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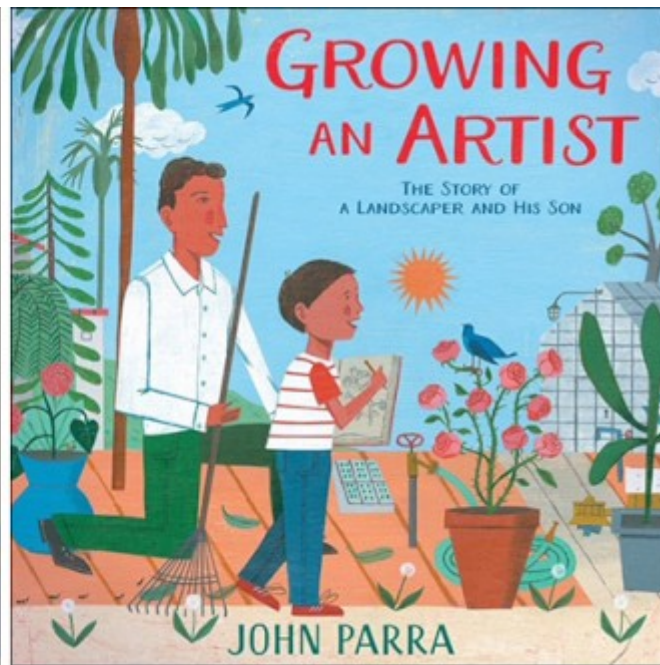
Q & A with John Parra

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jul 23, 2021

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John Parra is an award-winning artist, designer, and illustrator of children's books, such as Frida Kahlo and Her Animalitos and Little Libraries, Big Heroes. His upcoming titles include Growing an Artist, his debut as an author/illustrator, and A-m-o-r-e Spells L-o-v-e. His rich, colorful

illustrations are traditionally painted and have garnered three Pura Belpré Honors for Illustration, two SCBWI Golden Kite Awards for Illustration, and the Christopher Award, among others. His work has also appeared in books, magazines, exhibits—and even on six U.S. postage stamps. PW spoke with Parra about how his experiences as a student and an instructor have left an imprint on his art and how he hopes it inspires his readers to be creative.

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I started at a very early age. My father was an amateur artist and one of my early influences. He would tell us stories, like when we were sitting at a restaurant—with those white paper placemats—and he would start drawing with his pen about the time he was in the army. He'd draw trucks and people camping out. My two brothers and I thought his stories were fascinating. We couldn't get enough! My mother, too, who was an educator for 35 years, was an early influence. She would take us to the library to get books, to art museums, and other museums. It was all inspiring to me—listening to stories, looking at drawings and fine art. My mom didn't think we were too young to go to museums. And even though we would laugh and goof around sometimes, it all sank in. Looking back, these things really made a difference in my life!

How do you think they specifically made a difference in your early years?

When you are hearing stories, you are already thinking in pictures. So, as a child growing up, I became a very visual learner. To me, visual imagery was—and still is—something that I gravitate towards naturally. Because of all of this, I think it was just natural for me to develop the art side of me and the desire to be good at art from the very start.

To this day, I have a photo of me and my best friend at the time in pre-K creating self-portraits on the first day of school. It appeared in the Santa Barbara, Calif., newspaper. It's funny how that photo turned out to be prophetic.



Five-year-olds Abraham Barraza, (left) and John Parra put the finishing touches on some self-portraits. When asked if his mother had given him any last minute instruction prior to leaving for his first day of school, John Parra said, "No she didn't; I know it all already."

When did you start thinking of yourself as an artist?

All through regular school, art was a part of me. I was always "the artist in the class" and this gave me great confidence. I don't recall if I took many art classes at the time. But I do remember that if there was a book report that I had to complete, I'd spend more time drawing rather than writing the summary of the

book.

Soon after, some teachers encouraged and guided me into taking the next step to becoming an artist. My parents did, too, by buying markers and pens for birthdays and Christmases. I have been very lucky and am grateful to have had wonderfully supportive parents and teachers.

So, how and when did you take the next steps?

I took my "official" first art class in high school as a sophomore to see how it would go. There was a little fear in taking this step because I worried that if I become an artist as my job that I might not love art anymore.

Also, when I was attending Moorpark Community College [in Calif.], I started to doubt myself, and wondered, “What are you going to do with your life?” But, all the while, I kept taking classes. I didn’t know if I could become a professional artist—or if I could become a children’s illustrator vs. a graphic designer or a game designer. All I knew was that I loved to draw. And, in my second year, a fine artist, Larry Carroll, came to our college. I recognized his work, and was so excited to see him. At that moment, it was as if electricity shot through my body. I looked at his work, and I said, “This is it!” I knew what I wanted to do. Like they say, “If you see it, you can be it!”

You have shared in your bio and other interviews that this chance encounter with this artist changed your life. How did he change it?

