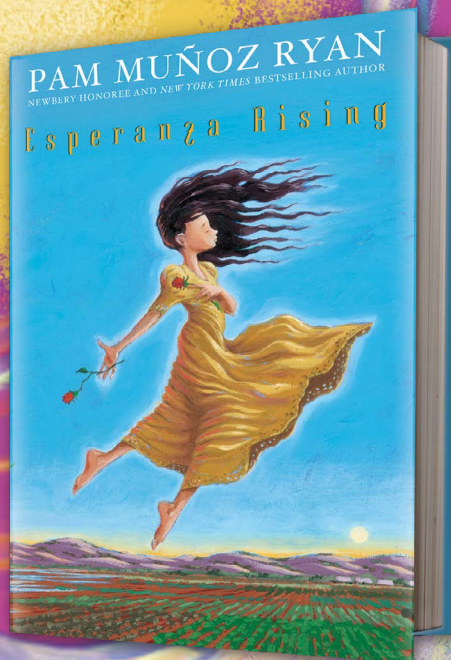
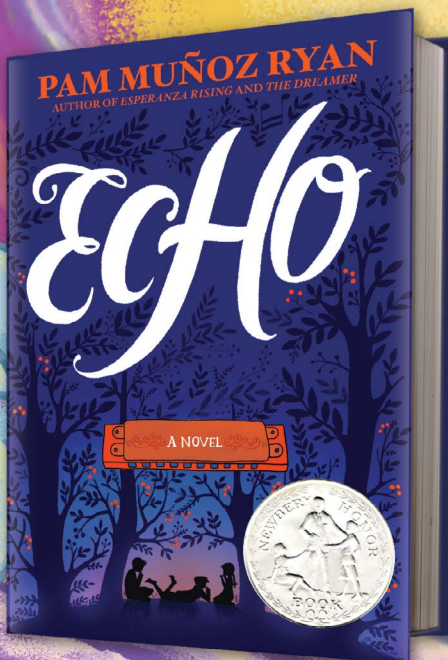
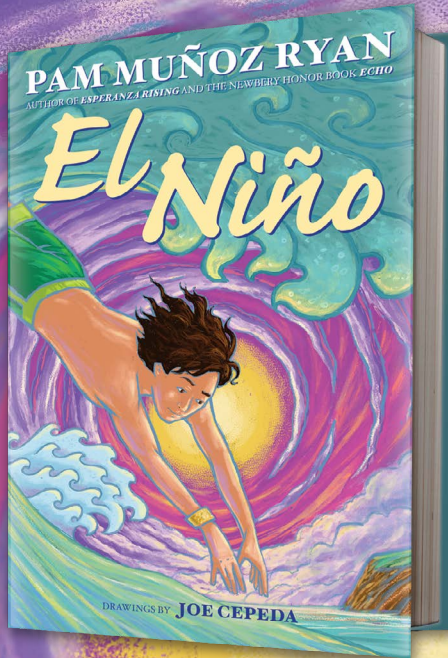


# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## The Expansive Worlds of PAM MUÑOZ RYAN

AGES  
8–14  
GRADES  
3–9



The  
Power  
of Story

Building Equitable  
Bookshelves

 SCHOLASTIC



# A Letter from Author PAM MUÑOZ RYAN

Dear Reader,

I live near the Pacific Ocean and love to be in, on, or near the water. I have always wanted to create a story about an underwater world.

Over fifteen years ago, I drafted a merfolk story that stalled when I began researching and writing my novel *ECHO*, and then *MAÑANALAND*. But the idea of an underwater realm stayed with me, and I found myself drawn to books about lost worlds and island legends, as well as myths about my home state, California, and how it was named.

Those stories captured my imagination and inspired me to write my own origin myth—about a submerged, gold-encrusted island ruled by an Amazonian queen and inhabited by mermaliens, part humans and part sea creatures. I knew I wanted them to protect and care for something more precious than gold, but what? My mind played with possibilities.

Then the pandemic hit, and I stalled again. Loss and heartache were everywhere. Covid separated us from our families, our friends, and communities.

One day while on a video call with two close friends, one of them confided that she was going through a particularly difficult time. I cupped my hands, held them toward the screen, and said, “Hand me some of your sadness. I’ll take good care of it for you until you want it back.” My other friend offered to do the same. We all laughed. If only it were that easy.

