

# Book Links

BOOKS AND AUTHORS:  
TALKING WITH CARMEN T. BERNIER-GRAND  
BY SYLVIA VARDELL

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Talking with  
**Carmen T.  
Bernier-Grand**



Biographies are books that try “to breathe life and meaning into people and events,” according to children’s literature expert Charlotte Huck. Often, though, we have to provide a “hook” or motivation to interest children in reading biographies of historical figures. We can capitalize on their innate curiosity about people using books like Bernier-Grand’s, which often use verse to paint a portrait in a few, deft strokes.

Carmen T. Bernier-Grand has written picture books, novels, nonfiction, and poetry, scooping up three Pura Belpré Honor recognitions and many other awards along the way. Her work provides a strong sense of time and place and explores the people and stories of her native Puerto Rico as well as the lives of other Latino and Latina artists, dancers, and political figures. This feature focuses particularly on her biographies in verse, which reviewers have described as “powerful,” “lyrical,” and “inspiring.” These titles, with their blend of poetry, history, and biography, are excellent study texts for applying Common Core State Standards and for bridging language arts and social studies. Her books are often included on the annual list of “Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People” as relevant resources for use across the curriculum. In the conversation below, she shares insight into her life, her views, and her writing process.

**BKL:** Did you grow up with a strong sense of place? How did your roots shape your desire to become a writer?

BERNIER-GRAND: Salty breeze, yucca, *morivivi* weed closing its leaves when I touched it, *reinita* birds nesting in our Christmas tree, *coquí* tree frogs singing me to sleep at night. The five senses composed millions of songs in me in Puerto Rico. The roots of their rhythms shaped me.

**BKL:** Was poetry an important part of your childhood? When did you first discover a love for the genre?

BERNIER-GRAND: “*Margarita está linda la mar.*” I can still hear my mother reciting Rubén Darío’s poems, and my aunt singing, “*Muñequita linda de cabellos de oro.*” At five, I pretended to be Margarita listening to my mother; I was the beautiful little girl with golden hair in the song my aunt sang.

**BKL:** You’ve written several different kinds of books for young readers, including fiction and nonfiction, so how did you first gravitate to the biography-in-verse form?

BERNIER-GRAND: My first biography in verse came from above. I felt as if César Chávez was dictating it to me in that format.

**BKL:** Do you approach writing poetry differently from your writing of fiction and nonfiction? What are the similarities or differences?

BERNIER-GRAND: In poetry, I think in short, lyrical vignettes. Although I like to write lyrically in any genre, in fiction and nonfiction, I expand and explain.

**BKL:** What do you think biographical poetry might offer that a nonfiction prose biography might not?

BERNIER-GRAND: It’s a limited form, but I see the illustrated biographies I write as introductions to the people I am presenting—appetizers for the very hungry.

**BKL:** What kind of research goes into writing your poem biographies?

BERNIER-GRAND: I completely immerse myself in the culture of my subject. I eat the food, listen to the music, go to related plays, watch related movies, read literature of the person’s times, and, of course, research from home. The latter includes getting in touch with people who know more about the person I am researching. I write the first draft by hand (maybe because I didn’t grow up with computers). Then I type the draft and revise it a million times. In the meantime, I am getting to know where the holes are. With those holes, I travel. And miracles happen! I got to meet Cuban ballerina Alicia Alonso; Diego Rivera’s daughter, Guadalupe; and Pablo Picasso’s grandson, Bernard Ruiz-Picasso.

**BKL:** Which people in history would you still like to explore in your poetry for young people?

BERNIER-GRAND: Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Casals, Rubén Darío.

**BKL:** Why are you so interested in art in your poetry writing, in particular?

BERNIER-GRAND: Here I have to give credit to former governor of Puerto Rico Luis A. Ferré. When I was growing up, he opened the Ponce Museum of Art. I spent hours looking at art from all over the world, but also by Puerto Ricans, such as José Campeche and Francisco Oller, who are also on my list to write about. How old was I? Much, much shorter than I am now.

**BKL:** What was it that drew you to write about artists such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Pablo Picasso, in particular?

BERNIER-GRAND: I wanted to write about a woman, and I chose Frida Kahlo for her painful but colorful life. Since I had done the Mexico City research for Frida, Diego came next. Diego and Picasso were friends, and their treatment of women was similar. So, why not Picasso?

**BKL:** So, to whom is Picasso leading you next?

BERNIER-GRAND: Picasso leads to Dalí!

