

MEET THE AUTHOR



Nick Glass of TeachingBooks.net interviewed Raúl Colón, in his New York City studio on May 14, 2014.

RAÚL COLÓN

You are the illustrator of more than thirty books for children and the recipient of a Pura Belpré Award, among many other honors. Do you have strong memories of drawing as a child or of events that influenced the artist you would become?

RC: One thing that happened in my childhood—and I know of other artists who have gone through similar situations as kids—is that I was very sick with asthma. I was born in New York City in 1952, and, back then, there weren't great treatments for the disease. There was an injection, maybe an inhaler, and that was it. For a while, I attended a special class for children who were sickly and missing a lot of school, but there were also times that I was bedridden. I spent a lot of those days in the house with a pencil and paper in hand, drawing to pass the long hours. So drawing is something I've done for nearly as long as I can remember.

What sort of feedback or instruction did you receive as a young artist?

RC: I was the kind of kid who was always drawing in the margins of my textbooks, and I remember a lot of teachers commenting on that, saying, "These pictures are very nice, but this is not an art class." But I just couldn't help myself; it was like my hand had a mind of its own, and I drew all the time. Other kids noticed, and they were always asking me to draw things for them. For some reason, they equated artistic talent with speed, so they might ask me how many times I could draw an elephant or a race car in a certain amount of time.

My dad could draw a little bit himself, and one thing he taught me was a grid technique. It's a way of drawing in which you pencil a grid over an existing picture that you want to draw—say, a photo or portrait—and another grid over a blank piece of paper. As you fill in the blank grid, box by box, you reference the grid that you drew on the original picture. That way, you measure things correctly and proportionally as you draw. I learned a lot from that technique early on, and I also learned a lot from comic books.

Please talk about how comics helped you develop your artistic talent.

RC: I used to read comics all the time, especially after Marvel comics became big. Superman started taking a backseat to Marvel characters like Spider-Man and Thor and the Fantastic Four. It was very instructive, trying to draw those characters. With Spider-Man, I tried to draw him in every pose I could, and I would always think of Steve Ditko when I did. He didn't write the character—that was Stan Lee—but Steve Ditko basically designed Spider-Man and the way Spider-Man moves. It was his design that I still try to emulate to this day,

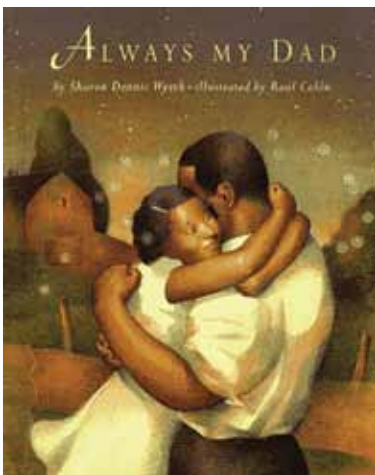
because I like to draw the human body in motion.

I actually tried to write my own comic books, too. I used to read a DC Comic called Sgt. Rock, which inspired me to try making a wartime comic book. World War II was big in those days for kids, and we saw a lot of black-and-white movies that were done during and after the war. I wasn't alive during the actual war, but those films were what you saw on TV in the years following. So the movies and Sgt. Rock were influential.

You discovered the idea of professional illustrating while living in Puerto Rico.

RC: When I was about ten or eleven, we moved to Puerto Rico because my mom thought it would be better for my health. Of course, it didn't end up that way because heat and humidity aren't always the best for helping asthma. But that's where we ended up, in her hometown of Caguas, and that's where I continued my education. Fortunately I already knew how to speak and write in English and Spanish, so I did okay in school.

I still kept drawing and reading comic books, too, and after a while, I began noticing all these ads in the comic books for this art school that would teach you to draw through the mail.



Those ads were where I first learned the word “illustrator” and [began to] associate it with the kind of work that Norman Rockwell was doing. I had seen some of his work in *Life* magazine, and I liked the idea of doing the stuff that he did.

I wrote to the art school from Puerto Rico and enclosed a little drawing test. They actually sent a representative to our house to meet with me, but at the time, we didn't have the money to pay for that kind of school. The representative said that if I was still interested in art as I got older, my mom should seriously consider giving me the lessons because there was enough talent there to pursue it. Maybe she was just saying that for the money, but that was the first time I ever had the inkling that maybe I could do this in the real world.

Did you ever receive any formal artistic training?

RC: At the time I entered high school in Puerto Rico, the federal government was a little kinder with the arts and education. In those days there was a special federal program that allowed students to learn a craft while still in high school, and one of the courses you could take was commercial art.

