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Pam Munoz Ryan's *The Dreamer: Opportunities for Reflection and Extension*

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with **Robert DeChambeau**
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What sky have the stones dreamed?

—Pablo Neruda, “Stationary Point”

*Does a metamorphosis begin from the
outside in? Or from the inside out?*

—Pam Munoz Ryan, *The Dreamer*

Pam Munoz Ryan will be one of three guest speakers (along with Debbie Reese and Carol Glynn) at this year's MCTE Fall Conference/Autumn Assembly: “Focusing the Kaleidoscope: Re-imagining English Language Arts in Michigan,” in Lansing, Michigan on October 29, 2010 (for more information, see <http://mienglishteacher.ning.com/>). In December 2009, Munoz Ryan sent me an early copy of her newest book, *The Dreamer*, as a Christmas gift, which I planned to read on a long flight to Dallas to visit my family for the holidays. Not only was I intrigued by the title of the book, which reminded me of childhood dreams (some fulfilled, some deferred), I also looked forward to reading something that would stretch me beyond the academic prose that fills my head during the school year. *The Dreamer*, told through the eyes of a shy, sometimes awkward but creative young man in Chile, turned out to be the perfect text to help me reflect on childhood dreams while extending myself beyond my own experiences. *The Dreamer* follows the early experiences of Neftali Reyes, a boy who is spellbound by the wonders of the natural world and grows into the man that we know as the Nobel Prize-winning poet Pablo Neruda.

The Dreamer demonstrates both Munoz Ryan's love of language and her ability to integrate meticulously researched details with a fictional tale.

The story of Neftali Reyes (Neruda's real name) drew me in as a reader because of the level of detail and the care the author takes in presenting the emotional battleground that is Neftali's heart. Munoz Ryan notes that she wrote the book in part because she, too, was a “day-dreamer and pretender, who could very easily slip into [her] own wandering thoughts.”

The Dreamer is filled with examples of poetry that would serve teachers well in helping students to fall in love with the power of language and the joy that writing brings. Munoz Ryan captures the mind and the imagination of young readers with her use of onomatopoeia. The novel is divided not into typical, numbered chapters; rather, the book appears in sections such as RAIN, WIND, MUD, PINECONE, and LAGOON. Each section is filled with simple, yet intriguing squares that contain visual “clues”—such as, an umbrella or floating mittens—that initially have the reader wondering as to their meaning. By the end of each section, the significance of illustrator Peter Sis's art is evident and leaves the reader with a deeper understanding of the item's importance and beauty to the main character, Neftali. Munoz Ryan's choice to create *The Dreamer* as a multi-genre text encourages readers to engage in what Henry Jenkins calls “transmedia navigation”: “the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities.” Much like the power of Ellen Forney's drawings in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, the illustrations Peter Sis contributes to *The Dreamer* prompts readers to make connections among words, drawings, imagination, and self.

Strategies for Teaching *The Dreamer*

Many resources, such as Scholastic's Web site for teachers and the fabulous Internet resource Web English Teacher (<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/>), offer a variety of strategies for teaching with Pam Munoz Ryan's books, including *Esperanza Rising*, *Riding Freedom*, *Becoming Naomi Leon*, and *When Marion Sang*; however, little appears yet for the teaching of *The Dreamer*. To fill that gap, I would like to make the following suggestions for

teachers of fifth through ninth grade.

- *Lists, Drawers, and Poems*: Munoz Ryan says, “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 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*” (Press). Neftali writes the words he loves to hear (such as “locomotive,” “terrible,” “chocolate,” “iguana”) on scraps of paper and keeps them safe in a drawer in his room. After *The Dreamer*, as well as a variety of other poems focused on sound, students can write lists of words they love to hear and put them into a common drawer in the classroom. Each student can then pull five words out of the drawer and write a poem focused on one or more of those words (Michigan standards W.GN.05.02, W.GN.06.01).
- *Power of Poetry*: Munoz Ryan says of *The Dreamer*, “I wanted the reader to hear the persistent rain, the call of the chucao, the pounding ocean, and the monotony of the printing press, too. I hoped the reader would recognize the relationship between the simplest of repetitive sounds and poetry” (Press). Introduce students to the concept of “onomatopoeia.” A wonderful lesson plan, “Onomatopoeia: A Figurative Language Minilesson,” created by Tracy Gardiner for the ReadWriteThink.org Web site, features Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Bells” and incorporates children’s literature, an interactive online tool, and graphic organizers in a series of activities designed to help students interpret poetry and identify structures unique to Poe’s writing (Michigan standards CE 3.1.4, CE 3.2.2).
- *Questions, Always Questions: The Dreamer* is filled with questions, inspired by Pablo Neruda’s *Book of Questions*. Some of Neruda’s poems from the text are included in a section called “Poems and