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## Sampling Bernier-Grand

**Alicia Alonso:** *Prima Ballerina*. By Carmen T. Bernier-Grand. Illus. by Raul Colón. 2011. 64p. Amazon/Two Lions, \$19.99 (9780761455622). 792.8. Gr. 5–8.


**César:** *¡Sí, se puede! Yes, We Can!* By Carmen T. Bernier-Grand. Illus. by David Diaz. 2004. 48p. Amazon/Two Lions, paper, \$7.99 (9780761458333). 811. Gr. 3–6.

**Diego:** *Bigger than Life*. By Carmen T. Bernier-Grand. Illus. by David Diaz. 2009. 64p. Amazon/Two Lions, \$18.99 (9780761453833). 759.972. Gr. 7–10.

**Frida:** *¡Viva la vida! Long Live Life!* By Carmen T. Bernier-Grand. 2007. 64p. illus. Amazon/Two Lions, \$18.99 (9780761453369). 811. Gr. 7–12.

**Our Lady of Guadalupe.** By Carmen T. Bernier-Grand. Illus. by Tonya Engel. 2012. 32p. Amazon/Two Lions, \$17.99 (9780761461357); e-book, \$9.99 (9780761461371). 232.91. K–Gr. 3.

**Picasso:** *I the King, Yo el rey*. By Carmen T. Bernier-Grand. Illus. by David Diaz. 2012. 64p. Amazon/Two Lions, \$19.99 (9780761461777). 709.2. Gr. 6–12.

**Poet and Politician of Puerto Rico:** Don Luis Muñoz Marín. By Carmen T. Bernier-Grand. 1995. 128p. Scholastic, \$16.99 (9780531087374). 972.95053. Gr. 5–8. 

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## Poetry and the 10 Themes of Social Studies

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), in cooperation with the Children's Book Council (CBC), has an annual book-review committee that selects books for children from kindergarten to grade 12 and produces an annotated list of "Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People." The committee looks for books that "emphasize human relations; represent a diversity of groups and are sensitive to a broad range of cultural experiences; present an original theme or a fresh slant on a traditional topic; are easily readable and of high literary quality; have a pleasing format; and, where appropriate, include illustrations that enrich the text." Interestingly enough, the notable social-studies selections from the last decade included a total of 55 works of poetry, with an average of 5 poetry titles per year—and the most recent list (2012) continues that trend of including 5 poetry books relevant for social-studies instruction. Those titles follow:

- *Hurricane Dancer: The First Caribbean Pirate Shipwreck*, by Margarita Engle
- *Inside Out and Back Again*, by Thanhha Lai
- *Never Forgotten*, by Patricia McKissack
- *Under the Mambo Moon*, by Julia Durango
- *The Watch That Ends the Night*, by Allan Wolf

Complete annotated bibliographies are available on the NCSS website ([www.socialstudies.org/notable](http://www.socialstudies.org/notable)). In addition, annotations for each book also indicate the thematic strand most appropriate to each title. The strands are drawn from the National Council for the Social Studies publication *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*.

Here are the thematic strands for the social-studies curriculum, along with recommendations of recent poetry books that can serve as exemplary mentor texts in each area.

### 1. Culture.

*Cowboy Up! Ride the Navajo Rodeo*, by Nancy Bo Flood

### 2. Time, Continuity, and Change.

*Dare to Dream . . . Change the World*, by Jill Corcoran

### 3. People, Places, and Environments.

*Cowboys*, by David Harrison

### 4. Individual Development and Identity.

*Etched in Clay: The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter and Poet*, by Andrea Cheng

### 5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions.

*The One and Only Ivan*, by Katherine Applegate

### 6. Power, Authority, and Governance.

*When Thunder Comes: Poems for Civil Rights Leaders*, by J. Patrick Lewis

### 7. Production, Distribution, and Consumption.

*I, Too, Am America*, by Langston Hughes and illustrated by Bryan Collier

### 8. Science, Technology, and Society.

*Brick by Brick*, by Charles R. Smith Jr.