So I took the commercial art class, which was three hours a day on top of regular school. It lasted all through high school. When I graduated, I received a little certificate that said I had studied commercial art. That was it: that was my formal artistic learning. Learning through experience came later, when I began working in the audiovisual and graphics departments when I went to college. I also worked in a trade shop, doing a lot of paste-ups, which meant rubber cementing words on pages for printing. That was a really boring job, but it's how I started getting some experience.

You had experience in television before you found your way to children's books illustration.

RC: When I left Puerto Rico, I ended up in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where there was an educational television station for the local county school system. This was right around the time when audiovisual was really taking off and TV was being used to teach in classrooms. The station needed an artist, and I was hired. They had me doing everything from designing and building sets to working with their version of the Muppets. I learned about animated film and cartoons, and I learned about sales.

It was all really valuable and a great experience, but after ten years, I had read enough of the annuals from the Society of Illustrators and seen enough work of illustrators beyond Norman Rockwell in magazines to know that I was still clinging to the idea of becoming an illustrator, myself.

I finally quit my job, printed some cards, got a whole list of art directors in New York, and went up there having decided I would freelance like these other artists were doing. Those were my salad days—or, actually, my peanut butter days. I ate a lot of peanut butter sandwiches and macaroni and cheese; anything that could sustain me on the least amount of money. I had some money from the job I'd just left in Florida, but after about six or seven months I was about to go broke. Finally, a poster I had done for a Fox TV miniseries paid off, and I got that check in the nick of time. I could pay my rent. From then on, I started getting work for media like *The New York Times* and *New York Magazine* and assignments for album covers for RCA Records and later B&G Music and Sony Records. I was hired by corporations to illustrate their

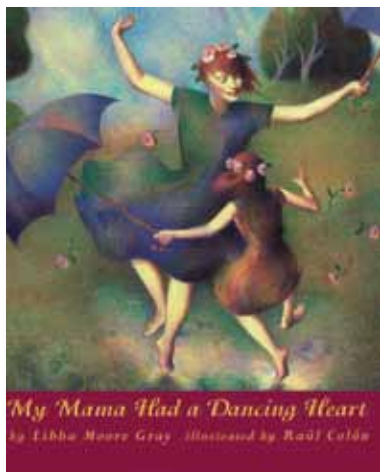
annual reports, which was a totally different animal because the art for the corporate world is very different. Things started to take off, and I actually began to make a living as a freelancer.

At what point did you begin illustrating picture books?

RC: Around 1995, some of my editorial art and work was featured in *The New York Times Book Review*. An editor at a New York publishing house saw it, and one day, believe it or not, I got a cold call from her asking if I wanted to do a picture book. I had been thinking for a while that I would love to try to do a picture book one day, and lo and behold, she called me first.

The first manuscript she sent me was *Always My Dad* by Sharon Wyeth, which is about a child whose father comes to see her on the farm where she is visiting with her grandparents. You realize that her parents don't live together anymore and that she sees her dad only when he visits his parents—her grandparents—on the farm. The story shows how she enjoys her time with her father, even though the visit can't last forever.

Always My Dad did very well, and then I was asked to illustrate *My Mama Had a Dancing Heart* by Libba Gray Moore. I began getting many manuscripts after that.



Do the characters you illustrate seem like real people to you as you develop them? They appear to have so much depth, almost as if you've infused them with their own spirit.

RC: I think that spiritual sense may come from how I grew up and what I was attuned to. My mom was very religious and very affected by the civil rights movement. I remember her watching TV once and crying when she saw some of the scenes being broadcast from the South, when they were beating up on civil rights workers.

My mom was very clear about what she felt about things. My parents are mixed. My father is dark skinned, and my mother is white. So I learned about things like this as a young boy. My mother always felt that humanity had to be better, that people had to be fairer with one another. I first learned to read Spanish because she wanted to be able to read the Bible with me in Spanish.

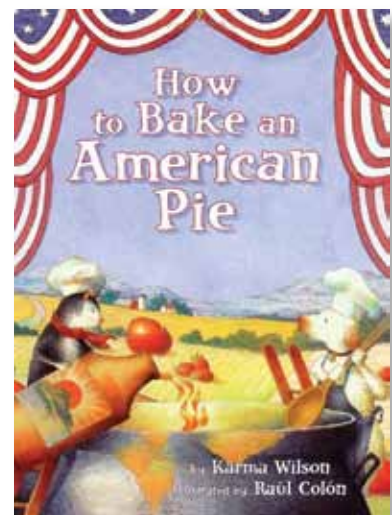
Because my upbringing was very spiritual, I probably carry a lot of that over into my drawings of people.

How to Bake an American Pie by Karma Wilson does not directly reference the characters that the reader sees in your illustrations.

