

Interview With Matt de la Peña and Christian Robinson

Matt: When I was writing the text of *Last Stop on Market Street*, I drew visually on Los Angeles. I know, Christian, you grew up in Los Angeles. I lived there for four years, and I didn't have a car, so I took the bus everywhere. So when I wrote the text, I always thought of Los Angeles and the Market Street downtown in LA. So it's interesting--when I go on the road--I don't know if this happens to you, but sometimes people will come up to me and say, "Hey, so is this the Market Street in Newark, New Jersey, where I'm from?" And I'll say, "Yes, it is." Because, really, there's so many Market Streets, right? They're all over the country, and we want this book to be everyone's story--or as many people as possible. Is that the way you feel?



Market Street, Los Angeles

Christian: Absolutely. I think we wanted to create a space that felt like it could be anywhere.

So when illustrating a book, it generally begins with the words that the author writes. In this case, *Last Stop on Market Street* kind of began with a painting that I did of a boy and his grandmother riding a bus. And then Matt saw that picture and an entire story kind of came from that. He was inspired by that picture.



After Matt wrote the manuscript, I then looked at those words and had to use my imagination to think of a way to tell that story with pictures. And I usually do that by starting small. I work on these small doodles, these sketches. These are my storyboards. And they're basically just tiny Post-it notes. And I work small because, guess what? I make mistakes. And it's easier to toss aside and throw away a small mistake than a big one.



Once I have an idea of what I kind of want the book to look like, I start to figure out who these characters are. Who is CJ? And his grandmother? What do they look like riding that bus? What does the city that they live in look like? And I usually use paint and collage and cut-out pieces of paper to make the art.

Matt: And then, Christian, when we were working together, you would send me notes when you started to do the art and I would sort of rethink the story. It probably happened a couple times where you sent a note.

I know you love to do animals, and there was no dog in the original manuscript. And I got a note from you that you wanted to do an animal in the book, and it's so strange how that changed the manuscript. All of a sudden, it made me think of this man who is visually impaired--maybe he had a dog with him. And it kind of changed the story.



Christian: Oh, wait. So there wasn't a seeing-eye dog?

Matt: No. There was no dog.

Christian: I just love animals, and I'm, like, we've got to squeeze in as many animals as we can.

Matt: I remember when I first saw your painting, it took me on a journey. I came from being a novelist. I'm telling stories with 70,000 words and no pictures. In that process, I'm responsible for all the visual details. So what I realized--when I had to write a picture book manuscript, I needed to show a little bit more restraint.

My favorite part of the writing process is finding the music of the story, especially when it comes to writing a picture book. I feel like the job of the picture book writer is twofold. You have to get

the story right, but then you have to get the music right, too. After I get the story in good shape, then I go in and really think about the sounds. What sounds are going together? When I find the right rhythm of the text, that's when I get really, really excited. And I have all my picture books memorized, not because I set out to do it. I've tinkered with the language so much, and I've rewritten every line so many times, that it's ingrained in my brain. It's almost like, for me, a picture book isn't just a story. It's almost like a song that you sing over and over again.

One of the things that I really love to do in a picture book is not have a traditional rhyme scheme that follows through the entire book. I like there to be internal rhymes. I like there to be alliteration. But sometimes, you do want that sort of traditional-feeling rhyme. I had this man on the bus with the guitar. And I was like, Okay, here's a moment where I want a rhyme. What rhymes with "guitar?" And then I found the word "jar." And then I was like, Oh my gosh, I need a certain amount of syllables before the word "jar." And it just so happened that "butterflies" worked perfectly. So when I originally conceived of that scene, I didn't know there was going to be a woman on the bus with a jar full of butterflies. But the rhyme led me to that--so sometimes the rhyme is smarter than the poet. I love that part of writing, when you can discover things when you're in the process of telling a story.

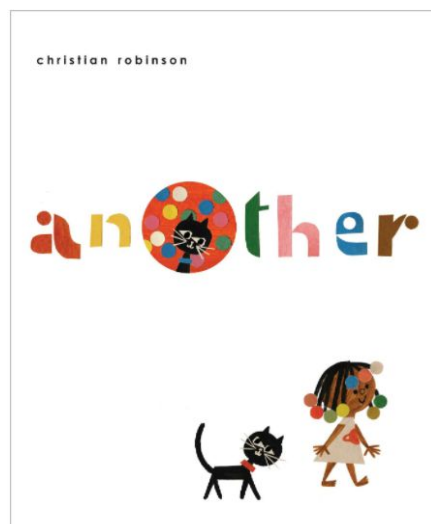
They sat right up front.
The man across the way was tuning a guitar.
An old woman with curlers had butterflies in a jar.
Nana gave everyone a great big smile
and a "good afternoon."
She made sure CJ did the same.



I think the worst thing you can do as a storyteller is go in with a message or an answer. The best thing you can do is go in with an interesting question, something you're curious about. One of the things I really like to do in picture books is explore big topics. I have this theory that kids

understand so much more than we give them credit for. So I like to go there--I like to go all the way. I will never write down to young people. I actually feel like I'm writing up. Sometimes I'm exploring big topics, and if a kid isn't ready to go there yet, they will experience the story on a different level. Take *Last Stop on Market Street*. Some young kids are just going to see a boy on the bus. And they're going to be so interested in this bus and who's on the bus. Other kids are going to bring different things to the table. And maybe they're going to be interested in, Why doesn't CJ have a car? Where are his parents? So we have to respect where kids are and kind of embrace that version of the story. And I think good picture books can exist on different levels, depending on where the reader is.

