

An Illustrator's Identity Crisis

by Laura Lacámara

My mom dug my first picture book out of a box in her dusty attic. I had written and illustrated it when I was ten years old. As I turned one meticulously hand-written page after another, I was amazed at how well the colored-pencil drawings of the little girl and her pony seemed to flow with the text!

"See," my mother said, "even back then you had a talent for combining stories with pictures."

Why is it then, I wonder, that I never feel like a "real" illustrator? But rather, like a wannabe, plan-to-be, working-to-be one. When I first started pursuing a career in children's book illustration, I told myself that as soon as my art appears in any aspect of book publishing, I'll consider myself to be "official."

The day I got a call to illustrate a book cover, I thought I had arrived. I did a fine job and got paid well. But the client was an individual, an entrepreneur, rather than a publishing house. Thus, I discounted my accomplishment as a fluke.

Next, I broke into the educational market. I was commissioned to illustrate a story based on a play by a well-known writer, Gary Soto. The story was published with my pictures in a ninth grade textbook. At last I could call myself a professional. Well, you'd think so, wouldn't you? However, I dismissed this achievement when repeated calls to the publisher failed to produce tear-sheet samples of my work. I felt as if the whole thing had never happened. Without proof, I was back to square one.

Then came a big break. My picture book dummy, including two full-color illustrations along with my manuscript, *Floating on Mama's Song*, landed me a literary agent. (Of course, it helped that my brother's friend had a few New York connections and was willing to recommend me).



Illustration by Laura Lacámara. Art: Sep. - 10th. Talk in America. © by Maria W. Garcia. Spanish Magazine. May/June 2005

After seven rejections (from the biggies: Simon & Schuster, Random House, etc.), *Floating on Mama's Song* caught the eye of Katherine Tegen at HarperCollins. "There's just one thing," said my agent. "They don't want to use your illustrations, they just want the story. Harper wants to go with a famous illustrator. You know, for better visibility for your book."

How ironic. I had written the story only because I wanted to have something original to illustrate that I could get excited about. I was thrilled to sell my manuscript to HarperCollins, don't get me wrong, but the validation I sought as an illustrator was still eluding me.

Now it seemed that only reaching my dream of illustrating a children's book or magazine would satisfy my quest to consider myself a "real" illustrator. Well, lo and behold, I recently had the opportunity to illustrate stories in two issues of *Iguana*, a new Spanish-language children's magazine à la *Highlights*. The pay was minimal, but the exposure was worth it. Plus, I got eight new portfolio pieces out of it, as well as printed samples. So now, when asked if I am published, I say yes, right? Wrong. I say, well

sort-of, but only in children's magazines, not in children's books.

Will I finally embrace being a "real" illustrator on the day I turn the pages of a hot-off-the-press picture book that reads, illustrated by Laura Lacámara? Probably at first, but I suspect the feeling won't last.

So what can I count on to be real and enduring? Maybe it's that pure unconscious joy of creating that at ten years old inspired me to write and illustrate my first picture book. In the story, the pony leaves the girl to join the circus, but soon returns to the home he loves when fame and fortune prove to be empty pursuits. Even back then, I knew to keep coming back to my own spark of love and inspiration to find what's true and everlasting. ✍

Cuban-born artist Laura Lacámara has illustrated book covers, editorials, textbooks, and posters. Her images are licensed and published by Joan Cawley Gallery, Ltd. Her first published book, *Floating on Mama's Song* (HarperCollins, Fall 2009), which she wrote, will be illustrated by Yuyi Morales. Visit www.LauraLacamera.com.