RC: I illustrate a lot of books that are character driven, sometimes about famous people who have done or accomplished something important. But *How to Bake an American Pie* was much more conceptual. It's a poem, and there were no characters, so to speak, in the text. I decided to invent a dog and a cat, even though there is no mention of a dog or cat in the whole story, because I felt they could help tell this story of the American experience and move it along.

I did those illustrations using traditional pen and ink with a little

watercolor wash, and it's one of the few books I've worked on that only features animals. I really enjoy illustrating books about people, but I also want to expand into other subject areas like this. I recently wrote and illustrated another book called *Draw*, which is about a boy who goes to Africa to draw all kinds of creatures. The book is rooted in my own experiences as a kid, trying to draw everything I saw, and it gave me the chance to do something more with animals.



Please describe your artistic process. How do you develop your characters and scenes?

RC: It all begins with a manuscript that my editor sends me. I don't think about doing this consciously, but as I read the manuscript, I start seeing images of the illustrations in my head. If those images are intriguing to me, I know it's a manuscript I want to do.

Later, I create thumbnails of the images I see. They don't have to be in order; I may start right in the middle of the story or with some big or small event that happens that I find particularly interesting. And it may just be a single image that I know will help me figure out the rest of the book. For instance, I did a book with Frank McCourt called *Angela and the*

Baby Jesus. There was only one image that came to my head when I first read the manuscript, and it showed the children crossing the street with their mother. They were carrying this statue of the Baby Jesus back to church, because a little girl had taken it home after deciding the weather was too cold for the statue to be out in the church. That was the first image that came to my head, and I did a very small thumbnail sketch, maybe an inch square. That triggered the rest of the visuals for the entire book.

After I have a few visuals, I begin filling in the other pieces that I need to complete the story. When I'm ready to do the actual illustrations, I usually work with watercolors on good-quality watercolor paper. Most of the time I'll start by putting a basic color on the paper. I'll often tint it with a golden yellow and draw whatever scene I'm working on in pencil. After that, I'll put on several watercolor washes, usually in sepias and browns, golden-browns and terra cotta tones.

Once I've done all that underpainting with watercolor, I etch patterns into the paper in the areas where I want more texture. On top of that, I'll put layers and layers of colored pencil. For instance, for a background where the undertone is an ochre, I might put in some aqua and other blues in pencil, or maybe some purples and reds. Then I'll etch that, too.

When I begin adding the colored pencils on top, you can see the color that's underneath show through, and it gives the drawing a certain luminosity, especially if you're looking at the original. That's one reason I don't totally trust digital reproductions, because what you see in the digital version will never look exactly like the original. I've found that a lot of people are surprised when they look at an original illustration and see how

much more luminous it is in person than on the page or on a screen.

Your books have reached a lot of readers, and many of the books you've illustrated, such as *Roberto Clemente: Pride of the Pittsburgh Pirates* by Jonah Winter, are used in schools.

RC: I've gotten many letters from teachers over the years, and I know *Roberto Clemente* in particular has been used a lot in schools. I've also received letters and e-mails from children and classes, writing me to say they've read the book in school.

I think *Clemente* probably does well in part because boys seem to relate to it. An editor once told me that there are a lot of books being written for girls, but she'd like to see a few more male characters with strong voices. Teachers are looking for ways to involve those boys who are more interested in playing video games than reading. Books like *Roberto Clemente* can help, I think.

I've illustrated other baseball books, too, including a book on Jorge Posada and a new book by Louise Borden called *Baseball Is . . .*

You illustrated *Portraits of Hispanic American Heroes* by Juan Felipe Herrera, in which many Hispanic and Latino men and women are showcased for their contributions to society.

RC: *Portraits* highlights several famous people who all happened to be Latino who contributed to American society in some way. I think there should be more books that feature minorities and the minority experience because, from what I've seen when I visit schools, there are a lot of minority students who respond to characters whom they can personally relate to. So it's important to keep publishing these kinds of books. I've worked on some of them,

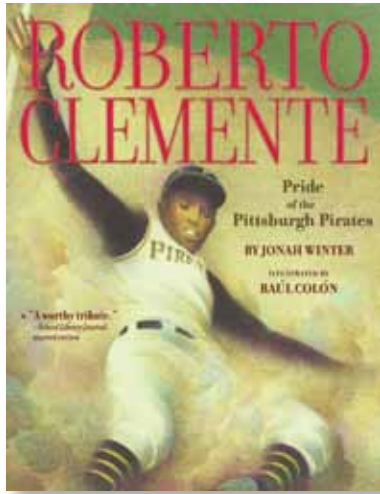
and I hope other artists are getting a lot of work doing the same thing.

