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Talking with Jorge Argueta



Jorge Argueta is a celebrated Salvadoran poet and writer whose bilingual children's books capture the stories and landscape of his beloved homeland as well as the immigrant experience in the U.S. His poetry for children and adults has appeared in numerous anthologies and textbooks. He won the Américas Book Award, among many other honors, for his first collection of poems for children, *A Movie in My Pillow / Una película en mi almohada*. His body of work for children includes the bilingual fictional picture books *Alfredito Flies Home / Alfredito regresa volando a su casa*; *The Fiesta of the Tortillas / La fiesta de las tortillas*; *The Hen in the City / La gallinita en la ciudad*; *Moony Luna / Luna, lunita lunera*; *Trees Are Hanging from the Sky; Xochitl and the Flowers / Xóchitl, la niña de las flores*; and *Zipitio*, as well as additional works of poetry, including *Talking with Mother Earth*, and his series of "cooking poem" books: *Bean Soup / Sopa de frijoles: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar*; *Guacamole: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar*; *Rice Pudding / Arroz con leche: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar*; and *Tamalitos: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar*. He is also the director of Talleres de Poesía, a literary organization based in the U.S. that has helped to launch and organize an annual Festival of Children's Poetry in both El Salvador and San Francisco. Recently, Argueta shared his thoughts about growing up in El Salvador, how his roots influence his poetry writing, and how we can encourage children to "play" with poetry.

BKL: Can you describe the role poetry played in your childhood?

ARGUETA: Growing up in El Salvador was a magical experience. I had the great fortune to experience life in the countryside and in the city. I grew up around my grandmother, cousins, and a large family, with whom I developed a love for Mother Earth, growing corn, beans, and tomatoes, and taking care of horses. My grandfather was a horseman, and he had a strong, sweet way with animals. My grandmother was an Indian healer. She had a way with words, and she spoke to the mountains, the trees, the fire, all in our native language, Nahuat. In the capital of San Salvador, my family owned a popular little restaurant, where people from all over the city would eat and tell stories of the colorful towns they came from. Whenever I need to write a poem about my life experience, all I need to do is close my

eyes, and I find myself in those places, where memories can be bright, dark, sour, and sweet.

BKL: You obviously grew up with a strong sense of place, and that comes through in your work—particularly in *A Movie in My Pillow / Una película en mi almohada*. How do those roots continue to shape you as a writer? Do you feel a dual sense of place now?

ARGUETA: I love El Salvador. In my memories are the happiness of a boy and the discontent and discomfort of a young man who starts to see the injustices in an impoverished neighborhood. I saw in San Salvador a place where children my age were left in complete poverty and anguish—an atmosphere of no hope, with prostitution, drugs, and alcohol. As a young man, I knew that words could help me express what my eyes were seeing, what my heart was feeling. When I wrote *A Movie in My Pillow* years later, I was honoring the Salvadoran children I grew up with. I was honoring their dreams, and also my dreams, of a country with a better future.

I left El Salvador many years ago, and I am now a citizen of the U.S. My life is in two cultures. I enjoy my life in San Francisco, but I continue to love my motherland, like a child loves his mother's hands and eyes. I believe that poetry plays an important role in a child's life. Writing *A Movie in My Pillow* helped me not to forget who I am, where I lived, and what I want to share with others who've had the same experience. Every child in this, or any other country, should have their dreams lullabied and understood, and they be given the right to education and to be fully multilingual.

BKL: Which poets, writers, or artists have influenced your writing for children?

ARGUETA: I was influenced mostly by the landscape of my country, El Salvador. I was also influenced by my grandmother, my aunts, my grandfather, and my father. Singing lullabies to me, my father would recite poems of Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Alfredo Espino, Claudia Laures. As I grew up, I read those poets' works, and as a young man, I imitated their way of writing. I believe that imitation is an inevitable part of the process for every writer, before going on to develop your own way of writing. I learned about similes and metaphors and descriptions of landscapes, especially in the poems of Pablo Neruda, whose work reminds me a lot of the landscapes of El Salvador.

