



FOCAL Points ~ ~



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FOCAL Award Luncheon, January 28, 2012

By Caroline Arnold

On Saturday, January 28, 2012, book lovers of all kinds—librarians, teachers, students, parents, authors, illustrators, readers—gathered at the Border Grill to celebrate the wonderful picture book, *Me, Frida*, written by Amy Novesky and illustrated by David Diaz, winner of the 2011 FOCAL award.

As people arrived, a slide show prepared by Mara Alpert of the Children's Literature Department flashed on the screen, reacquainting us with past winners, going back to 1980 when the first winner was Leo Politi for *Pedro: The Angel of Olvera Street*. On display at the front of the room was a striking black-and-white drawing of Frida Kahlo, created by David Diaz, available to the lucky winner of the opportunity drawing, enthusiastically promoted by Renny Day. David couldn't attend the luncheon because of a scheduling conflict, but sent his best wishes. Amy, who lives in San Francisco, had flown down for the day to accept the award.

The tables in the room were decorated with delightfully detailed centerpieces depicting the themes of the book, which had been made by art students of Ray Moszkowicz at Palms Middle School. Each centerpiece showed San Francisco, the redwoods, an easel with one of Frida's paintings, and a bird cage topped with a little pink bird and a purple ribbon inscribed with Frida's words.

Caroline Gill welcomed us as the luncheon began and introduced Martin Gomez, City Librarian. Then Barbara Metzenbaum conducted a brief business meeting. We all then enjoyed the delicious Mexican style Border Grill food, perfectly suited to the occasion! After the main course, Sandy Schuckett introduced the talented winners of the student essay contest, Killian De Rego, Gloria Aranda (who came dressed as Frida), and Morgan Schwartz. Remarkably poised, the three students read their essays, telling us what they loved about the book and why they wanted to meet the author.

Carol Raby then introduced the members of the award committee and showed a short video of a visit by David Diaz to Paseo del Rey School in December at which he gave a lesson to an auditorium full of fifth graders on how to draw a face—not hard if you follow his ten easy steps! Next, Carol Onofrio came up to present another one of her remarkable puppets, this one of Frida Kahlo in a flowing gold gown, red shawl, and jade necklace, just as described in the last scene of the book.

And, finally, Amy Novesky told us in her acceptance speech about herself and how she came to write *Me, Frida*. She grew up in California near the beach and knew she wanted to be a writer from the age of nine. She has always liked to tackle difficult subjects for her books and spent ten years working on *Me, Frida*. She told how in the process of “turning a not quite story into a story” she came upon the image of the little bird as a theme to carry through the book. She emphasized her life-long love of books and how much libraries helped shape her as a writer.

The day ended with autographing and a tour of the library for Amy. Afterward, she wrote, “I really enjoyed taking a tour of the children’s wing of the library—what a gorgeous building—and seeing all of the FOCAL award-winning books and puppets. To see *Me, Frida* among them really brought home the meaning of this award.”

EDITORS’ NOTES

Amy’s most gracious thank-you note is on the next page, along with some photos. Everyone said it was the best luncheon ever. Kudos to everyone involved !

Congratulations to Eva Mitnick, who is on this year’s Newbery Committee.

FUN FOR KIDS: Some highlights coming up...

Saturday, March 24 Family Program “**Flights of Fantasy: Soaring on the Wings of a Tale**”
Multicultural stories and fables (Mark Taper Auditorium, 2pm)

Saturday April 7 Family Program “**Science Day 2012: What a Hoot**” . Explore the science of sound from the Discovery Science Center. Hands-on science activities from the California Science Center. Crafts, experiments, volunteer readers and more. Thornton and Children’s Courtyards, Taper Auditorium, 1-3 pm.

Saturday April 28 Family Program “**Hula O Hoaloha**”. Hawaiian culture through dance and music (Mark Taper Auditorium, 2pm)

Special Spring Break Programs in Children’s Literature: Week of April 2-6. Games and activities for children of all ages (11am in Children’s Literature).