Christian: Growing up, I was actually a reluctant reader. I struggled with learning how to read, and I really wasn't drawn to books that didn't have pictures. It was picture books, and later comics and graphic novels, that kept me engaged in books and reading. But I think pictures and words have the same purpose. They're tools to communicate ideas and to share ideas. And the first time I made my own solo picture book, it was actually a wordless book, because I love to leave that space for the reader--for the viewer, in this case--to create their own story.

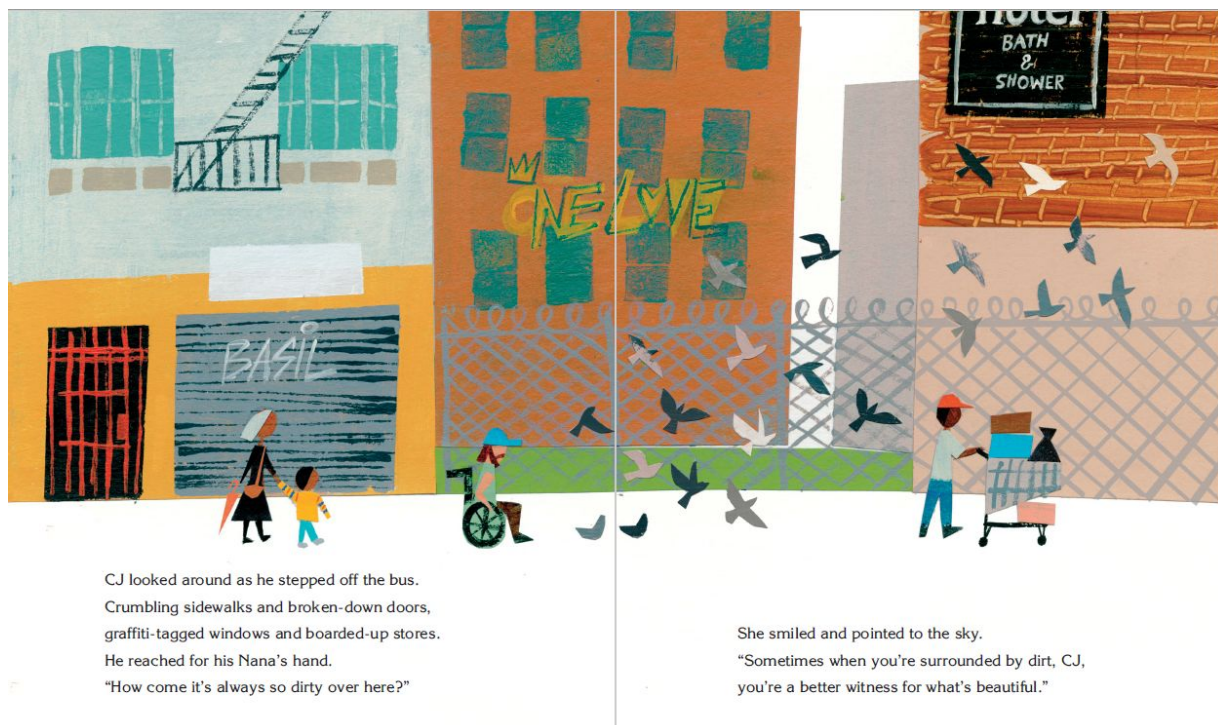


The advice that I would give to young creatives, young artists, is just to make things that make you happy. I draw and I create things because it's fun. I love doing it. One of my favorite quotes from a creative person who I admire--Miles Davis, who was a famous trumpet player--is something like, "Sometimes you have to play a long time in order to learn how to play like yourself." And that's true for drawing or anything. It takes a lot of practice and making a lot of mistakes. And that's okay. It's all part of the journey.

Oh, and do a lot of exploring, too. Do it all--crayons, markers, color pencils, watercolor--just try everything. Because that will help you figure out what is most "you" that you have to say.

Matt: When I found out that I was the first Latino to win the Newbery Medal, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. Growing up, I was never a big reader. I didn't feel like books were part of my universes. I also felt like maybe this award will open doors for future generations of Latinx kids who might want to write their story. Representation is a big deal to me--bringing in stories with kids who look like me, or my cousins, or Christian. And it's very important for young people to be able to see themselves in story lines that have traditionally left them out.

Christian: And I think there's something healing about seeing yourself, seeing your community shown in a book. When I was illustrating *Last Stop on Market Street*, it was so important for me to show the city as it feels, as I experience it. I love what you wrote on this spread, where CJ wonders why this community is so dirty and why the stores are boarded up and why windows are broken. Because that's the reality--that's how some neighborhoods look. Not every community in a picture book needs to have tree-lined streets and picket fences.



Matt: And in a way, the most important line in the book, for me at least, is when the grandmother, in that setting, says "Sometimes when you're surrounded by dirt, you're a better witness for what's beautiful." And what I take away from that idea is that sometimes when you have this perspective of both sides of America, you see it better. And you're in a better place to report about the country.

Christian: Or anywhere.

Matt: Or anywhere.