



Duncan Tonatiuh

TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth Author Interview

Duncan Tonatiuh was interviewed in his home in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, January 7, 2015.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are an award-winning author and illustrator of children's books who most recently received Pura Belpré and Sibert Honors for [*Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation*](#). How did your interest in art and words take root?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: There are a few people in my family with artistic inclinations; I have an uncle and a cousin who are painters, and my dad was a photographer for many years. So I grew up with artwork around the house. I starting drawing as a kid because of a cartoon that was very popular in Mexico called *Los Caballeros del Zodiaco*, which featured all these warrior guys. Kids would send their drawings to the show, and their work would be aired during the commercial breaks. That got me making my own drawings. I don't think I ever sent one in, but just knowing that I could submit my work motivated me to start drawing.

Then, one summer when I was around eight years old, I stayed at my grandma's house, where a cousin had a stack of comic books. I really got into them and into Japanese anime, and I began making my own comics, too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You spent part of your childhood in Mexico and part of it in the United States.

DUNCAN TONATIUH: I was born in Mexico City. My mother is Mexican, and my father is American. When I was about seven or eight, we moved to San Miguel, which is a very beautiful city that has a large American and Canadian expat community. Growing up, I learned English from my father, and I also spoke English with an American woman whose dog I walked.

I mostly grew up in Mexico, but I really didn't like my high school in San Miguel. So when I was sixteen, I left for a progressive boarding school in Massachusetts that an American cousin of mine had attended. I really got into art there; I started doing a lot of painting and photography. When I graduated I went to the Parsons School of Design in New York City, which is part of [The New School]. I was able to take illustration and

photography and design classes, and also writing, literature, journalism, and urban studies courses through the liberal arts school. I could study all the subjects I was interested in.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did going to high school and college in the US, so far away from your hometown of San Miguel, Mexico, influence your art?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: When I started high school in the United States, I began to miss things about Mexico that I had taken for granted before—the music, the food, the culture, the art. As I studied art in school, I got into the work of Egon Schiele and Van Gogh and other painters, and I also started appreciating the Mexican art that surrounded me when I was growing up. Around my senior year, I started developing a drawing style that was inspired by pre-Columbian art.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk more about the artistic style and creative process you've developed over time, which seems to merge the past with the present.

DUNCAN TONATIUH: When I make a book, there are two stages. The first stage involves me coming up with a story and writing it and doing sketches. It's a very creative part, and it can be the more difficult part, because sometimes I get stuck.

The second part begins when I start the artwork. Initially I draw in a style that's traditional and historical, taking inspiration from old Mixtec art. Drawing in that style is a way for me to honor the artwork and artistic styles that existed before—and to make my own work more interesting. I draw by hand, with a pencil, on a piece of regular, letter-sized paper. Once I'm happy with [the drawing], I go over it with a pen. I'll do that for different characters, separately, and then I scan those images and arrange them. When I have a composition I like, I start putting color and texture into the illustrations. I often use Photoshop for that, though sometimes I'll scan a texture, like a piece of cloth or a newspaper. For textures that I can't scan, like a brick wall, I'll take a photograph or I'll look online for photos of those textures. It's a very laborious process, but I don't have to think as much as I did in the first stage. I can have soccer or the news on in the background, because I don't need to focus as hard—I just need to devote a lot of time to it. One nice thing is that the computer is neat and clean, so I don't need too many tools. No scissors or tape. Sometimes I'll just go to the library with my computer and work there.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books address important issues, such as immigration. As a young person, how did your understanding of immigration take shape?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: Around the time I was starting to adopt pre-Columbian elements into my art, I was also becoming more interested in issues faced by people of Mexican origin in both Mexico and the United States. I knew about immigration early in my life,

even though it didn't affect any of my family directly. In San Miguel, it's very common for young men to leave to find work in the United States. I knew kids who had not seen their brother or dad for years at a time, and little by little, as we grew up, the kids that I would hang out with also began leaving.

