Sonia Manzano: How She Got to Sesame Street

Mary Pope Osborne Celebrates 25 Years of Magic Tree House Adventures

New Children’s Book by Jon Klassen and Mac Barnett Takes Shape

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Raising a Mighty Girl
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Sonia Manzano brought decades of sunny days to Sesame Street and to millions of children watching the iconic television show. When Manzano auditioned for the fledgling show in 1971, she couldn’t have foreseen its immense popularity and never imagined she’d be spending the next 44 years teaching children how to count to 10 in Spanish, tooling around in the Fix-It Shop, and hanging out with the likes of Oscar the Grouch...

For the past 25 years, Mary Pope Osborne has taken readers on exciting adventures with time-traveling siblings Jack and Annie. Since 1992, 55 Magic Tree House books have been released, and to the delight of her readers, there are more on the way...

Also in this issue, we meet children’s author Veronica Appleton, who writes stories that celebrate the everyday lives of multicultural families, and fortunately for fans of adventure stories, 13-year-old author Evan Gordon and his dad, Scott have written two critically-acclaimed sci-fi books and their fans are currently awaiting the third in their trilogy. And the latest book from Jon Klassen and Mac Barnett is shaping up to be yet another success! Their newest title is a funny tale about some very sneaky shapes.

In 2004, Kenneth Braswell founded Fathers Incorporated, a non-profit organization based in Atlanta, to encourage and assist men to become more-engaged and more-involved fathers. Braswell, an author and the organization’s executive director, has launched a new campaign called “Real Dads Read.”

This month’s special contributors are Shirin Zarqa-Lederman, who discusses the benefits of reading to reduce anxiety, and Julianne DiBlasi Black, who tells us how to raise a mighty girl.

Tell us what you think of this issue! Email your comments to cristy@storymonsters.com.
For countless kids who grew up watching the iconic Sesame Street, Sonia Manzano was one of their favorite people in that storied neighborhood. Manzano, who cheerfully acknowledges that she’ll always be best known for her days as “Maria,” is also an Emmy-winning television writer, author, and speaker.
When Manzano auditioned for the fledgling show in 1971, she couldn’t have foreseen Sesame Street’s immense popularity and never imagined she’d be spending the next 44 years teaching children how to count to 10 in Spanish, tooling around in the Fix-It Shop, and hanging out with the likes of Oscar the Grouch. Manzano knows the secret behind the show’s long-lasting appeal. “Because it’s real, because it’s funny, because it didn’t shy away from the human experience, and because of the Muppets.”

Manzano grew up poor, living in an inner-city tenement. “We were a struggling Puerto Rican family living in the Bronx, and to complicate matters, the household was ruled by domestic violence,” she says. Manzano loved to read, but lacked access to many books. Instead, she used television as a way to escape the harsh realities of her life. “I found comfort in the orderly stories told on television shows like Father Knows Best and Leave it to Beaver,” she says.

Considering the hardships of her childhood, it’s not surprising that Manzano decided to take up acting. “I loved fantasy and making believe I was someone else,” she says. At the suggestion of a teacher, she auditioned for a spot at Manhattan’s High School of Performing Arts and was accepted. “Going from a South Bronx school to a more challenging school was shocking,” she says. “My grades suffered, but I discovered theater was a way to get into college!” She was awarded a full scholarship to Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. She says her parents weren’t a major factor in her decision to pursue a career in acting. “My father was unavailable and my mother would’ve encouraged me to do anything, no matter what it was.”

While at Carnegie Mellon, Manzano was selected to perform in a student project, a then-unheard-of musical called Godspell. The show was a smash and in 1971, Manzano’s junior year, she appeared as a cast member in the show’s original off-Broadway production.

Godspell was a turning point for Manzano’s acting career. “I learned I was funny, and what it felt like to be in control of an audience.”

She happened to be back in New York City at just the right time to audition for a role on Sesame Street. She had seen a few clips of the show and had been pleasantly surprised by the multi-racial cast, which was unusual for television at that time. Manzano was cast as “Maria.”

A natural performer, Manzano enjoyed singing and dancing with the Muppets, but she also felt a responsibility to accurately represent her Latin culture. When something didn’t feel right, she would make her voice heard. “I questioned the Hispanic content pieces and producer Dulcy Singer suggested I try writing some pieces myself,” she says. Manzano found that she liked writing for Sesame Street, and she was good at it, too, ultimately earning 15 Emmy Awards for her work. Notably, she wrote many of the storylines when “Maria” married “Luis” (played by Emilio Delgado) in 1988 and when “Maria” and “Luis” subsequently had a baby girl, who was portrayed on-screen by Manzano’s real-life daughter, Gabriela.

While continuing to portray “Maria” and write for Sesame Street, Manzano tried her hand at writing children’s books. In 2004, she released No Dogs Allowed! (Simon & Schuster), which was later...
“It made me feel invisible and I wondered how I would contribute to a society that didn’t see me. I hope my presence on television dispels that notion in others.”

translated into a musical for children. In 2007, she published A Box Full of Kittens, and released the Christmas-themed Miracle on 133rd Street in 2015.

In 2012, Manzano branched out into the young adult genre, releasing the critically-acclaimed The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano (Scholastic Press). In 2015, she revisited her tumultuous childhood in her memoir, Becoming Maria: Love and Chaos in the South Bronx. “I was inspired by Frank McCourt’s memoir, Angela’s Ashes,” Manzano says. “Frank McCourt inspired me because he told the story of his miserable childhood with humor and compassion. I wanted to try doing that as well.” For Manzano, reflecting on those early years with the perspective of an adult offered some insight. “I think it helped me understand my parents better,” she says. “I understood the predicament they were in.”

Over the years, Manzano has appeared on stage, most notably in Love, Loss and What I Wore, and on the big screen. In 2015, she officially retired from Sesame Street, giving her more time to pursue other interests. “More books!” Manzano promises. She’ll also continue to support causes she believes in, including serving as an advisor and volunteer at Symphony Space, a Manhattan performing arts organization. “I love the Adult Literacy Program wherein we read published stories to adult students to inspire them to write stories or poems of their own,” she says. “Then, the same performers read the adult students’ efforts. Their efforts are always poignant.”

Manzano has earned much recognition for her work, including the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Award, the Hispanic Heritage Award for Education, an Honorary Doctorate from Notre Dame University, and induction into the Bronx Hall of Fame. Last year, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Daytime Emmy Awards. “My children and just about every child in America has grown up learning their ABC’s from the iconic character of ‘Maria’ on Sesame Street, played by Sonia Manzano,” says Bob Mauro, National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences President. “Sonia not only brought the life events of marriage, having a baby, and being a mother to viewers young and old, she also brought a seldom-seen diversity, a Latin role-model, unlike anything on television at the time.”

The award was even more meaningful to Manzano because it was presented to her by Rita Moreno, one of her lifelong role models. “Who doesn’t love Rita Moreno?” says Manzano. “But obviously, I related to her because when I was growing up, she was the only Latina in media. It really made me reflect on my journey.”

Manzano says she’s always been cognizant of the impact her role as “Maria” would have on the children watching Sesame Street. She recalls how the dearth of Hispanic television characters made her feel as a child. “It made me feel invisible and I wondered how I would contribute to a society that didn’t see me,” Manzano says. “I hope my presence on television dispels that notion in others.”

For more information about Sonia Manzano and her books, visit www.soniamanzano.com.