LA TEEN AUTHOR READING NIGHT Thursday, February 23, 6:30 pm

Hosted by Cecil Castelluci. Reading and panel discussion with: Lauren Kate, Abby McDonald, Kathy McCullough, Blake Nelson and Carol Tanzman (Meeting Room A)



Dear Carol, Caroline and the entire FOCAL Organization,

I want to thank you again for the award and for the wonderful luncheon. You were all so welcoming, and your support of and praise for Me, Frida was truly touching. Thank you, too, for the puppet and the table centerpiece and the essays. I really enjoyed taking a tour of the children's wing of the library – what a gorgeous building! – and seeing all of the FOCAL award-winning books and puppets. To see Me, Frida among them really brought home the meaning of this award. It is one of the highlights of my career. I hope my speech expressed how important libraries were to shaping me as a writer. My speech was so long at one point, I ended up having to cut the part about my love of librarians, how one in particular inspired me so much, I applied to library school! You all inspire me, too. The work you do is so important and valuable. The kids of Los Angeles are lucky to have such a wonderful place(s) to go, to read and be inspired, and they are lucky to have all of you.

It was a pleasure meeting you all! Thank you again.

Love,
Amy



FOCAL ESSAY CONTEST – 2011

Winning Essays

Grades 3-4: Killian De Rego, 4th grader at Paseo del Rey School

Nobody paid attention to Frida! The book, Me, Frida by Amy Novesky is about artist Frida Kahlo and her trip to San Francisco. What strikes me is that Frida hasn't had anyone pay attention to her, but she gets enough courage and everyone pays attention to her. She started painting wonderful paintings. In the illustration on the page with the author's note, she and her husband, Diego Rivera are both standing side by side with the love to paint. At the end of the story, Frida is painted bigger and more colorfully because it was her first art show.

Inside, Frida was a good painter, but ignored. Because I am small I used to get passed up for basketball team picking. Nobody paid attention to me. One day, I made a shot, and then everybody started passing to me. They found out inside I am really good at basketball.

A character from the book that stuck with me is the pink bird with the wavy feathers. It was always there to communicate with Frida and the reader about problems happening in the story. A scene I really liked in the book is on the last page where Frida is big this time and Diego was the one in the painting in the background.

It would mean everything in the world to meet the author! Amy Novesky writes so I just want to read more. It is like all the information about Frida is flowing into my mind from hers. The source of all this power is the book and the love of reading. The same is true for the illustrator, David Diaz. His drawings are so beautiful that it is like I am right there with Frida, Diego, and the bird. This is what Me, Frida means to me.

Grades 5-6: Gloria Aranda, a 5th grader at Fairgrove Academy

Me, Frida submerged me into a world of color and style just like in one of Frida Kahlo's paintings. It was only four years ago when I experienced for the first time the colors, culture, and style in person.

I feel a personal connection with Frida ever since I went to Diego and Frida's Blue House in Coyoacán (a suburb of Mexico City). Her bed was my favorite thing. It was sort of like a bunk bed and there was a mirror on the top, so when she painted self-portraits she could see herself. In El Palacio de Bellas Artes I also visited her 100th anniversary exhibition. Frida's original paintings were truly astonishing and I'm glad my family and I got to see them.

The book taught me many things. That standing out is a good thing, never be afraid of trying anything that's new to you, and you can never work hard enough for your dreams. I especially enjoyed the scene where Frida Kahlo stepped out and decided to explore San Francisco on her own. It made me feel like I was exploring with Frida. In one of Frida's most famous paintings she is wearing a dress that looks just like one of my Folklorico dance costumes and that made me ever more interested in her life.

I'd burst with excitement if I met the author and illustrator. Meeting people that inspire you with their words and their drawings is such an honor. I looked at the pictures dozens of times and they could've

told the story themselves. I still ponder at how beautiful they are. *Me, Frida* is a new and marvelous look at the artist and her life. This book made a great impression on me that I'll never forget.

Grades 7-8: Morgan K. Schwartz, a 7th grader at Paul Revere Middle School

Frida Kahlo wasn't ordinary. In fact, she wasn't anywhere near it. Her husband, Diego Rivera was a very successful muralist. Because of this, he was asked to move to San Francisco, where Frida's life changed forever.

This book offers a fascinating short story and brilliantly colorful illustrations. Novesky and Diaz tell a tale of Frida that many people can relate to: moving away from home and having to start all over, just like Frida did when she moved all the way from Mexico to northern California.

As the book states, Frida spent long days without Diego, but she was brave, and she found herself in her new home, found a way to become herself again. She rediscovered her artist identity, especially when she painted her famous portrait, *Frida and Diego Rivera*.