As I got older, I started hearing details—stories of people trying to cross the desert and running out of food, of having to wait for the coyote in a shantytown and of getting caught and deported back. By the time I was in college in New York, a city of immigrants, I was actually meeting a lot of people who had come from Mexico or places in Central and South America who had had those experiences. I had friends who had not seen their mom or their children for years at a time because they were too scared to go back. They were all working hard and trying to make ends meet.

All this gave me a fuller picture of immigration. I decided to take a class called Community Organizing, and that led me to get involved with an organization that assisted workers who hadn't gotten paid or were being taken advantage of. One of the workers I met was a man who was a Mixtec, which is an indigenous group in the south of Mexico. He'd speak with his cousins in their Mixtec dialect, and I was so blown away by that, seeing these indigenous people speaking their language and dealing with such difficult issues thousands and thousands of miles away from home.

For my senior project at Parsons, I created a very short graphic novel-type book about this Mixtec man and his story. When I started working on it, one of the first things I did was go to the library to find images of Mixtec artwork to inform my approach. When I did, I came across all these beautiful Mixtec codices, and I immediately knew that I wanted to create a sort of modern-day codex with that look--very geometric and stylized. That style has stuck with me since.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did your first book, [*Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin*](#), come to be published?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: The opportunity to publish this book kind of fell into my lap, and I'm grateful for it to this day. When I was at Parsons working on a graphic novel about the Mixtec man I'd met through my volunteer work, a professor came to critique our work. She really liked what I was doing, and asked if she could show [my work] to a friend at a publishing house. He also liked it and he said he'd love to work with me. He'd received a manuscript that he thought would suit my style. He told me a few very basic things about picture books, like the fact that they're usually 32 pages, because I wasn't deeply familiar with the form. I hadn't taken any picture book classes or really considered the field at that point.

Soon after, I had the idea for *Dear Primo*. It would be a story about two cousins: Carlitos, who lives in a rural community in Mexico, and Charlie, who lives in an urban

center in the [United States]. It's based on my personal observations of people from both places. [The cousins'] lives are very different, but at the end of the day, they're similar, because—and I believe this is true of kids everywhere I've visited—all kids like playing, spending time with their friends, eating, and being with their families. I wanted *Dear Primo* to show the contrasts but also the similarities.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What inspired you to write and illustrate [*Diego Rivera, His World and Ours?*](#)

DUNCAN TONATIUH: For a while I had a small job doing textbook illustration for a company here in Mexico. While I was working on that, I started looking at a lot of Diego Rivera's artwork, because he speaks about Mexican history through his murals. He painted all kinds of important and epic things in Mexican history—the conquest and independence, the revolution, the industrial revolution, and so on. He was also very interested in technology.

As I learned about him I started wondering what he would paint nowadays, and what his murals would be about. And then I thought, the answer to that question might be a good picture book. So I did even more research, and then started writing. I wanted to keep it simple; [Rivera] was a complicated character and I wanted him to be accessible and relevant for young readers. In the end, I imagined what he would do if he were creating today, in the hope that that would help bring his work closer to a child's world.

The artwork for this book is done in my Tonatiuh style, so to speak, but I also referenced Rivera's murals. I tried to get a sense of their composition, what some of the most important characters and scenes in them were -- and then come up with a way to redraw those scenes in my own style and in a kid-friendly manner.

It was a fun project, and I learned a lot because I was looking so closely at how he created his images. I discovered he was also inspired by pre-Columbian art, so there were a lot of elements in his artwork that I'd been trying to do. The book opened up a lot of possibilities for me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: [*Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*](#) is a picture book you wrote and illustrated that evolved from the Little Red Riding Hood story.

DUNCAN TONATIUH: Yes, *Pancho Rabbit* came about after I went to hear an editor speak at a European book fair. The editor was talking about how he figured he'd never publish a book about the Little Red Riding Hood because it's been done so many times. But one day this artist came to him with some drawings he'd made of [Red Riding Hood] that were so different, so original and modern, that he felt he had to publish the work.

