

TOMÁS RIVERA AWARD

By Marilyn S. Olson

MEXICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD 10th Anniversary Celebrated

Born in Crystal City in 1935, Tomás Rivera spent his childhood traveling the Midwest with his migrant farm worker parents. Rising from these humble beginnings, Rivera graduated from Texas State with both his bachelor's and master's degrees before receiving a Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma. Capping a career in education that started in Texas' public high schools, Rivera was named chancellor of the University of California-Riverside in 1979 – the first Hispanic named to a chancellorship in the University of California system – a position which he held until his death in 1984. He was survived by his wife, Concepción, and three children.

A Distinguished Alumnus of Texas State, in 1971 Rivera published his landmark novel *...y no se lo tragó la tierra! ...And the Earth Did Not Part*, which reflects the lives of migrant farm workers in 1940s America through a child's eyes. His other works include a volume of poetry, *The Searchers*, and a short story collection, *The Harvest*.

Texas State established the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award to honor Rivera's literary legacy and to congratulate and acknowledge authors and illustrators dedicated to depicting the values and culture of Mexican Americans.

The Tomás Rivera Award for Mexican American children's and young adult books, celebrating its tenth birthday on Oct. 28, was created in the College of Education at Texas State University to be an instrument for social justice, to promote reading and education, and to instill pride in the cultural roots of a portion of the American population that has been historically neglected by the publishing industry. In the first year of the prize, 1995, the regional committee, working to create a short list, had only six books to choose from; in recent years the number has sometimes been over 50 – not a number proportionate to the size of the Mexican

American population in Texas, but a meaningful number, nonetheless. Texas State's zeal in promoting the books and Anheuser-Busch's timely donation that allowed substantial prizes to be given annually have been rewarded. The anniversary celebration this year will help to raise public awareness of a group of volumes well worth buying and reading.

The books themselves – 11 in all, since two prizes were awarded in the first year – reflect the various committee members' attempts to define literary excellence and the authentic Mexican American cultural experience. Until this year, the books divided into roughly two areas of emphasis: the

biography or voices of ancestors and the fable or folktale with didactic intent. Tribute to the Southwestern landscape and other forms of beauty runs as a thread through many of the stories. Eight of the books are bilingual or available in both Spanish and English editions.

The biographies, autobiographies and histories vary a great deal, but most strongly emphasize the importance of reading and family encouragement of children's goals. *Tomás and the Library Lady* (1998) by Pat Mora and Raul Colón exemplifies the group in its recounting of Tomás Rivera's life-changing experience with a public librarian in Iowa when he was

a migrant child – a child who would grow up to be a writer, an educator, a chancellor of the California State University system, and promoter of education for Mexican American youth. The interchange between the story-telling of his grandfather and the stories Tomás reads in the books from the library, with the strikingly imaginative illustrations by Raul Colón, celebrates stories, respect between cultures, and dreams. *In My Family / En mi familia* (Lomas Garza), *My Very Own Room/Mi propio cuartito* (Pérez/Gonzalez), *A Library for Juana: the World of Sor Juana Inés* (Mora/Vidal), *Breaking Through* (Jiménez), and *The Farolitos of Christmas* (Anaya/Gonzales) are written by authors and illustrated by artists with a similar desire to inspire. *My Very Own Room, A Library for Juana*, and *The Farolitos* are stories of beloved young girls whose aspirations are accommodated by their families, even through difficult times. The poverty of an aspiring immigrant family, the gender discrimination of seventeenth-century Mexico and World War II threaten these dreams, but Amada is provided with a space to read, Sor Juana becomes the famous poet, wit and scholar, and Luz becomes an accepted innovator within her patriarchal home, a partner in a Christmas celebration. Lomas Garza and Jiménez, whose childhoods are roughly contemporary, paint and write loving tributes to their families but with a wider range of realistic detail. Although Jiménez's adolescent exposure to discrimination, immigration authorities and his father's labor-induced ill health is frankly told, he "broke through." Both authors give striking images, Lomas Garza's in the form of her well-known paintings, Jiménez's in words, of lives full of generosity, hard work, affection for little children, religious faith, a good eye for the beautiful in life, interested parents, loyal sons and daughters. The lessons about life put forward here are those many families hope to cultivate.