And yet, *could* it be? I began to wonder about a place where people’s grief and sadness could rest and be cared for so that the mourner could lay it down, if only for a time. Those imaginings led me to create the Library of Despair and Sorrow, a sanctuary for the world’s suffering, my “something more precious than gold,” in need of protection.

Enter my protagonist, Kai Sosa, a once up-and-coming swimmer with a chance to prove himself on an elite team, following in the footsteps of his legendary older sister, Cali, who disappeared at sea. Now his challenge is to figure out where he fits into the world without her and how to release the skiff of sadness he’s been towing. When he encounters the dolphin that was Cali’s last companion and an ancient myth in a book she had read countless times, fantasy and reality collide as Kai suddenly finds himself on a desperate quest to fulfill his last promise to Cali—a promise that could have consequences for the whole world. It’s up to you to decide what’s real and what’s imagined.

*EL NIÑO* challenged me to stretch myself creatively and buoyed me during a difficult time. I hope it offers you escape, enchantment, healing, comfort, epiphany, or all of them at once.

I can’t wait to hear from you.

Pam Muñoz Ryan

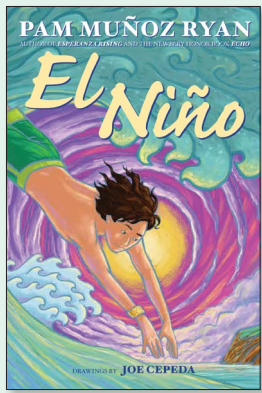


## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pam Muñoz Ryan is the recipient of the NEA's Human and Civil Rights Award, the Center USA Award (now known as the PEN America Award), and the 2024 Children's Literature Legacy Award for her body of work. She was the 2018 US nominee for the international Hans Christian Andersen Award. She received a Newbery Honor Medal and the Kirkus Prize for her *New York Times* bestselling novel *Echo*. Her other celebrated novels, *Esperanza Rising*, *The Dreamer*, *Riding Freedom*, *Becoming Naomi León*, *Paint the Wind*, and *Mañanaland*, have received countless accolades, among them the Pura Belpré Award, the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, and the Américas Award. Her acclaimed picture books include *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride* and the Sibert Honor book *When Marian Sang*, both illustrated by Brian Selznick, *Mice and Beans* illustrated by Joe Cepeda, and *Tony Baloney* illustrated by Edwin Fotheringham, as well as a beginning reader series featuring Tony Baloney. Ryan lives near San Diego, California, with her family.



Photo © Mike Brown



# El Niño

**Sometimes the only way to hold on to what we love is to let it go.**

Kai Sosa is so passionate about swimming he is practically a fish. This summer, he's determined to become the athlete he once was on an elite swim team. But something invisible holds him back. His race times are off. Dreams of his sister Cali haunt him. And he hasn't found her missing gold cuff, her last request. Mom is still talking about grief, even though it's been two years since she disappeared. He's fine now, isn't he?

When Kai discovers a library book Cali had checked out multiple times—about an underwater realm and a mysterious place called the Library of Despair and Sorrow—details from the story begin to appear in his own life: dolphin pods, imposing rock towers, unusual sea creatures, and even Cali's beloved bracelet. As myth and reality collide, El Niño unleashes its fury, and Kai is swept up in a storm of events that will change his understanding of love, death, grief, and how best to honor those we've lost.

## Praise for *El Niño*

**"A gem! This beautiful book is divided into four parts: Above, Below, Between, and Beyond. I never would have predicted what happens in parts two through four. W-O-W!!! I gasped! I cheered! I marveled at Pam Muñoz Ryan's brilliant mind!"** —**John Schu**, librarian and author of the *New York Times* bestselling *Louder Than Hunger*

EL NIÑO

HC: 9781338068559 • \$18.99

Spanish PB:  
9781546176473 • \$8.99

Ages 8–12 • Grades 3–7

Also available in ebook and audiobook

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### CHARACTERS

Every member of Kai's swim team is a highly motivated athlete. List each member of Kai's pod and their respective reasons for swimming competitively. How do their individual reasons contribute to the strengths of the team?