When he related that story, I immediately said to myself, I want to do a version of Little Red Riding Hood that an editor can't turn down. I started thinking that maybe instead of a hood, she wears a *rebozo*; instead of taking place in the forest, it takes place in the desert; instead of a wolf, there's a coyote.

I then remembered that "coyote" is slang for a person who smuggles people between the [United States] and Mexico border, and I thought, aha, it could have a double meaning in this story. I could create an allegory about immigration. I got very excited and immediately started writing and sketching.

When I showed my idea to my editor, he said it was very good, but he felt that since I didn't have some of the key characters from the Little Red story, like the grandmother or the hunter, I needed to either commit to making it more like the tale, or back away from the traditional story.

I decided to move away from Little Red Riding Hood because I thought what was most important and most interesting about this story was the immigration angle. So I changed the human protagonist to Pancho the rabbit, and I tried to give a fable-like sensibility to the story. All the different obstacles that Pancho overcomes are the hurdles that migrants encounter on their difficult journey.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about *Separate Is Never Equal* and what led you to tell this story of the Mendez family's fight for the desegregation of California's schools.

DUNCAN TONATIUH: When I finished *Pancho Rabbit* I wanted to do another book that addressed issues of social justice. That's when I got an email from my editor, who told me about the Mendez family and their successful effort to desegregate California schools in the 1940s. I thought their story sounded fascinating.

It just so happened that two months later, I was in Austin, Texas, for the Texas Book Festival, and a book called [Sylvia & Aki](#) was being honored. It was a middle-grade novel about the Mendez kids, as well as a Japanese-American family who was sent to an internment camp. Sylvia Mendez was at the festival, and I got to hear her speak and spend some time with her, getting to know her story in her own words.

I started working on the book after that. I visited Sylvia at her home in California. While I was there, she talked about the case her family brought against the school board, and she shared photos and memories of her childhood. After her family won the case, she was able to go to an integrated school, and she eventually became a nurse. When her mom fell ill [Sylvia] cared for her, and she listened when her mom expressed sadness that nobody seemed to know the story of their family's fight for justice. So Sylvia made it her mission to travel around and educate people about the case.

I obviously felt it was important, too, which is why I made a book about it. Even though the story has gotten a bit more attention in recent years, with Sylvia receiving a medal from President Obama and [the introduction of] commemorative postage stamp, it's still relatively unknown. I also felt it was important because I think the issues are still relevant. There is a lot of division and segregation still—I notice it when I visit schools in different parts of the United States. I often see that the poorer schools, the Title 1 schools in poorer neighborhoods, tend to be mostly Latino and African American, while schools in wealthy suburbs tend to be predominately white. So I think a lot of the issues Sylvia was dealing with in the 1940s are still present nowadays.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Separate Is Never Equal* won both a Pura Belpré honor and a Sibert honor. How did you approach this nonfiction subject in terms of the illustrations and text?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: The illustrations are done in my traditional codex-like style, but I looked at a lot of images from the time period to try to capture a bit of the way people dressed, the cars they drove, the buildings of the time—different things like that. I was also able to consult photographs that Sylvia shared with me from when she was young, including pictures of her father, of the whites-only Westminster School where she wasn't allowed to go, and the so-called Mexican School. So the illustrations aren't perfectly realistic by any means, but they are drawn from sources, and I try to draw from reality.

As far as the text goes, I was able to get transcripts of court records, and some of the dialogue in the book comes directly from listening to Sylvia speak about the issues and her story. It was a tricky balance; I wanted to make the text accessible to young readers, but I also thought it was important to include certain terms that are a bit technical. I always tried to explain them, though, and put them into context.