After Mr. Carroll saw my work, he offered to mentor me and said, “You are going to polish up your portfolio, get a scholarship, and get into art school!” My professor, Frank Sardisco, encouraged me to work with Mr. Carroll, and so, I did. I talk a lot about the importance of mentors in my art classes and school presentations. At the right time, mentors can show you the right things. That’s really what education is: helping kids have the vision. *You* have to do the work, but *they* have a vision—and *they* see it in *you*. And, they help *you* see it.

How did you find your way into the world of children’s publishing?

After art school, I decided to pack up and head to N.Y.C. to become an illustrator. Once there, I started dropping off my portfolio and I got editorial and illustration work with magazines and corporate clients (including United Airlines, Virgin Records, National Geographic, PBS, etc.) It was hard. I had to push myself.

Then one day, Northland Publishing’s Luna Rising imprint was looking for new talent and saw my portfolio. I took the job because I needed the work, but I had no idea what I was doing. It was one of the hardest things that I had ever done: I had never done so many paintings for one project before, and it took a lot longer than I thought it would!

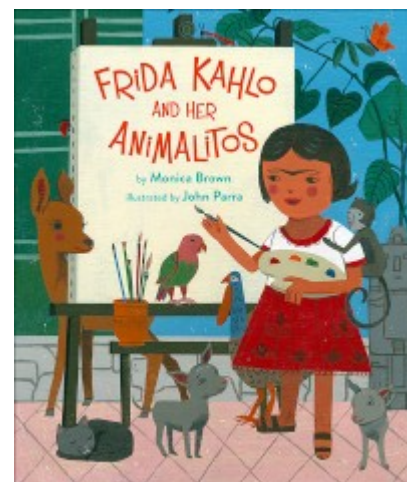
What happened next?

Once I turned it in, someone offered me another book who had seen my first book. This taught me how important it was to do a good job on each book because that could lead to the next book, and they did. With my first three books, I was turning in illustration assignments without knowing that there was an entire community of librarians, teachers, authors, illustrators, book lovers, or the SCBWI. That changed in 2010, when I won a few awards from the American Library Association [Pura Belpré Honors for Illustration]. Everyone greeted me with open arms, and was so kind, thoughtful, and supportive. I asked myself, “Did I just find my creative family?” And, the answer was, “Yes!” I’m so grateful for all of this—and to be a working artist.

When do you begin teaching?

After I graduated from art school and before I moved to N.Y.C., I taught art lessons for kids and a high school mural program at the Carnegie Art Museum of Oxnard [Calif.]. With my mural class, the students could see the energy that comes from collaboration—and that was so exciting to be a part of. This is one of my goals when I teach classes or do school visits: that students feel connected to the art process. I also encourage them to make creativity part of their lives, whether they want to sing, dance, paint, etc. Because when you do this, you start to think differently and develop creative problem-solving skills.

How have your teaching and interactions with kids influenced your work?



Both constantly remind me who my audience is! They also help me to visualize them as I work. That is my true inspiration. And, whether I am teaching a class or doing a school visit, the real magic happens when we get to draw together. That's because when I see their creativity; it inspires the creativity in me. I also get excited for them and try to help them see their potential. It was hard for me to see mine for a long time until I met an artist during a school visit. You never know what will come of one!

Can you talk a little about your upcoming book?

My debut as an author-illustrator will be out in May 2022 from Simon & Schuster. It's called *Growing an Artist* and is based on my life growing up and working with my father, who was a landscape contractor. The little boy in the book is an artist and he brings his sketchbook along with him to his father's work and starts drawing. Because of this, he helps his father with his drawings of his landscape design. They end up working on this together, and they get a big job. It's a story about creativity and how your ideas can become reality.



Parra with granddaughter Sophie Ella.

What are you working on now?

A-M-O-R Spells L-O-V-E by Michael Genhart [Holiday House/Neal Porter Books, May 2024] is a story of the National Spanish Spelling Bee. It is about a boy who is studying for the bee with his grandma, and while preparing, he learns that long ago when she was younger she was punished for speaking Spanish at school in the U.S., that her teacher called her names and treated her poorly. Like *Growing an Artist*, it is based on real-life experiences. The book blends together some of the history of Spanish-speaking in America with a celebration of speaking *and* spelling in Spanish.

Do you have any advice to aspiring artists of any age?

Approach art like a kid! Take art classes, buy supplies, and have a spot in your house, classroom, or library ready to go. Visit art museums. Be inspired by music. Go to plays or performances. Study other artists. Work at it. You'll be encouraged and sometimes discouraged. But you can learn from discouragement. It may not always turn out exactly the way you want, but then

ask yourself, "What can I do differently or change?" And soon, you'll start thinking outside the box and using creative problem solving. That's what we need more of in this world! Some of the most successful people have an artistic side to them—and it makes them successful. Art allows everyone to be creative and to show sides of ourselves that are hard to express in words. So, do it!

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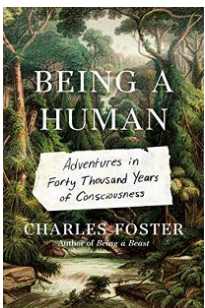
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