### 9. Global Connections.

*The Lightning Dreamer*, by Margarita Engle

### 10. Civic Ideals and Practices.

*Rutherford B., Who Was He? Poems about Our Presidents*, by Marilyn Singer

## Common Core Connections: Carmen T. Bernier-Grand's Biographies

Below are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with biographies in verse by Carmen T. Bernier-Grand. You can find more information about the standards at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

**In the Classroom:** In *What Would Cleopatra Do? Applying the Wisdom of the Past to Today's World*, Myra Zarnowski suggests that we build “historical literacy” by helping children make connections to today through activities that encourage them to interpret events in both historical and contemporary contexts. Zarnowski recommends the following four steps: raise a current question (for someone from the past); read historical literature about the person (what were his or her views on the issues of the times?); research and discuss the current question (using nonfiction, Internet sources, etc.); and answer the current question from the point of view of the historical person.

For example, here are suggested questions based on Bernier-Grand's books:

- After discussing *Frida: ¡Viva la vida! Long Live Life!*, ask students, “What would Frida Kahlo think about Lady Gaga?”
- After discussing *Picasso: I the King, Yo el rey*, ask students, “What would Pablo Picasso think about graphic novels?”
- After discussing *César: ¡Sí, se puede! Yes, We Can!*, ask students, “What would César Chávez think about global warming and climate change?”

Students can also research the contemporary topic at hand (e.g., Lady Gaga, graphic novels, climate change). Have students present their findings in discussion, oral presentations, or written reports. By speculating on the point of view that the book's character—Frida Kahlo, Pablo Picasso, César Chávez—might have regarding each modern issue, students are making connections between the past and the present. These exercises can help students see the relevance of reading about history as well as the timelessness of attributes such as dedication, integrity, and resourcefulness. And crossing genres from poetry to nonfiction and back again challenges students to employ multiple resources and think more critically.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6.** Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.4.** Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

**In the Classroom:** Bernier-Grand uses free verse to convey the life stories of her subjects, but these same individuals have also been the focus of many works of notable nonfiction titles and picture books for young readers. Pair and compare the poetic and the expository approach using some of the following text sets, based on Bernier-Grand's titles:

#### **César: ¡Sí, se puede! Yes, We Can!**

- *Harvesting Hope*, by Kathleen Krull
- *A Picture Book of César Chávez*, by David A. Adler

#### **Diego: Bigger than Life**

- *Diego*, by Jonah Winter and Jeanette Winter
- *My Papa Diego and Me / Mi papa Diego y yo: Memories of My Father and His Art / Recuerdos de mi padre y su arte*, by Guadalupe Rivera Marin

- *Diego Rivera: His World and Ours*, by Duncan Tonatiuh
- *Diego Rivera: An Artist for the People*, by Susan Goldman Rubin

#### **Frida: ¡Viva la vida! Long Live Life!**

- *Frida Kahlo: The Artist who Painted Herself*, by Margaret Frith and Tomie de Paola
- *Frida*, by Jonah Winter and Ana Juan
- *Me, Frida*, by Amy Novesky and David Diaz

#### **Picasso: I the King, Yo el rey**

- *Just Behave, Pablo Picasso!*, by Jonah Winter and Kevin Hawkes
- *Picasso and Minou*, by P. I. Maltbie

Working in groups, students can discuss those points that are different in each book and why that author might have chosen to include those particular details. Students can then present their findings in a bulleted list gleaned from the books of their choice. Finally, guide the groups to make a Venn diagram of facts that highlights the information found in multiple sources at the center of the diagram.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1.** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.9.** Compare and contrast one author's presentation of events with that of another (e.g., a memoir written by and a biography on the same person).

**In the Classroom:** Challenge students to take on the persona of Diego Rivera or Frida Kahlo in oral readings. Use both *Frida: ¡Viva la vida! Long Live Life!* and *Diego: Bigger than Life* to examine how the artists are presented through the poems in each book. Invite students to select and perform their favorite examples of poems about Rivera filtered through Frida's point of view in *Frida: ¡Viva la vida! Long Live Life!* These might include “Diego,” “You Have Talent,” “¡Extra!,” “My Diego My Child,” “Second Marriage,” and “What Do I Live For?” Next, ask other students to do the same with poems about Frida in *Diego: Bigger than Life*, such as “Wings of a Blackbird,” “Devil Frida,” “An Orchid for Frida,” “Anguish and Triumph,” “Diego's Words,” and “Death Dance.” Students can work in pairs or small groups to prepare their readings; then invite them to perform their poems in a point-counterpoint fashion.

Lead students in discussing how each artist talks about the other—about their first meeting, about their art, and about their lives together. How do their feelings change toward each other, and how is that expressed? Guide students in discussing the details that converge about each figure and how the poet portrays the emotions of each person.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.3.** Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.4.** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.6.** Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.