Odes.” Have students read poem XIV from *The Book of Questions*. Examine the use of questions in Munoz Ryan’s *The Dreamer*. Then instruct students to write their own poems in the form of questions—taking on timely issues that are relevant to them as individuals or as members of a specific community or location. An alternative assignment could focus on writing historical fiction in answer to specific questions about a historical event or important person in history (Michigan standards W.GN.07.01, W.GN.08.01).

- *Dreams and Nightmares*: Students can construct questions about the subject of “dreams” or “nightmares,” then can write about their researched questions after exploring data in newspaper articles, magazines, journals, and Web resources (Michigan standard W.GN.08.03). For those teachers who have more sophisticated middle school students, a wonderful cross-curricular lesson sequence about “The Interpretation of Dreams” is available through Discovery Education Web site (<http://school.discoveryeducation.com/lessonplans/programs/dreams/>).

Mini-biography and an Invitation to 2010

MCTE Conference

Pam Munoz Ryan is an acclaimed author and recipient of the Pura Belpre Medal, the Jane Addams Peace Award, the Americas Award Honor Book, an ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults, the national Willa Cather Award, the California Young Reader Medal, and the ALA Sibert Honor and NCTE’s Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children. She received her Bachelor’s and Master’s Degrees at California State University, San Diego. She was a bilingual Head Start teacher after graduating with her Bachelor’s degree, and directed an early childhood program after completing her Master’s degree.

Munoz Ryan was born and raised in California’s San Joaquin Valley, and currently lives in San Diego County with her husband, Jim Ryan, their four children, and her dogs Sami and Buddy. She grew up with a large extended family “nearby and considers herself truly American because her cultural background is [what she calls an]

ethnic smorgasbord,” because she is “Spanish, Mexican, Basque, Italian, and Oklahoman.” Born on Christmas Day in 1951, in Bakersfield, California, the author is the oldest of three sisters and the oldest of twenty-three cousins. Munoz Ryan never considered writing as a career until a colleague asked her to co-author a book. The two worked on the project together, and Munoz Ryan began her own work shortly after, publishing *One Hundred is a Family*.

Pam Munoz Ryan says, “...sometimes an idea is like a confluence of rivers” (qtd. in Pierpoint). Our hope is that *LAJM* readers will explore the waters of Pam Munoz Ryan’s novels and other literature, be inspired, navigate various ideas/texts/lessons, and join us on October 29, 2010 at the MCTE Fall Conference at the Lexington Hotel in Lansing for an opportunity to focus on the kaleidoscope of possibilities in teaching English Language Arts. To propose an interactive session at this year’s fall conference, please visit the MCTE ning at <http://mienglishteacher.ning.com/> or contact Kia Jane Richmond at krichmon@nmu.edu.

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About the Authors

Kia Jane Richmond (krichmon@nmu.edu) is Associate Professor, starting her tenth year, at Northern Michigan University, where she co-directs the English Education program. In addition to publishing in journals such as *LAJM*, *Composition Studies*, *English Education*, and *The Writing Instructor*, Dr. Richmond presents frequently at MCTE, NCTE, and CCCC, and is the incoming President of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English.

Robert T. DeChambeau, after completing a Juris Doctorate degree at Barry University, earned his masters of Arts degree in English from Northern Michigan University in 2008, where he teaches composition as an instructor. He is a member of MCTE, NCTE, CCCC, and is currently looking into PhD programs in English Studies.