Kai searches for Cali's missing gold cuff because it was the last promise he made to her. What does Kai learn about his sister while searching for the cuff? What does he learn about his family?

Readers meet Cali through the memories of other characters, her possessions, and Kai's sleepwalking experiences. Who was Cali? Describe her personality, beliefs, actions, and appearance based on how her family, friends, and the other swimmers saw her. Share examples from the text to support your character sketch.

The author does not definitively explain what really happened to Cali. What does Kai think happened to her? What do his family and community think happened to her? What do you think happened? Share text evidence to support your opinion.

Both Kai and his father feel responsibility for Cali's disappearance. How do they carry this guilt differently? What actions and interactions show that they are working to manage those feelings?

### SETTING

Cali's library book *The Elusive Island of California* provides both mythological and historical details. How does Kai use information from the library book to solve problems or make decisions?

During the open water swim practice, Kai travels to an underwater world populated by mermalions. What does this world reveal about the mermalions, their history, and their abilities? How does this affect the way Kai understands the relationship between mermalions and humans?

Pam Muñoz Ryan describes California and the ocean using sensory images such as color, sound, and detailed descriptions of water, animals, plants, and other natural elements. How does the author's use of these sensory details help you picture the setting and understand the story better? Share a few sensory words or phrases from the text to support your ideas.

The author incorporates substantial scientific information in *El Niño*, including information about ocean currents and storms, geography, and animal behavior such as, "Sharks prefer to go around kelp forests." What are three scientific facts you have learned while reading this book?

What additional questions do you have about the ocean or its inhabitants? Using resource materials, investigate your questions. How does the information you gather add to the information you learned from *El Niño*?

The story that Pam Muñoz Ryan tells in *El Niño* is her unique explanation for the ocean atmosphere phenomenon known as El Niño, although it is rooted in ancient stories. Research other myths and stories that explain the origins of natural phenomena or geographic features, and/or create your own story to explain how something came to be.

### THEMES

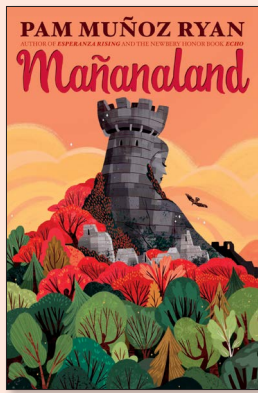
Kai and his family grieve Cali's disappearance. Two years later, the world has moved on, but the Sosas still struggle without her. List the four Sosa family members and describe how each one mourns Cali in their own ways. What evidence in the book shows that they each are moving toward peace and healing by the end of the story?

The Library of Despair and Sorrow plays a significant role in *El Niño*. Describe why this library is important. Why is it necessary for this library to exist in the story? Why do we need a place to "offer up our grief"? What do you imagine would happen to the world if this library fell into the wrong hands?

What is the importance of the dolphins in the story? What do Luna and the other dolphins teach the human characters of *El Niño*?

Mr. Sosa is known for his "coachisms"—the motivational phrases he repeats to the swimmers he coaches such as, "Asking for help doesn't mean you're less; it means you want to become more." Pick one coachism from the story. What message does it have for the Aquarius athletes? Do you agree with the coachism's message? Why or why not? Do your coaches, teachers, caregivers, parents and grandparents, or other mentors use "coachisms" of their own? Share one of them. Why is it memorable or important to you?

Explain the phrase, "The pod is one." What does it mean to you? How do Kai, his teammates, and his coaches show this message of unity when they are not swimming?



**MAÑANALAND**  
 HC: 9781338157864 • \$18.99  
 PB: 9781338157871 • \$8.99  
 Spanish PB:  
 9781338670097 • \$8.99  
 Ages 8–12 • Grades 3–7  
 Also available in ebook and audiobook

# Mañanaland

Maximiliano Córdoba loves stories, especially the legend Buelo tells him about a mythical gatekeeper who can guide brave travelers on a journey into tomorrow. If Max could see tomorrow, he would know if he'd make Santa Maria's celebrated fútbol team and whether he'd ever meet his mother, who disappeared when he was a baby. He longs to know more about her, but Papá won't talk. So when Max uncovers a buried family secret—involving an underground network of guardians who lead people fleeing a neighboring country to safety—he decides to seek answers on his own. With a treasured compass, a mysterious stone rubbing, and Buelo's legend as his only guides, he sets out on a perilous quest to discover if he is true of heart and what the future holds. This timeless tale of struggle, hope, and the search for tomorrow has much to offer today about compassion and our shared humanity.