The animal tales and folklore-derived tales have, for the most part, very straightforward advice to impart, but the approaches are very different. *The Three Pigs: Los tres cerdos: Nacho, Tito, & Miguel* by Bobbi Salinas is a non-violent version of the nursery tale containing witty pictures of the pigs who are a pianist, a painter and great reader and writer. The reader,

temporarily laying aside his copy of Cesar Chavez's *Si Se Puede*, defeats the wolf. *Chato's Kitchen* by Gary Soto is a comedy about tolerance, about mice and birds living precariously in the same East L.A. neighborhood with Chato the cool low-riding cat. The out-witted Chato, however, is treated to the same humorous tolerance that he reluctantly accords to his neighbors. A lovable childlike villain who is not quite what he seems, much of Chato's character is conveyed in images created by Susan Guevara: a house full of grandmotherly furniture and decorations, a garden of purple flowers and clean laundry and a kitchen full of the freshest food. Rudolfo Anaya's *My Land Sings: Stories from the Rio Grande*, a book of folktales and modern tales on folklore themes set in the Mexican/Native American cultures of New Mexico, depicts what becomes of young people who forget their home teaching. Respect

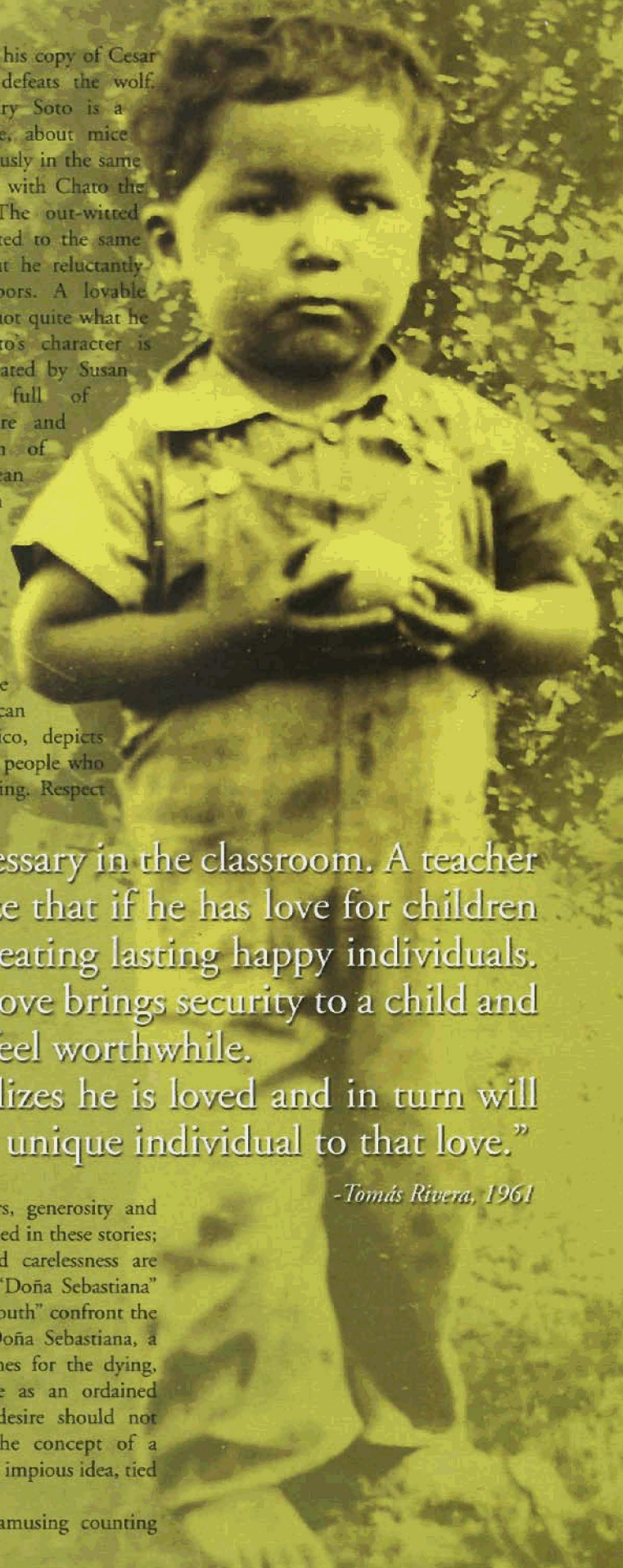
"Love is necessary in the classroom. A teacher should realize that if he has love for children he will be creating lasting happy individuals. A degree of love brings security to a child and makes him feel worthwhile.