BKL: All of your poetry for children is published in bilingual editions. Do you write your poems in Spanish first and then in English, or do you move back and forth between languages?

ARGUETA: I see, feel, hear, smell, and write in Spanish, but I can also feel in both languages now. Similes and metaphors are easier for me in Spanish, of course, but I do my own translations for some of my work. I want my work always to be published

bilingually because I believe that children who come from El Salvador, or any other place in Latin America, should have access to our stories, so that they can develop love for their culture and for their language. Children shall find themselves in the books that we write, in the characters they see, in multicultural and bilingual books.

BKL: *Mixing food and poetry is an interesting and unique approach, and you do it beautifully. Did this grow out of your memories of your family's restaurant? Which new foods do you still hope to write about?*

ARGUETA: Yes, these books are inspired by my memories of the kitchen in my childhood house: the smells, the shapes, the colors, the pots, the pans, the water, the fire. I know memories don't really disappear. They live like flavors in our hearts and minds. When we close our eyes, we can travel to those places that are filled with shapes and colors—the food of our heart and our spirits. These simple books that talk about beans, rice, avocados, and tamales are profound, deep memories of my childhood. I can hear and see my mother's hands clapping tortillas. I can see the pots boiling with delicious onions, tomatoes, garlic, and bell peppers. I can hear familiar voices turning into a delicious pot that becomes a poem. I want to write more about these comfort foods, such as pupusas and stuffed peppers, with delicious landscapes. Pupusas are like two tortillas put together with cheese, beans, and meat. I can see myself writing this book and filling up this pupusa with corn dough, then with clouds from San Francisco, clouds from Mexico, and clouds from El Salvador. My next book in this collection of cooking poems is called *Salsa: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar*.

BKL: *In your extensive work in the schools, what do you find is the key to unlocking children's interest in poetry?*

ARGUETA: Playing! Children are natural poets. I come and simply am myself, without having anything to teach, sharing my love for corn, for rocks, for fire, for the moon, for my shoes. When you lose your fear of being ridiculous, that's when you are being yourself, and you let the madness rise. The kids understand that in that man or in that woman standing in front of them, there is something that reminds them of themselves, and you win their attention. Sometimes, I bring corn and tell them that the corn has stories to say, and if they pay close attention, the corn will tell them stories about where their grandmas and grandfathers came from, the stories of rivers and birds, of streams, and tall houses. The world of poetry is one that keeps on opening. It's one that never ceases to change. It has many colors and many shapes. Just like the universe—endless.

BKL: *You launched an Annual Festival of Children's Poetry Festival in El Salvador and San Francisco in collaboration with other cofounders. Can you tell us a little about it and why you helped start it?*

ARGUETA: I believe in the power of poetry, in the power of reading, in the power of storytelling. In my country after many years of violence, there continues to be a need for all of these. Our children in El Salvador grow up in an atmosphere of beautiful landscapes around them. When it rains, there is a torrent of sounds . . . an orchestra that comes down singing from the clouds. My country is green and yellow and orange and is an amazing place where children need to have opportunities. A lot of our youngsters are in jail, drugs, and prostitution. The power of poetry, the power of story traditions, can play an important role in the life of a child. The poetry festival—now in its fourth year—lasts three days, and children from different sectors of the country can come and enjoy poetry workshops. In San Francisco, I founded another festival for children, *Flor y Canto*, Flower and Song, which takes place on a yearly basis. Our hope is to reach the children in our community who need to get close to their heritage and develop a love for reading and writing.

BKL: *Each of your books of poetry for children has been richly illustrated. What role, if any, have you had in the art or design of your poetry books for children?*

ARGUETA: I have been fortunate that I've been able to meet the illustrators. In the case of *A Movie in My Pillow*, I became really close friends with Elizabeth Gómez, who did amazing work. She told me that she became a Salvadoran for a few months, eating pupusas and getting to know our culture, so that she could do the illustrations of the book. We had long conversations about the El Salvador landscape and my family. For my newest books, my editor, Patricia Aldana, decided that each would have a different illustrator. For the past five years, I have been writing what I call cooking poems, a recipe in a poem. Each one of these has been done by a different illustrator, and I am very pleased with the amazing illustrations these artists have created. I am amazed how the combination of words and illustration work together like magic.

