page for reference.

If your class has Spanish-speaking students, encourage them to volunteer to translate the words for the class. In doing so, these students can feel proud of sharing the role of teacher to their peers.

## AFTER READING

### Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite evidence with their answers.**

<b>Literal Comprehension</b>
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(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1 and 3)

1. What information is provided in the introduction? What is the purpose of an introduction in a biography? How does this introduction help you understand the story of Pura Belpré?
2. Where was El Barrio? Who lived there?
3. How did the people of El Barrio feel about New York winters? About living in New York? What challenges faced people who lived in El Barrio?

4. How did Hildamar and Santiago feel about winter? Why?
5. What is Three Kings Day? Who celebrates that holiday? When? How is it celebrated?
6. Why was celebrating Three Kings Day important to Hildamar, Santiago, Pura Belpre, and the community of El Barrio?
7. On page 8, what does Hildamar ask Titi María? What does this tell you about Hildamar's life? How is her experience different from or similar to yours?
8. What did Hildamar and Santiago think of Pura Belpré? What important information did she give them?
9. How did the people in El Barrio respond to Pura Belpré? What was their impression of her? How do you know?
10. What did Pura Belpre do to bring people from the community into the library? Why was it important to have Spanish language books in the library?

### Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strand 6)

1. Think about the way the English and Spanish text is laid out in the book. Where are the Spanish words? Where are the English words? Why do you think they are positioned this way?
2. In this book, sometimes Spanish words are included in the English text. What do you think was the author's reason for doing this? How does the inclusion of Spanish words and phrases add to the experience of reading Pura Belpré's story?
3. What kind of person was Pura Belpré? How would you describe her? Think about what she says and what she does. Think about her career and her contributions to her community. Does the author want you to aspire to be like Pura Belpré or not? What makes you think so?
4. What is "Navidad?" What clues in the text did you use to help you figure out what that word means?
5. Why did Pura Belpré use a candle every time she shared a story? How did it set the mood for the children? What made the candle important to the story?
6. Take a close look at Lulu Delacre's illustrations. What unique material did she use in the images? Why do you think she used it? How did it add to the story?
7. What was special about the first story Pura Belpré's told the children in the book? Why did her story impact Hildamar and Santiago particularly?
8. Reread page 16. Why do you think the adults had doubts about going into the library? What was holding them back?
9. What is the theme/author's message of the story? What does the author, Lucía González, want you to learn through Pura Belpré's story?
10. How did Pura Belpré change the community? What did the adults learn in this story? What did the children learn?
11. Why do you think the New York Public Library wanted to hire Pura Belpré? How did Pura Belpré change the library?
12. Why do you think it is important for libraries to offer books, resources, and space for many languages? How would our communities be affected if languages other than English were not allowed?

### Literature Circles

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.

- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines or sentences in the story that explain new vocabulary words.
- The **Illustrator** might illustrate a new scene from the book using old newspapers as a collage element along with other art media.
- The **Connector** might find other books written about immigrants who made an impact during the same time in history that Pura Belpré lived.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting
- The **Investigator** might look for information about libraries, librarians, and bilingual books.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

### Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)  
(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3, Craft & Structure, Strands 4–6, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. Why did the author, Lucía González, choose to call this biography *The Storyteller's Candle*? Do you think this is a good title for Pura Belpré's biography? Why or why not? Use examples from the book to support your answer.
2. Which parts of the book did you connect to the most? Which parts of the story did you connect to the least? Why? What memory can you share of a librarian or library helping you in some way?
3. Why are libraries an important part of a community? What do you think would happen to your community if there was no library? Who benefits from a community library? What can someone do at a library, in addition to reading books?
4. Have students write a book recommendation for *The Storyteller's Candle* explaining why they would or would not recommend this book to other students.
5. Read the author's note on the next to last page of the book. Why is Pura Belpré an important historical figure? How did her actions and choices make a positive change in her community? How might El Barrio have been different if Pura Belpré hadn't worked at the library there?
6. What do you think the children, Hildamar and Santiago, wished for when they blew out the storyteller's candle? What do you think the adults wished for? What would you wish for if you were given the chance? Why?

### ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader. Students who speak Spanish can help with the pronunciations of the Spanish words and terms in the book.