A child realizes he is loved and in turn will respond as a unique individual to that love."

-Tomás Rivera, 1961

and obedience to elders, generosity and religious faith are rewarded in these stories; disobedience, greed and carelessness are punished calamitously. "Doña Sebastiana" and "The Fountain of Youth" confront the role of death in life. Doña Sebastiana, a skeletal figure who comes for the dying, defines the end of life as an ordained moment that human desire should not attempt to change. The concept of a "fountain of youth" is an impious idea, tied to greed and discontent.

Just a Minute, an amusing counting





From left to right: Raul Colón, Susan Guevara, Beatriz Vidal, Carmen Lomas Garza, Yuyi Morales, Concepción Rivera (Thomás Rivera's widow), Bobbi Salinas, Pam Muñoz Ryan, Amada Irma Pérez. Winners not pictured: Rudolfo Anaya, Edward Gonzales, Maya Christina Gonzalez, Francisco Jiménez, Pat Mora and Gary Soto

Winners

2004 Pam Muñoz Ryan *Becoming Naomi León* • **2003 Yuyi Morales** *Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book* • **2002 Pat Mora/Beatriz Vidal** *A Library for Juana* • **2001 Francisco Jimenez** *Breaking Through* • **2000 Amada Irma Pérez/Maya Christina Gonzalez** *My Very Own Room/Mi Propio Cuartito* • **1999 Rudolfo Anaya** *My Land Sings: Stories from the Río Grande* • **1998 Bobbi Salinas** *The Three Pigs/Los Tres Cerdos Nacho, Tito, and Miguel* • **1997 Pat Mora/Raúl Colon** *Tomás and the Library Lady* • **1996 Carmen Lomas Gana** *In My Family/En Mi Familia* • **1995 Rudolfo Anaya/Edward Gonzales** *The Farolitos of Christmas* & **Gary Soto/Susan Guevara** *Chato's Kitchen*

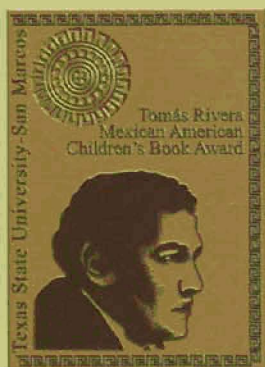
book for little children by Yuyi Morales, has its own rather ill-at-ease death figure in Señor Calavera. Morales never defines Señor Calavera's errand to the grandmother, emphasizing, instead, her good-natured and mischievous ability to make the visitor wait until an elaborate birthday party with her grandchildren is completed. The befuddled decorated skeleton labors about the kitchen, joins in the party, and – when grandmother declares that she can go now that her tasks are completed – puts off his errand in order to be invited next year. A tribute to labors of love and family affection, *Just a Minute* also exemplifies the reconciliation to the natural order of the person who has spent her life well.

Spending life well in these books has specific and repeated definition. The scenes of home are very beautiful, containing not only family and family pictures, but a fitness

and grace that exemplify a right relation to nature and the world. Windows letting in light, mesquite branches, mountain landscape, people in stylish clothing, fresh fruits, tile floors: a vision of an ideal world. Beatriz Vidal, who recreated the costumes and rooms of seventeenth-century Mexico City, surrounds the childhood of Sor Juana with flowers; Carmen Lomas Garza's Kingsville recreates the fabrics and appliances of the 1950s, in juxtaposition to the symmetrical and pleasing South Texas cactus and foliage. Maya Christina Gonzalez' too-small house is bravely colorful. Edward Gonzales' New Mexico skies and painted carvings balance, once again, the appealing garments and graceful attitudes of the family, whose religious and neighborly intentions gain dignity from the natural landscape.

