



Pam Muñoz Ryan

Author Interview  
**THE DREAMER**

**What about Pablo Neruda and/or his work moved you to write this fictional account of his childhood?**

The book was an evolution. One thing led to another: the story of the hole in the fence led me to Neruda's essays, which led me to his memoirs, which led me to the biographies written about him, which led, ultimately to his poetry. The more I learned about Neruda's childhood, the more captivated I became. And the more of his poetry I read, the more I wanted to learn about him.

**Can you tell us more details of the story of the hole in the fence that first gave you the idea for *The Dreamer*?**

In 2005, shortly after my return from a trip to Chile, I was at a conference with author and illustrator, Jon Muth. During a conversation, I mentioned my travels and the subject of Neruda came up. Jon told me a story about the young Neruda passing a gift to unknown child through a hole in the fence. I was intrigued and after the conference I found the essay Neruda wrote about the incident. That was all it took for an idea to plant itself in my mind and relentlessly hold on. A few weeks later, I received a beautiful book in the mail from a friend in Chile who knew of my affection for Neruda. The book was, in essence, children's answers to selected questions from Neruda's, *THE BOOK OF QUESTIONS*. I began thinking about a book with my own questions that might parallel the events of his childhood.

**What inspired you to insert the sound poems?**

Rhythm was a presence in Neruda's life and I wanted that to somehow translate to the book. I attempted to create a type of soundtrack. I wanted the reader to hear the persistent rain, the call of the chucao, the pounding ocean, and the monotony of the printing press. I hoped the reader would recognize the relationship between the simplest of repetitive sounds and poetry.

**Does your interpretation of Neruda's relationship with his father minimize or exaggerate his father's insensitivity and brutishness?**

This was one of the most difficult challenges of this book - to portray the father with dimension. By all accounts in my readings of the many biographies written about Neruda, his memoirs, and the scholarly papers, his father was as I depicted him. I wanted to understand why Father behaved the way he did. I discovered that his early years had been difficult. He left home at a young age and struggled to survive. That issue of wanting a different life for his children, and the cultural issues of a man's dictatorial role in the family at that time, contributed to his personality. I trusted the reader to understand. That is one of the reasons I included Neruda's poem about his father in the back matter. Neruda came to terms with his father, at least in his mind. After *THE DREAMER* published, I received a letter from a Neruda academic in the United States who added this post script: You were generous to the father. You and I both know he was much worse.

**Can you tell us more about the significance of printing *The Dreamer* in green ink?**

Neruda loved the natural world. Many of his poems reflect this affection. As a child, he loved collecting things from nature. He marveled at nature and was quite distracted by it. As he grew older, writing in green ink became one of Neruda's idiosyncrasies. He thought that green was the color of esperanza, hope. It makes sense when you consider how very much the natural world meant to him – the greens of the Araucanian forest, the river Cautín, and the ever-changing hues of the Pacific.

**You have previously collaborated with other well-known illustrators such as Brian Selznick (Riding Freedom), Joe Cepeda (Becoming Naomi León) and Rafael López (Our California). Was Peter Sís your choice for the illustrator of The Dreamer? Did you work with him, or did he base his illustrations on your writing?**

I have been a fan and admirer of Peter Sís's work for a long time. Years ago, when I was in Chicago to speak at a university, I went to see his exhibit at the museum. Of course, as I walked the halls admiring his original art, I never imagined that someday he might illustrate one of my books. As THE DREAMER progressed, my editor, Tracy Mack, and art director, David Saylor, began to discuss who might illustrate the book. For me, that Tracy and David even thought to pair us was a huge compliment. Very early in the project, Peter and I did meet with my editor and art director to see if he was intrigued with the idea of the book. When Peter agreed, I was, understandably, thrilled and honored. We kept him in the loop and he saw several preliminary drafts. Peter and I are both traditional in our approach to a book and respectful of the protocol, meaning that if I had a comment about the art in relation to the writing, I went through my editor and vice versa. The only time we communicated during the actual illustration of the book was when Peter needed a specific image reference for the art. Then he emailed me and I would send it. The art is his interpretation. I find it transporting and inspiring. It gives the story another dimension.

**Can you speak about some of the relevant themes in the books that readers will relate to—or that you related to?**

I think that there are many elements in Neruda's young life that will feel common and familiar to readers: his strained relationship with his father and brother, his supportive relationship with his sister and Mamadre, his struggle for independence, his painful shyness, his desire to collect and organize mementos. And also, his suspicion and hope that there was something yet-to-be-discovered about himself that was magnificent – something that he had to share. When I wrote the book, I often envisioned a middle grade boy and girl as the potential readers – brooding adolescents, who might feel misunderstood and might be a closet artists. I saw them carrying the book around, and writing in its margins. That would have been something I might have done. From the fifth grade on, I was an obsessive reader and I carried favorite books with me, underlining and writing in the margins. I was also a day-dreamer and pretender, who could very easily slip into my own wandering thoughts. And like Neruda, I wanted to have a profession that had something to do with books someday, but coming from a blue collar family, that needed to translate into a job that paid the bills. That issue was never dictated or imposed. It was simply my reality. And I think that is true for many students.