

### **How did this story take shape for you? What was the impetus?**

I live near the Pacific Ocean and love to be in, on, or near the water, and have always wanted to create a story about an underwater world.

Over fifteen years ago, I drafted a mer story that stalled when I began researching and writing my novel *Echo* and then *Mañanaland*. But the idea of an underwater realm stayed with me. One day, I dragged out the box of research that said, mer, and began again. I read about lost worlds and island legends, as well as myths about my home state, California, and how it was named. I began by writing my own origin myth, taking it beyond the trope echoed around the world, about a mysterious island inhabited by women and ruled by an Amazonian queen. In my story, the island is submerged and inhabited by mermaliens, part humans and part sea creatures. In the traditional myth, the Amazonian warriors guard treasure embedded in mountain cliffs; I wanted my mermalien warriors to protect and care for something more precious than gold. But what?

As I tried to inch the story forward, the pandemic hit and like the rest of the world, I was stunned and mired. Loss and heartache were everywhere. The story stalled again. I began to wonder about a place where people's grief and sadness could rest and be cared for so that the mourner could lay it down, if only for a moment. Those imaginings led me to create the Library of Despair and Sorrow, a sanctuary for the world's suffering. *That* was the place I needed and it was also the answer for my mermalien caretakers. They would protect the world's grief, the "something more precious than gold."

Enter my contemporary protagonist, Kai Sosa, a once up-and-coming swimmer with a chance to prove himself on an elite team, following in the footsteps of his legendary older sister, Cali, who disappeared at sea. When he encounters the dolphin that was Cali's last companion, and an ancient myth in a book she had read countless times, fantasy and reality collide, and Kai suddenly finds himself on a desperate quest to fulfill his last promise to his sister—a promise that could have consequences for the whole world.

### **Why the title, El Niño?**

Translated from Spanish, *el niño* means simply "the boy." But as anyone who follows the weather or the news knows, *el niño* also refers to the weather phenomena. In the story, I explore the mythology and science behind the warm water effect.

**What were some of the challenges of combining myth and reality in this story?**

The challenge was walking a fine line between what was happening to my character, Kai, and what he *perceived* was happening to him.

Kai becomes so immersed in the book he discovers that the story takes over his thoughts and begins to affect his day-to-day life. I hoped to blur the lines between fantasy, reality, and mythology, and to leave room for the reader to wonder and draw their own conclusions.

**Tell me about how you work with Joe Cepeda. Do you go back-and-forth or just hand him the manuscript and let him interpret. Tell me about what you think his illustrations and covers bring to your work.**

I've been fortunate to have Joe's art in three of my books. He illustrated the cover of *Esperanza Rising* over twenty-five years ago. Joe also illustrated my picture book, *Mice and Beans*, which remains in print twenty years after publication.

*El Niño* came together in a fairly traditional way, meaning I sent the manuscript to my editor, Tracy Mack, and she and I worked together through a number of rewrites until the story was far enough along to share with an illustrator. We discussed who might be a good match for the story and consulted art director, Marijka Kostiw, who has designed most of my books. We all thought of Joe. Tracy and Marijka then met with Joe and sent him the manuscript. We were thrilled when he said yes.

From the outset, we agreed that we wanted the art to immerse the reader in the underwater world and help blur the lines between fantasy and reality. We exchanged lots of reference material and visual inspiration. I saw ideas and sketches along the way. The process was collaborative; it was exciting and inspiring to see the bookmaking evolve. One of my favorite touches is the ink color choice. In my book *The Dreamer*, we had printed the type and illustrations (by Peter Sís) in green to reflect Pablo Neruda's penchant for writing in green ink. For *El Niño*, Tracy and Marijka proposed printing the type and illustrations in blue to evoke the feel of the ocean setting. It's a beautiful compliment to the story. I'm eager to hear how readers respond to the pictures.

**Tell us about the cover and how you feel it captures the spirit of the story!**

The cover is an imagined moment that aligns closely with one of the last scenes in the book. I love how dynamic, mysterious, and interpretive it feels, with the waves at sunset and Kai wearing the gold cuff that is so essential to the story and a poignant connection to his sister. He is diving through the water as if he has emerged from the turbulent surf. If you look at the full wrap, you'll see Kai's legs morphing into a dolphin-like tail on the back. Joe captured a story that could be fantasy or realistic fiction or a blend of both.

**How did you combine the importance of storytelling with the theme of grief?**

Many of my novels are about overcoming obstacles, loss, and putting one foot in front of the other during difficult times. In *El Niño*, I mined these themes, weaving elements of myth and fantasy into a contemporary story. Grief changes my character's life and he must find a new path through the world. I wanted this story to feel hopeful and redemptive, for my character and for readers. If I was able to get it right, that's the real power of the story.