2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
  - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
  - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about a character or central figure in the story.
5. The story contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

### INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Student who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

#### Social Studies

1. Ask students to research immigration to the United States in the 1920s and 1930s through Ellis Island. Who immigrated to the US? Why did people choose to move here? Where were the immigrants from? What challenges did they face once they arrived? Where did many of the immigrants settle? How did their lives change? What traditions did they try to preserve?
2. Have students research New York City in the 1920s and 1930s. What immigrant groups were living there? In what neighborhoods or areas were the different communities living? What type of work was available to new immigrants? What languages other than English were spoken? What was school like for new students, especially if they didn't speak English?

#### Language Arts

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3)

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strand 9)

1. Several of Pura Belpré's stories are still in print. Help students find a copy of the story *Pérez and Martina* (in your local library or through inter-library loan). Read the story together and then let volunteers act it out. You may also wish to follow this procedure with some of Pura Belpré's other stories that are available.
2. Invite a local storyteller to visit the class for a storytelling event.
3. Read the book *Richard Wright and the Library Card*. Have students compare and contrast the librarians in the two books. Students may also compare and contrast the treatment of different groups of people in the stories. How have libraries changed from the 1920s to today? Why did Hildamar and Santiago in *The Storyteller's Candle* and Richard Wright in *Richard Wright and the Library Card* have such different experiences? Why were libraries so important to the characters in the two books?

#### Art

1. Have students split the story of *Pérez and Martina* into parts and let them illustrate scenes from the story. Some students may also wish to make puppets for the story, as Pura Belpré did.
2. Lulu Delacre, illustrator of the book, included newsprint in every illustration. Have students search the pages to find the newsprint, and then talk about what they discovered. Interested students may also wish to make their own collage illustrations incorporating discarded newspapers, magazines, and/or other print materials.

### Home-School Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2 and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strand 7)

1. Invite students to interview their parents, grandparents, or older relatives. When did their family first come to the United States? Who was the first to come? How did that person or persons get here? What challenges did they face when they arrived? What motivated their family member to leave their home country? How does the family keep its culture and traditions alive? What traditions or stories have been passed down to each younger generation?
2. Encourage students to ask parents, grandparents, and/or guardians to help them research immigrant groups in their community or town. What languages are spoken? Where did people come from? What are some of the reasons that motivated or caused people to move to the United States or this community/town in particular?
3. Take students on a trip to your local public library. Arrange for students to interview a librarian there, check out books, and see what events are coming up. Have students prepare a list of interview questions in advance. For example: What motivated him or her to become a librarian? What is his or her favorite part of being a librarian? What are some of the challenges? How have libraries changed? Why is it important for communities to have libraries?
4. Have students ask an older family member or other adult they know well to tell them a story or folktale they remember from growing up. Encourage students to bring the story to school and allow children to share the stories with the class or in small groups. Use a “storyteller’s flashlight,” instead of a candle, to set the mood, and allow students to make a wish at the end of the story. Some of the adults could also be invited to share their stories to the class.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lucía González** is an award-winning author, a bilingual storyteller, a puppeteer, and a children’s librarian. Born in Cuba, she is a dynamic performer celebrated for her storytelling technique. González performs string stories, puppetry, and anecdotes about growing up in Cuba and coming to the United States. She also tells the legends of various Latino cultures. A two-time recipient of a Pura Belpré Author Award Honor, González lives in Miami, Florida, with her family and two cats.

### ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Lulu Delacre** is the author and illustrator of many award-winning children’s books, as well as a nonfiction novel for teens. Winner of several Pura Belpré Illustrator Award Honors, Delacre has been named a Maryland Woman in the Arts and has served as a juror for the 2003 National Book Awards. She first learned how to illustrate picture books by looking through the collection in the children’s room of her local public library. A common thread in Delacre’s work, which has been exhibited internationally, is the celebration of her Latino heritage. A native of Puerto Rico, Delacre lives with her husband in Silver Spring, Maryland. [Her website is luludelacre.com.](http://www.luludelacre.com)

### Book Information

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### RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *The Storyteller's Candle* at: <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2804>

### Order Information

#### On the Web:

<http://www.leeandlow.com> (general order information)

<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2804> (secure online ordering)

#### By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

212-683-1894 fax

#### By Mail:

Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, NY, NY 10016

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