Interactive discussion with Eric Velasquez: Children’s Book Author and Illustrator

Date: March 1, 2016

The K-12 Outreach Program at the Institute of Latin American Studies at Columbia University sponsored award winning author/illustrator Eric Velasquez to present about his life and work on children’s literature at Teachers College, Columbia University, on March 1, 2016.

In his presentation, Eric Velasquez discussed how his childhood experience growing up as an Afro-Latino, with Spanish as his first language, influenced his artistic development and his work in many ways. He addressed the role of diversity in children’s books today and remarked the importance of representing people of color in children’s literature.

Eric Velasquez learned too young that African Americans and Latinos appeared too little in books, and when they did, their representations were mainly negative, portraying subservient roles or as caricatures. The characters that looked like him were never the main protagonists or heroes and heroines in books. Such realization led him to create books that highlight the relevance of diversity and inclusion, as he is convinced that when children see themselves in books, their existence is validated and they feel they are part of the world. Even today, most of the time, children do not see themselves represented in books and, if they see people that look like them, the images are usually portrayed in a negative way and do not reflect their worldviews.

Eric Velasquez’ stories and illustrations depict a variety of cultures; they portray Black Latino and African-American characters as protagonists, family relationships, Puerto Rican music, life in Harlem, among others. Books like The Rain Stomper, Grandma’s Gift, Grandma’s Records, My Friend Maya Loves to Dance, The Other Mozart, and others, question labels and disrupt the current cultural models that exclude people of color. They also offer children a space that affirms diversity and allow them to create their own worlds. Overall, they contribute to stopping the perpetuation of inequality and marginalization within society.