At the same time, I want to say that I also feel that we Latino writers and illustrators should always try to expand what we do and not just illustrate or write about one particular thing or the other. We should be able to show children that you can grow into all kinds of art or writing, into anything that interests you. You don't have to stick to one point of view or experience. That's why I am comfortable illustrating a book about Martin Luther King, Jr., or Jorge Posada, or ballet, or cats and dogs. We should be able to show children that whether you're Latino or from another background, you can write about or draw anything.



There seems to be a musical quality to many of your illustrations. Is there any truth to that sentiment?

RC: I think sometimes you might detect a musical quality to my illustrations, even if the book isn't about music. I'm actually a frustrated rock-and-roll star. When I was a kid, the only other thing I would have done besides draw is play music. I grew up in the '60s, back when if you didn't pick up a guitar or the drums, there was something wrong with you.



Everybody seemed to want to learn how to play the guitar, including me. I didn't stick to it, so I can't say I'm a musician, but I learned enough to know what a chord is, and I played a lot with my cousins. We recorded a little, sang, harmonized. We had a band, and I remember the first time I wanted to do a late gig with them. I was sixteen, and I told my mom our plan, and she said, "Oh yeah? What time?" I told her I thought it started at midnight, and she said, "Midnight's when you're going to be out there? No, no, no."

So that ended my rock career. I still play, and in terms of my illustrating, I use music to keep me inspired. People sometimes ask me about what inspires me, and I don't think there is such a thing that can cause me to get inspired all of a sudden. But I do know that being involved in all kinds of art, including music, helps the mind stay open. And I've always used music to keep me going.

Are there times when you get stuck? What do you do in that situation?

RC: I do get stuck. It's part of the drill. What I've found, though, is that I only get stuck when I have a lot of time. I've never gotten stuck when I've been under the gun, even with editorial work. Editorial work can be the worst

in terms of time, because you often have only twenty-four hours to turn the work around. But for some reason, something always happens in my brain in those situations: my mind clicks into such a high gear that I get it done. I've never failed to complete a job when I've had only twenty-four hours to do it. I always manage to finish.

Sometimes the best ideas come to me that way, under pressure. But when I'm working on a picture book, I have a little more time, so there are moments when I get stuck. Usually what I do then is I'll go for a walk or play the guitar. Often by the time I come back, I'll have a few new ideas floating around. Other times, I'll just go to bed, and I'll wake up during the night and, boom, there's the answer I was looking for.

I was recently reading a book about how letting your brain relax allows random thoughts to come in, and that's where ideas come from. It's why a lot of people in the corporate world say they come up with big ideas in the shower. You have to get away from the work sometimes, and when you're not thinking about it, all of a sudden, a solution or new path will present itself.

What do you like to talk about with students when you meet with them?

RC: I think students like to know how I do my work, so most of the time when I visit them, I'll bring sketches and the mockup book I have, in addition to final art. They really seem to enjoy seeing my doodles and how I start the whole process. I think they connect with that stage. The kids I talk to are usually younger, and most of them like to draw, so when they see my early-stage work, they can say, "Hey, this is what I like to do. I like to doodle." They relate to it and to the process of how the art is created.

It seems to me that creativity and critical thinking skills are key to what makes us all better, but I worry that schools today are too caught up with testing, with everything being black and white with strict parameters. So I try to teach kids that sometimes you have to be crazy. You have to come up with the craziest ideas, and, from those, you'll create something interesting. Adults and the world may tell them they have to give that part of themselves up, but I think what happens to artists is, we hang onto it. We always keep it with us.

What do you like to tell educators?

RC: I usually share a bit about my process with educators, but what I really like to talk to them about is children. I like to tell them that if they have a student who seems to be a little off, who spends a lot of time doodling or seems to be in his or her own little world, maybe that's not such a bad thing. Of course they have to teach the student, but maybe there's something else within that student's mind that also needs to be cultivated. Unfortunately, figuring out that cultivation can be hard, because educators today have their hands tied. They have to stick to the program, and that's a killer, but I try to encourage them to do what they can.

Is there anything else you'd like people to know about you or your work?

RC: I think one thing I'd like people to know is that this work is not easy. "Persistence" is a word that I hear used a lot, but I can't think of a better one to describe what's often required to move forward as a professional artist. I've had to stick to my guns. It took me years to succeed, and I got a lot of rejections from people when I first started. But eventually, those people and companies became some of my

best clients. You have to be able to take rejection; you have to be able to be told that your work isn't good enough without falling apart. You have to receive the feedback openly, and be honest with yourself, and do the best you can. And from there, you'll learn and get better.



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