It's not the easiest book, so to speak, for a young kid, and I think there are some elements in it that could be turnoffs. But I also think young readers totally get the concept of injustice, and that they can identify the injustice in this story right away. Kids are very into what's fair and what's not fair. So overall, I think they can relate to the story and enjoy it and respond to it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you enjoy doing when you're not writing and illustrating?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: I like riding my bike into town. I like reading. Lately I've been doing a little capoeira. I like eating, traveling. I have traveled a lot in Mexico, and through my books, I've been able to visit a lot of places in the United States by now. Every once in a while I do other art projects, like a book cover or a tee-shirt design. A little while ago I designed a temporary mural for the Akron Art Museum. I created it on the computer the way I do most of my illustrations, but then it was printed really large. It was a very exciting project to do.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: If I get stuck on a particular project, it tends to happen earlier in the process, when I'm drafting the text or doing the sketches. If that happens, going to the library helps me. I like to ride my bike over there and get away from any distractions—be away from the Internet, be away from the temptation to go to the kitchen to make a PB and J; things like that. At the library, I just sit, and then I can focus a little more. I'll try to rewrite if I'm writing, or think of a different angle if I'm sketching.

Overall, I think just getting up helps me a lot. Sometimes being away for a little bit to walk the dog or run an errand can help me find solutions or insights. Stepping outside allows me to return to the project later and think about it in a different way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell children when you visit them in schools?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: It depends a little bit on the kids' age, but I really prefer to talk with them as much as possible, rather than talk at them. I'll always tell them a little bit about myself, and if they're very young, I'll read to them. If they're older, I'll engage them in a deeper conversation about what led me to do the books; what my experiences were when I was a kid; what my experiences are now; why I feel the issues that a particular book addresses are important; and why I'm passionate about those issues. My hope is that they connect to those issues, too, and see the value in learning history, learning about the social justice issues of our time and remembering that beneath the statistics that the media and politicians like to cite, there are real people being affected.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell educators when you speak to them?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: What I tell teachers and librarians is not very different from what I tell kids, but I also like to share with them my belief that creating art can give children a unique tool to consider themselves and the world around them. I've found this to be true with my own illustrations; I think it's challenging to make a multicultural book because I want my books to be truthful and to celebrate the things that make Mexican-Americans and Latinos different and special, but I also don't want them to be stereotypical or cartoonish. So I try to find that balance.

I also think it's important for us to make learning fun for kids, and I try to do that with my books whenever I can. For instance, a book like *Pancho Rabbit* addresses immigration, a serious issue, but hopefully it's also entertaining, and a story that kids will want to read and reread. If I can find interesting ways to talk about important issues so that kids want to engage with them and not be bogged down, that's a good thing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are you looking forward to sharing with readers next?

DUNCAN TONATIUH: I'm currently finishing a book called [*Funny Bones: Posada and Day of the Dead Calaveras*](#). It's a picture book biography of an artist named Guadalupe Posada, who made the very famous and iconic Day of the Dead skeletons. I'm sure a lot of people have seen his work or images inspired by it, but they may not know his name.

This book is partly a biography, but it also shows a lot of his original artwork juxtaposed with my own illustrations, in which I've tried to depict the scene or the people or situation that might have inspired him. So the book is about him, but also about the Day of the Dead and the different traditions of that holiday. I'm very happy with how it's turning out, and excited to introduce readers to an influential artist whose story isn't very well known.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It seems that so much of your work pays homage to Mexican history, but also addresses contemporary issues. You seem to connect deeply to both the past and the present.

DUNCAN TONATIUH: I think a big part of that, and a big reason for my interest in contemporary issues that concern people of Mexican origin in both Mexico and the US, is the fact that I'm a dual citizen. I have two passports, I pay taxes in two countries, and I have family in both countries. I think that's made me very appreciative of many things that each country has to offer, and also aware of some of the problems that each country has—many of which stem from history.

When I create, I try to look at what's been done in the past, what's been successful, and take elements from that and try to make it interesting and relevant to readers nowadays. As an artist and author, I gain so much from creating something new out of pieces from the past.

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