Running Wild

Authors use animal characters to teach kids important life lessons

BY DAVID STEINBERG
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Ollie is a young owl who'd rather hang out with his vagabundo friends Raven and Crow than go to school. They steal Sister Squirrel's pinon nuts. They rip off a pack of cigarettes from the mayordomo of the acequia. Ollie confesses to his parents that he ditched school and didn't do his homework. What's more, he can't read. Gloria La Zorra (fox), Trickster Coyote and Luis Lobo take advantage of Ollie's illiteracy when he's en route to Nana's Wisdom School to start reading lessons. The moral: Reading is a critical tool in life.

Famous Chicano author Rudolfo Anaya, who turns 80 this month, and Albuquerque artist/illustrator El Moisés (Moisés Salcedo) make these riotously colorful characters larger than life in their instructive, fun bilingual children's book "Owl in a Straw Hat/El Tecolote de Sombrero de Paja." Anaya and El Moisés praised each other's contributions. "I think his illustrations are going to make the book. People are going to buy a work of art," Anaya said in an interview.

El Moisés said Anaya's words made the illustrations happen. Anaya said he was inspired by "The Cat in the Hat" to write a children's book more culturally relevant. "Our kids need something closer to them, the cultura, a New Mexico setting. An owl came to me. I don't know why. I associated with owls from 'Bless Me, Ultima' where the owl protects the little boy."

And owls traditionally symbolize wisdom.

"Part of the lessons for the chamacos is that it takes time but you can learn to read and reading will help you make your future," Anaya said. "I am very concerned about championing and pushing literacy everywhere. We have so many video games that tie the kids down to images. Learning to read is freedom. It's entertainment and it's knowledge in the same package."

At the back of the book is a helpful two-page glossary of Spanish words with English translations.

Anaya has finished a sequel to "Owl in a Straw Hat." And he's working on a novel for young adults and adults titled "Chupacabra Meets Billy the Kid."

El Moisés' art was seen in the popular exhibit at the New Mexico History Museum "Lowriders, Hoppers and Hot Rods: Car Culture of Northern New Mexico." He will read from and sign copies of "Owl in a Straw Hat/El Tecolote del Sombrero de Paja" at 6 p.m. Oct. 17 at Bookworks, 4022 Rio Grande NW.

Author Mac Barnett and illustrator Jon Klassen will talk about their new children's book, "The Wolf, the Duck & the Mouse," at 6 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 12 in Budagher Hall at the Bosque School, 4000 Bosque School NW.

The book is about a duck and a mouse who are swallowed, but not eaten, by a wolf and decide to make their home in the wolf's belly. Klassen will give a drawing demonstration. He and Barnett will autograph copies of the book, which will be for sale. The event is part of the school's service learning project and art and literature exploration.