BKL: *How would you say your poetry has evolved? What kinds of surprises have you discovered along the way?*

ARGUETA: One of the greatest joys life has given me is writing poetry and children's stories. On more than one occasion, I have found myself walking the streets of the San Francisco Mission District, and young people tell me they learned Spanish because of my books. In 2011, the District of Columbia in Washington, D.C., named a festival in my name, and my work as an honored poet was to visit schools. To my surprise, children had memorized my poems, and I heard them singing and reciting them. It was an amazing feeling, an amazing experience. But the satisfaction of writing poetry goes beyond my selfish feelings. I would like poetry to be accessible to every child, in this country and in any other country. Poetry is an instrument of peace, among children and adults alike. I believe that poetry should be taught in the schools as a necessary class. Every head of the government should know poetry.

BKL: *What else would you like to explore in creating poetry books for young people?*

ARGUETA: I would like to write history books that talk about heroes in my country and the unknown heroes of this country, too. I would like to write poems about my country's heroes and about the characters that I see in my neighborhood in San Francisco and that I find in the places that I visit around the U.S. and in other countries. I believe that it is necessary to explore . . . poetry in ways that communicate our history and values. We have in El Salvador hundreds of stories that go back to colonization, beyond colonization, and all the way up to modern stories. Our mythology needs to come through for our children in this and in any other country.

Sampling Argueta

Alfredito Flies Home / Alfredito regresa volando a su casa. Illus. by Luis Garay. Tr. by Elisa Amado. 2007. 40p. Groundwood, \$17.95 (9780888995858). K–Gr. 3.

Bean Soup / Sopa de frijoles: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar. Illus. by Rafael Yockteng. 2009. 32p. Groundwood, \$18.95 (9780888998811). 861. Gr. 1–3.

The Fiesta of the Tortillas / La fiesta de las tortillas. Illus. by María Jesús Álvarez. Tr. by Joe Hayes and Sharon Franco. 2006. 32p. Santillana, paper, \$14.95 (9780882722023). Gr. 3–5.

Guacamole: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar. Illus. by Margarita Sada. Tr. by Elisa Amado. 2012. 32p. Groundwood, \$18.95 (9781554981335); e-book, \$18.95 (9781554982097). 861. Gr. 2–4.

The Hen in the City / La gallinita en la ciudad. Illus. by Mimi Castro. 2006. 32p. Santillana, paper, \$14.95 (9780882722030). Gr. 3–5.

Moony Luna / Luna, lunita lunera. Illus. by Elizabeth Gómez. 2005. 32p. Lee & Low, \$16.95 (9780892392056). PreS–Gr. 1.

A Movie in My Pillow / Una película en mi almohada. Illus. by Elizabeth Gómez. 2001. 32p. Lee & Low, \$16.95 (9780892391653); paper, \$8.95 (9780892392193). 861. Gr. 4–8.

Rice Pudding / Arroz con leche: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar. Illus. by Fernando Vilela. 2010. 32p. Groundwood, \$18.95 (9780888999818). 861. Gr. 3–5.

Talking with Mother Earth / Hablando con Madre Tierra. Illus. by Lucia Angela Perez. 2006. 36p. Groundwood, \$17.95 (9780888996268). 861. K–Gr. 3.

Tamalitos: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar. Illus. by Domi. 2013. 32p. Groundwood, \$18.95 (9781554983001). 861. Gr. 2–4.

Trees Are Hanging from the Sky. Illus. by Rafael Yockteng. 2003. 32p. Groundwood, \$15.95 (9780888995094). 861. PreS–Gr. 1.