## Praise for *Mañanaland*

- ★ “Ryan beautifully layers thought-provoking topics onto her narrative while keeping readers immersed in the story's world.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, **starred review**
- ★ “A lyrical, fablelike tale of love, loss, community, and standing up for what is right. Another unforgettable work from a master storyteller.” —*Booklist*, **starred review**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### CHARACTERS

Compare Max and his friend Chuy to Ortiz. How are these boys alike and how are they different? Why do you think Ortiz is so sure of himself? Why do Max and Chuy quarrel? Why do you think Chuy does not defend Max to the other boys?

How is Max's family different from the others in his town? Why will Max's father not talk about the mother Max can hardly remember? How does his father's silence affect Max? What role do Buelo and the uncle and aunts play in Max's growing up? Why are they all so protective of Max?

How do various families in Max's village feel about the stories of “the hidden ones” and “the guardians”? Why do people have such different opinions on these stories? How does Max learn to separate the reality of these stories from the legends?

Why does Max know he can trust Father Romero? How does he convince Isadora to trust him? How do Lola and the kitten help in their journey to take Isadora to the next guardian?

How is Yadra different from other characters in this story? Why does she create a safe haven for travelers? How does her story differ from the “hidden ones” and how is it similar? What does Max learn from her about his own quest to find his mother and about what is most important in his life?

### SETTING

Discuss the meaning of the first line of the book: “Somewhere in the Americas, many years after once-upon-a-time and long before happily-ever-after . . .” (p. 3). Why did the author choose to describe the time and place of this story in vague terms? Why did she choose the language of folklore?

Describe the importance of La Reina Gigante and the image of the ruins towering over the village. Why are the ruins of the palace off-limits for the children? Describe the effect of those ruins on Max when his father takes him there. What does Max find when he returns on his own?

How is Max able to find his way through the countryside on his journey with Isadora? How has Buelo's storytelling prepared him for the trip? Compare Buelo's story to the actual landmarks that Max follows.

Compare what you learn about the country of Abismo to Santa Maria. Why is it necessary for certain people to run away from Abismo? How does Max learn that “Mañanaland” is not an actual place where he might find his mother?

### THEMES

What is the importance of the peregrine falcon? Why does Buelo call it a pilgrim bird? What does the bird represent to Max? How does he use the falcon in the story he tells Buelo and Papá at the end of the book?

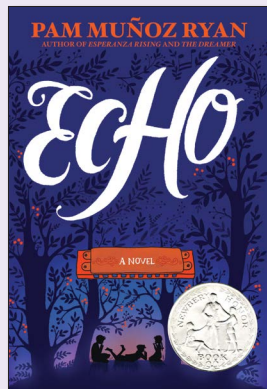
Discuss Buelo's saying: “Solo mañana sabe. Only the place we know as tomorrow holds the answers” (p. 28). How does this phrase help Max? How does it relate to the title of the book? Discuss the concept of Mañanaland, as a destination and as an idea.

Max's father and grandfather are bridge builders, and the bridges are an important part of this story. Discuss the practical use of bridges in the story and also what the bridges represent metaphorically.

Discuss the themes of courage and hope in this book. What does Buelo mean when he tells Max, “It was worth finding the courage . . . to give people hope . . . Being a guardian is not about borders or laws or money” (p. 96)? Which characters do you think exhibit the greatest courage in this story and why?

When Max decides to accompany Isadora, he tells Father Romero, “Favor con favor se paga” (p. 134). Discuss the meaning of this phrase in the context of the story and the theme of selfless devotion to helping others. Why is Max willing to risk danger to help someone he doesn't know? How do his motivations change over time?