I loved how the author interpreted Frida's thoughts throughout the story. I could feel her loneliness, I explored the city with her, and I was inside her bursts of creativity. Frida was not afraid of what people said, and that makes her a very admirable character.

In almost every page of the book, there is a bird, the same bird that is in Frida's painting. The bird is my favorite character. It is a symbol of Frida: small, until it spreads its wings, and then it's free. Once Frida spread her wings, she was her own person.

It would be amazing to meet the author, Amy Novesky, and the illustrator David Diaz, because they wrote, illustrated, and published an award winning story that explodes with creativity. This book is both fun and educational. Colorful, well written, and eye catching, *Me, Frida* is the best view of Frida Kahlo that I have ever read.



My Newbery Year

by Madeline Bryant, Senior Librarian, Children's Literature

With Autumn comes anticipation. The sun slants lower, weather and wardrobes change, and lots of newly published children's books hit the shelves. It was exactly this time last year that I began to really feel the very weighty responsibility (okay, the *complete stress!*) of making my first three nominations for the John Newbery Award Committee. Each committee member nominates a total of 8 books from October through December. Currently, my thoughts are with the 15 children's literature experts whose task it now is to select the "most distinguished" children's book published in the United States this year.

Members of the committee are responsible for reading the text of all children's fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and even picture books during a calendar year. Last January, I made room in my house for the expected arrival of over 800 books! Glittery envelopes, plain packages, and boxes of books trickled in slowly at first, and increased steadily until the "thumps" could be heard almost daily on my doorstep. I made friends with the FedEx, UPS, and USPS workers and thanked them profusely as they trudged up the 20 steps to my front door. The oversized bookcase I bought specifically for the task soon was double-stacked, spilling over into virtually every room of the house. Friends and colleagues helped me sort through this massive amount of text. I even held a "Newbery Party" which involved everyone sitting down with a stack of books and sorting them into possibilities. Every year during each month, committee members "suggest" books that should be looked at seriously. Through all this process, you are sworn to secrecy!

It may come as a surprise to many that the committee must wait until the Midwinter Meeting in January to have any genuine book discussion. Emails aplenty address issues of eligibility, publication status, various errors and even authors' citizenship status. Most of our discussion focused on "the terms, definitions, and *the criteria*" for the award (which are defined on page 10 in the 79 page manual) to which the committee constantly refers while reading and discussing. A book's excellence is determined by an author's mastery of interpretation of theme or concept, presentation of information, plot, characters, setting, and appropriateness of style. This kind of careful reading takes much thought, energy, and time. I gave up hobbies, quit my music lessons, missed many social events and even canceled an annual trip to my favorite vacation spot, Yosemite. I all but sequestered myself during the Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years holidays as I reviewed, revised, and re-read until I thought my eyes (and brain) would give out.

Imagine a job interview, final exams, and jury duty all rolled into one. That's what it felt like entering the "deliberation" room in San Diego last January. Nerves were already on edge and tension high. Luckily, we had a fabulous committee chair who broke the ice by bringing squeezable sponge tomatoes for us to use during times of anxiety (and we did!). Everyone brought food from around the country to nourish us during this long weekend of work. For two days straight, from 8:00am until around midnight, we discussed and debated the intricacies of each nominated book. Although the committee can select as many honor books as it wants, or none at all, only ONE book can be declared the winner. Knowing that your decision will forever change peoples lives only makes it *that* much more difficult a process.

As the Senior Librarian in the Children's Literature Department and the juvenile collection development manager for the Los Angeles Public Library, I am currently musing over Mock Newbery lists, scouring blogs, and tallying up starred reviews to make sure no good book has been missed. As the end of the year draws near, I am taking time to read much more than usual. But unlike last year, I

am not obligated to read every book. Or take notes. Or keep my speculations a secret! I feel incredibly honored to have been elected to the 2011 Newbery Committee. Serving on the committee was a career highlight and an opportunity that I will always be thankful for. As I wait for the big announcement in January, I am experiencing eager anticipation, fond memories...and a lot less stress.

Moon Over Manifest by Clare Vanderpool was the 2011 Newbery Award winning book.



***** MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION *****

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Membership is for calendar year, January through December.

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DUES FOR 2012 ARE NOW DUE

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