Xochitl and the Flowers / Xóchitl, la niña de las flores. Illus. by Carl Angel. 2003. 32p. Lee & Low, \$16.95 (9780892391813); paper, \$8.95 (9780892392247). K–Gr. 3.

Zipitio. Illus. by Gloria Calderon. Tr. By Elisa Amado. 2003. 32p. Groundwood, \$16.95 (9780888994875). K–Gr. 3.

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Common Core Connections

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with Jorge Argueta's books for youth.

In the Classroom: Argueta's first work of poetry for children, *A Movie in My Pillow / Una película en mi almohada*, focuses on his childhood memories of growing up in San Salvador and then as a young immigrant in San Francisco. In *Talking with Mother Earth / Hablando con madre tierra*, Argueta continues to explore his cultural heritage with a focus on his roots as a Pipil Nahuatl Indian, descendant of the Aztecs. After sharing both titles with students, introduce them to the concept of memoir and encourage them to write or draw memories of their earlier childhoods, describing their own "movies in their pillows." They might consider these elements drawn from Argueta's work: favorite foods (e.g., Argueta mentions pupusas); favorite toys (e.g., yoyos); favorite pastimes (e.g., bicycle riding); best friends (e.g., Argueta mentions old friends, including Neto, and new friends, such as Tomás); and favorite family times (e.g., Grandma's stories). As an additional activity, share another Hispanic memoir for children, Carmen Lomas Garza's bilingual picture book *Family Pictures / Cuadros de familia* (1993). Consider inviting students whose native language is not English to write about their memories in their native tongues or even in bilingual poems or prose.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.4.** Describe how words and phrases (e.g., regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.6.** Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.2.** Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.3.** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

In the Classroom: After completing *A Movie in My Pillow / Una película en mi almohada*, have older students research the location and history of El Salvador, the site of Argueta's earliest upbringing and an important component in his autobiographical writing. Students can find the capital, San Salvador, and if possible, the San Jacinto hill where Argueta's early

home was located. Ask them to also identify the vegetation, wildlife (especially birds), and languages spoken there, since each of these is referenced in Argueta's poetry. Students can present their findings as written or oral reports or as a collaborative discussion. As an additional project, students can study the history of the civil war that wrenched the country apart (1980–90) and drove many citizens to flee to other countries—as Argueta did when he settled in San Francisco.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.4.** Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.10.** Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.7.** Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.

In the Classroom: Share *A Movie in My Pillow / Una película en mi almohada* and *Mother Earth / Hablando con madre tierra*, and then pair those titles with Antonio Skármeta's book *The Composition* (2003), a fictional account of a community living under a repressive regime that asks its children to spy on their parents. During a class discussion, use a list or graphic organizer to highlight similarities and differences among the formats and ideas expressed in all three titles.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1.** Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2.** Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1.** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Common Core Connections

In the Classroom: Share one or all of Argueta's cooking poetry books: *Bean Soup / Sopa de frioles: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar*; *Guacamole: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar*; *Rice Pudding / Arroz con leche: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar*; and *Tamalitos: A Cooking Poem / Un poema para cocinar*. Use Argueta's lyrical model of writing "cooking poems" to guide students in writing about their own favorite foods. They can interview family members to obtain the basic recipes for the dishes, and then describe each step on a single page of its own with text and illustration. Encourage students to use similes and metaphors as Argueta does in his food-related books, comparing each ingredient and step in the process to something else. Share students' "cooking poem" books.

For a true multisensory experience, if your class has access to a kitchen facility, try to cook some of the students' recipes together. Or try cooking any of the recipes that Argueta details in his books: bean soup, guacamole, rice pudding, or tamales. Gather the ingredients and utensils ahead of time, read the book aloud to savor the language and imagery of the recipe, and work together to synthesize and write a list of steps needed to prepare and

cook your chosen dish. Be clear about those steps that can be handled independently and those that require adult supervision. Film your process like a cooking-show segment. Throughout, encourage students to explore foods from their families' traditions and heritage—writing in English or another language.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.2.3.** Describe the connection between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.5.** Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.2.** Paraphrase portions of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3d.** Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.