Becoming Naomi León, Pam Muñoz Ryan's winning entry of this year, is both

like and unlike the previous winners. The story of a family whose roots are both in Mexico (the absent father) and America (the deserting Anglo mother), the tale is unusual in this list for being fiction rather than biography or folktale, including characters that are not Mexican American, and discussing the readers' own time. While it is too early to know whether *Naomi León* indicates a movement favoring contemporary social realism among Mexican American children's book authors or prize committee members, its "differentness" provides a lens through which to see the others. *Naomi* is a story of finding love and artistic encouragement in Mexican roots; both child characters already excel as students. *Naomi* pits the commitment of an Anglo grandmother, good neighbors, a caring hospital and school and a long-lost Mexican family against the perfidy of an addicted, selfish



and insensitive mother. While the other work for older children, *Breaking Through*, directly addressed discriminatory treatment in Jimenez's youth, and the attempt to build cultural pride (which many of the authors acknowledge) implies a kind of circling of the wagons against a cruel outside world, Muñoz Ryan's story does not mention this. In her classroom, there is harmonious ethnic diversity, already a good store of Mexican American pride and a welcoming attitude toward finding out more about Mexico on everyone's part. The cruel issue is, instead, maternal rejection of the children, particularly the little boy who is physically handicapped and emotionally fragile. Naomi's new-found ability to stand up for herself and her brother, to be a "lion," rests firmly on the bedrock of her extended family's nurturing priorities and gallant struggle against the limitations of poverty. In this case, though, the people of goodwill are predominantly, but not exclusively, Mexican or Mexican American.

Writing in the seventies about a fundraiser for the Chicano literary magazine *Caracol*, Tomás Rivera surveys Mexican American literary production as a "three part mission": *conservación, lucha e invención*: conservation of a culture; the struggle for better economic, social, educational and political equity; and invention — primarily of the emancipated, self-defined Mexican American experience that the Rivera prize committees have assembled to articulate every year. The children's books are more about a future of hope than a past of oppression; by becoming a presence in children's lives, they have the power to change the definition of an experience as well as document it. They honor their traditions. Happy anniversary! **HV**

Editor's Note: Marilyn S. Olson is a professor of English at Texas State, specializing in children's literature.

Tomás Rivera

Education

- 1969 University of Oklahoma, Ph.D.**
Romance Languages and Literature
- 1969 University of Oklahoma, M.A.**
Spanish Literature; minors: French Literature, Spanish and American Literature
- 1964 Southwest Texas State University, M.Ed.**
Education Administration; minors: English, Spanish
- 1958 Southwest Texas State University, B.S. Ed.**
Major: English; minors: Spanish, History, Education
- 1956 Southwest Texas Jr. College, A.A.**
Major: English
- 1954 Crystal City High School, Diploma.**
Crystal City, Texas.

Other Preparations

- 1963 University of Arizona,**
Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, 1963.
NDEA Spanish Institute Level I.
- 1962 University of Texas at Austin,**
NDEA Spanish Institute Level I.

Employment Record

- 1979-84**
Chancellor, University of California, Riverside
- 1980-84**
Corporate Officer, Times Mirror Company.
- 1978-79**
Executive Vice President and Acting Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Texas at El Paso.
- 1976-78**
Vice President for Administration, University of Texas at San Antonio.
- 1973-76**
Associate Dean, College of Multidisciplinary Studies, University of Texas at San Antonio.
- 1971-73**
Director, Division of Foreign Languages, Literature and Linguistics, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Texas at San Antonio.

- 1972-73**
Visiting Professor of Spanish (part-time), Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas.
- 1969-71**
Associate Professor of Spanish, Sam Houston State University.
Summers 1971 & 1970
Teacher, Mexican Field School, Puebla, Mexico, program of Sam Houston State University.
- Summer 1969**
Assistant Director, Language Laboratories, University of Oklahoma.
- 1968-69**
Instructor Director, Spanish Studies Program in Madrid, University of Oklahoma.
- 1966-68**
Teaching Assistant, Department of Modern Languages; and Lecturer on migrant problems in VISTA training program, Multi-purpose Training Center, University of Oklahoma.
- 1965-66**
Chairman and Instructor, Department of Foreign Languages, Southwest Texas Jr. College.
- 1960-65**
Spanish Teacher, Secondary, Clear Creek I.S.D., League City, Texas.
- 1958-60**
Spanish Teacher, Secondary, Crystal City I.S.D., Crystal City, Texas.
- 1957-58**
English Teacher, Secondary, Edgewood I.S.D., San Antonio.