

Little Rebels

Q&A between Neal Porter, Publisher Emeritus, Neal Porter Books/Holiday House and Yuyi Morales, author-illustrator of *Little Rebels*

Neal Porter: *Little Rebels* is publishing right at a time when kids need it most. How did today's international landscape impact the work you did on this picture book?

Yuyi Morales: Your question makes me reflect on when the right time for a book like this is. For children who are going through things like detention, hunger, displacement, violence, and even genocide, we are absolutely already late! And yet, Neal, I would say that making a book like *Little Rebels* at this moment is part of this path that we have taken in life and bookmaking. It was kind of like a spark ignited for me when we decided to make *Dreamers* and it made me realize that we weren't making a book about my individual immigration experience, but rather a book that invited us to recognize the struggles, the bravery, and even the beauty of the universe of migratory experiences around us.

And now, here is *Little Rebels*, which has taken me so long to write and to illustrate, but mostly it has taken me so much walking and so much wondering with people who are painting collective murals, and with neighbors defending trees and lagoons, and joining marches for demanding the stop of the Palestinian genocide, or anywhere in the world. In the middle of all of this, *Little Rebels* has been taking shape, from the inspiration I have experienced while working with people who defend the dignity of life, to the joy that I felt as I recognize that, yes, other worlds are possible, and we can create them with our words, thoughts, feelings, and our actions together.

NP: In your letter at the end of *Little Rebels*, you discuss the memories and discoveries that inspired you to write this book, including the evaporation of the Farallón Lagoon. How did you get from these initial inspirations to the finished book?

YM: In 2020, after I finished making *Bright Star* and *Lucero*, I came out of a nine-month creative confinement only to find out that the world around me was deep into the COVID pandemic. Like many of us, I needed a connection and a place to feel safe. Two important things happened then: the first was that I came to meet a feminist collective of young people called Hipericas, and the second was that I decided to build a little palapa, a hut-like home, in a very small town called La Mancha, near the ocean of the Gulf of Mexico. Little did I know how those two things would turn my worldview upside down. I remember how when I came to live in La Mancha, one of my neighbors told me that this place was so amazing that my next book would be inspired by it. And that is exactly what happened!

Characters like Kek, Señora Cangreja, and the plants and butterflies in the story of *Little Rebels* are part of the natural beauty of La Mancha. However, it is because of the richness of natural resources available that this territory is highly coveted by industries, both local and foreign.

The Farallón Lagoon is only two miles from my place at La Mancha, and while it had begun drying in 2018, it was exactly at the time I came to live in the area in the spring of 2021 that the Farallón Lagoon became completely dry. The first time I saw it from a distance the view was impossible to bear. My new friends at Hipericas knew activists that were working hard to bring the attention of the people to the loss of the Farallón Lagoon as the effects of the abuse and high-level extraction of the lagoon's water for agriculture and mining practices.

From those days I remember two questions that began forming in my mind:
When something like this happens and we lose something as big as a lagoon, how can any of us, who are rather little, do anything that can change the world that is so enormous?
And who are these people who are researching, demanding accountability, and working together to restore what has been lost? Aren't they ordinary people like you and me?

Answering these and many other questions is how I began my journey of making *Little Rebels*. But it was far from easy! Do you remember, Neal, how many versions of my book you saw and how long it took me to complete it? One of my biggest difficulties was that I didn't really know the answers to any of those questions! Again, my friends from Hipericas loved exploring difficult subjects with me, and one day I told a friend how I was struggling to even figure out how to begin writing the story. My friend suggested making my doubt part of the book: how shall we begin? And that is what I did! From then on rather than coming up with answers, I came up with a story.

NP: Each "Little Rebel" in the book brings a different perspective. What were the inspirations behind each of the three little rebels?

YM: So much of my energy went to figuring out who these little rebels were. While I knew they represented powerful things, I also wanted to make sure that they were common creatures living and feeling things we all experience, no superheroes, no special powers, but just the beautiful ordinariness of being children. Although I didn't give them names in my story, while I was working, I referred to each of them with certain words, for example, Roja is the child that represents the morning sunlight, they are followed by butterflies and love to dance, play, and speak poetry. My inspiration for Roja is the prince of flowers, Xochipilli.

Bruja carries their instrument called Jarana everywhere they go. They represent the knowledge of healing: they plant seeds, and they collect wisdom that their ancestors have passed from one generation to the next. To me they also have a strong connection to water.

Cabeza Olmeca is the jaguar child, they are learning when to use their teeth and claws and when to give tenderness. They are inspired by the colossal Olmec heads, and to paint them I photographed the colors and texture of one of these sculptures at the Museo de Antropología in Xalapa, where I live. I also need to mention Luna the dog. They are a representation of all the stray dogs that have arrived in my life since I've been in Mexico. Over the years, I find myself accompanied by dogs that somehow, once we cross paths, we start looking for each other and become part of each other's lives. Since it is very difficult to find homes for the majority of these dogs, they continue to be strays, but I organize spaying and neutering campaigns and usually ask people in the neighborhood to help care for them informally.