ECHO

HC: 9780439874021 • \$19.99

Ages 10–14 • Grades 5–9

Also available in ebook and audiobook

# Echo

Otto's extraordinary encounter the day he is lost in the Black Forest involves him in a strange destiny—a quest given to him by three mysterious sisters, a prophecy, and a very special harmonica. Many years later the lives of three young people become entwined with that same harmonica. Friedrich must find a way to escape with his father from the growing menace of Nazi Germany, but how can they do that when his father has been imprisoned? Mike is desperate to find a better place for himself and his younger brother than the orphanage where they live near Philadelphia; but perhaps the solution, when it comes, is too good to be true. Ivy longs for her migrant family to have a permanent home in the farming country of California, but does it have to be at the expense of another family's misfortune? What is the secret of the mysterious harmonica that comes into each of these lives, and how will it help to fulfill a promise made long before they were born?

**Newbery Honor Book | Kirkus Prize Winner | Américas Award Winner | New York Times Notable Book**  
**New York Times Bestseller | Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year | ILA Notable Book for a Global Society**  
**ALA Notable Children's Book | Odyssey Honor Audiobook**

## Praise for *Echo*

- ★“Ingenious plotting . . . and eloquent prose.” —*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, starred review
- ★“A grand narrative that examines the power of music to inspire beauty in a world overrun with fear and intolerance.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★“Each individual story is engaging, but together they harmonize to create a thrilling whole.” —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### CHARACTERS

What clues are in the prologue story about Otto to help you determine when and where his story takes place? How does the harmonica help him to find his way home? Why will no one believe his story about Eins, Zwei, and Drei?

Compare the lives of Friedrich, Mike, and Ivy. How are their challenges similar and how do they differ? Discuss how each of them shows courage and determination to find a path for their lives. How does the harmonica play a role in each of their journeys?

Discuss the role of adult characters in the lives of each young person. Which adults are positive role models, and how do they help each of the children to grow in confidence and understanding? Which adults are negative influences in their lives, and how do the children react to them?

Discuss the role of siblings in the lives of Friedrich, Mike, and Ivy. What are their respective sibling relationships? Describe how their different personalities and ages affect the way each reacts to the time and place in which they live—in Germany, in Pennsylvania, and in California.

This story is told from many points of view. Discuss how the author establishes a unique voice for each of the main characters. Why do Friedrich's, Mike's, and Ivy's sections each end with a “cliffhanger” moment and unanswered questions about what will happen to them next?

The main characters in *Echo* are fictional, but there are historical figures and events mentioned throughout the book. Look up information about Adolf Hitler, Matthias Hohner, Albert Hoxie, Larry Adler, Pearl Harbor, Japanese internment camps, and the Bracero Program. Compare what you find in information sources to what you have learned about each of these topics from the book.

### SETTING

Look up information about the town of Trossingen in Germany. Why is this place referred to as a “music town”? Compare what you know about Trossingen from the story to what you can learn from information sources.

Read fiction and nonfiction books with similar themes and settings to compare to *Echo*. To understand Elisabeth's point of view in Part One, for example, read *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti (Scholastic, 2005). For Part Two, compare Mike's plight to that of another Irish-American boy in *The Journal of Sean Sullivan* by William Durbin (Scholastic, 1999), and for Part Three, contrast Ivy's journey to that of Esperanza in *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (Scholastic, 2000). Compare the story of “A Witch, a Kiss, a Prophecy” to fairy tales in collections such as those of the Brothers Grimm.

### THEMES

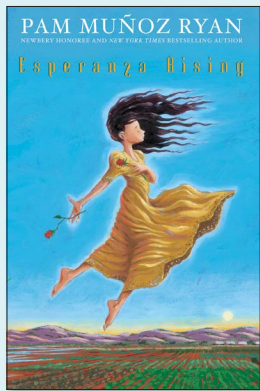
Discuss the first line of the folktale: “Once, long before enchantment was eclipsed by doubt . . .” (p. 4). How does this choice of words set a tone for the book?

Discuss the meaning of the midwife's prophecy in the tale: “Your fate is not yet sealed. Even in the darkest night, a star will shine, a bell will chime, a path will be revealed.” How does this prophecy apply to the lives of Friedrich, Mike, and Ivy as well as to Otto and the sisters in the tale?

Discuss Friedrich's thought in the last section: “They all spoke the same language and had found their way to this night with their own stories of determination and practice and their love for music. Here he was safe” (p. 554).

