

BOOK REVIEW

We Love, We Sing, We Include, We Heal

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When We Love Someone, We Sing to Them: Cuando Amamos Cantamos by Ernesto Javier Martinez. San Francisco, CA: Reflection Press, 2018. Pp. 40. \$19.95 (hardcover)

In Mexican culture, a serenata is a long-held tradition of honoring a loved one through song. Whether it be on someone's birthday or just to express your love and admiration, serenatas are a beloved part of Latinx culture. In *When We Love Someone, We Sing to Them: Cuando Amamos Cantamos*, author Ernesto Javier Martinez explores the traditional gender rules of the serenata music genre. More specifically, he insightfully describes how the act of serenading can be modernized to be more inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community.

Cuando Amamos Cantamos is centered on a Mexican American young boy who learns about the importance of cultural musical traditions from his father. The protagonist yearns to express his feelings for another boy and believes a song would allow him to communicate his affections publicly. His father, upon realizing there is no song for a boy to express affection for another boy, aids his son in writing a new song. This story skillfully examines the definition of love and how it evolves from a father to a son, or a young boy to his schoolboy crush. As the story unfolds, it quickly becomes apparent that for the boy and his father, there is no one singular definition for love in the world of serenata. What starts off as a simple story of songwriting, is at its core a masterful metaphor for the struggle of traditions in a modern-day

and diverse Latinx community. LGBTQ+ members are an integral part of the Latinx community and groundbreaking books such as this one exemplify that acceptance and tolerance need to be taught beginning at a young age. Furthermore, the book shows how to address a taboo subject in a child-friendly, inclusive, and relatable way.

This book is a stellar example of Chicana/Latina children's literature because it places an emphasis on oral traditions and starts a critical conversation about cultural preservation. In addition, the unique angle of a queer protagonist allows this book to serve as an important counter-narrative to the ethnic stereotype that Latinx families are patriarchal or homophobic. Machismo, or aggressive masculine pride, is a troublesome socio-cultural issue in Latinx studies. Taking this into consideration, this book thoughtfully addresses why it is important to disrupt the accepted ideals of who can love whom in Latinx culture. In addition, it allows for a more diverse perspective of what it means to be Latino in terms of both language and culture. Many people identify as Chicano but that does not mean they speak Spanish fluently nor grew up knowing about Mexican cultural traditions such as serenata or the Mesoamerican deity named Xochipilli. By introducing these cultural symbols in a book that is written in equal parts Spanish and English, this narrative embodies the inclusivity it aims to teach its readers.

At its core, this emotional, fictional story successfully illustrates how to disrupt the conversation around hetero-normative standards in traditional Latinx culture. As explained by author Ernesto Martinez, this story allowed healing through the process of writing. Shepherded by revolutionary publisher Maya Gonzales at a six-week workshop, Gonzalez insists that the writing process allowed him to mind his childhood experiences as a queer person of color. According to Martinez, an associate professor in the Ethnic Studies

department at the University of Oregon, this book was never meant to “dumb down the world for children...but doesn’t reinjure them either.”¹ Instead, Martinez strove to highlight the importance of healing and acceptance, both prominent themes in this ruminative narrative. This children’s book was originally published with second- to fifth-grade students in mind. However, its life lessons of how to juggle a bi-cultural, bilingual heritage while also promoting acceptance for queer people of color can resonate with Latinx parents of children of all ages.

Notes

¹ Ernesto Javier Martinez, interview by Bobbie Bermudez, June 05, 2019, taped recording, Eugene, OR.