NP: How did your cultural background influence the making of this book?

YM: I would say that my cultural background sustains my stories. It is possible that for readers in the USA the cultural references in *Little Rebels* might feel like part of the past or a nostalgia for things far away, but the reality is that events in other territories are happening right now, and it is very important to me to bring awareness to how interconnected we all are even if I live in Mexico and you read my book in the USA.

NP: You have a very distinct art style that uses multimedia techniques and collage-like designs. What's your process for creating your illustrations?

YM: For *Little Rebels* I began making drawings in my journal, and on pieces of a roll of paper, and I tried many, many different ways my characters would look like. I love making drawings with my pencil and eraser, but when I felt stuck (which was often) I would turn to write down technical sheets where I listed and drew not only how they looked, but also how they acted, what they liked, and what they represented.

When my story began to take shape, I started making thumbnails, but this time, rather than continue drawing on paper, I decided to use my portable tablet. Yes, I made many versions of my story, and for months and years, every time I showed you what I was doing, I was getting a worried look from you, Neal! It took a record long time for me to have sketches approved by you, but when I finally had the story, I downloaded Photoshop onto my new tablet, and there I began the process of giving color to the story. As I have done with *Dreamers* and with *Bright Star*, I collected the images, textures, and colors I would use to paint this book. I photographed crepe paper in different colors, paper colored with acrylics, raw manta fabric, grass rope, wool, amate paper, and even the rock texture of the Olmec heads in the permanent exhibit at the Anthropological Museum of my city, Xalapa. I also took a picture of the soil at the Farallón lagoon, and with that image I painted the dry bottom of the lagoon that the Little Rebels encountered.

I also created my own digital brushes by photographing wool and cotton stitches from crafts I had at home, and with that I was able to create patterns that I used to digitally embroider some of the images in *Little Rebels*. Although I didn't do it with real thread and needle—as I did in *Dreamers* and *Bright Star*—this time I used my digital pencil and my table, moving and rotating the stitches until I would get the patterns I wanted.

NP: How has your creative style evolved over time, from book to book? Are there aspects from *Dreamers* or *Bright Star* that make a reappearance in *Little Rebels*?

Dreamers, *Bright Star*, and now *Little Rebels* are very connected. I would say, Neal, that one of the most important things I learned in the last few years is how the world we want to live in is one that we can only create in community. And when I think of who our community is, I have to go beyond human existence. *Dreamers* is a book where I explored the human condition through the lens of immigration, and in *Bright Star* I opened my eyes to the effects of the immigration policies on the environment and the natural world. In *Little Rebels* I feel very motivated to strengthen the connection between the environment, the natural world, and the people with whom we share this planet.

NP: How do you practice being a rebel in your daily life?

YM: For a long time, I didn't think of myself as a rebel of any sort, especially since I grew up believing that being a rebel was a bad thing! But now I want to explore the infinite ways of being a rebel:

I live with and take care of animals as much as I can. That means that I have stopped eating or wearing or using anything that comes from the imprisonment, mistreatment, or the killing of animals.

I boycott. That means I don't use services or have business with companies who support violence, the destruction of the environment, or genocide. For example, I no longer eat Oreos.

I make art, stickers, and protest signs, I hand-paint banners with words that speak of my dreams and hopes, and I participate in marches to pressure authorities and institutions to act with kindness, honesty, and respect for everybody.

I planted a small fruit forest and I am learning to be caring, to give space and to treat with tenderness all the creatures and plants that come to live in it.

I collect rainwater.

I changed my regular toilets for composting toilets so that I won't continue dirtying clean water when I have to go.

I organize with my neighbors into a movement that protects and defends my local lagoon, la Laguna de la Mancha, from being exploited and contaminated.

I am part of a weaving of love and care with my friends.

I am constantly asking questions, and I practice honest curiosity.

I write stories and make books where I explore how to be a rebel, so that, even if I am little, I can join other little rebels and thus make a difference to the big world.

NP: Why do you think it's important that children learn how to be little rebels?

YM: To me being a little rebel is not only something that happens individually, but rather something that we share with more and more people. And if children, no matter how little they are, can become little rebels with other little rebels, they together will have great strength and collective wisdom to shape our world into a more beautiful and safe place for EVERYBODY.

NP: How do you hope readers will respond to *Little Rebels*?

YM: I hope that children can see how they already are little rebels! Because to be a little rebel they don't need superpowers, or sophisticated devices, or to be something different other than who they are. All they need is to care. And being caring is a capacity that we all have, especially those who are young. So, I hope that children who read this book will be able to see themselves in a mirror, and they will recognize that being a little rebel is their most natural state of being. What a joy!



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by Yuyi Morales

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