What is the importance of the final sentence in the fourth section: “. . . and connected by the same silken thread?” (p. 578). How does that phrase echo the themes in the story of the three sisters?

Listen to recordings of the pieces of music that introduce each part of this story. How are the songs integrated into the lives of the main characters in each part of the book? Discuss the importance of music in the lives of each of the characters.



# Esperanza Rising

Esperanza Ortega's happy life on her family's large ranch in Mexico ends abruptly with the murder of her father. Forced to flee their land and her greedy uncles, thirteen-year-old Esperanza and her mother escape with their former servants to a migrant camp in California. Life in the agricultural camps is a hard adjustment, and when Mama falls ill, it is up to Esperanza to earn money by working in the packing sheds as well as helping with the chores of their new extended family in the farm camp. As Esperanza struggles to understand her new life, she transforms from a pampered rich girl to a hardworking and compassionate young woman. Readers will gain a deep understanding of the historical forces of the Depression, labor strikes, and the immigrant experience in 1930s Southern California through Esperanza's story.

Pura Belpré Award Winner | Américas Award Honor Book | Jane Addams Children's Book Award Winner  
Willia Cather Award Winner | *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Finalist | IRA Notable Book for a Global Society  
ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults | *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year

## Praise for *Esperanza Rising*

★ "Told in a lyrical, fairy tale-like style . . . Readers will be swept up." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ "This well-written novel belongs in all collections." —*School Library Journal*, starred review

### ESPERANZA RISING

HC: 9780439120418 • \$18.99

PB: 9780439120425 • \$7.99

Spanish PB:  
9780439398855 • \$7.99

Ages 8–12 • Grades 3–7

Also available in ebook and audiobook

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### CHARACTERS

Why does Esperanza's father have a special feeling for his land? Discuss the characters of Tío Luis and Tío Marco. How are they different from Esperanza's father?

What does Esperanza mean when she says to Miguel that there is a "deep river" (p. 18) that runs between them? How does this change when they move to California? Discuss how Esperanza grows as the story progresses.

Why do Alfonso and Hortensia offer to take Esperanza and her mother to the United States with them even though doing so puts their own lives at risk?

On the train ride to California, Esperanza refuses to allow a peasant girl to touch her treasured doll; yet later she offers to give the doll to Isabel, Miguel's cousin. What has brought about this change in her feelings?

Why does Esperanza dislike Marta when they first meet? What makes her change her mind about Marta?

### SETTING

Compare the setting in Aguascalientes to the company camp in California. How does Esperanza react to the changes in her life? How does her illness affect Esperanza? Compare the two train rides—the one Esperanza and Miguel took as young children and the one they take to California. What is significant about the description of the earlier train ride in the story?

Compare the strikers' camp to the company camp. How does seeing the strikers' camp affect Esperanza? Why do Josefina and Hortensia tell Esperanza and Miguel to shop only at the Japanese store? What does Alfonso mean when he tells Miguel that Mr. Yakota is "getting rich on other people's bad manners" (p. 188)?

### THEMES

When Esperanza lives at El Rancho de las Rosas, she and her friends look forward to their Quinceañeras, after which they will be old enough to marry, "rising to the positions of their mothers before them" (p. 8). Compare this idea of "rising" to the rest of the story and to the title. How does the meaning change?

Discuss the Mexican proverbs at the beginning of the book and how they relate to the story:

"He who falls today may rise tomorrow."

"The rich person is richer when he becomes poor, than the poor person when he becomes rich."

Why does the author name each chapter for a fruit or vegetable? What is the significance of each type of fruit or vegetable to that part of the story? What is the significance of the rose cuttings that Alfonso and Miguel carry with them from Mexico?

How does Abuelita's experience of leaving Spain for Mexico compare to Esperanza's of leaving Mexico for the United States? How does Abuelita's crocheting reflect their experiences? What does she mean when she speaks of the "mountains and valleys" (p. 51) in the stitching?

Research the legend of the phoenix in Mexican folklore. What does Abuelita mean when she says, "We are like the phoenix"?

Available 2026

*Esperanza Rising: A Graphic Novel*, with art by Andrés Vera Martínez

